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# Safe employment integration of recent immigrants and refugees



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# Safe employment integration of recent immigrants and refugees

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## Executive Summary

Part of settlement and integration involves helping recent immigrants and refugees find work and become financially solvent. Yet many newcomers end up in survival jobs that are precarious, physically demanding and expose them to hazards. While “welcome materials” and settlement programs help newcomers find employment, few offer guidance on employment rights, employer responsibilities and how to stay safe at work. This study examined the employment preparation process of newcomers in Ontario with the aim of determining key training and resource needs and opportunities related to safely integrating recent immigrants and refugees into the labour market.

**Methods:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 service providers, program developers and policy makers from the immigration and employment fields to understand (a) current programming and funding arrangements that shape the newcomer employment preparation process, and (b) opportunities for and challenges to integrating worker rights and occupational health and safety (OHS) resources into existing programs. Eighteen focus groups (13 in English and five in Arabic) were held with 110 recent immigrants and refugees who were looking for work or who had recently found work, to understand their experiences with job search and in their first jobs in Canada. An exploratory qualitative research approach was used to collect and analyze the data.

**Findings:** Newcomers reported difficulty finding work and being impelled to take precarious jobs. Among participants with work experience in Canada, first jobs were often characterized by low pay, precarity and poor working conditions, including work with hazardous materials and minimal or no job-related or health and safety training. Most participants had little knowledge about their rights at work or the responsibilities of their employer and were not sure what to do when asked to do something unsafe or when mistreated in the workplace.

Although most participants in our study had accessed employment preparation services, these programs mainly focused on resumé building, networking or cultural competency training. Participants reported receiving very little information about employment standards or health and safety rights. The programs that included OHS information tended to be one-off workshops—programming was not systematic and

was hindered by a lack of consistent funding and diffusion of responsibility. Some service providers reported sending newcomers to external resources and websites, but they rarely had time to follow up and determine whether these resources were accessed or useful.

**Conclusion:** This study focused on the experiences of newcomers, using focus groups and interviews with newcomers and other key informants to gain insight into how to prepare newcomers to safely integrate into the labour market. We identify optimal points in the settlement process where information can be provided, and some of the roles that can be played most effectively by service agencies, regulatory bodies and employers.

## Introduction

Part of settlement and integration involves helping recent immigrants and refugees find work and become financially solvent. This process can be challenging. Many newcomers have difficulty finding good quality jobs because their credentials are not recognized (1; 2), they have few social networks (3), lack work experience in the country of arrival (4) and do not have full proficiency in English or French (5). Many of these workers end up in “survival jobs.” These jobs are concentrated in non-unionized industries, are more likely to be part-time or temporary, and lack employer-sponsored benefits such as pension plans and health insurance (6-8). Compared to Canadian-born workers, recent immigrants and refugees are more likely to do shift work and work in physically demanding jobs, and less likely to receive training (7). These conditions are known to expose workers to a higher risk of injury. Systemic racism and language barriers also make getting good quality jobs more difficult (9; 10). Refugees often end up in the most precarious work situations. Many have not had an opportunity to prepare to come to Canada and important work-related documents and credentials may be lost in the migration process (11). Refugees enter Canada to escape humanitarian crises and they receive some governmental support for a period after their arrival. The vast majority of refugees eventually look for work and enter the labour market (12). The numbers of people involved are substantial: for example, as of January 2017, Canada had accepted over 40,000 Syrian refugees, with the greater Toronto Area (GTA) being a key destination for these newcomers (13). This is in addition to the intake of other refugees and immigrants.

The province of Ontario recently introduced mandatory occupational health and safety (OHS) awareness training for workers and supervisors. However, a study by Lay and colleagues found that, compared to Canadian-born workers, fewer recent immigrants and refugees knew about or had received this training (14). While many provincial and federal “welcome materials” and settlement programs focus on helping newcomers find work, few offer guidance on employment rights, employer responsibilities and how to stay safe at work (15). We know very little about how recent immigrants and refugees prepare for employment, the types of resources that are needed to protect them at work or which groups are well-positioned to deliver these resources.

The purpose of this study was to examine the work-integration process for recent immigrants and refugees in Ontario and determine key training and resource needs and opportunities related to safely integrating recent immigrants and refugees into the Canadian labour market. Specifically, our goal was to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of newcomers looking for work? What challenges do they face in securing good quality, safe, sustainable employment?
- 2) What are their first jobs? What is the quality of these jobs? What sort of employment preparation and training have newcomers received from their employers?
- 3) How do newcomers prepare to enter the workforce safely? Which programs and resources do newcomers access in preparation to enter the workforce, particularly regarding OHS or employment standards? When and where? Are they aware of their rights and responsibilities and those of their employers?

## Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with service providers, program developers and policy makers who work in the immigration, employment and OHS fields. Focus groups were also conducted with recent immigrants and refugees who were looking for work or who had recently found work, to understand their job search experiences. An exploratory qualitative research approach was used to collect and analyze the data. The research protocol was approved by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board. In the reporting of findings some minor details were removed from quotes to preserve participant anonymity.

### Recruitment and Sampling

*Key informant interviews:* Key informants were recruited through settlement organizations in Ontario and by contacting policy bodies in the labour and immigration fields. The research team's pre-existing contacts (e.g. professional networks, research partners) were used to make initial inquiries, with the aim of identifying service providers, program developers and policy makers who might participate as key informants. Referred individuals were then sent a recruitment e-mail that briefly explained the study objectives along with a study information letter providing study details, including privacy and confidentiality issues. Interested individuals were invited to participate in an in-person or telephone interview that lasted approximately one hour. Sampling was based on analytical grounds and emerging concepts, and recruitment continued until saturation was reached and no new themes were forthcoming.

*Focus Groups:* Focus group participants were recruited through settlement organizations and community groups that help recent immigrants and refugees in the GTA, Eastern Ontario, and Northern Ontario. Recruitment for focus group participants was aimed at identifying immigrants and refugees from different countries and immigration streams. Syrian refugees were targeted in particular because the research team received SSHRC funding to specifically examine employment preparation process of Syrian refugees and their key training and resource needs for safe work integration. Settlement organizations publicized study information provided by the researchers. Recruitment materials for Syrian refugees were translated into Arabic by peer researchers. Individuals interested in

participating in focus groups were asked to provide their contact information using a sign-up sheet or to contact the researchers directly. All potential participants received a study information letter explaining the details of the study along with privacy and confidentiality information. Recruitment continued until a diversity of participants was achieved and saturation of concepts was reached (i.e. no new themes were forthcoming).

## **Procedure**

*Key informant Interviews:* One-on-one interviews were conducted with service providers, program developers, and policy makers between November 2016 and January 2017. Service provider and program developer interviews focused on current programming; opportunities for and barriers to including worker rights and OHS resources into existing programs; and possible approaches to integrating these resources into service delivery. Policy maker interviews focused on understanding how current funding and policy arrangements shape the newcomer and refugee employment preparation process and the benefits and challenges of greater settlement sector involvement in the dissemination of work, health and safety information to newcomers. Interviews were held in person or via telephone, depending on the participant's location and preference. In-person interviews took place in a private room in the community/settlement organization. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of the interview. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded.

*Focus Groups:* Focus groups were conducted between February and May 2017 with recent immigrants and refugees who were looking for work or who had work experience in Canada. Focus group questions focused on the employment preparation process with the aim of understanding where newcomers access work-related resources and support; their knowledge of rights and responsibilities related to employment and safety at work; resource and service gaps; and their experiences in their first jobs. Four peer researchers who speak Arabic were recruited to facilitate focus groups with Syrian refugees. Peer researchers attended two training sessions on ethics, recruitment and focus group facilitation delivered by members of the research team.

All focus groups took place in private rooms in community/settlement organizations. Focus groups included 4 to 10 participants and lasted 1 to 1½ hours. All participants

signed an informed consent form. Facilitators were on hand to answer questions about the study and the consent form.

## **Participants**

*Key informant interviews:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 service providers, program developers and policy makers. Service providers worked as employment counselors, job coaches and employment specialists providing language and employment support to newcomers. Program developers described their role as program design, research and the monitoring and evaluation of programming for newcomers. Policy makers described their role as determining funding and program priorities, the evaluation of trends in employment or OHS, and the monitoring of funding agreements.

*Focus Groups:* In total, 110 recent immigrants and refugees participated in eighteen focus groups (13 in English and five in Arabic). Fifty-five percent of participants were women. Participants came from a variety of regions including South Asia, South America and the Caribbean, and Europe. More than half came from the Middle East (54%). Participants were distributed among a range of age groups, with close to half (43%) being under the age of 35. Out of 92 participants who reported their immigration stream of entry, 25% were economic immigrants (including spouses of principal applicants), 35% were humanitarian refugees and 9% were family members other than spouse to the principal applicant. The majority of the participants (70%) had been in Canada less than 3 years. Most participants (73%) had some university training and before coming to Canada had professional experience in the fields of engineering, education, skilled trade, business, or health. Further information about the sample can be found in Appendix A.

## **Data analysis**

All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Arabic focus groups were translated and transcribed by peer researchers. A research team member who has proficiency in Arabic also reviewed translated focus group transcripts to ensure fidelity between the recordings and transcription.

A thematic content analysis was used to organize data systematically and to identify, analyze, and report themes (16). Transcripts were entered into NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) for data storage and organization (17). Interview data and

focus group data were analyzed separately. In the first phase of coding, three researchers read a sample of interview and focus group transcripts and established a preliminary list of codes. Once the preliminary coding list was discussed amongst the research team, a coding manual was developed that included a definition for each code and an explanation for how its content would apply to the research objectives. Transcripts were then coded in two rounds by researchers. Once the first round of coding was applied, the coded text was sent to the second reviewer to add additional codes or to identify and discuss sections that may have been miscoded.

The content assigned to each code was later reviewed to identify themes, patterns, gaps and contradictions in data. Common themes and concepts across codes that captured key insights were identified. Any discrepancies in coding or interpretative differences were discussed and resolved in team meetings. The constant comparative method was used to understand how newcomers come to understand their rights and where there are gaps in resources and training.

## Findings

### 1. Looking for work

The process of looking for work occupied a lot of discussion during focus groups. Almost every focus group participant reported great difficulty finding employment. Language barriers, a lack of local experience and the requirement for Canadian credentials were described as key obstacles to finding a good quality job.

*But, even if you have experience in your country ... I have more than 12 years' experience in work. I worked in [Middle East country] and I also worked in [Country in Western Asia]. Whenever I go and apply for a job, they told me, you should have Canadian experience. How can I obtain it if I am a newcomer?"*

*(GTA, FG #10)<sup>1</sup>*

Barriers such as language were felt more acutely by refugees who tended to have more difficulty communicating in English. However, almost all participants reported that not having English as a first language was a problem when it came to writing resumes and in interviews. Similarly, lack of extensive social networks in the newcomers' field of employment contributed to difficulty finding work. Participants described sending numerous resumes to employers without success.

Participants noted that there was an expectation that they have Canadian experience, even in jobs where this seemed irrelevant. One participant, for example, described being asked for Canadian experience when applying for a dishwashing job. Another talked about being asked for Canadian experience to do sewing work. Such experiences led to newcomers feeling dejected and "worthless":

*The first job I asked for, because the place was near to my place and I felt like it would be easier to go there and work, they were looking for a dishwasher. I had been volunteering for some good months and, of course, I had dishwashing experience. They asked, do you have any Canadian dishwashing experience? I said, I've*

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<sup>1</sup> FG=Focus Group; GTA=Greater Toronto Area

*been volunteering. They said, I don't think you're qualified enough for this job.*

*(GTA, FG #11)*

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*I have had quite a bit of interviews. Most of them have been unsuccessful. The interviewing person will seem to have a problem believing my experiences and abilities. They will ask for Canadian experience. That seems to be a big thing. On account of that, you're not as valuable.*

*(GTA, FG #11)*

Participants who had advanced degrees and training spoke with some optimism about eventually finding work in their field. However, as one service provider noted, their hopes and plans often led to disappointment:

*...the reality is, very rarely do these newcomers actually quickly, or even over an extended period of time, end up in their field. The vast majority end up under-employed. There's a continuum, and I notice this, it's a cycle that you can mark. Somebody will come in, very optimistic ... [name] came in a little while ago, a doctor, and he thinks that he can get a fellowship. Not going to happen. Depending on their state of finances, and their clarity around the obstacles that they face, it will be a little while before they say, okay, give me anything.,*

*(Key Informant, Service provider, P01)*

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*Canada, we are open. We are the best country in the world. Come to Canada. You're like, I'm coming, Canada. We get here and they're like, anything you have done before—worthless.*

*(GTA, FG #13)*

These participants had come to Canada expecting to work, only to realize that the credentials from their home country were often not recognized. This left them in a difficult position—accepting a job that was far below their qualifications and education or spending time (sometimes months or years) and money on retraining. Often, retraining was perceived as a means to find a decent job in their field. For some participants, retraining was a coping mechanism against the resentful experiences from their survival jobs.

*Yeah. And because of that [after being verbally abused by the employer for seeking treatment for a workplace injury], I stop and I want to go to school. My English is, when it is good, I go to ... by proficient and working. I don't like it, the labour work. I don't go anyplace. I'm learning English, and when I'm perfect, I'm going to college and my professional upgrade and I start work. I decide this work.*

*(GTA, FG #13)*

For participants who had arrived in Canada as refugees, an added difficulty was that transcripts and credentials from their home country were difficult to access or had been destroyed.

*They told me, get your degree, your documents from your university. How would I do that? How would I send this request, there's no one there to receive it. There might be records there, I graduated in 2000. But even if there were records of it, everything is burnt down. I went to the University of [a city in Syria], there's nothing left.*

*(Eastern Ontario, Arabic FG #15)*

While refugees receive income support during the first year in Canada and settlement organizations often tailored their employment programs to newcomers who had some language training (and had been in Canada for at least a few months), most participants in our study reported looking for work almost immediately upon arrival. They felt pressure to find work in order to have greater financial security for their families. Many did not want to depend on “charity” and instead wanted to become economically self-sufficient.

*I know somebody, on disability or welfare working for a painter every day. \$1,000 from government, \$2,000 or \$3,000 from this job [comes out] to \$4,000 a month, but I don't like this kind of life. I hate this kind of work. I like my experience. I want to continue my experience in Canada. I want to start a job seriously, to get to pay tax. Many things...if I have a job, I can rent condominium one bedroom for myself. [...] I don't need any offer from government, just I need, I want, job.*

(GTA, FG #13)

Participants also spoke about the need to send funds to their home country or save money to sponsor other family members. If they were receiving income support from the government or a sponsorship group, the amount was often inadequate, especially in expensive cities like Toronto.

Race, gender and age also shaped participants' experiences finding work. For example, a number of participants suggested that a key barrier to finding work or getting their credentials recognized was the colour of their skin. There was some suggestion that employer demand for Canadian experience or credentials was in fact a manifestation of racism. Similarly, some participants felt that it was no coincidence that the immigrants who ended up in the worst quality jobs were people of colour.

*For me, I'm a coloured woman, everywhere you go, the first thing they look at is your colour. Before even they take the interview.*

(GTA, FG #11)

Gender could also influence the process of finding work. Women described a lack of daycare as well as care-giving responsibilities that limited the types of programs they accessed and jobs they were able to secure. Further, some key informants suggested immigrant women from certain cultures were not interested in paid work and, in some instances, this belief appeared to lead to a gender bias in employment-related programming that tended to reinforce the belief. For example, one organization held work and health workshops only for immigrant men.

Some older participants also described the challenges they experienced finding work because they had difficulty learning the language. Also, many of these workers held

senior positions in their home countries and when this experience or their education was not recognized they were faced with working in jobs far below their skill or training.

### **Strategies for entering the Canadian labour market**

Given the difficulty finding work, participants described a number of strategies for trying to enter the Canadian labour market. These included volunteer work; participating in employment programs offered by settlement organizations; using family, cultural and community connections to find jobs; and accepting poor quality, survival jobs to gain Canadian experience and financial solvency.

### **Volunteer labour**

Participants described being encouraged by service providers to participate in volunteer activities. Some participants also believed that doing unpaid labour for a potential employer or settlement agency would lead to paid employment. At the very least it would provide the opportunity to practice language skills and gain Canadian work experience. However, a number of participants reported being disillusioned with volunteering. The volunteer job was rarely in the newcomers' professional field and as a result did not provide the sort of experience that would lead to the type of work newcomers hoped to find. Although in some cases volunteer jobs did provide some opportunity to practice language skills, for other newcomers it meant leaving formal language training. Volunteering also sometimes continued for long periods of time or required considerable time commitments (many hours a day) leaving little time to search for paid work and taking time away from family obligations.

*R1:<sup>2</sup> I think the way is too narrow for us. It's just be patient, first of all, and volunteer work. Here they say you have to give your experience in the volunteering work. And we have to do it..*

*M: For how long?*

*R1: Maybe years, maybe years.*

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<sup>2</sup> R = Respondent; M=Moderator

*R2: I'm doing from three years, almost, volunteer work.*

*(Eastern Ontario, FG #3)*

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*It's helpful, yes, but it's eight hours per day. You are spending them and you are helping people and you're exhausted and you are out of your home and leaving your kids and your responsibilities. What is the return? No tokens. No nothing.*

*(GTA, FG #9)*

### **Settlement organizations**

Many newcomers participated in programs developed by settlement agencies that connected them to employers. Some settlement organizations sought to find employers (or were approached by employers) to hire newcomers. Employers participating in these programs received incentives for hiring a recent immigrant, for example, a wage subsidy for a period of time. Both service providers and newcomers described being grateful for the employment connections, as these were a way of gaining a foothold in the labour market. However, jobs provided by these employers were often low-paying, manual labour jobs.

A number of service providers noted that while they appreciated having these employer connections, there had been instances where employers did not follow rules set out in labour contracts or treated workers poorly.

*[Recent immigrants] end up in unsafe situations. Depending on how desperate their situation is, it can be very exploitative. [...] there are employers who essentially subcontract out work rather than paying employment insurance and benefits, etc. They just call their employees independent contractors, like cleaners, for instance, make them buy all the equipment themselves, usually from the company hiring them, and then leave them with nothing if anything happens. So, that's becoming an increasing trend as well that we've seen.*

*(Key Informant, Service provider, P08)*

Service providers noted that in these instances they were put in a difficult position because they wanted to help and support the worker (their client) but also wanted to maintain a good relationship with the employer. Some service providers spoke positively about the relationship they had with employers, but it was noted that the jobs provided were not sustainable and employers sometimes fired workers as soon as the incentive or subsidy stopped. This issue also came up in some focus groups:

*They go to these schools where they know there are people who are eager for a job and when you get the job, then they work you really hard and at the end of the job, the guy says, I'm not going to pay you what we agreed. So, my pay was reduced. [...] I was moving bales of lumber. I've moved all of those into a building, move another set again into a building. That's what I'm doing. [...] Sometimes, I felt, I'm going to fall down here. But, I continued to work. When I was finished, when all of that was done, after a few days, the guy said he's not going to pay me what we agreed, he would pay me less. I realized that they know there are people in the schools who are eager for a job and they go there to get them. They work a few of them, let them go, go get a few more, work them and let them go. Because it's easy, they just keep rolling over. Don't think these are white guys who are doing that (work). (GTA, FG #11)*

Many service providers also noted that they did not know what happened to newcomers once they entered these jobs—for example, whether they continued working or found other, higher quality jobs. As one key informant described:

*R: Yeah, and that's the part that we are not good at yet...we put people through a pre-employment program or training and we can count the number of people that might get employment after that. We don't do a lot of follow up at all to see if three months after perhaps the training now has really yielded them a job, but we don't know that and we'll never know that because we don't follow up with them.*

*M: What's the barrier to following up, why do you think you don't follow up?*

*R: We don't, we don't right now have any mechanism to do that and we haven't asked the service providers to do that.*

*(Key informant, Policy maker, P15)*

Service providers mentioned reporting the number of job placements to funders but did not have much insight about newcomer experiences in those workplaces. With the overwhelming workload in these employment agencies and based on the activities incited by the funding model, service providers found themselves placing newcomers in the first available job without inquiring about the quality of that work.

### **Family, cultural and community connections**

Many participants who had found jobs in Canada described finding them through family, cultural or community connections. For example, participants spoke about finding work through other newcomers, friends, distant relatives or through their place of worship. Participants also described finding work by tapping into members of their ethnic community or found work through temp agencies that hired members of their ethnic or cultural community.

*Because of language for the newcomer is very hard to get a job. So, I found a job from my [ethnic] community, even working in the [store], the company is a global trade company. But I still found this job in my [ethnic] community, so maybe it's advice for the newcomer to maybe stay in your own community for a couple of years.*

*(GTA, FG #6)*

Although these avenues seemed to be more effective for finding work than cold calling or sending out resumes, they had some drawbacks. While there was a perception from service providers that securing work through networks would lead to better work, jobs found through these networks were still typically precarious, poor quality and low pay.

R: I did two months of dishwashing, but not with a SIN number, I worked under-the-table. They paid \$10, but they gave me no rest. Work, work, work, work, work. I had headaches, so I stopped and went again to school.

M: How did you find this job?

*R: My friend, I think he made more money sometimes. I think so. Because I can't change the cheque, after I gave to him the cheque, that time, he took \$40 and they gave for others, \$10. I work, work, but no money.*

*(GTA, FG #11)*

In other instances, jobs were in small businesses run by other newcomers and a number of service providers questioned whether these small business owners knew about or were concerned about their obligations when it came to employment standards, training and health and safety.

*In the construction industry...the newcomers come in, the sectors that they're going to, are the sectors where the greatest OHS risk takes place. It's the sector where it's predominantly the smaller employer, so that employer profile is important to understand. They don't know, they're ignorant, they don't care, and there's very little consequence if they actually do it. How do you bring about change, given those four factors?*

*(Key Informant, Service provider, P01)*

Work secured through personal networks also meant that the newcomer could end up in an environment where they almost exclusively spoke their native language. Yet many newcomers noted that one goal of finding work, beyond income, was to immerse themselves in an English-speaking environment in order to improve their language skills. Finally, some described instances when finding work through cultural or family networkers had undesired consequences:

*I think that this [chemical liquid] is not good for me, because all the time I have a runny nose, I cough and I sneeze. I think it's [chemical liquid], and I need to tell the manager that this one is not good for me. And then she told me if you say that, maybe you're going to lose your job. Because she said I need you to do [it]...And so it's very hard for me, because she's from my country. I know her in my country, we have a tradition. You have to respect somebody if she's*

*older than you.... So, I have to respect her, but sometimes she abuse(s) [me].*

*(GTA, FG #13)*

In these cases, securing work through family or cultural networks left newcomers vulnerable to exploitation and resulted in circumstances that were difficult to navigate. Workers in these situations were typically grateful for finding work, but at the same time, personal connections and tradition made it difficult to speak up when they were mistreated.

## **2. First jobs**

Among participants with work experience in Canada, first jobs were often “survival jobs,” characterized by low pay, precarity and poor working conditions. Participants described jobs that were temporary and where they worked with hazardous materials and received minimal job-related or health and safety training. While there were some participants who had jobs where they had positive experiences and received information about their rights, this was the exception, not the norm. Some participants described working for “cash only” and being paid less than their Canadian-born counterparts. When workers were injured or hurt, they described being reprimanded or told to leave the workplace. Workers who became injured had little to no knowledge about workers’ compensation. Below are examples of work experiences discussed in focus groups:

*...I'm working at the freezer and I stay for eight hours, no giving us a break... I feel sick one day, sick like I can't breathe, and the cold... one day I passed out, don't feel good and no sitting [in the] room, nothing... Somebody came in and tell me, you'd better not say words [...] You're not allowed to talk, you're not allowed to talk. You talk to the next person, we change you for another department.*

*(GTA, FG #13)*

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*I was working in a pizza store. I didn't know how to use the oven. So, that should have been part of the training because I burned*

*myself several times...When I came to Canada I realized that there is a minimum wage. I didn't know it before. I wasn't paid the minimum wage. Like he talked about, we do a lot of cash jobs, which is wrong... but I don't know what to do about it. And getting the job is more important, so you ignore it.*

*(Eastern Ontario, FG #4)*

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*I work in factory. After I came here maybe for three months or four months, I was working in that, picking the package, the cartons, and keeping in the skids. And I told my supervisor it is very heavy, and the job without people. I am just one. And now I have a problem in my back. I feel that I can't bend myself. He told me, remember, if you will go now, I will send a report against you to the temporary agency and I will tell them that you have a problem in your back...they will not call you again for any kind of job. And maybe they will cancel your file.*

*(GTA, FG #9)*

*For many newcomers in our study, the jobs that they first did in Canada were completely new to them. They were not accustomed to the work environment and had no training in the tasks they were asked to perform.*

*We are not used for that kind of work. We don't even know how to do it. We came with education then we would look for work that is appropriate for us and not work in a kitchen or in a restaurant or I don't know what. We are not used to that kind of work...we find it very hard."*

*(GTA, Arabic FG #18)*

In addition, many also did not have strong English-language skills. This made the reported lack of job-related and OHS training particularly troubling.

### **Job Information provided by the employer**

Participants rarely reported receiving comprehensive health and safety training from employers or elsewhere and most had limited knowledge of employment standards. The worker below described his work experience with training:

*In a hotel? No. I've been in four hotels. Four. Not one of them I've ever been in, never in no orientation they say, this is what you do, this is what you bring to work, this is what you never do.*

*(GTA, FG #11)*

There was a degree of confusion regarding what was meant by these concepts. For example, when asked about their *rights* as a worker, some newcomers instead listed their *responsibilities* in the workplace, for example, the work tasks they were expected to complete in the course of their jobs. In some instances, participants simply described signing a contract that outlined their responsibilities when asked about their health and safety training.

*M: You know when you were saying that with some of the training, did you ever receive any kind of materials that sort of told you about your rights or what to do if you're injured? Anything around that?*

*R1: At the beginning they give a bunch of papers.*

*R2: A contract.*

*R1: Yeah, they give so many papers and we have to sign it. In my case, they give and we need to sign all of the papers before we come to work.*

*R2: And when we start to read, they will look at your face that the person is first time reading the papers." (Northern Ontario, FG #5)*

Workplace health and safety was at times taken to mean measures to protect clients or customers instead of the worker her or himself. For example, one participant discussed getting a Safe Food Handling Certificate (which focuses only on food and customer safety). Another participant who was a personal support worker discussed getting training on preventing falls and injury, however when pressed for details, it

became clear this training only focused on the safety of her elderly clients. Finally, a few workers described receiving WHMIS training and doing the mandatory awareness training. However, detailed recollection of material covered by this training was limited.

### **Speaking up at work...or not**

Given some of the work conditions described by participants, we wanted to know how newcomers dealt with situations where they were asked to do something unsafe or when they encountered poor working conditions. For those participants who had not yet found work in Canada, many felt confident that if they were mistreated or if they encountered poor working conditions, they would speak up or refuse to do anything that would put them in danger. However, participants who were or had been employed in Canada tended to have a different perspective. When these newcomers were mistreated in the workplace, they typically were not sure what to do. Some, driven by necessity, put up with poor treatment. When things got too bad or when they were injured, the solution was to simply leave the workplace.

*M: Did the people do anything when you fell down?*

*R: Yeah, my manager at the work are there. But, they don't help. Then, I went home and three or four days rested. But, I didn't go to the hospital, because I don't understand how to explain to the doctor.*

*M: You didn't want to go to the hospital, because you didn't know how to explain it.*

*R: Yes. So much, language is problem. Before, I couldn't understand. I'm looking just the face.*

*M: Your supervisor called you to come back? But, they didn't do anything else?*

*R: No.*

*M: And then you didn't go.*

*R: No.*

*(GTA, FG #12)*

Speaking up when asked to do something unsafe or when experiencing mistreatment was made more difficult by some of the circumstances described above—complicated relationships, financial insecurity and precarity in the labour market. One participant, for example, described his reluctance to speak up after an experience working through a temporary work agency:

*R: They are using those people. They are paying them very less and they're getting money from the company or the factory or whatever, using those people.*

*M: Have you ever considered raising your voice ...or complaining to anybody about how you have been treated over there?*

*R: Yes, I complained. If you are working for the agency, they give you many notes in a paper. If you want to complain, complain [to] us. Don't talk to anyone. If somebody raises his voice... don't take any reaction, just call us.... They will do just one thing. They will remove you from the list. They don't give more help.*

*(GTA, FG #9)*

In addition, most participants had little knowledge about their rights at work or the responsibilities of their employer. One participant, for example, described being perplexed when her employer called, angry that she had “cost him money.” She had been injured at work and when her pain persisted she visited a doctor. When asked by the doctor about her injury she mentioned it had happened at work and this resulted in the doctor contacting the workers’ compensation board.

*The manager scold me, why you are going to hospital? What do you say when the doctors ask you, your arm injured in my workplace? And when hiring, they give me five days full time working. When I am injured, I come back and I was in my work, they give me two days in the week. And I'm stuck, because it doesn't make sense for me, two days.*

*(GTA, FG #13)*

The employer was upset that the worker had set a workers' compensation claim in motion and this resulted in the worker's hours being cut. The worker did not know that by saying she was hurt at work this would happen. Most newcomers in the study did not know anything about the workers' compensation process.

Newcomers who had been looking for work for several months or those who had ended up in survival jobs often expressed anxiety, disillusion, frustration and a loss of hope. This was the case particularly for immigrants with high levels of education and training who often had an expectation that they would eventually find a job in their field. For the workers in these survival jobs, one barrier to speaking up was the knowledge that finding work was exceedingly difficult and if they were laid off or fired they would not easily find another job:

*No one would say anything (if they were asked to do something dangerous) because they wouldn't want to lose their jobs. If it was easy to find another job then one would. But if you have spent like 4 or 5 months looking for work then (you) would stick to this job no matter what.*

*(GTA, Arabic FG #18)*

### **3. Preparation for entering the work force safely**

Given that many participants in this study were working in precarious, poor quality jobs, we wanted to understand whether they had received any resources, training or materials that would help protect them at work.

Due to our recruitment strategy, most participants in the study had participated in some type of employment-related workshop or program at a community group or settlement agency. Typically, this programming involved help with job searches, resume building, cultural competency training and networking. Rarely did these programs include formal OHS or employment standards curricula. The following type of exchange was common in focus groups:

*M: So, you said you never received any information about [health and safety]. Did you receive any information about your rights as a worker, like what you're entitled to?*

*R: No.*

R: No.

R: No.

R: No.

(GTA, FG #13)

Service providers did discuss examples of programs that addressed health and safety either in their organizations or in other community agencies. The programs they described tended to be one-off workshops, often focused on particular occupational groups (e.g. engineering or construction):

*No, [it's not systematic] but when we do the workshop, if we're doing (it) for Syrian refugees, we talk about it [health and safety] in general ...Chemical-based only, but we do say that every employer is supposed to have had health and safety training. If they don't, you have to come and talk to us before you join the job so that we can give you some basic, basic ideas about what you can ask. We do a lot of pictures, a lot of visuals. [...] We've done four workshops in that. We do talk about health and safety, but it's only done, so far, for the guys...*

(Key informant, Service provider, P17)

Some service providers felt that OHS programming was not something they were comfortable providing. They did not have extensive knowledge of this area and were not sure they could provide clients with accurate information.

*We're not trained on those types of things. It might be an idea for us to bring in somebody to talk about it every couple of months or something. That might be something else that we could offer, but I don't believe that part of that is in our mandate. [...] So, if it was me, I would refer people to Employment Ontario, give them the phone number if they're having issues like that. But as for training on it, there are no programs that are offered here for that.*

(Key informant, Service provider, P09)

Services, we were told, were largely newcomer driven, meaning programming was designed around client demand. Newcomers rarely asked for information related to OHS or employment standards and this was one reason given for not developing these programs. Service providers described a demand for programs in other areas of settlement (education, health etc.) and these were viewed as a priority.

*... you have competing workshops (for service providers) on offer so the participant can make their choice based on what's important for them. There has been very little take-up of the workers' health and safety or human rights types of workshops. I don't think it's because they think it's unimportant, but it's because there are other priorities that are far more urgent, things like violence against women prevention and access to social assistance for low income clients. There is only so much that you can do within a certain timeframe so almost always it's one of the last priorities. It doesn't always get picked.*

*(Key informant, Service provider, P15)*

When clients did come to them with work-related concerns about pay or being asked to do something unsafe, service providers said they tried to help them, but also depended on other external resources such as the Ministry of Labour website, the Welcome to Canada or Ontario guides, and Employment Ontario.

Service providers also noted how resource constraints prevented them from developing programming that was far-reaching or systematic. Often, when service providers described programming related to employment standards or OHS, it was something that was developed on their own time without dedicated federal or provincial funding. Many service providers noted that they did not have the financial or human resources to provide comprehensive programming. This seemed to contribute to the piecemeal nature of the programs that were in place.

Finally, some service providers assumed (and hoped) that employment standards or OHS programming was something that newcomers would get elsewhere, for example, through their employer. A number of key informants noted that it was the employer's responsibility to provide their workers with training and information.

However, many also understood that there were employers who were not fulfilling their responsibility in this regard.

#### **4. Refugee-specific issues**

We found that there were many similarities between the reported experiences of refugees and immigrants with respect to looking for work, accessing health and safety resources and first jobs. Refugees, despite receiving financial assistance during the first year in Canada, described starting to look for work very quickly after arrival. In part, this was due to the high cost of living in cities like Toronto. Many refugees also wanted to make their own way in Canada and did not want to have to depend on government (or sponsor) support. Those who found jobs tended to work in precarious, manual jobs, like other immigrants in this study. Not surprisingly, English language proficiency was low in this group of workers and this was considered a major obstacle to finding work. As was noted previously, many of these participants did not have documents and credentials from their home country which also limited access to better quality jobs.

It should be noted that many refugees came to Canada via other countries where they lived for a number of years. Some participants noted that they had gained work experience in these transition countries that was not always recognized by service providers. We also noted that while the backgrounds and work experiences of refugees were diverse, programming for refugees tended to be both narrow in scope and gendered in nature. For example, programs for women were focused on child care or food preparation. Programs for men tended to be related to jobs in construction and other manual occupations. This sort of programming may contribute to nudging refugees into jobs that reinforce gender stereotypes and limit their opportunities.

## **Discussion**

### **A perfect storm**

Recent immigrants and refugees face a number of challenges when looking for work and in their first jobs. Job prospects are narrowed by a lack of Canadian work experience, limited employment networks, language barriers, discrimination and lack of recognition of foreign credentials. Many newcomers, anxious for financial stability and eager to gain Canadian work experience, end up in jobs they have never done before. These types of survival jobs are often precarious and hazardous. Yet newcomers know little about their rights in the workplace and many report not having received job or OHS training. Because they have such difficulty finding work and do not want to lose a job once they have found one, newcomers are reluctant to speak up when asked to do something unsafe or when working conditions are poor. The fact that many newcomers depend on members of their community to find work can also make it more difficult to raise workplace issues, as this may be socially awkward and culturally inappropriate in some instances. The possibility was also raised by some study key informants that recent immigrants who are small business owners and hire other recent immigrants may themselves not know very much about employment standards or OHS. This “perfect storm” of circumstances makes recent immigrants and refugees particularly vulnerable to poor working conditions and work injury. It is crucial that these new workers are prepared for entering the Canadian workforce safely and that their health is protected at work.

### **Diffusion of responsibility**

There are many different stakeholders and organizations that potentially have contact with newcomers as they arrive in Canada and look for employment. These include pre-arrival groups, organizations serving newcomers, the federal and provincial ministries responsible for citizenship and immigration, the Ministry of Labour, employers, libraries, places of worship and so on. These points of contact present opportunities to provide employment standards and health and safety resources to newcomers. However, these multiple points of contact can also lead to a diffusion of responsibility related to health and safety. While there was agreement that newcomers often end up in poor quality jobs and are susceptible to exploitation, most interview participants believed that health and safety resources were being

provided by someone else. Some of the policy makers we interviewed, for example, assumed that work-related programming received by newcomers through settlement organizations included OHS and employment standards information. Yet, as we have noted above, most groups did not have the resources or the expertise to develop systematic programming in this area. Some service providers reported sending newcomers to external resources and websites, but they rarely had time to follow up and determine whether these resources were accessed or useful. The resources newcomers were referred to—for example, the Service Ontario website or the *Welcome to Canada Guide*—contain virtually no information about worker rights or health and safety. Others, like the Ministry of Labour or WSIB websites, are difficult to navigate, particularly for those who do not speak English or French fluently. Some service providers noted that it was the responsibility of employers to provide immigrant workers with OHS resources and training. Under Ontario's *Occupational Health Safety Act*, the employer has the greatest responsibilities with respect to health and safety and must both inform workers of and protect workers from hazards. However, many newcomers in our focus groups ended up in jobs where they did not get information or training on health and safety—something that has been corroborated by other research (18). In fact, service providers noted that some employers assumed that when newcomers came to them via settlement or employment programs, they had already received health and safety training. This diffusion of responsibility can have potentially devastating consequences for newcomers entering the workforce. It is possible that many newcomers start work in Canada without knowing anything about their rights, without receiving job or OHS training and with little knowledge about what to do if they encounter dangerous working conditions or become injured.

### **A stretched sector**

There is an opportunity for the settlement sector to become more involved in the provision of resources and programming related to employment standards and OHS. One benefit of this approach is that newcomers can raise issues with service providers, for example, about their rights and the responsibilities of their employers, without worrying about losing their jobs. Participants in the study spoke highly of the settlement services they received and of the service providers and educators they had contact with. This trusted relationship can be leveraged to help newcomers understand their rights and recognize potential workplace hazards. The settlement

sector provides a range of programs, including programs that prepare newcomers for employment. This seems like an ideal context in which to introduce the topics of employment standards, OHS and workers' compensation. However, there are a number of barriers that may stand in the way. As already noted, service providers do not always have a great deal of knowledge about these topics themselves. Gaining such knowledge requires an investment of time and resources. Yet, many service providers described organizations as being precariously funded and stretched. Settlement workers themselves are often on temporary contracts that do not allow for long-term planning. Short term, precarious funding to organizations encourages one-off programming without a wide reach. Service providers also noted that there was virtually no funding for any follow up activities, meaning that once a newcomer was referred to a different program or found work, there was no way to track long-term outcomes. As a result, little is known about the quality of jobs that newcomers get or whether they stay in those jobs in the long term. If the settlement sector is to be involved in comprehensive employment preparation programming that includes health and safety, it is important that organizations in this sector receive adequate funds to do this work. Sustained funding is needed to help train service providers, to have staff available to run regular workshops (or other programming) and to identify external organizations with expertise in worker protection that could provide programming within the settlement sector.

### **You don't know what you don't know**

A number of interview participants in this study noted that programming in the settlement sector tends to be client driven and newcomers rarely ask for resources or information on OHS or workers' compensation. One reason for this may be that, for at least some newcomers, there is an expectation that they will secure good quality jobs in their field. Canada has programs to attract highly educated immigrants into fields where there are employment shortages and many materials aimed at newcomers do not provide a realistic depiction of the type of work newcomers are likely to find. Many participants in our study were disillusioned because they had not found jobs that fully used their skills and recognized their experience and education. So, it is possible that many newcomers do not expect to find themselves in hazardous, poor quality jobs and, as a result, do not anticipate needing information about how to keep safe at work or what to do if they become injured. It is also possible that newcomers do not fully understand the gaps in their knowledge. For

example, a study by Lay, Kosny and Smith (14) found that in a survey of recent immigrants and refugees, participants reported similar levels of knowledge of rights and OHS awareness as Canadian-born workers. We would expect immigrants to report lower levels of knowledge. Similarly, in this study there were newcomers who said they were aware of their rights at work. However, as noted above, the participants' understanding of rights was not always congruent with that of the researchers and often when participants were probed about the depth and breadth of knowledge it became clear that their knowledge of this area was limited. If content related to employment standards, OHS and workers' compensation is included as a regular part of employment-related programming, regardless of whether clients ask for this type of programming or not, newcomers accessing employment programs will be better prepared when they start their first jobs.

## Study strengths and limitations

During this study, we spoke to newcomers using settlement services about their experiences integrating into the labour market in three different regions in Ontario. This research cannot speak to the frequency of particular events or experiences. However, given the convergence between the reported experiences of newcomers and the information shared by service providers in interviews, we are confident that the experience of our participants is not unique. Caution, however, should be taken when extrapolating findings. For example, the study participants did not include temporary foreign workers or immigrants who do not access settlement services. Also, most of the refugees participating in the study were Syrian and because there has been a great focus on the integration of Syrian refugees in Canada, these newcomers may have greater access to resources and support than other refugees in the province. It is also important to note that the participants in this study had fairly high levels of language skill (excluding Syrian refugee focus group participants) as they were recruited via employment programs that require a certain facility in English. It is likely that newcomers with lower levels of education and poor English-language skills have more difficulty finding work and understanding their rights or invoking them.

## Implications and future areas of research

This study began with the overarching goal of gaining insight into how we can prepare newcomers to safely integrate into the labour market. Our conclusion is that it has to be done systematically, at multiple junctures and in many different ways. One key informant suggested:

*[There's] not a 'best time,' it's one moment when you can touch on an element of that. But you will then need to revisit it, it will need to be revisited when the language comprehension is improved, it will need to be revisited when they have absorbed some of that information, it will need to be revisited when they find the problem. All of those...it's not a linear path. I think the question is, how can the resources be made available in multiple formats at multiple*

*times, that consider the social, and workplace, and economic-related factors that are impacting the ability for people to absorb, process, and implement the OHS legislative entitlements.”*

*(Key informant, Service provider, P01)*

### **What now? Potential solutions**

*Making it systematic.* Offering OHS content as a regular part of employment-related or settlement programming would reach many more newcomers than one-off workshops or seminars on employment standards or OHS. Staff at these organizations could be trained to deliver the content, which could be integrated into existing programming. Other organizations could also offer the content, for example, organizations with expertise in OHS like the health and safety associations, the Workers’ Action Centre or unions that have been active in health and safety programming. With funding and in partnership with the settlement sector, these types of organizations can be allies in the development and provision of programming to newcomers.

*Starting early.* The newcomers in our study were looking for work shortly after arrival in Canada. We were told by service providers and recent immigrants that newcomers often do not wait to finish language training or, for refugees, until their government assistance ends, to begin looking for work or working. There is a need to develop programming that can be integrated into entry-level language training. Ideally this programming can be repeated as newcomers become more proficient in English. One entry point for health and safety programming can be an initial discussion about employment standards as newcomers may be interested in learning about the minimum wage, hours of work and overtime regulations.

*In-person programming.* Employment standards and OHS training cannot involve only sending newcomers to websites. Government websites are often difficult to navigate, particularly when individuals do not speak English or French fluently. Although it is important to have resources on hand, these should not be the primary mode of providing OHS and employment standards information. In-person programming allows newcomers to ask questions and get clarification when needed. When websites or guides are suggested as resources to newcomers, it is important that both the quality and accessibility of information in the resource be assessed.

*Going beyond providing information.* Having knowledge about rights and responsibilities and OHS does not guarantee that newcomers will be safe at work. A multi-pronged and wide-reaching approach is needed to decrease hazard exposure in newcomers' first jobs and increase newcomer empowerment to speak up when they encounter discrimination, hazards and poor working conditions. In addition to providing resources to new workers, this approach could involve providing guidance and training to employers, fining employers who do not provide safe working conditions, improving pathways to credential recognition and decreasing barriers to finding high quality employment.

*Involving champions.* In this study, organizations that had introduced programming related to worker rights or health and safety typically had a champion in the organization—someone who was both knowledgeable and invested in providing these resources to newcomers. These champions took the lead in applying for funding to run programs and helped make these issues a part of employment-related programming. A champion is also needed at a system level. If one policy body or ministry played the role of coordinating health and safety programming for newcomers, it is possible that this programming would be more systematic and better integrated among all the groups and organizations that have contact with newcomers.

*Making health and safety part of employment-related resources.* There are many resources available to newcomers that focus on the labour market, finding jobs and upgrading skills. These resources would be an ideal place to include information on OHS, employment standards and what to do in the event of an injury.

*Considering culture and gender in programming.* It is important to question cultural and gender stereotypes and whether programming reinforces these. Offering women from all cultures access to the same employment programs as men, regardless of background, opens up opportunities. Female-dominated workplaces, such as those involving child care, housekeeping and food preparation, can be hazardous and these workers need protection. It is important that the developers of employment programs understand this; employment programs that explicitly address these issues with female newcomers will better prepare them for safe work. Finally, access to free childcare for participants could increase women's participation in settlement programming and therefore in the labour market.

*Tracking outcomes.* The diffusion of responsibility combined with the funding constraints facing the settlement sector results in limited long-term tracking of newcomers' work experiences. For example, there is little information available about whether recent immigrants and refugees receive appropriate training at work, the quality of their jobs, and whether job placements (for example, through settlement agencies) result in sustained employment. Organizations in the settlement sector may require resources to build capacity and enable long-term tracking of employment outcomes.

*Managing expectations.* Services and resources available to newcomers can provide information about the jobs the newcomers are likely to find in Canada, the difficulties they may encounter and the challenges of getting credentials recognized. Setting realistic expectations in this way can assist newcomers with planning finances, language acquisition, networking and other education.

### **What next? Future research and inquiry**

*The role and experience of employers.* This study focused on the experiences of newcomers using interviews and focus groups with newcomers and other key informants—service providers, educators, program developers and policy makers. Future research could examine the experiences of employers who hire recent immigrants. For example, what are the needs of different types of employers (large businesses that hire recent immigrants, immigrant-run small businesses, etc.)? Where and how do employers learn about their legislated responsibilities and any changes to them? What are the challenges they face? Are there employers who have found effective ways of training recent immigrants?

*Newcomers who do not access settlement services.* Our study included only newcomers who had some connection to settlement groups in Ontario. However, there are large groups of immigrants and refugees who never access settlement services. It is important to consider how these newcomers connect to the labour market, as well as their access to health and safety resources.

*Considering race, gender and age.* The types of programming that newcomers are able to access and their labour market integration can be shaped by race, gender and age. Studies on labour market experiences or workplace injury rarely include statistics on race, ethnicity or culture and this can mask how these factors influence

job acquisition and quality. These communities could benefit if researchers included this information in their data collection and analyses.

*Include recent immigrants, refugees and linguistic minorities in research.* Many studies on work and health do not include newcomers and individuals who do not speak English. Difficulties related to recruitment, language comprehension and research funding constraints contribute to this research gap. The exclusion of these participants means that policy makers, service providers and other decision makers may not have a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of the most vulnerable workers in the Canadian labour market.

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## Appendix A: Sample Characteristics



