

**Executive Summary of the Research Project**  
**Revisiting *Personal is Political*: Immigrant Women’s Health Promotion**  
Denise Gastaldo, Nazilla Khanlou, Notisha Massaquoi, Deone Curling, and Amoaba Gooden  
Project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research

This study explored settlement experiences of immigrant women who arrived to Canada in the last 5 years and lived in Toronto. The main goal of the study was to analyse social determinants of health in the context of recent immigration in order to understand which strategies would promote health and empower these immigrants.

The methodology employed was participatory-action research. For almost a year, 13 women met bi-weekly to discuss their experiences as immigrants. Data was collected through diary writing, photos, and group discussions. The data was analysed using discourse analysis and a post-structuralist framework guided the study.

The collective research outcomes were the creation of a webpage to offer information to prospective and recent immigrants ([www.nursing.utoronto.ca/immigrationguide](http://www.nursing.utoronto.ca/immigrationguide)), a poetry booklet (I am not the woman I used to be – 30 poems by recent immigrant women), a 20-minute video to motivate discussions about the experiences of newcomers in Toronto (Recent immigrant women’s experiences in Toronto – I am not the woman I used to be), and the creation of a support group to provide information to other immigrants.

The analysis of all data collected led into three main analytical categories: Experiences of displacement, becoming an immigrant, and limits to empowerment.

### **Experiences of displacement**

*“Toronto is a place full of worries for immigrants”*

Talking retrospectively, participants exposed that at an early stage of the immigration process, multiple and competing images and discourses shaped their experiences as immigrant women in Canada; they were living in a state of “in-betweenness”. While some moved to Canada on their own or with children, others came with the whole family. Despite the distance, those “left behind” were part of the everyday lives of many women, who were likely to live in a transnational space through immigration.

Some of the first challenges experienced by the participants of the study in Toronto were related to language skills and social welfare. Many did not expect to have to take classes to improve their English (to get a job) and were not prepared to have an accent and lose the ability to easily communicate. At this early stage, they had also to confront their expectations of life in a “first world country” with the circumstances encountered in Toronto (e.g. lack of access to health care for 3 months, difficulty in finding affordable housing, difficulty in accessing affordable child care or high cost of higher education). These experiences were combined with a very limited social network to support people in their initial months in Canada.

Participants did not know about the existence of many agencies and services and most had no acquaintances to which ask for help.

For most women, very early, Canada started to become a different place, no longer the “first world country” that selected them according to professional qualifications where they would find jobs and contribute to society.

### **Becoming an immigrant**

*“Everyday Toronto is ugly and you are busy”*

After living for 2 to 3 years in Toronto, two words were very prevalent in the participants’ descriptions of their everyday lives: busy and tired. The participants were engaged in school activities, volunteer and community work, a few had paid work (“survival job”), daily chores, and care giving for themselves and others. No participant had found a job equivalent to her degree of preparation. Those who experienced the intersections of gender, race, aging or disability were unemployed or had some of the worst jobs within the group. The general explanation for the phenomenon of underemployment or unemployment was the participants’ level of fluency in English. Language was seen as the main tool for social and economic inclusion.

Despite their knowledge of street names, public places, and the TTC system, most participants had a very limited use of the city. There were a few malls, squares, food stores, second-hand stores, and particular roads that framed these immigrants’ everyday living. Most of them had never visited the city’s attractions (CN Tower, Yorkville, Ontario Place) nor entered in a Canadian home (the house of someone who is not an immigrant). Through their photos we saw very modest living standards (e.g. 4 people living in a one-bedroom apartment), basic furniture, and homes situated in average to poor neighbourhoods. They did not have access to paid cultural events, but many had a good knowledge of free services (e.g. libraries, swimming pools, community centres, religious centres, and museums).

Gender inequities were observed in different ways among the participants. While some women were in charge of all house work and care of children, others shared these responsibilities with their partners. However, a more invisible form of work, which is the emotional support of family members and mental health promotion activities for family and friends, commonly remained a woman’s responsibility. This was concomitantly a pleasure and a burden, like any other form of care giving. What was also observed is that the lack of support for women in Canadian society has a great impact on immigrant women. For instance, women with small children could not find jobs that would pay enough to cover childcare expenses and had to give up on having a career/job for some years in order to remain a full time caregiver. The same did not happen to the partners of these women.

During the meetings, participants’ exchanges revealed they have experienced a particular process of disciplining and normalization. Through their contacts with agencies, schools, Canadians, and other

immigrants, these women recreated their subjectivities and became “immigrant women”. Collectively, they have shown that becoming a good immigrant requires a constant manifestation of gratitude for being accepted into the country, hard work, being self-conscious for having limited English skills, full or partial acceptance that education from other countries is not sufficient preparation to work in Canada, that volunteer work is a central element in becoming Canadian, that previous professional and experiential knowledge are very limited because “Canada is different”, and, finally, that despite all these elements for hopelessness, immigrants should persevere through the hardship of their lives because “eventually they will succeed”. There is an equation reiterated by many participants that is: very good English + additional Canadian studies + volunteer work = good job opportunity (this means a full time job in the person’s field of study).

### **Limits to Empowerment**

The participatory and action work developed over almost a year with and by the participants of the study produced an intense reflexive process. Given the high educational level of most, diary writing was also mentioned as an important reflexive tool for the participants. By examining their experiences and noticing that all participants shared similar circumstances, they partially moved beyond self-blame and were able to identify some dominant discourses that limit the social inclusion of immigrants in Canada and produce their underprivileged positions to exercise power in Canadian society.

An element of psychological empowerment experienced by the participants was the creation of networks of social support, what the participants called “making new friends”. Through these networks, some women found jobs, learnt about resources available to immigrants, obtained career advice, socialized together, among others. The participants also collectively decided on topics for workshops the research project funded for them and they selected subjects related to employment. Another evidence of the benefits of this collective work among recently arrived immigrant women was the request from other women to join the group.

Despite the consciousness raising nature of the work developed and the employment of principles for individual and community empowerment, the participants remained underemployed professionals. The social construction of immigrants as problematic (rather than problematizing Canadian society) is a strong disciplinary process that is difficult to challenge, especially when no program or project has the potential or economic means to achieve significant social transformation for immigrants’ social and economic inclusion. The current gaps between the Canadian government immigration policy, the professions’ regulatory bodies, and the employers’ recruitment strategies are insurmountable to local programs and the immigrants they intend to empower. Under these circumstances, empowerment is impoverished of its original meaning and programs promote the subjectivity of the “hopeful and perseverant immigrant” who, despite all the hardship aforementioned, keeps trying to achieve the Canadian dream.