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Book Review: Racialized Migrant Women in Canada: Essays on Health, Violence, and Equity

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Racialized Migrant Women in Canada: Essays on Health, Violence, and Equity. 2009. Vijay Agnew (editor). Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 329 pp. \$35.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Sarah Rudrum¹

Racialized Migrant Women in Canada: Essays on Health, Violence, and Equity aims to document inequalities experienced by Canada's migrant women who are affected by racialization -- the process of constructing "race" as a socially meaningful category through attaching special and differential significance to features of people's appearance, voice, language or place of origin. Editor Vijay Agnew brings together diverse interdisciplinary voices, highlighting the breadth of research in this area, yet returning to consistent themes throughout. Her focus in bringing the collection together was on documenting inequalities rather than on "an abstract and theoretical discussion of the nature and form of equality" (30). However, the strength of this collection lies not only in documenting the effect of systemic inequalities on the lives of migrant women, but also in its interesting demonstration of the various theoretical models used by scholars of inequality.

The book's three sections focus on violence, health, and equity with contributions by writers from a range of disciplines including sociology, law, nursing, and migration. While the theoretical and methodological approaches are varied, several themes emerge. In particular, many of the pieces discuss problems associated with the large numbers of women immigrating as sponsored dependants within the family class category. The chapter, "Gender, Migration and Health" highlights the risks to women who are dependent on their abusive partners to maintain their immigration status, and note that the category erases women's educational and employment background and potential. In her strong piece "The Complicity of the State in the Intimate Abuse of Women," Janet Mosher elaborates on how immigration policies exacerbate the vulnerability of women to intimate violence, focusing on barriers to social services, such as the policy making accessing social services a reason to deny permanent residency.

Monica Boyd and Jessica Yiu note that another shortcoming of Canadian policy, the failure to recognize foreign diplomas, is potentially feminized through women's arrival as sponsored dependants to primary applicant spouses. Louise Racine's contribution on "Haitian Canadians' Experience of Racism in Quebec" also emphasizes the negative effects of the failure to recognize foreign diplomas, citing a participant who said "that's where social integration starts. . . you have to open doors".

While there is no attempt to create a universal theoretical framework, the value of intersectionality, social determinants of health and population health frameworks, and a critique of Canadian multiculturalism are revisited by several authors. Bilkis Visandjée and her co-authors provide an exploration of the potential of a gendered social capital framework to improve public policy, with insights that articulate well with Jill Hanley's description of "Challenging Gendered and Ethno-Racial Assumptions in Organizing for Housing Rights".

Agnew's introduction includes an excellent review of Canadian immigration policies and settlement services, including their historical basis, and is a strong platform

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for the rest of the book. Situating the term within the broader feminist debate over identity, she explores definitions of “racialization,” highlighting the socially constructed and unstable nature of categories of “race,” and how they serve to create or further social inequality. The concept of racialization clearly informs the work of most of the authors, who demonstrate how challenges faced by immigrant women are structured by our social and political landscape, and do not result from individual characteristics or features of their cultures of origin. Many of the pieces successfully focus on how various policies create vulnerabilities across broad sectors, rather than among particular “ethnic” groups. Hanley's piece “Challenging Gendered and Ethno-Racial Assumptions in Organizing for Housing Rights” is strongly self-reflexive, and discusses best practices for facilitating meaningful participation of racialized migrant women in existing community organizations. Annie Bunting and Shadi Mokhtari do an excellent job clarifying the current role of Shari'a in Ontario family dispute resolution. They introduce the pragmatic and cultural concerns of religious Muslim women and their feeling of being caught between two forces, patriarchal “Islamic revivalism” and racist and sexist “Orientalism”. While several pieces are less situated, this piece and the two located in Quebec, by Racine and by Hanley, highlight important provincial and local particularities in immigrant experiences of social inclusion.

While this collection emphasizes the diversity within “immigrants” as a category, the contributors follow a more hegemonic understanding of “women” and do not explore gender or sexuality diversity. For example, Bierman et al spend a paragraph elaborating on ethnicity as “a socially constructed phenomenon” (101), but only nod to gender as similarly fluid. Perhaps because of the large numbers of spouse-sponsored women immigrating to Canada, there is a strong focus on women as members of heterosexual couples. The book's organization is slightly out of balance, with half as many pieces on violence as on health or equity. The section divisions themselves are somewhat artificial, since violence is itself a health issue and both health and intimate violence are structured by issues such as racism, employment inequity, and (lack of) self-determination explored in the equity section. However, Agnew's brief section introductions help create cohesiveness and situate the selections within the broader context of scholarship in each area. While the chapter authors cross-reference each other, a greater sense of a dialogue would have improved the book. The collection's breadth of scope is both a strength and a weakness; there were many further topics to explore in each area.

Overall, *Racialized Migrant Women in Canada* succeeds in providing a compilation of compelling work addressing important social justice concerns. It makes a valuable contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship, and will be of interest to feminist and antiracist researchers engaged in studies of healthcare, legal and social policy, and local organizing. As well as documenting the marginalization and prejudices that result from bad public policy, the selections provide nuanced explorations about how these inequalities can be systemically addressed.