

METROPOLIS BRITISH COLUMBIA

Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity

Working Paper Series

No. 11-20

December 2011

Immigrants and Low-Paid Work: *Persistent Problems, Enduring Consequences*

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Metropolis British Columbia

Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity

MBC is supported as part of the Metropolis Project, a national strategic initiative funded by SSHRC and the following organizations of the federal government:

- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA)
- Canada Border Services Agency
- Canada Economic Development for the Regions of Quebec (CED-Q)
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)
- Canadian Heritage (PCH)
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)
- Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario (FedNor)
- Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSD)
- Department of Justice Canada
- Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC)
- Public Safety Canada (PSC)
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)
- The Rural Secretariat of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (Rural Sec't)
- Statistics Canada (Stats Can)

Metropolis BC also receives funding from the Ministry of Jobs, Tourism, and Innovation (JTI). Grants from Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria provide additional support to the Centre.

Views expressed in this manuscript are those of the author(s) alone. For more information, contact the Co-directors of the Centre, Krishna Pendakur, Department of Economics, SFU (pendakur@sfu.ca) and Daniel Hiebert, Department of Geography, UBC (daniel.hiebert@ubc.ca).

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, immigrants have accounted for over half of Vancouver's job growth. The increased economic participation of immigrants, however, has not corresponded with an overall expansion of job opportunities, or improved levels of economic well-being for this sizeable portion of Vancouver's population.¹ In comparison to the 1970s, immigrants today face more difficulty finding well-paid work; experience higher levels of unemployment and poverty; tend to work in low-wage and insecure jobs in food services, hospitality and retail sectors; and are more likely to take on multiple jobs to meet the rising cost of living standards.² The earnings gap is particularly significant for individuals employed on the bottom rungs of the wage spectrum. According to a 2008 Statistics Canada report, immigrants are 1.8 times more likely than native-born Canadians to earn less than \$10 per hour.³

Why do immigrants experience chronic low-pay? How does the inability to find higher-paying jobs affect the ability of immigrant parents to raise their children? How does repeated disappointment in the labour market affect immigrants' self-esteem and sense of belonging and membership in Canada? What strategies and solutions can overcome persistent inequality in the labour market for socially and economically disadvantaged immigrants?

This report draws on a series of community-led focus groups conducted in the summer of 2010. Focus groups reflected the format of "neighbourhood

1 Daniel Hiebert, *The Economic Integration of Immigrants in Metro Vancouver*. Metropolis BC Working Paper No. 09-08 (September 2009), accessed 20 June 2011, <http://www.amssa.org/arc/pdfs/188.pdf>.

2 Daniel Hiebert and Ravi Pendakur, *Who's Cooking? The Changing Ethnic Division of Labour in Canada, 1971-1996*, Metropolis BC Working Paper No. 03-09 (March 2003), 20, accessed 17 June 2011, <http://www.amssa.org/arc/pdfs/98.pdf>.

3 The 2008 Canadian Immigrant Labour Market: Analysis of Quality of Employment <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/71-606-x/2009001/part-partie1-eng.htm> (accessed July 31, 2010).

cafés,” in which community members discussed the costs and consequences of low-paid work for immigrants and their families living in the Greater Vancouver Area. The goals of the neighbourhood cafés were threefold: 1) to share key research findings about the links between immigrants and low-paid work in an accessible manner, 2) to identify key concerns regarding immigration and low-paid work with community members who are directly affected by these issues, and 3) to develop creative solutions to issues that emerged from the focus groups.

The neighbourhood cafés brought together 44 individuals from ten different countries of origin that have lived in Canada for periods of time that ranged from five months to 35 years at the time of the study. Despite differences regarding national origins and length of tenure in Canada, many participants described similar experiences when it came to the Canadian labour market: they had become “stuck” in low-paying jobs — such as cashiering, house-keeping, janitorial work, and dishwashing — or were currently unemployed. Participants highlighted several key barriers to finding higher-paid work, such as the non-recognition of foreign credentials, the lack of “Canadian experience,” and limited English skills. Yet, perhaps more significant was the disconnect between Canada’s immigration policy, which favors skilled and educated applicants, and restrictive labour market policies and practices that relegate many immigrants to “survival employment”—that is, jobs that support basic livelihood needs for oneself and one’s family rather than jobs that utilize one’s educational and skill level.⁴

The inability to find satisfactory work has not only resulted in financial strain and economic hardship for many immigrants, but it has also contributed

⁴ Gillian Creese and Brandy Wiebe, ‘Survival Employment’: Gender and Deskilling among African Immigrants in Canada. *International Migration* (2009), no. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00531.x

to a generalized state of frustration and disappointment. Many participants emphasized social and emotional costs of being relegated to the bottom of Canada's labour force, including heightened feelings of isolation and marginalization, as well as feelings of frustration associated with being unable to provide for one's children and the inability to speak out against employer abuse and discrimination.

Many of the issues raised in this report are well known to both researchers and the general public. Yet, the chronic nature of these issues reveals that more action, rather than more research, is required to begin addressing the problems and finding effective solutions. The urgency of resolving labour market barriers for immigrants is particularly urgent given the continued preference in Canadian immigration policy for skilled and educated immigrants. Our focus groups illustrate the enormous challenges that immigrants face in the labour market, not only upon arrival but long after living in Canada, and the urgent need to develop immediate and coordinated actions to improve access to more stable and higher-paying jobs.

METHODOLOGY

The project utilized a participatory action research approach. Seven immigrant women were invited to participate as peer facilitators, including four women from Frog Hollow's Community Connections project and four women who were members of the Hospital Employees' Union's Living Wage Campaign committee.⁵ Peer facilitators attended a pre-café training workshop and a post-café evaluation workshop. Peer facilitators were asked to utilize their social networks to recruit participants who were interested in attending a café-style focus group about their experiences with low-paid work, its effects on

⁵ One HEU member dropped out of the project after attending the training due to personal reasons.

work and family life, and strategies to cope with the difficulties of earning low wages. Since a snowball method was used for recruitment, the sample is not representative of the immigrant population in Vancouver. Rather, it includes participants with pre-existing interest in the issue of low-paid work and immigrants.

Focus groups were conducted in three languages—English, Spanish, and Cantonese—and took place at the following locations: Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, Thunderbird Community Center, Progressive Intercultural Community Services (PICS), and Mable Elmore's Community Office. Focus groups began with a brief introduction of the project goals and the distribution of research participation consent forms. Focus groups participants received a "café menu," which outlined the questions that would be asked during the focus group. They also received a summary of key academic research findings on the links between immigration and low-paid work in the format of a two-page informational brochure (see Appendix 1). The majority of questions focused on individuals' experiences in the labour market, the effects of low-paid work on family and quality of life, and coping strategies. In addition to the focus group, participants were asked to fill out a brief survey. The conversations from the focus group were digitally recorded, translated, and transcribed. All participants received a small gift as a token of appreciation and were also reimbursed for bus transportation expenses.

The project was guided by a collaboration between Jennifer Chun, a UBC Sociologist; Priti Shah, an independent consultant who has worked in several different immigrant serving organizations and who provided essential support for the focus groups and facilitator trainings; and Marcy Cohen, the former Research Director at the Hospital Employees' Union and board member at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The community advisory group

consisted of Eva Aboud from Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, Blanca Salvatierra from Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, and Sherman Chan from MOSAIC BC. Several undergraduate and graduate students provided essential project assistance including Amanda Cheong, Erin Roberts, Dora Ng, Fang Xu, Geraldina Polanco, and Sara Koopman. The BC Metropolis Research Dissemination grant provided substantial funding for the project.

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

A total of 44 people from ten different countries of origin participated in the focus groups. The majority of participants were from the Philippines (16) and China (11). Other participants were from Mexico and various Latin American countries (7), India (4), and Mongolia (2) (see Figure 1). The average age of participants was 42.4 years, with the oldest being 60 years old, and the youngest being 14 years old. The majority of participants (67%) had a two-year college degree or higher (see Table 1). Participants had lived in Canada for diverse lengths of time, ranging from five months to several decades (see Figure 2). Of those participants who were employed (49%), average hourly wages ranged from \$8 to \$13. The following is a more detailed description of the participants who attended each café.

FIGURE 1: COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

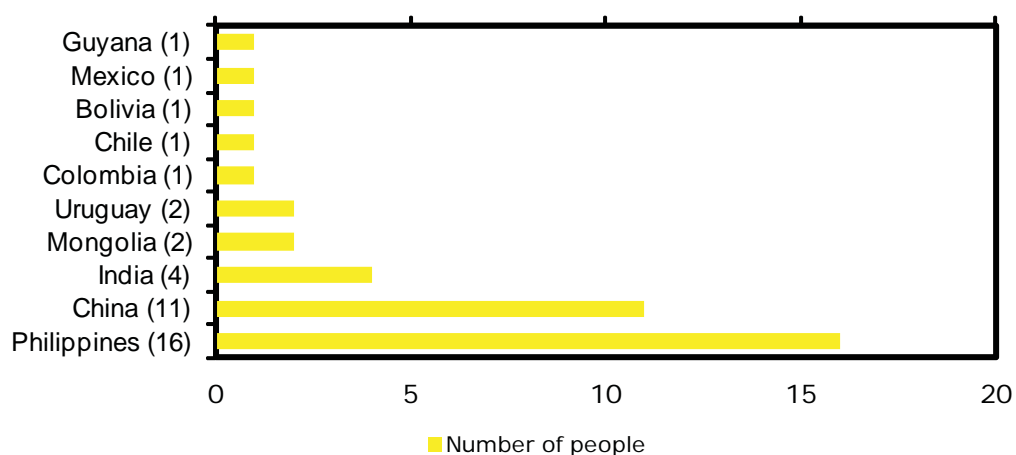
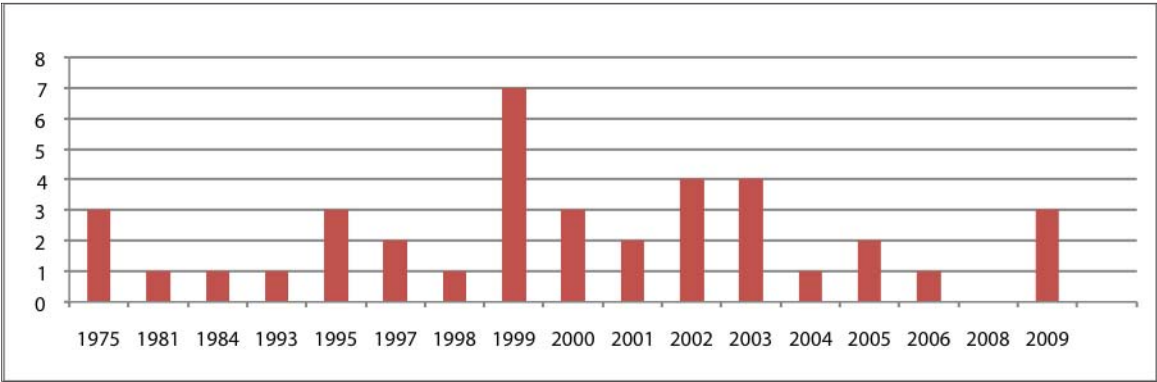


TABLE 1. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Junior high/Middle school	8% (4)
Senior high school	20% (9)
Two year college	16% (7)
Four year university	39% (17)
Master's/Postgraduate degree	11% (5)
No response	6% (3)

FIGURE 2. YEAR OF IMMIGRATION TO CANADA



Thunderbird Café

The focus group participants were all mothers who had immigrated to Canada from China and primarily spoke Cantonese. Peer facilitators described the recruitment process as relatively easy, since they encountered many immigrant mothers in various community-based childcare programs who spoke openly about the difficulties finding higher-paid employment. The average age of the participants was 37 years old, with the youngest participant being 31 years old, and the oldest 46 years old. Participants lived in Canada for an average of 11 years. None of the participants had lived in other countries prior to their immigration to Canada, and none of the participants were employed at the time the dialogue took place. The average wage earned by the participants during their last job was \$10.33 per hour, with their hourly wage ranging from

\$7.15 per hour to \$17 per hour. Almost all participants stated that the reason they immigrated to Canada was to reunite with family, with one participant citing the desire to provide a better life for her children as the reason she immigrated.

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House Café

The eight participants of the Spanish-language focus group hailed from Bolivia, Chile, Colombia (3), Mexico, and Uruguay (2). The average age of the participants was 48 years old, with the youngest participant being 35 years old, and the oldest 60 years old. The participants were generally very highly educated, with five possessing university degrees and two holding college diplomas. In their first jobs in Canada, participants earned an average of \$10.65 an hour, with a range of \$7.50 to \$21.87 an hour. Six out of the eight participants were employed at the time of the focus group. Among the six participants who disclosed their annual incomes, figures ranged between under \$15,000 to over \$100,000 a year. Participants most commonly cited employment opportunities and providing a better life for their children as their motivations for immigration, with some immigrating for educational opportunities and the desire to escape political uncertainty in their home countries.

Progressive Intercultural Services (PICS) Café

A total of 16 participants attended the focus group. Of the participants, eight individuals immigrated to Canada from the Philippines, four from India, one from Guyana and one from the Fiji Islands. Two participants were born in Canada. Those who immigrated had lived in Canada for an average of 14.6 years. The average age of the participants was 42 years old, with the youngest participant being 16 years old and the oldest 58 years old. Six participants

possessed university degrees, and three participants attended college before moving to Canada. The average wage earned by participants in their first jobs was \$7.56 an hour, with a low of \$2 an hour and a high of \$11.50 an hour. Fourteen of the 16 participants were working at the time of the café. The average wage of those currently employed was \$11.66. This included the wage of a student currently working at McDonalds for \$6.75 per hour. Nine of the twelve respondents who disclosed their yearly incomes earned under \$30,000 annually. The major reasons cited for immigration were to provide a better life for their children, to seek job opportunities, and to reunite with family.

Mabel Elmore Community Office

The café was attended by nine participants who moved to Canada from China (1), Mongolia (2), and the Philippines (6). The average age of the participants was 45 years old, with the youngest participant being 38 years old and the oldest 56 years old. Participants were all university-educated, with four possessing graduate degrees. The participants had lived in Canada an average number of 3.2 years. Four participants were currently working while five were not. Wages earned in their first jobs in Canada ranged from between \$7 to \$11.50 an hour, with an average of \$9.28 an hour. Participants most commonly cited providing a better life for children as their motivation for immigration, with a few immigrating to find a better job and better educational opportunities, or to escape political uncertainty in their home country.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT AFTER MIGRATING TO CANADA

The discussions that took place during the neighbourhood cafés elucidated a sharp disjuncture between participants' expectations of new opportunities in Canada and the actual circumstances they face upon arrival. Participants were

most commonly drawn to Canada in order to (1) provide a better life for their children, (2) reunite with family members, and (3) seek better employment opportunities than what was available in their home countries (see Chart 1). Although many of the café participants immigrated to Canada with high expectations, many have been frustrated by the lack of economic opportunities they have had access to as immigrants. One participant in the Cantonese-speaking focus group described the dilemma that she and many other immigrants face in Canada as a result of the gap between perception and reality:

“At first what is our reason for immigrating? It’s to find a good life, right? Otherwise, why wouldn’t we stay in our home country? But [once we move to Canada] because of low income ...and the high cost of our living expenses...it is difficult. We are unable to invest a lot for our children’s education, which leads them to not be able to keep up with the mainstream society’s standards, which makes their quality of life low. But what solutions are there? We can’t provide a good life and a good education for them.”

Participants cited several factors to explain why immigrants faced difficulties in the labour market. The following sections elaborate on the most commonly cited reasons discussed during focus groups: 1) English-language skills, 2) Non-recognition of international credentials, 3) Lack of Canadian experience, and 4) Limits of existing programs and resources. Many of these issues are frequently raised in the academic and policy literature on immigration and low-paid work. However, what was striking about the focus group discussions was the chronic nature of these problems for many of the participants, whether he or she was a recent arrival, or had lived in Canada for fifteen years.

CHART 1. MOTIVES FOR IMMIGRATING TO CANADA

Job/Employment opportunities	20% (9)
Provide better life for children	32% (14)
Family reunification	34% (15)
Improve quality of living	2% (1)
Educational opportunities	4% (2)
No response	3% (7)

English-language skills

The lack of English-language skills is often one of the first barriers that participants mention when asked about their difficulties finding a job in Canada. Individuals with difficulties communicating in English face severely limited job options, unable to secure the most entry-level jobs in service and manufacturing. This sentiment was emphasized by the Cantonese-speaking participants who believed that their lack of basic English-language skills confined them to jobs in ethnic-owned and -frequented businesses in the Chinese-Canadian community. Participants viewed these jobs as highly competitive and often more exploitative explaining that employers used the participants' lack of English skills as a way to justify long working hours, failure to pay overtime compensation, and minimum wages.

Several participants highlighted the link that employers drew between "probation" and lack of English-language skills. Judy immigrated to Vancouver from China eight years ago, and—like many newcomers—she relied on other Chinese immigrants to help her find a job. After multiple failed attempts, she secured a job at a small grocery store on the condition that she begin as a "volunteer cashier" and forego paid employment for an entire month. May Lei, who also immigrated from China in the early 2000s, commented that she was consistently told that with no experience the starting wage was \$6 per hour with a three-month minimum probation period. Upon hearing the term

“probation,” another participant emphasized that some employers used “probation” as a way to extract free labour from immigrants.

Spanish-speaking immigrants also identified English-language barriers as a source of economic disadvantage. Rocio worked as a finance controller before emigrating from Bolivia twelve years ago. To obtain comparable employment in Vancouver, Rocio needed to demonstrate competency in Grade 12 English. Since he could not afford to take two years off to upgrade his English-language skills through a local certification program, he chose instead to work in various low-paid jobs that allowed him to contribute to his family’s basic economic expenses. Unable to find the time or money to improve his English-language skills after immigrating to Canada, Rocio says he has given up hope of ever being able to work in the field in which he was educated.

While participants often accepted that the inability to speak English was a legitimate reason for experiencing difficulty in the Canadian job market, some participants also expressed frustration over the subjective measures used to assess one’s language competency. Leona, a participant from Mexico, had immigrated to Canada with the expectation that she would be able to resume her practice in physiotherapy. After being told multiple times that she needed to upgrade her English, she came to the realization that her native Mexican accent, rather than her actual English-language ability, would always be a source of disadvantage:

“I tried to work as a physiotherapist here, but they kept insisting on lots of studies . . . I had to have very good English. And one has to be realistic and understand that one’s English, it does not matter how much one studies (at least in my case) is never going to be how they want it to be.”

Another participant in the Spanish-speaking focus group expressed that it would be futile to try to adopt a convincingly Canadian-sounding grasp on

English: "I think that we will never be able to change our accent, not like our children who have absolutely perfect English, right?"

Participants' experiences with language discrimination support research findings from a study conducted by Gillian Creese and Edith Ngene Kambere (2003) who found that employers discriminate against language accents, rather than actual language ability, when hiring African women immigrants.⁶ Many of the African women immigrants in Creese and Kambere's study were successful in obtaining a job interview based on their résumés and their high educational and skill levels. However, when they showed up to face-to-face job interviews, employers often re-assessed their employment competency after hearing the "colour of their English"—that is, their non-European English-language accents.

Non-recognition of international credentials

Non-recognition of international credentials was also a commonly cited barrier to finding employment. Though Canada's Points System attracts immigrants with high levels of education, non-Canadian degrees are often not recognized once they enter the country.⁷ Paul, a Filipino immigrant who has been unable to find employment as a civil engineer, put it succinctly when he stated:

"Your educational background is not acknowledged here in this country. If you're a professional in your old country, when you come here it will be scratched. You have to start [over] or you have to study. But, you can't study unless you have enough money to support your family while you are

⁶ Gillian Creese and Edith Ngene Kambere, "What Colour is Your English?" *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* (2003) 40: 565.

⁷ Asha Chakkalakal and Jane Harvey, "Access for Foreign-Trained IT Professionals: An Exploration of Systemic Barriers to Employment," *JobStart and Skills for Change* (2001), 24, accessed 17 May 2011, http://www.skillsforchange.org/library/pdfs/access_report.pdf.

studying. So eventually you will get rid of that option and then you just take any job that you can.”

Often lacking the resources to repeat their schooling, many immigrants find themselves “stuck” in low-skilled, low-paying jobs that they are overqualified for – a phenomenon commonly referred to as immigrant “deskilling.”⁸

Stories of deskilling were repeated in every focus group. Prior to moving to Vancouver in 2001, Patricia worked as a nutritionist; she is currently working in a coffee shop earning less than \$10 per hour. She used phrases such as the “the black hole of immigration” and “a vicious cycle” to describe the gap between Canada’s preferential immigration policy for skilled and educated immigrants and the actual experiences of such immigrants after they arrive. She also highlighted the “illusion” she had before immigrating that she could find a similar job in Canada to the one she had in Mexico. Robert was a very recent arrival to Canada, emigrating from the Philippines in April 2010 with his wife and two sons. After studying electrical engineering in university, he worked for thirteen years in the shipbuilding and ship repair industry. Eager to take advantage of new economic opportunities in Canada, Robert attended numerous workshops to help him find employment soon after arriving in Canada. However, after months of unsuccessful job searching and the evaporation of \$20,000 in savings to pay for basic living expenses for himself and his family, he abandoned his career to work as a janitor.

Despite early difficulties accessing employment opportunities, some participants such as Paul have experienced some improvement in their job situations. After working as a stocker for the large retail outlet, Real Canadian Superstore, Paul was soon promoted to work as a machine operator and then

8 Harold Bauder, ‘Brain Abuse’ or the Devaluation of Immigrant Labour in Canada.2003. *Antipode* 35: 699-717.

an inventory worker. Several years later, he found a job in the shipping and receiving department in a mailing house services company and is currently working as a data programmer. He explained that he is still hoping to find a job as a civil engineer, but he recognized the many difficulties of this:

"I'm still hoping to have the job I used to have in the Philippines, but I can't afford to now because I can't go to school because of the financial needs [of my family]. If you want to go to school, you have to earn something while doing schooling which I cannot do, so I'm stuck."

Sharing stories of deskilling and underemployment yielded some of the most animated conversations during the focus groups, and many participants, including those who do not enter as skilled immigrants, expressed frustration and skepticism regarding Canada's selective immigration policy. For example, in the Cantonese-speaking focus group, most participants did not immigrate as skilled immigrants. However, when the subject of non-recognition of international credentials was raised, the following dialogue ensued:

Participant 1: "They [Canadian government] need large quantities of immigrants, right? But when the immigrants come, basically, there are no good working opportunities for them.

Participant 2: That's why people go back....

Participant 1: Yeah, there are no jobs...

Participant 2: You can't make a living!

Participant 1: So that means that the [Canadian] government is so contradictory. They are so welcoming of immigrants, especially skilled workers. They recruit them by the batches...

Participant 3: The most welcomed are investment class immigrants! (group laughter)

Participant 1: Yes, that's true, haha.

Participant 3: They need their money! They have very high standards...But, you know, to tell you the truth, when skilled immigrants come here, they need to get local certification, take local courses, and it doesn't work. **It's just the same for them.**

Participant 1: In the beginning, when they [the government] import them [immigrants], they don't say this...

Participant 2: It's true! Once you land, you realize this.

Participant 1: Exactly, it's afterwards, after you land that you realize, 'Oh no, before you're a doctor, teacher... [But here in Canada] don't even talk about such high standards of jobs. Even people who had a basic office job before, when they come here [Canada], they aren't guaranteed to be able to find it again.

By calling attention to the fact that "it's just the same for them," the Cantonese-speaking participants emphasized the similarities between their difficulties in the labour market and that of former professionals and more wealthy immigrants from China.

Lack of "Canadian experience"

Another term that was frequently invoked during the focus groups was "Canadian experience." Few participants could define what the term meant, but every participant could elaborate the effects of not having it. Christine explained that despite the fact that she has extensive work experience and a university degree in China, only one thing matters for finding a job in Canada: Canadian experience. She explained:

"I know some people have very high educational levels in their home countries but whenever you apply for a job, sometimes the job requires two to three years of local experience. When I look at ads, I don't even dare to apply for it."

Another participant explained that he was advised by employment counselors at an immigrant services agency to downgrade his work experience to appear less "skilled." Yet, even after "lying" about his education and previous work experience, his lack of Canadian experience prevented him from securing a job. He explained:

"So basically, they are asking you to down tone your qualifications so that you can get the job, but even if you down tone your qualifications, since you don't have a Canadian experience you don't even get the job. So it's a chicken and egg thing."

Like immigrants whose international credentials are not recognized by Canadian employers, the lack of Canadian experience also serves as a source of deskilling. Daniel moved to Canada seven years ago from Argentina. Hoping to enter the tourism industry, where he had previously worked, he took a course on tourism at Sprott Shaw Community College in order to obtain Canadian credentials. However, employment recruiters repeatedly pointed to his lack of Canadian experience when rejecting his application. He explained:

"I've tried in numerous hotels to try and get a job. But, it's been a bit difficult, particularly in the area of experience, asking for experience when we're just initially entering. So currently, I am working at the airport but that is very low starting, in the area of customer service."

While the literature highlights that volunteering may help immigrants gain Canadian experience, focus group participants were highly skeptical of the effectiveness of this strategy. Efforts to gain Canadian experience by volunteering, or working at severely reduced wages and hours, often went unrecognized by employers, according to one participant who stated:

"Speaking from my experience, volunteering experience doesn't count. Even if employment counselors tell their students, 'volunteer. That acts as real work experience.' I say, 'No.' [During my interview], the employer told me,

'I know you volunteer, but I don't think that's real experience because the pressure's different.'

Although some immigrants spoke positively about the benefits that volunteering has on obtaining paid employment, volunteering was not seen as a viable strategy for helping obtain employment in one's desired field or occupation. Rather, volunteering was seen as a pathway for obtaining jobs in completely different fields such as child care or elder care, or work in immigrant service agencies or community centres.

Some participants suggested that employers referred to the lack of "Canadian experience" as a way of masking discriminatory hiring practices, or creating unnecessary obstacles to finding even the lowest-paid jobs.⁹ Lola came to Canada in 1982 from the Philippines and is currently struggling to support herself and her two teenage daughters as a single mother. She claims that she has faced severe discrimination in her many years working as a cleaner in various hotels and hospitals. She believes that the reason for not getting hired in jobs that she has applied for in the past has to do with the colour of the skin, rather than the amount of work-related experience she has. Recalling the time she applied to a hotel for a job, Lola recalled:

"Even if you have six years' [experience] they're like, 'Sorry, that's not the experience.' I applied to the Sheraton Hotel. I went to speak to the manager. She goes, 'Oh, you did six years. I'm sorry. You clean in a hospital. That's totally different from a hotel.' I'm like, 'I know how to use a vacuum. I know how to use a broom.' She goes, 'It's not the same.'"

Another participant explained:

"They always ask me, 'do you have experience here?' [I respond], 'No.' Even just for jobs that pay you \$10 or \$8 at the most, it's like you need to

⁹ Eric Liu, "A Descriptive Study of Employers' Attitudes and Practices in Hiring Newcomer Job Seekers, Policy Matters (CERIS— The Ontario Metropolis Centre, 2007), 10.

be well-connected. My friends who live here would always say to me, 'Well, lie. Lie. Tell them that you've taken care of children, that you've cleaned houses, that you've worked as a babysitter, that you've done translations, etc. Lie, lie, lie.'

Thus, even for some of the lowest paid and least desirable jobs, the lack of Canadian experience serves as a major impediment to economic integration.

Limits of Existing Services and Programs for Immigrants

Several participants mentioned that they have participated in various programs to help them find re-employment in Canada, such as enrolling in local college certificate programs and attending various workshops at community centres and immigrant service agencies. Few focus group participants found these programs to be effective. While the discontent with existing services and programs may be symptomatic of the kinds of participants who attended the focus groups, the frustration expressed by numerous participants reveals the shortcomings of strategies that identify individual-level solutions to broader structural problems.

Robert was particularly vocal about the many difficulties he encountered trying to find a job upon arrival to Canada. After taking numerous job-related workshops offered to immigrant newcomers, one of Robert's employment counselors recommended that he attend a job fair. However, after attending the job fair, he felt even more frustrated, explaining:

"There was a big job fair in Surrey on July 8th. I attended. There was a long line [emphasis] and the line [of people waiting to enter] the fair took you one hour under the sun. Then, once you're in there, there's nobody there. They were selling training. They were selling diversity. They were selling how to write your resume. Then, there was Safeway trying to hire. Everybody was jumping at Safeway, so it was chaos. And then, there was training for

how to become an electrician, a machinist. So I think job fair for me is a no, no. And it's a hole in the wall."

In response to a fellow participant's remark that the job fair could have been "just one bad experience," Robert emphasized, "No, no, no. We went to Langley as well. It was a long line and . . . So I'm just telling you my experience but it is not one." Chona, in support of Robert's assessment, explained that she waited for three hours at a job fair on Granville Street, and she was shocked at how many people were waiting to get in. She explained, "Too long, too long. It was even more than we experienced in the Philippines. Oh my God."

Several participants also emphasized that job-related immigrant resettlement programs seemed to have little impact on their job search process. Mira immigrated to Canada from Mongolia in 2003. Prior to coming to Canada, she worked in international trade for twelve years in Asia and Europe. Despite spending time and money enrolling in several different programs, she is still currently unemployed. She stated, "I took lots of different programs....You know the program they have YWCA, blah, blah, too many of them. They say exactly same thing. But, I still can't find work." After having had a professional career in her home country, she now feels like she has been relegated to "the bottom line in society" here in Canada.

Leona had taken multiple courses at an immigrant settlement agency to help her find a job. Although she received much encouragement and praise from employment counselors, she was ultimately unable to find employment. She explained:

"When I went to MOSAIC, they congratulated me, [telling me] that my interviews are great, divine, fantastic. But then, I would go to the interviews, and I never got any responses. And they weren't even jobs for supervisory positions, they were survival jobs—for a dishwasher and those things. And so,

I changed my résumé...I did not put that I'm a physiotherapist, never. [But, still I did not receive a call]. I thought to myself, 'how is it possible that I don't receive a call even for washing dishes? It's possible that it's just illogical, or it was during a time that it was not easy to get a job. I don't know.'

José also engaged in various strategies to make himself more "marketable" in the job search process, such as attending resume writing workshops and job search seminars, but had little insight into why he was repeatedly unsuccessful in securing an interview. José was transferred by his company to Canada from Colombia in 2000. He lived in Canada for several months before deciding to permanently relocate with his wife and sons. After giving up his old job, José was unable to find re-employment for two years. When asked why he thought he experienced such difficulties in the job search process, despite his qualifications, José responded:

"Well for me, the truth is that I don't know what the difficulties are for finding a job, because I was looking for work actively for more than one year and with no results. I don't know the reasons why they [employers] did not call me. I went to one of those workshops that they make you go to out of obligation in order to learn how to make a resume, in order to be able to discuss the interview, in order to be able to help you find your strengths and weaknesses... [But, I did not] even get one [job] interview, not even a phone call."

José's experience calls attention to research findings from a study conducted by Philip Oreopoulos (2009) in which immigrants with non-Anglo-sounding names experience discrimination in the very initial stages of job acquisition. Oreopoulos sent thousands of fabricated resumes to online job postings across multiple occupations in Toronto. He found that interview request rates for English-named applicants with Canadian education and experience were

more than three times higher compared to resumes with Asian names with foreign education and experience.¹⁰

The inability of existing programs and services to help immigrants find employment highlights a deeper problem in the dynamics of local labour markets. While it is essential for newcomers to gain the skills and experience necessary to adapt to Canadian workplaces, few employers seem willing to hire immigrants, especially in higher-paid and higher-skilled occupations.

CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Many participants who immigrated to Canada expected to find employment in jobs related to their experience and education. However, as the above cases show, immigrants often take low-paid jobs that have little to do with their previous employment or educational background. Many participants relied on help from family and friends, rather than employment services, to obtain employment (see Chart 2). Work obtained through family and friends is often low-paid work within one's ethnic community or among other under-employed immigrants. One participant recalled that "all the jobs I've had until now have been with immigrants." This experience is shared by many of the participants regardless of their educational attainment.

While the characteristics of the participant sample are weighted towards individuals who have experienced difficulty in the labour market, the downward employment trajectories of almost all the participants was striking, as they indicate that many immigrants face tremendous barriers in the labour market, regardless of their length of tenure in Canada (see Chart 3). The most common occupations held by participants included sewing, cleaning,

10 Philip Oreopoulos, "Why Do Skilled Immigrants Struggle in the Labour Market? A Field Experiment with Six Thousand Resumes," *Metropolis BC Working Paper No. 09-03* (May 2009), 5, accessed 17 May 2011, <http://www.amssa.org/arc/pdfs/4.pdf>.

CHART 2. METHOD OF FINDING FIRST JOB

FIRST JOB IN CANADA	PERCENTAGE
Family	21% (8)
Friend	44% (17)
Job posting	8% (3)
Newspaper	15% (6)
Applied on site	5% (2)
Agency	5% (2)
Walk in	2.5% (1)
Other	5% (2)
Family	21% (8)

and cashiering. Those with higher levels of education were sometimes able to find employment in office administration, trades, or managerial positions, although many of them had begun working as cleaners, cashiers, or restaurant workers when they first arrived in Canada. It is also noteworthy that 51% of participants are currently unemployed, not because they have reached the retirement age, but because they have been unable to find any employment, whether it matches their skill and educational level or not.

CHART 3. CAREER TRAJECTORIES AFTER IMMIGRATING TO CANADA

JOB BEFORE CANADA	FIRST JOB IN CANADA	CURRENT SITUATION
Teacher	Waitress	Unemployed
Accountant	Cashier	Unemployed
Computer Technician	Housekeeper	Unemployed
Office Clerk	Factory worker	Unemployed
Social worker	Carpenter	Unemployed
Physiotherapist	Warehouse assembly	Seamstress
Nutritionist	Barista	Unemployed
Teacher	Housekeeper	Housekeeper
Engineer	Stocker	Data programmer
Banker	Receptionist	Bulk foods clerk
HR supervisor	Cashier	Unemployed
Engineer	Janitor	Janitor
VP Marketing	Sales clerk	Bank teller
Lawyer	Dishwasher	Seamstress

The following sections provide brief descriptions of the most common jobs and job trajectories.

Sewing or Restaurant Work

Three participants from China worked as waitresses or in sewing factories before moving to Canada. After immigrating, they wished to pursue the same type of work they had in China. While they were able to find work waitressing or in sewing factories with help from family and friends, they reported deteriorating working conditions due to competition from other immigrants and a decrease in the number of sewing factories in Vancouver. One participant, Ellie, explained that when she first arrived in 1998, she secured a job in a dim sum restaurant as a food runner through a friend's referral. Although her co-workers earned \$7-\$8 per hour, she only earned \$5 per hour based on the employer's rationale that she had no experience. After attending some English-language classes, Ellie managed to find work in a "Caucasian factory" at slightly higher wages. She explained:

When you come down to it, the income is still low, but still, working at Caucasian factories, they will go according to the labour laws. Like, they'll look at how many hours you work and pay you overtime according to the law, and after a year they'll give you benefits. So it's very proper...But after one year, the factory closed down, so that was it."

Thus, even for immigrants who are able to secure higher-paid jobs in non-ethnic businesses, they are still limited to relatively lower-paid and more insecure forms of employment in the larger labour market.

Cleaners

Eight participants from India and the Philippines were working as cleaners and housekeepers. As a group, they were highly educated. Four cleaners had university degrees; two had graduated from two-year college programs, while the other two had graduated from high school. While two participants working in cleaning were new immigrants, the others had been cleaning from 7 to 35 years. There were very few improvements in wages reported, aside from increases in the minimum wage. Many participants working in cleaning regarded themselves as stuck in “survival jobs,” and half of them are taking college or certificate programs in hopes of finding alternative employment.

Cashiers

Six participants worked as cashiers upon moving to Canada. Four came from China, one from the Philippines, and another from India. Most of them had a high school education, though the participant from the Philippines had a postgraduate degree. Participants employed as cashiers were formerly clerks, accountants, or computer technicians in their home country. Although working as a cashier still paid relatively low wages, participants remarked that cashiering was less strenuous than working in factories or working as a waitress and did not require working late night shifts and, thus, was a more preferred job.

Office Workers

Six participants worked office jobs either as clerks, receptionists, or administrative assistants. All participants who worked in an office had university degrees from their country of origin, and two participants had master’s degrees. While for some participants, being an office worker marked a slight

improvement from their first jobs in Canada as cashiers or housekeepers, these positions simultaneously represented a steep decline from their careers in their home countries, such as working as an editor or nutritionist. Although the wages earned at office jobs are not high—the average wage of the clerks was \$11.25 an hour—some participants remarked that they are grateful for a job with steady hours where they do not have to stand on their feet for eight or more hours at a time.

Residential Care Work

After she lost her job at a garment factory, one participant explained that she spent her savings on English classes and job training classes in the health-care field. She managed to find a job as a residential care worker earning \$17 per hour; however, she explains that she spends more time working than she actually gets paid for:

“So they send me to the different homes to work. And I get \$17 something an hour. But it’s still pretty hard work, because I go to this home and work two to three hours, and then another home for one to two hours, and I’m running around. So in a day, I’m actually out for ten hours, but hours actually worked would be like six hours, because the time in the middle is not counted. But then they do compensate gas, like if you’re going from A to B, they’ll give you a dollar or something, according their rate.”

Thus, although she was able to find work at a higher hourly wage, she is only paid for actual time spent with clients. Taking into account transportation costs—including having to sometimes travel from Delta to North Vancouver in a single day—she is paid much less.

Trades

Five participants, all of whom held university degrees, worked in diverse positions in some kind of trade, such as a pressman, or cable assembler. As a group, participants working in trades had the highest average earnings at \$15 an hour. However, none of them worked in trades related to occupations they held at home. For example, a social worker from Uruguay worked first as a carpenter, then in the plastic industry.

Managers

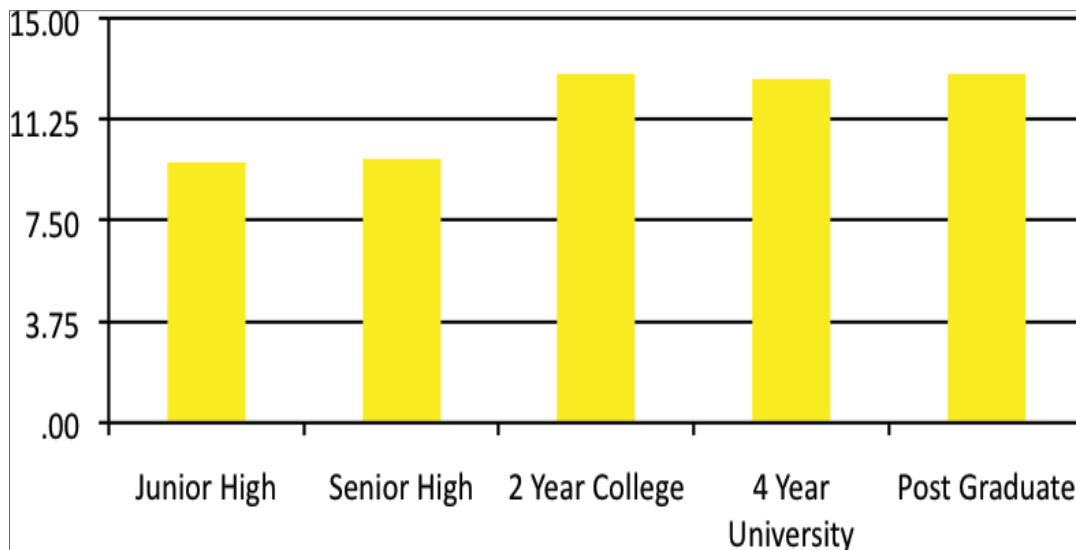
Of our 44 participants, only two reported that they worked in managerial positions. They are mostly university graduates; one has an MBA. However, while one participant reported that he is a project manager, his hourly wage was only \$10 an hour. It is interesting to note that both managers are new immigrants who arrived in 2010.

IMPACTS OF LOW INCOME

The living wage calculation in Metro Vancouver is \$18 an hour, while those earning below \$10 an hour are considered to be low-income. When discussing the efforts of Vancouver's current Living Wage Campaign, led by First Call BC, to pass a city living wage ordinance, some participants gasped, making comments such as "Wow!", "Who makes that much?", "I don't think we get even over ten an hour! How many people can make that?", "We are so poor!" and "So under \$18 is low income?" Most participants who participated in the dialogues earned between \$8 to \$13 per hour, and only two earned over \$18 per hour. (see Figure 3). Participants' surprise at the living wage figure, which is considered a conservative estimate by First Call BC, highlights the poverty-level wages that many immigrants receive in Vancouver.

Low income poses a variety of deleterious effects upon immigrants and their families. Of all 44 participants, only one believed that her income was sufficient to meet her everyday needs. Two percent of participants responded that they had a good quality of life, and 28 % responded that they had a poor quality of life. The vast majority of participants (70%), however, responded that they had an average quality of life, despite the fact that they earned low wages or were unemployed. Such a widespread resignation to this state of living may point to a *normalization* of the economic subordination of immigrants, whereby immigrants themselves are internalizing a lower sense of self-worth and second-class status, as well as accepting the accompanying abuse and neglect by Canadian employers and the government.

FIGURE 3. AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE



The main costs of low-income work described by focus group participants included: 1) financial strains, 2) health problems, 3) difficulties providing for children, 4) erosion and improvement of self-esteem and self-worth, 5) perceptions of discriminatory treatment and “second class” status, and 6) inability to speak out against employer abuse and discrimination. The following section elaborates on each of these issues.

Financial Strains

Chronic underemployment and low-wage work have prompted many participants to describe their experience living in Canada as a struggle to meet the most basic needs. Unable to secure a stable, adequately paying job, participants have reported various consequences, such as being in debt, relying on welfare payments, having to use services such as local food banks, and more. For the first six years of their lives in Canada, Maria and her husband worked graveyard shifts distributing newspapers in order to supplement their daytime. Describing the conditions as “slave-like,” Maria recalled:

“I worked at night under tight circumstances of time and working seven days a week...We were responsible because it did not matter what happened—sickness, that the car broke down—no, it didn’t matter to the manager...The pay was something like thirteen cents per newspaper, and if the customer complained, they would take off three dollars...It was never enough.”

Taking into account having to incur the car maintenance and fuel costs, the work provided meager profits. Disillusioned by the struggles she and her family face on a daily basis, Maria stated, “We thought that working hard would be enough.”

Participants emphasized that they learned to eliminate any unnecessary costs to save money, including going out to restaurants, seeing movies, or taking vacations. One participant with school-aged children remarked, “You take vacation [time], because [your employer] gives you two weeks [paid vacation], but you have to stay at home because you don’t have anywhere to go.” Most of your extra money is spent on your children, she added:

“You have to dress them, you have to have money for their school trips... education might be ‘free’ in regards to public education, but their being in school means that there are all kinds of demands. And if you have a poorly-

paid job, this generates the need to pay on credit. But then, you get to the moment where you can't even pay the minimum payment. Or you continue paying just the minimum payment, and the interest keeps rising. The line of credit is the same. And even when one goes back and looks at what they spent the money on they realize that they spent it just on living. Simply just on living. Trying to pay bills, trying to meet the needs of one's family - and so poorly paid work generates dissatisfaction in all aspects of life."

Participants acknowledged that coping with lower incomes meant making tougher choices, but they also recognized that immigration is often associated with desires for greater consumption and more comfortable lifestyles. Maria's husband, Will, stated:

"But the system sells it to us too. Because all of us here have a television, right? They sell you an image of the ideal family in North America. Big house, beautiful clothes, they sell you the image, and you often enter into that fantasy...And so they hone into not your individual needs and desires but instead "you are the same as him. You are the same as him." And you get in and you get in, but it's a lie! Because it's a trap. The system wants you to get in, to get in. What we need to do is have less televisions and read more [laughter]."

Although Will never explained who "they" referred to, the laughter of all the focus group participants revealed that many could relate to his sentiments. Some felt it ironic that they came to Canada looking for more comfortable lifestyles promised by the Canadian government, only to end up socioeconomically worse off than when they were in their home countries. They pointed out the disconnect that exists between the attractive messages projected by the Canadian government to prospective newcomers, and the inadequate support services provided to them once they set foot within Canadian borders.

Health Issues

Low income is inimical to the physical, emotional, and mental health of immigrants. Participants reported a wide variety of threats to their well-being. Work-related accidents –suffered as a result of unsafe working conditions – further impinged on the ability of some participants to make a sufficient living. Chronic stress and exhaustion have led to gastrointestinal problems, as well as conditions of anxiety and depression. One mother believed that financial constraints on her grocery budget contributed to her daughter’s high cholesterol count. The insecure nature of the work many of the participants engaged in often left them without health benefits, and consequently unable to access the necessary medical care and therapy services.

The lack of sick pay for many immigrants employed in low-paid work also resulted in situations where immigrants put their health in jeopardy to keep their jobs. One participant explained:

“You can’t be sick. You can’t miss any day. Even you can’t have an appointment because you lose your hours. You can’t pay for that. And your employer can get you off the job, because if you’re not working – well they can hire a better person who is more flexible.”

The high cost of healthcare for immigrants who do not have extended healthcare insurance resulted in some immigrants having to return to their home country for medical treatment, according to one of the Spanish-speaking participants:

“A poorly paid job generates few benefits and an enormous amount of difficulties. There are few companies that actually provide people with extended healthcare. And if you need to go to a specialist for some major issues, right there you’re talking about thousands of dollars. And so what do you have to do? When you travel to your country, you go down there and do it there be-

cause it's cheaper there, and by that point your teeth have already fallen out [laughter throughout].

The laughter of all the other focus group participants again indicates that traveling to one's home country to receive medical treatments was a fairly common practice among immigrants.

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILY LIFE

Low-paid work among immigrants is a deeply gendered issue, with women of colour with foreign degrees commonly experiencing the least return on their skills when searching for jobs in a new country.¹¹ Immigrant women are said to be caught in "double jeopardy" and have higher unemployment rates than both immigrant men and Canadian-born women.¹² Mothers are often forced to take multiple jobs in order to support their families and, thus, have little time to monitor their children's progress in school or spend time with them at home.¹³

Many participants expressed regret at not being able to provide properly for their children. One participant expressed that she believed that it was unfair to her children that she was unable to provide summer camps, swimming, or music lessons, which she perceived were privileges commonly enjoyed by Canadian children. Another participant expressed that being unable to invest as much in her children's education as other Canadians meant that her children's "quality of life" suffered as a consequence.

11 Gillian Creese, Isabel Dyck, and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The 'Flexible' Immigrant: Household Strategies and the Labour Market*, Metropolis BC Working Paper No. 06-19 (December 2006), 9, accessed 17 June 2011, <http://mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2006/WP06-19.pdf>.

12 René Morissette and Garnett Pico, *Low-Paid Work and Economically Vulnerable Families over the Last Two Decades*, Statistics Canada (April 2005), 24, accessed 17 June 2011, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2005248-eng.pdf>.

13 Geraldine Pratt, "Deskilling Across the Generations: Reunification Among Transnational Filipino Families in Vancouver," Metropolis BC Working Paper No. 08-06 (September 2008), 42, accessed 17 June 2011, www.amssa.org/arc/pdfs/13.pdf.

Low wages also meant long work hours for many of the participants, often at the expense of being able to provide direct care for their children. One immigrant from China expressed remorse for the conditions under which she and her husband raised their son. With no choice but to work late shifts in a restaurant in Chinatown, she recalled:

“Sometimes we would work overtime until 1:00 a.m. And then in the middle of the night, my husband would wake my son up and say, ‘Hey son! It’s time to wake up. It’s time to wake up and drive mommy home.’ So they would have to come pick me up at 1:00 a.m. or 2:00 a.m.”

Some participants were unable to continue working due to the impact their long working hours and commutes had on their children. Lila recalled:

“Once I found a job in Surrey. I got up at 6:00 a.m.; I brought my child to childcare around 7:00 a.m. I took the transit, took the bus to get to Surrey. I came back around 6:00 p.m. because I need to take the bus and sometimes get some food. And I got home, cooked the dinner. After dinner right away, went to bed. My child couldn’t bear it. So for a career, for a job, it’s not just about the skills, it’s related to many other problems, many other social issues. “The difficulties for parents with young children, especially single mothers, were especially apparent during the focus groups. Janet moved to Canada with two young children. She explained:

“Because I was alone with the children, I had a huge problem with the schedules...The kids start at 9:00 a.m., but whatever job you take, you have to start at 8:00 a.m. or 7:00 a.m. And so I thought to myself...what was I supposed to do with the kids?”

Parents faced many agonizing choices when it came to the economic hardships associated with immigration. Burt, who immigrated from Uruguay 13 years ago with his wife Maria, could not afford to pay their children’s international student fees for two entire years prior to being granted Canadian resi-

dency. Consequently, his children could not attend school for two years. He remembered:

“That affected us a lot emotionally. Because watching our children falling behind in school, watching them not be able to go was very hard. Because we wanted them to be able to, we knocked on all the doors that we could. And they said no.”

Furthermore, since both he and his wife worked extremely long hours throughout the day and night, they were unable to spend as much time as they would have liked to with their children while waiting for their residency status.

The inability of parents to financially support their households often resulted in situations in which children worked at young ages. Lupe explained that the economic contribution of her children was a “double-edged sword.” Although her children brought in much-needed income to support the household, they also grew up faster. She explained:

Our children start working here from such a young age and they’re helping to support the family. Before in one’s country, one was the head of the family, and now kids are helping you to make it. That helps them [the kids] grow...and there are lots of benefits to that...But at times as a parent, this is not what I wanted for my child. This was not part of my plan.”

An added complication was the reversal of authority roles, Lupe emphasized:

“Because your children bear so much of the responsibilities, they start [saying things like], ‘No mother, you know, I’m not going to do that like that.’ And what can I say? You are no longer the head of the family because the role that made you that has been fundamentally changed...That is an enormous frustration! So you are frustrated by the career aspect of your life. You are frustrated by your economic situation. You are frustrated by the way that your own family treats you!”

Self-Esteem and Self-Worth

The difficulties that immigrants experience related to underemployment and low-paid work have contradictory effects on one's self-esteem and self-worth. On the one hand, participants talked about the isolation associated with living on tight budgets, the difficulty of coping with downward status mobility, and the disappointment of foregoing even simple luxuries such as buying mascara or going to a restaurant. One participant explained:

"You can't achieve a certain state of living and it puts your self-esteem down. And you get stuck, and along the way there are problems with your children, with your partner, personal problems, health problems, stress."

Another participant talked about the inability to discuss one's problems with friends and family, especially in one's home country:

"So the most hurtful thing about it is you can't talk about it to your friends from way back home because – maybe it's your pride that, 'Why did you go there? Just to be a low- income earner when you were better off here.' Of course [you can say], 'I'm doing this for my children and everything.' But deep inside, you don't know how to feel. Sometimes you don't know what to feel anymore. You just wake up, go to work, cook dinner, sleep again, wake up go to work. You don't want to think about it anymore. So that's the most difficult thing, even if you want to talk about it among your friends here. But your best friends are from your country and yet you can't talk about yourself so truthfully."

On the other hand, working in low-paid jobs served as a source of pride and self-worth, especially for individuals who were more accustomed to being served in their home countries. Leona explained:

"Yes, working in a coffee shop was difficult for me. I was used to always being served, and not be the one doing the serving. But I have seen that I have become into a better person, I am a much more humble person. I get a lot of joy out of seeing the person that I have become. Why? Because I am

a humanitarian person, I am a person who sees people as people, not like servants or like a thousand other things."

Eduardo also recognized the value of moving to another country and experiencing downward status mobility. He explained that his transition to a new type of employment helped broaden his perspective and open his mind:

"Coming here to Canada or any other part of the world is a great challenge. At first I came with my mentality. I said look, this country is going to support me. Canada is a country that gives opportunities, and that's that. And then, you get shocked with the reality that it is not actually like that. And well you have to be open, because as Maria said, because we came here on our own parts, no one obligated us to come. We came here on our own and it was a decision that was taken, well thought out, and so we have to live the consequences. And one of the consequences is being open to a new career. For example, before I used to work as a social worker but now can you imagine I work in a kitchen. That is a new stage, well I did it but now I'm working in a commercial kitchen."

Marginalization, Racism and "Second-Class" Status

Despite the positive experiences associated with learning to cope with social and economic hardships, participants describe mixed feelings associated with experiencing discrimination in the labour market. Christine immigrated to Canada in 2002, after earning her master's degree from the "top university in China" and working at a "very famous publishing house." She initially expressed positive feelings about Vancouver and Canada:

"I like Canada. I like Vancouver very much. It's a truly beautiful city. It has lot of advantages compared to other countries, but I think it still has some severe social issues like low-paid work for immigrants. Many immigrants are very skilled but because of lack of experience and local diplomas or degrees, they can't do the job they are good at."

Unable to resume the job she left behind in China, she lamented, “We cannot do what we like to do and what we’re good at. What’s the point of living here for the rest of our lives?”

Participants recognize that Canada has strong laws when it comes to human rights and protection from discrimination, but they also emphasize the gap between perception and reality. One participant explained:

“So, I mean the laws here are always very good, but enforcement of the law is a big problem. Like discrimination...When we were trained as immigrants, the employment counselor said, ‘In Canada no discrimination is law because of your age or race or education.’ But in fact, it happens everywhere.”

Another participant emphasized:

“You see the discrimination in all areas. You see it in commerce or you see it in the movies, and who is the servant? Maria [laughter throughout]. Who is the good cleaning lady? A Latina. Who is the gardener? A Latino. You’re never going to see an American working as a domestic. Or Jennifer Lopez, what did she do in her movie in the hotel? Living in a tiny home with her mother, Latina working in a hotel as housekeeping. I think that there is racism absolutely in this country. For a Latina? Even more. Maybe my head is too square. But ever since I’ve lived in Canada I’ve seen it.”

Mariela came from Uruguay thirteen years ago with her husband and three children looking for a better life, only to make numerous sacrifices for meager benefits. She described the perception that she believed employers in Vancouver had towards Latinos, stating:

“I think the theme of Latino I am mentioning because what I have seen always, okay, you want to work [sic]? Cleaning or construction. Cleaning or construction. [Those are] the things that are offered to you. And if you go to a cleaning company—I worked for a cleaning company—70% of the other people employed there are Latinos. And construction, the same. So in other words...from the beginning they put you into a box. I could not expect to have been offered anything else. Cleaning or construction, that’s it.”

Calling attention to the existence of discrimination and racism is not an easy task. During the focus group conducted in Surrey, one of the participants displayed hesitancy before openly discussing racism in front of Erin, a white student from UBC who was taking notes. Erin assured her that she was not offended and, in fact, understood where she was coming from, which helped allay the participant's fears. This interaction, however, epitomized the difficulties that some immigrants of colour experience speaking openly about discrimination and racism in front of White Canadians. Part of the difficulty in openly discussing discrimination and racism was linked to the inability to verify the root causes of labour market barriers. Betty, who immigrated from Mexico, commented:

"For us new immigrants, we don't know the reasons why are they discriminating. Because we think we are qualified. But in reality maybe for them it's not discrimination, but for us we really feel we are discriminated because why am I not hired? [Is it because] I am Brown? If he can do, why can't I? Because he knows somebody in the company and I don't know anyone, so I have no connections?"

Regardless of the ability to say without reservation that their difficulties in the labour market are due to discrimination, the effects of being denied the ability to secure employment that matches one skill and educational level often resulted in feelings of devalued worth and status. One participant who immigrated to Canada from Columbia in 1999 explained that he considered himself a "second class citizen" in Canada:

"It has been a struggle. I have found that the wages have never been enough. Even trying to establish a good home, I feel that every day one is even more in the reality of debt that one incurs slowly and slowly, but that after a while it is very difficult to get out of. And so any initiative that tries to improve the situation of immigrants who come here with valid qualifications, with good English or no English, but that nevertheless have been accepted

by this country. That they have the opportunity to have a life that at the very least they can have the same expectations as the Canadians, that here I still consider myself a second class citizen because I cannot aspire to have what one [non-immigrant Canadian] has here regularly.”

Inability to Speak Out against Employers

Many participants recalled feeling powerless to counter abusive or discriminatory treatment on the job. Ada immigrated from China twelve years ago. She found a job at a restaurant working for less than minimum wage while simultaneously going to school. She agreed to work for \$5 an hour— one-third less than her fellow colleagues—operating under the perception that a lack of experience in the restaurant industry was a valid reason to be subjected to below-minimum wage pay. She also faced discrimination and abuse at the hand of her employers. She stated:

“Every night I got home, I was crying. It was so draining. And I got scolded. They wouldn’t care if you were a new immigrant, inexperienced or not—if you [made] mistakes, they [would] yell at you.”

Ada explains that this constant mistreatment eventually led her to quit the restaurant job and pursue factory work instead.

Becky, an immigrant of seventeen years from China, also shared her experiences of oppression in the workplace. She described her early days struggling to meet deadlines as a seamstress while taking care of her children as “inhumane.” She recalled:

“Those days were really miserable. Not just miserable for myself but hard on the kids too, because they [would] give you hard deadlines. If your deadline is three days, then even if you die, you *will* give them the goods”

Being overworked constantly prevented her from being able to spend any time with her children. She later found a job at a factory, where she discovered that protesting for one's rights was highly discouraged. She explained:

"They [would] tell you, 'Work! Just work!' So I worked. Every day I worked overtime. I would start at eight, and finish at eight. You needed to be obedient. They tell you to walk, you walk. Stand, you stand. So you can work seven days if you want, but there's no overtime pay."

Afraid of losing their jobs, Becky said that she and her immigrant coworkers did not dare to engage in any collective action.

Participants who had attempted to exercise their rights remarked that their efforts often resulted in more harm than help. One of the Cantonese-speaking participants recalled that while working at a restaurant, her wages and hours were continuously reduced without cause. Together, she and her co-workers tried to take action by seeking the assistance of the Labour Department. As a result, all the workers who attempted to file complaints ended up losing their jobs in the end.

Fear of losing one's job was commonly repeated in response to questions about how individuals addressed discriminatory or unfair treatment in the workplace. One participant who worked as a bank teller explained that even big employers like banks rarely paid immigrant workers overtime:

"I did a lot of overtime and they said when I got the job that whenever I do overtime, they pay extra. But in reality they changed. They said, "Oh, our policy has changed...So sorry. If you would like to continue to work here, accept it. If you do not, [feel free to leave]."

One participant explained that employers avoid paying legally required benefits by refusing to provide full-time jobs:

“Some employers are very smart, super smart. They give the employees 37, 38 or sometimes 39 hours a week but they don’t give you 40 hours because once one works 40 hours, it’s a totally a full-time job and they have to give the benefits. So they give them a little bit less than full-time so that they save lots of money. They don’t give you the full benefits. And many immigrants realize that after they work there for a while.”

Lacking familiarity with Canadian workers’ rights, membership to formal labour organizations, or a collective will to action out of fear of being fired, many immigrants feel powerless to change their current situations for the better.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FOR CHANGE

While low-paid work among immigrants has remained a persistent problem in Canada, immigrants themselves are rarely given the opportunity to propose ways to eliminate the barriers and ameliorate the negative consequences that directly affect them and their families. The neighbourhood cafés provided a safe, non-judgmental, and open arena in which participants were encouraged to voice their opinions and creatively propose their own ideas for affecting positive change for immigrants trapped in the Canadian labour market.

Many participants expressed anger and frustration with the gap between Canada’s immigration policy and reality and emphasized the urgent need for the government to address the situation. When asked why he felt so passionate about the Canadian government’s responsibility to resolve the issue of immigrant underemployment, one participant responded emphatically that the Canadian government actively recruits immigrants with strong educational backgrounds and professional work experience to immigrate, which creates the expectation that immigrants will be able to find comparable employment in Canada. Another participant agreed, stating:

“The government should have ways to help the workers, to say, ‘Okay well, we brought you here because you have qualifications and we are going to help you make sure that these skills get recognized here so that you can work in the area in which you studied for.’ I think that the government is trying to say things [pause] because there has been a trend in this country in which immigrants come and they end up driving taxis, or working in cafeterias although they are very qualified to be doing other labour, in the case of doctors, nurses, psychologists, therapists, of everything. In other words, governments should establish practices in which to integrate these people in the productive forces of this country. But that they have not done [anything] yet.”

To reduce the gap between perception and expectation, participants suggested that the Canadian government provide a more realistic picture of the difficulties that skilled immigrants face in the labour market. They also suggested the need for increased dialogue between immigrants and immigration officials.

One concrete area for improvement relates to the provision of job-related settlement services for immigrants. While services related to labour market adaptation for immigrants exist, many stated that information about such opportunities is not readily accessible to immigrants. Some participants have joined programs like Skills Connect, but the majority of participants had no knowledge of the programs and organizations that were available. Furthermore, many of these programs are designed specifically for newly arrived immigrants, blatantly overlooking the fact that immigrants who have been living in Canada for several years and who are thus ineligible to take advantage of these services still possess specific needs and face specific challenges.

Participants also emphasized the need for services and programs that provide an actual pathway to employment. Programs that provide genuine em-

ployment experiences, as opposed to help with resume writing and interview skills, were seen as particularly valuable. One participant explained:

“I have a son who’s 20 years old. He’s the youngest actually who’s with me here among my sons. And we [coincidentally read about] this government program that gives three months on-the-job paid training to out of school youth who wants to get into the work force This is sponsored by SUCCESS but I think they only do it once a year or I’m not sure...I hope the government can support that further because out of 50 applicants or 100 applicants, they only take 15 a year and luckily my son was one of those. Right now he’s earning something while being trained or learning on how to join the workforce.”

Other participants emphasized the importance of knowing what resources and opportunities are available to low-income people, especially when it comes to qualifying for income assistance or housing assistance benefits.

Another urgent issue raised by participants was the lack of affordable childcare. Not having affordable childcare often meant that immigrant mothers had to sacrifice their careers and jobs in order to take care of children, which further reduced the family’s income. While the lack of affordable childcare affects all working families in Vancouver, the consequences low-income immigrant families suffer is particularly alarming. Participants also emphasized the need for employers to provide job opportunities that provide childcare subsidies, rather than create part-time jobs that do not offer such benefits.

Finally, participants recognized the value of sharing their experiences with others who have gone through similar situations. While they emphasized that talking was never enough, the ability to share one’s trials and tribulations with other immigrants with similar experiences was seen as a way to counter feelings of isolation and low self-esteem associated with immigrating to Canada. Also, the ability to connect with other individuals and groups who view immi-

grant deskilling and poverty employment as widespread community concern has given participants the confidence and experience to continue developing collective solutions to collective problems.

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APPENDIX 1: NEIGHBOURHOOD CAFÉ BROCHURES

Brief Background

- Low-paid work is widespread in British Columbia. One in five workers earned less than \$12 per hour, according to 2008 figures.
- Low-paid work contributes to child poverty. 56% of poor children in BC live in families where at least one adult works a full-time/full-year job.
- Immigrants, especially recent immigrants, are over-represented in Canada's poor population. Compared to the 1970s, immigrants have more difficulty finding well-paid work and have higher rates of poverty.
- Women, aboriginal people and members of visible minority groups (e.g. persons, other than aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour) are also more likely to work in low-paid jobs and have higher rates of poverty.

Café Discussion Questions

1. What kind of work are you doing now?
2. Is it the same as or different from the first job you got after immigrating to Canada? What are the main differences between your first job and your current job?
3. What difficulties have you experienced finding a job? Why do you think you experienced difficulty?
4. Have you ever experienced job discrimination? What do you think are the reasons?
5. What are the effects of low-paid work in your life?
6. What are the effects of low-paid work on your family?
7. Outside of work and the home, where do you spend most of your time?
8. How do you cope with the difficulties of living on low-pay?
9. Who do you ask for help when you have a problem with your job?
10. Who do you ask for help when you have a problem with your family?
11. What strategies have you used to try to improve the quality of your life?
12. What can we do together to improve the living of low-paid workers and their families?

For Further Snacking

Coordinadora de Asociaciones y Agencias de Servicio Multiculturales de BC, Conectando Investigaciones; www.amsnsl.org/bc/
 Centro Canadiense para Políticas Alternativas; www.policyalternatives.ca/newsroom/
news.releases/2010/Hiring-wage-slows-real-costs-raising-family-micro-vancouver
 Campaña para un salario digno en Vancouver; livingwagedforfamilies.ca

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Neighbourhood Café

Costs and Consequences of Low-Paid Work for Immigrants and their Families



What's on the menu?

1. Brief Background on low-paid work and immigrants
2. Research studies
 - Why do many immigrants have trouble finding good employment?
 - How does low-paid work affect the lives of immigrants and their families?
 - How do low-income immigrants cope with the barriers and difficulties of finding good employment?
3. Café discussion questions
4. For further snacking

Principal Researcher: Jennifer J. Chun, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia
 Community Consultant: Priti Shah
 Community Partners: Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, MOISAC BC, Hospital Employers Union
 Neighbourhood Cafes sponsored by: BC Metropolis Research Dissemination Grant
 For more information, contact Jennifer Chun: emajichun@interchange.ubc.ca | phone 604-822-4387

Why do some immigrants have difficulty finding good employment?

One answer: Lack of Canadian experience
Employers use Canadian experience to determine if job applicants are capable of performing in the workplace (Liu 2007). Immigrants without Canadian work experience or references often have difficulty finding employment. This can create a "trap" for immigrants without Canadian experience who become stuck in low-paid survival jobs. One African immigrant woman who experienced discrimination in the job-seeking process asked: "If you don't give me the work, where would you like me to get the Canadian experience?" (Creese 2005)

One answer: Non-recognition of foreign credentials
Canadian immigration policy rewards immigrants for their credentials, but Canadian employers do not. One immigrant from South Asia explained: "Here's the story. You are in Iran or India. And you want to migrate to Canada. OK? So on the basis of the fact that you're a doctor, you get x number of points. So I'm saying "hey you're a doctor, great! Come to Canada!" But you can't practice in Canada. Now explain this to me." (Baister and Cameron 2002)

One Answer: "the colour of their English"
Gillian Creese and Edith Kambere (2003) conducted focus groups with African immigrant women in the Lower Mainland. Their study found that despite their fluency in the English language, employers perceived them as unqualified job candidates.

- One focus group participant described her experience with language accent discrimination: "I made my resume and when they read it, it was excellent and then they called me for a job interview. When I started to answer some of the questions they asked, "where are you from?" Then I said "from Africa." "When did you land as an immigrant?" Then I said "in Africa we are also trained in English." "No wonder, your accent is too heavy; we cannot understand you."

- Another focus group participant said: "The language is a barrier to integrate in the society because if you speak English in your accent, people will know you are from Africa . . . and by the accent they can not give you a job, or a house."

Focus group participants said that these experiences discouraged them from seeking better jobs and made them feel like they would never truly belong in Canada.

One answer: Discrimination based on foreign-sounding names
One research study by Philip Oreopoulos (2009) says that job applicants with English-sounding names have an easier time finding employment. The study found that job applicants with English-sounding names received interview requests 40 percent more often than those with common Chinese, Indian or Pakistani names. The study concluded that, "employers discriminate substantially by the name included on the resume."

What are the consequences of low-paid work for immigrants and their families?

One answer: People become "trapped" in poverty jobs.
People often work 2 or sometimes 3 jobs to earn enough money to provide for basic necessities (e.g. food, rent, clothing, transportation, etc.). This leaves little time for rest, taking care of one's health and spending time with family and friends. Working long hours also makes it difficult to find the time or money to retrain oneself to get a better paying job. As a result, low-paid work can trap people in a lifetime of poverty and chronic stress.



One answer: Lose one's skills
When foreign education and skills are not recognized, immigrants tend to lose their skills or become "deskilled." Though some immigrants become retrained in Canada, they rarely regain the qualifications they held before they immigrated.

Immigrant women of colour with foreign degrees experience the least return on their skills (Creese et al. 2006). One reason is the mismatch between skills and education requirements and job placement in programs such as the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) which requires nannies and domestic workers to have university degrees.

According to one former caregiver: "It takes two years before you can have an open visa here in Canada. By that time you have been deskilled and it becomes extremely difficult to get other jobs besides housework. So your past training is almost nothing. If you are a nurse and if you haven't worked as a nurse for two years, you can hardly go back to the profession anymore." (Pant et. al 2008)

One answer: Low-paid work inherited by children of immigrants
Youth from immigrant families often find themselves in low-paid work. One study found that the children of immigrant women who came to Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program often accept low paid work instead of continuing their education in order to help support their family (Pant et. al 2008).

One young immigrant who came to Canada to join his mother said: "We looked for ways to be able to go to school, but there were not enough funds. So we looked for ways to look for jobs. And the plan for education was forgotten. We also have to work to help my siblings back in the Philippines." Another study found that youth from immigrant families without university education had no difficulty finding jobs, but they were mostly low-paid jobs with little opportunity for advancement (Yan, Lauer and Chin 2009).

How can low-income immigrants cope with the barriers and economic uncertainty of finding good employment?

One answer: Education
Many immigrants use education as a means of entering the labour market, including enrolling in bridging courses for immigrants, ESL classes or diploma programs at local colleges. Many children of immigrant parents also use education to improve their chances of getting a better job.

One answer: Volunteering
To improve their chances of gaining Canadian experience, some immigrants seek volunteer work. Immigrant settlement organizations offer courses with an unpaid practicum to help immigrants obtain Canadian work experience.

While volunteering may help immigrants find employment in the long-run, it may not be a good short-term strategy. Once volunteer work is attained immigrants typically provide free labour for several months to build up the necessary 'Canadian experience' on their resumes. (Creese 2005)

One answer: Organize to secure a living wage
Workers paid low-wages do not earn enough money to keep their families out of poverty. Paying workers a living wage is one solution to helping individuals improve the quality of their lives. A living wage is different from the minimum wage, which is the lowest legal wage an employer can pay a worker. A living wage calls on employers to pay a wage that allows a worker to provide for basic expenses (such as housing, child care, food and transportation).

In 2010, the living wage rate in Vancouver was set at \$19.17 for a two-earner family with two young children. The City of Westminster was the first city government to pass a living wage for all city and contract workers.

Breve introducción

- Hay bastante trabajo mal pagado en British Columbia. Uno de cada cinco trabajadores gana menos de \$ 12 la hora, según cifras del 2008.
- El trabajo mal pagado contribuye a la pobreza infantil. 56% de los niños pobres en BC viven en familias donde al menos un adulto tiene un trabajo de tiempo completo, que dura todo el año.
- Los inmigrantes, especialmente los inmigrantes recientes, están sobrerrepresentados entre los pobres de Canadá. Comparado con la década de los 70s, a los inmigrantes ahora les es más difícil encontrar un trabajo bien pagado y tienen mayores niveles de pobreza.
- También es más probable que las mujeres, los indígenas y miembros de grupos minoritarios visibles (por ejemplo, *personas no indígenas pero que no son de raza caucásica, o no de color blanco*) tengan trabajos mal pagados, y tienen mayores niveles de pobreza.

Preguntas para la discusión

1. ¿Qué tipo de trabajo estás haciendo ahora?
2. ¿Es el mismo o diferente del primer trabajo que consiguió después de emigrar a Canadá? ¿Cuáles son las principales diferencias entre su primer trabajo y el trabajo que tiene ahora?
3. ¿Qué dificultades ha tenido para encontrar un trabajo? ¿Por qué cree que enfrentó esta dificultad?
4. ¿Alguna vez ha experimentado discriminación en el trabajo? ¿Qué cree usted que son las razones por ello?
5. ¿Cuáles son los efectos del trabajo mal pagado en su vida?
6. ¿Cuáles son los efectos del trabajo mal pagado en su familia?
7. Fuera del trabajo y el hogar, ¿dónde pasa la mayor parte de su tiempo?
8. ¿Cómo lidia con las dificultades de vivir con un salario bajo?
9. ¿A quién le pide ayuda cuando tiene un problema con su trabajo?
10. ¿A quién le pide ayuda cuando tiene un problema con su familia?
11. ¿Cuáles estrategias ha usado para tratar de mejorar su calidad de vida?
12. ¿Qué podemos hacer juntos para mejorar la vida de los trabajadores mal pagados y sus familias?

Más bocadillos

Coordinadora de Asociaciones y Agencias de Servicio Multiculturales de BC. Contactando Investigaciones: www.amsst.org/bc/
 Centro Canadiense para Políticas Alternativas: www.policyalternatives.ca/newsroom/
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 Campaña para un salario digno en Vancouver: livingwageforfamilies.ca

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Diálogos comunitarios

Los costos y las consecuencias para los inmigrantes y sus familias del trabajo mal pagado

¿Qué viene en el menú?



1. Breve introducción sobre el trabajo mal pagado y los inmigrantes
2. Investigaciones previas
 - Por qué a muchos inmigrantes les cuesta encontrar un buen trabajo?
 - Cómo afectan los trabajos mal pagados a las vidas de los inmigrantes y sus familias?
 - Cómo hacen los inmigrantes de bajos ingresos para enfrentar los obstáculos y las dificultades que tienen para encontrar un buen trabajo?
3. Preguntas para la discusión
4. Más bocadillos

Investigadora principal: Jennifer J. Chum, Departamento de Sociología de la Universidad de British Columbia

Asesora comunitaria: Priti Shah
 Socios comunitarios: Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, (Centro Comunitario Frog Hollow), Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, (Centro Comunitario Mount Pleasant), MOSAIC BC, Hospital Employees Union (el sindicato de trabajadores de hospitales)
 Los diálogos comunitarios son patrocinados por: la subvención para la investigación BC, Metrópolis
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1. ¿Por qué algunos inmigrantes tienen dificultades para encontrar buen trabajo?

Una respuesta: La falta de experiencia canadiense

Los empleadores solo miran la experiencia de trabajos que el trabajador ha tenido en Canadá para decidir si un solicitante de trabajo va a ser capaz de hacer el trabajo (Liu 2007). A los inmigrantes sin referencias o experiencia de trabajo en Canadá muchas veces les es difícil conseguir trabajo. Esto puede crear una "trampa" o bucle, para los inmigrantes sin experiencia canadiense, quienes se quedan atorados en trabajos mal pagados que tienen que tomar para sobrevivir. Una inmigrante africana que sufrió discriminación al buscar trabajo preguntó: "¿Si no me das el trabajo, ¿dónde quieres que consiga la experiencia canadiense?" (Creese 2005)

Una respuesta: La falta de reconocimiento de credenciales extranjeras

La política de inmigración de Canadá premia a los inmigrantes por sus credenciales, pero los empleadores canadienses no. Un inmigrante del sur de Asia explicó: "Este es el cuento. Estás en Irán o la India. Y quieres emigrar a Canadá. ¿OK? Así que basado en el hecho de que usted es médico, le dan x número de puntos. Así que te están diciendo "Usted es un médico, ¡excelente! Ven a Canadá!" "Pero después no puedes ejercer como médico en Canadá. Ahora explicame esto." (Baudery y Cameron 2002)

Una respuesta: "El color de su inglés"

Gillian Creese y Edith Kamber (2003) hicieron grupos de discusión con inmigrantes africanas en el área de Vancouver. Encontraron que a pesar de hablar inglés como primer idioma, los empleadores las veían como no calificadas para el trabajo.

- Uno de los participantes del grupo de discusión describió su experiencia con la discriminación por su acento: "Hice mi currículum y cuando lo leyeron les pareció excelente y me llamaron para una entrevista. Cuando empecé a responder a algunas de las preguntas me preguntaron, "¿de dónde eres?" Les dije, "de África." "¿Cuándo llegaste como inmigrante?" Así que les dije, "en África nuestro entrenamiento también es inglés." Pero me dicen, "con razón, tu acento es demasiado fuerte y no te podemos entender."
- Otra participante del grupo, dijo, "El idioma es una barrera para integrarte en la sociedad, porque si hablas inglés con tu acento, la gente sabe que eres de la África y por el acento no te dan un trabajo, o una casa."

Participantes del grupo dijeron que estas experiencias las desanimaban a buscar mejores trabajos, y las hicieron sentir que nunca realmente pertenecerían en Canadá.

Una respuesta: La discriminación basada en nombres que suenan a extranjero

Una investigación hecha por Philip Oreopoulos (2009) encontró que para los que buscan trabajo que tienen nombres que suenan como inglés les es más

fácil conseguir trabajo. Su investigación encontró que los que buscaban trabajo con nombres que suenan como inglés recibieron 40% más entrevistas que los que tenían apellidos comunes entre gente de la China, India o de Pakistán. La investigación concluyó que, "los empleadores discriminan bastante basado en el nombre dado en el currículum."



2. ¿Cuáles son las consecuencias del trabajo mal pagado para los inmigrantes y sus familias?

Una respuesta: Las personas quedan "atrapadas" en trabajos de pobreza.

Las personas muchas veces tienen que trabajar 2 o a veces 3 trabajos para ganar lo suficiente para cubrir sus necesidades básicas (como comida, renta, ropa, transporte, etc.). Esto deja poco tiempo para descansar, cuidar la salud, y pasar tiempo con la familia y los amigos. Las horas largas de trabajo también hacen que sea difícil encontrar el tiempo o el dinero para re-entrenarse para conseguir un trabajo mejor pagado. Como resultado, un trabajo mal pagado puede atrapar a la gente en toda una vida de pobreza y estrés crónico.

Una respuesta: La pérdida de habilidades

Cuando la educación y las habilidades conseguidos en otros países no son reconocidos, los inmigrantes tienden a perder sus habilidades. Aunque algunos inmigrantes se vuelven a entrenar en Canadá, pocas veces recuperan las certificaciones que tenían antes de emigrar.

Las inmigrantes que no son vistas como 'blancas', y que tienen títulos conseguidos en otros países, son las que menos rinden de sus habilidades (Creese et al. 2006). Una de las razones es la falta de correspondencia entre los requisitos de educación y de habilidades y la colocación en un trabajo por programas tales como el 'Live-in Caregiver' (cuidadores que viven en el domicilio), que exige que niñeras y trabajadoras domésticas tengan títulos universitarios.

Según con una que trabajó cuidando en una casa: "Tomé dos años antes de que te dan una visa abierta aquí en Canadá (para poder trabajar en otro lado). Para ese entonces ya dicen que has perdido tus habilidades profesionales, y se vuelve muy difícil conseguir otros trabajos que no sean trabajo doméstico. Así tu entrenamiento pasado vale casi nada. Si eres enfermera y no has trabajado como enfermera por dos años, casi no puedes volver ya a la profesión." (Pant et al. 2006).

Una respuesta: El trabajo mal pagado es heredado por los hijos de inmigrantes

Los jóvenes de familias inmigrantes muchas veces se encuentran en trabajos mal pagados. Una investigación encontró que los hijos de mujeres inmigrantes que llegaron a Canadá en el programa de 'Live-in Caregiver' (cuidadores de domicilio) suelen tomar trabajos mal pagados para ayudar a mantener a su familia en vez de seguir su educación (Pant et al. 2006).

Un inmigrante joven que vino a Canadá para estar con su mamá dijo: "Buscamos la manera de poder ir a la escuela, pero no teníamos los fondos. Así que buscamos la manera de buscar trabajo. Y el plan de conseguir más educación quedó atrás. También tenemos que trabajar para ayudar a mis hermanos que quedaron en las Filipinas."

Otra investigación encontró que jóvenes de familias de inmigrantes sin educación universitaria no tuvieron dificultad encontrando trabajo, pero la mayoría eran trabajos mal pagados, con pocas oportunidades para avanzar (Van, Lanery Chan 2009).

3. ¿Cómo pueden los inmigrantes de bajos ingresos enfrentar los obstáculos y la inseguridad económica para encontrar un buen trabajo?

Una respuesta: Educación

Muchos inmigrantes usan la educación como manera de entrar al mercado laboral, incluyendo asistiendo a cursos de puente para inmigrantes, clases de inglés, o diplomados en los 'colleges' locales. Muchos hijos de padres inmigrantes también usan la educación para mejorar las posibilidades de conseguir un mejor trabajo.

Una respuesta: El voluntariado

Para mejorar sus posibilidades de conseguir experiencia canadiense, algunos inmigrantes buscan trabajo voluntario. Las organizaciones de apoyo para inmigrantes ofrecen cursos con pasantías no pagadas para ayudar a los inmigrantes a conseguir experiencia laboral en Canadá.

Aunque trabajar de voluntario puede ayudar a inmigrantes a conseguir trabajo a largo plazo, puede que no sea buena estrategia a corto plazo. Una vez que los inmigrantes consiguen un trabajo voluntario, normalmente hacen un trabajo por gratis por varios meses para conseguir la 'experiencia canadiense' necesaria para su currículum/ hoja de vida. (Creese 2005).

Una respuesta: Organizar para conseguir un salario digno

Los trabajadores con salarios bajos no ganan lo suficiente para evitar que sus familias caigan en la pobreza. Pagar a los trabajadores un salario digno es una solución para ayudar a las personas mejorar la calidad de sus vidas. Un salario digno es diferente al salario mínimo, que es el salario más bajo que un empleador legalmente puede pagar a un trabajador. Un salario digno pide a los empleadores pagar un salario suficiente para que un trabajador pueda pagar por gastos básicos (tal como vivienda, guardería, comida y transporte).

En 2010 la tasa de un salario digno en Vancouver se fijó en \$18.17 dólares para una familia con dos ingresos y con dos niños pequeños. La ciudad de Westminster fue el primer gobierno municipal en aprobar una ley que requiere que a todos los trabajadores del gobierno municipal, y a los contratistas, se les pague un salario digno.