

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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“No Canadian Experience?” Barriers and Deskilling of Immigrant and Refugee Women in Grand Erie

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What you need to know

While research has explored the “lack of Canadian experience” as a barrier to immigrant/refugee integration, very little is known about the health effects of deskilling. Further, most studies on immigrants’ experiences are related to their settlement in large urban centres such as Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto. This study focused on a mid-sized, urban-rural region in Ontario where immigrant/refugee visible minority women identified the “lack of Canadian experience” as the most significant factor in their deskilling. Deskilling had a negative effect on women’s psychological well-being and identity. They felt frustrated that they could not achieve their career goals and felt disempowered.

What is this research about?

This community-based participatory research examined how employment experiences impacted the health and well-being of visible minority immigrant/refugee women in Grand Erie – an urban/rural region in Ontario consisting of the City of Brantford and Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk counties. This research fills an important gap in research by illuminating the health effects of deskilling outside of large urban centres.

In this study, deskilling is defined as a process by which an immigrant’s education and/or employment skills which they obtained in their country of origin are not recognized in Canada. As a result, this person is forced to work in low-paid and low-skilled jobs such as a restaurant server, retail salesperson, factory labourer, or nanny.

Evidence suggests that more immigrant women (40%) than immigrant men (28%), and native-born women (12%) who are university educated are likely to be employed in [low-skill and low-wage jobs](#). Foreign-born visible minority women are more likely to be [unemployed or underemployed](#), suggesting that deskilling is racialized and gendered.



Participant-generated photo

“Deskilling is like this tree. It represents me with my arms cut. I am feeling powerless and trapped.”

What did the researcher do?

This research was conducted in collaboration with the local newcomer task force called Immigrant Settlement Transition and Employment (ISTEP). ISTEP’s vision is to foster the integration of immigrants/refugees in Grand Erie.

The study used photovoice, an arts-based qualitative research methodology, where participants received photo cameras to record their employment experiences. The researcher

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analyzed the participant-generated photographs, diaries, and in-depth interviews of 20 skilled and educated immigrant/refugee visible minority women employed and living in Grand Erie.

The participants were between the ages of 35 and 44. They reported the following countries of origin: China, Philippines, Singapore, India, Zimbabwe, Iraq, Mexico, Chile, and Jamaica. The majority spoke at least two languages, including English, and most of them had a Bachelor's Degree, a college diploma, or a graduate degree.

What did the researcher find?

This study found that de-valuation of foreign education and work experiences as well as employment discrimination are common barriers to the labour market integration of immigrant/refugee women. However, participants identified the demand for "Canadian experience" as the most significant factor contributing to their deskilling.

Participants' photos and narratives suggest disempowerment, loss of identity, and mental and physical health issues. Psychologically they feel frustrated and even face identity crisis. Older participants in jobs that require manual work experience physical pain and discomfort to such a degree that they might develop a disability.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers can use this research to understand immigrant/refugee women's experiences in small urban-rural communities in Ontario. In 2012, the province introduced *Ontario's Immigration Strategy* to facilitate collaboration among policymakers, employers and business leaders to attract and retain skilled immigrants by connecting them with jobs that match their skills. However, employers in rural regions are

not aware of this strategy. To ensure these regions also benefit from *Ontario's Immigration Strategy*, the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade needs to educate employers on the economic value of immigration in building vibrant communities.

From the perspective of retention, it is not sufficient to attract immigrants to small urban communities and rural regions in Canada. Employers and service providers must work together to support immigrants in finding employment in their field of expertise as soon as possible.

Employers and health care providers should also recognize that deskilling is costly to Ontario. With the retirement of baby boomers and a shortage of skilled labour, Ontario will rely more upon immigrants to fulfill its labour market shortage. If immigrants are deskilled it will be harder to rely upon this workforce.

This study is also useful to researchers as it highlights the importance of community-university collaboration in addressing issues of deskilling and discrimination.

About the researcher

Bharati Sethi is currently a postdoctoral fellow at McMaster University and a part-time instructor at Wilfrid Laurier University.

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