



Symposium: Breaking Barriers and Moving Forward - Narratives of Challenges Faced by Asian Women Diaspora and Immigrant Women in New Brunswick, and Strategies for their Successful Integration

Dates: May 18 & 19, 2017

Location: Wu Center, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB

The Symposium was the outcome of a collaboration between Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research (MMFC), the Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick (AHSNB), the Anthropology Department, and the New Brunswick Multicultural Council (NBMC). The objectives were: address diverse challenges faced by 'newcomer women' (i.e. immigrant/permanent residents, refugees, temporary workers/spouses, international students/spouses) and older citizens, with a specific focus on women of Asian heritage; and find ways to facilitate successful integration of this heterogeneous group with the mainstream population of New Brunswick. The Symposium was developed based on prior and ongoing activities of these organizations; such as projects of Violence against Immigrant and Visible Minority Women Research Team of MMFC and the AHSNB's annual celebration of Asian Heritage month in Canada.

Day 1 of the Symposium (May 18) began by introduction and welcome speeches by Layla Rahmeh (Fredericton Chamber of Commerce), Madhu Verma (Chair, AHSNB), the Honorable Monique LeBlanc (MLA for Moncton East, on behalf of NB Premier's Office), and Dr. Koumari Mitra of UNB's Anthropology Department. Next, the documentary film **Breaking Barriers Moving Forward** was screened. Members of the Violence against Immigrant and Visible Minority Women Research Team of the MMFC collaborated with the AHSNB in the production of film which features 11 Asian women speaking about the challenges that they face living in New Brunswick society and the courageous ways in which they have overcome them. The women's stories are situated within the context of research conducted through the MMFC, UNB Faculty of Arts, and St. Thomas University. The film was produced to build capacity, heighten awareness and initiate discussions for change. The video is available on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/l1ciRp-o9aA>), and

we encourage our funders to view and share it widely with their networks. The film is grounded in research on gender, mental health, social networks and immigrant women, carried out by Dr. Catherine Holtmann (MMFC/UNB), Dr. Koumari Mitra (UNB) and Dr. Aamir Jamal (St Thomas University). The premier screening was followed by a question-answer session paneled by Dr. Holtmann, producer, Jeremy Nason, assistant producer, Tarun and Devika Mathur, the makers of the film, and Shanti Bell, the film editor. The response to the film was very positive. There were 102 participants at the screening and a reception concluded the evening's program.

Day 2 of the Symposium (May 19) commenced with a welcome address to the 62 participants, by Dr. Mitra and Mrs. Verma. Thereafter Dr. Yoko Yoshida of Dalhousie University gave the keynote presentation, **"How do Immigrants Fare in New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada?"** Using census data, Dr. Yoshida explained demographic and economic trends of Asian heritage immigrants to Atlantic Canada. The presentation focused on increasing the immigration of Asian heritage groups, as well as retaining and integrating them in Atlantic region. Since 1996 immigration from Asia to Atlantic region has been steadily growing, with China, South Korea, India, and Philippines as the topmost sources. However retention has been poor, with New Brunswick retaining only 58% of its economic category immigrants; although family class immigrants show higher retention rates, around 80%. The main reasons for non-retention are: misperceptions of mainstream community about Asian immigrants, misperceptions of Asian immigrants about Atlantic Canada, along with lesser and slower integration in the labour market. In the question-answer session, Prof Yoshida averred that integration is a multifaceted entity, and hard to define as the meaning varies. Moreover, levels of integration differ from one group to another, in spite of same opportunities for employment, job satisfaction, etc. Furthermore integration has many aspects, and economic integration is but one part but not all, as other elements like health play a vital role. As regards the higher retention of family category immigrants, economic reasons aside, the social aspect has a huge impact, especially in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

The next segment consisted of three breakout-sessions with approximately 20 participants each, for identifying **barriers faced by newcomer women** in NB (and overall Atlantic Canada). The first session, coordinated by Natasha Akhtar of AHSNB, focused on **individual, cultural and social barriers**, and 5 key issues were identified. The 1st issue is the barrier of language, like the inability of many newcomers to comprehend spoken English of a native speaker. This barrier is pronounced particularly for refugees, as their functioning becomes limited due to their dependence on translators. Furthermore, funding for English/French language language-training is inadequate, and excludes certain newcomer groups. The 2nd issue is social isolation and not being able to connect with mainstream community (and vice-versa). Many newcomer women, even though well educated, are unable to properly express themselves to the mainstream society, due to unfamiliarity about local customs and norms. Additionally, most New Brunswickers are unaware about the background of newcomers, or about the challenges they face while living in Canada. The 3rd issue concerns sexism confronted by newcomer women, from family, kin and the immigrant community; which is the main barrier for pursuing a career. Husbands' behaviors, such as reluctance to share housework or child care, worsen the disadvantage of working women. Many newcomer women, especially belonging to patriarchal cultures, are discouraged regarding occupation or independent socializing. As regards domestic

violence, even though resources are available, they are not culturally sensitive and are not available in newcomer's native tongue, which are barriers for utilisation of these resources. The 4th issue identified was racism and exploitation faced by newcomer women, such as discrimination in their children's schools, home owners' prejudice while renting, etc. Occasionally newcomers also are biased towards mainstream Canadians, like not attempting to learn about their lives and cultural values. The 5th issue is about the lack of a working plan for socio-cultural integration of newcomers within mainstream New Brunswick society and the lack of cultural liaison personnel for certain newcomer groups.

The second breakout session, coordinated by Dr. Felisa Chan of AHSNB, focused on **economic and geographical barriers**, and 4 important issues were identified. The 1st issue is the rejection of foreign credentials, as well as policies that hinder transfer of foreign qualifications. Furthermore, newcomers frequently end up acquiring employment experiences that are below their skill levels. Professional associations, educational institutions and inter-provincial discrepancies also add to the problem. For many newcomer women, obtaining Canadian qualifications is financially burdensome, and regionally available programs to become re-qualified are quite limited. Besides, acquiring training from outside the province is not feasible. The 2nd issue is about the lack of job oriented settlement services for newcomer women, which is due to a continuous decrease in funding. Furthermore, the services are not sensitive to the heterogeneity of the group and diversity of needs; which is why several newcomer women lack information about totality of available services. In addition, newcomer women who want to start entrepreneurial ventures face many obstructions while accessing credit. The 3rd issue concerns newcomer women's lack of access to networks for creating social capital, lack of culturally suitable networking spaces, lack of information relating to training and employment, and gaps in local approaches for transition to employment. Networking is difficult for newcomer women owing to subjective barriers, such as unwillingness to leave their comfort zones, or to learn customs of mainstream Canadians. Community barriers encompass inadequate childcare provision for job-searching newcomer women, lack of family support and encouragement, etc. Other barriers emanating from mainstream community are: insufficient acceptance in social groups, exclusion from community activities, and networking information not being fully shared. Lack of public transport is the 4th issue, as often newcomers have no other mode of transportation.

The third breakout session, coordinated by Jael Duarte of NBMC, highlighted **political and structural barriers**. Of the 5 important issues, the 1st is insufficient education/sensitization of mainstream New Brunswick population, about the government's immigration and refugee programs. There is a lack of awareness even about basic matters, like the difference between citizens, refugees, temporary workers, international students, and permanent residents. The 2nd issue is inadequate support for refugees, as they are a group that suffers most amongst newcomers, mainly due to their exposure to trauma. Furthermore, refugee status and government funding ends in one year, which is extremely stressful. The 3rd issue pertains to lack of advocacy organizations for assistance with legal concerns. There is an urgent need for lawyers who can understand the concerns of newcomer women, especially seniors. There is also an absence of a culturally accommodating advocacy group, which is vital as newcomer women are

hesitant to report physical or sexual violence or custody issues. The 4th issue is of governmental policy barriers, such as poor communication between newcomers and government. There is sexism in immigration policies, as it makes women who are dependent on spouses very vulnerable; given that the fear of being deported (due to separation) is formidable among women. The 5th issue concerns restrictions to training programs, insufficient access to childcare, and difficulties of children's education.

After lunch, the ensuing segment was given to three breakout-sessions, with approximately 20 participants each, for **identifying solutions for the barriers** that are highlighted in the preceding sessions. The first session, coordinated by Runu Kumari Singh (UNB-F), focused on **governmental strategies in mitigating barriers**, faced by newcomer women. Out of the 3 main proposed solutions, the 1st is forming working plans to enable integration of newcomer women into the mainstream community. Government must utilize newcomer women's strengths and capabilities, and arrange peer-group programs by funding/collaborating with existing forums of immigrant women. Government officials should attend multicultural events for educating the mainstream population, as well as newcomer communities, about various programs. The 2nd solution is increased governmental provision for social services for newcomer women; like mechanisms for making newcomer women feel instantly welcome, impart awareness of their rights, and prevent their isolation. In addition, increased funding for language training, and higher number of ground-level officials, who deal with newcomers' administrative issues. Moreover, reporting channels must be made approachable for newcomer women. The 3rd set of solutions pertain to advocacy groups and lawyers who can understand concerns of newcomer women. Steps must be taken to reduce newcomer women's reluctance to report physical and sexual violence or custody issues; such as added governmental investment in family legal matters and for interpreters, information materials translated in languages and formats that are comprehensible to newcomer women, etc. A vital step is forming a single agency, which will coordinate various services for newcomer women, and also serve as an access point for newcomer women.

The second breakout-session, coordinated by Layla Rahmeh, identified 3 **strategies to increase economic prosperity for newcomer women**. The 1st strategy is creating incentives for newcomer women to participate in the workforce and develop skills; such as employment and experience-based programs (similar to SEED and other summer employment), internship programs, face to face group sessions for building job-searching capabilities, etc. A vital aspect in this regard is awareness and training of employers regarding skills of newcomer women, along with urging companies to do cultural competency workshops. The 2nd strategy consists of governmental support; like bridging the gap between employers and newcomer women's foreign qualifications and work experiences, provide incentives like subsidies or tax rebates to various institutions for training and employing newcomer women, programs for newcomer women like the One Job Pledge (where money is given to businesses to create new positions for specific groups, like youth), etc. The 3rd strategy highlights economic and financial literacy for newcomer women, especially through micro-credit financing schemes and entrepreneurial opportunities. For the same, a singular source of information should be created, where newcomer women can begin their ventures. Governmental agencies should be responsible for welcoming these women and

distributing this information; for example, via volunteers who will reach out and invite them to organizations and services.

The third session, coordinated by Dr. Indu Gambhir, focused on **mental and physical health of newcomer women** in New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada. The session suggested 2 main solutions, and the 1st is identifying and solving the causes for depression, stress related illnesses, and other ailments among newcomer women; such as insufficient support systems in terms of people with whom ailing newcomers can discuss and consult, isolation and stress of newcomer women which leads to depression, etc. Other problems that require resolution are: a medical care system that is not accommodative (in particular, doctors with inadequate acquaintance vis-à-vis newcomer women's cultural norms and customs), and healthcare professionals communicating in technical terminology that is practically incomprehensible to these women. Furthermore, significantly uneven power relations exist between doctors and newcomer women, which results in women who feel powerless and have no say in their medical matters. Consequently, newcomer women have immense hesitation as regards clarifying confusions and queries regarding their health. The 2nd set of solutions pertain to strategies for the healthcare system; such as a creating mechanism for explaining to newcomer women regarding how the Canadian healthcare system works (i.e. family doctor, walk-in clinic, specialist, etc.), simpler access to community-level treatments, mental health programs for refugees (like peer support network for experiences of war, violence, etc.), and translators for senior newcomer women while visiting medical care professionals. Lastly, the healthcare system should be acutely sensitive about domestic violence, as newcomer women feel shame and a lack of trust, which is why the problem is vastly underreported.

The findings from the breakout session were summarized in a joint session, paneled by Dr. Holtmann, Dr. Yoshida and Dr. Mitra. Some of key findings are: the 'dependent' label lowers self-esteem and social recognition of newcomer women, language learning is not sufficient as deeper understanding via intercultural communication is needed, and social isolation largely contributes to poor mental health. The main recommended policy resolutions were: **improvements on how information is communicated**, information should come from one central source, and message must be strategic as well as non-threatening to mainstream Canadians; **collaboration** with mainstream Canadians for common issues (like childcare, transportation, employment, etc.); and **all of Canadian society must engage in intercultural communication**, as bulk of the work is in the civil society.

After the joint session, two speakers talked about their experiences as immigrant women in Canada, as well as about their accomplishments. Dr. Indu Gambhir, a physician with over 22 years of medical practice, described her arrival in Canada, along with experiences of prejudices in professional and personal life. She explained how she succeeded through her actions like establishing clinics for Urban Inuit in Ottawa and Akwesasne Mohawk Reserve. Layla Rahmeh of Fredericton Chamber of Commerce described her journey to Canada as a refugee from Syria. She overcame immense financial and personal obstacles, in order to emerge as leader of the 'Succession Connect' pilot project for new Canadian investors.

During the closing banquet, Dr. Joanne Wright, the Dean of Arts at UNB-F and Dr. Holtmann thanked everyone for their participation. The dinner speaker was Dr. Farzana Hassan-Shahid, a well-known writer and commentator on **Muslim women's issues**. She talked about the problems faced by newcomer Muslim women in Canada; followed by a question-answer session.

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