



**Responding to Changes in Immigration Policy**

June 4, 2013

**Background**

On April 18, 2013 the Migrant Mothers Project at the University of Toronto hosted a community forum in Windsor, Ontario in collaboration with Windsor Women Working with Immigrant Women (W5). In this document we provide a summary of the community forum where over 30 people engaged in dialogue about the challenges service providers face when supporting immigrants and recommendations for improving service delivery. Forum attendees included front-line workers, management and volunteers who work in the areas of immigration and refugee settlement, immigration law, child protection/children's aid, health care services, adult education, anti-violence against women services, and language assistance.

The forum agenda included:

- A legal panel on immigration policy presented by Rupaleem Bhuyan (University of Toronto), Karin Baqi (Staff Lawyer, South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario), and Cathy Kolar (Immigration Specialist, Legal Assistance of Windsor).
- A community panel included presentations by Shelley Gilbert (Coordinator of Social Work Services, Legal Assistance of Windsor) and Sudip Minhas (Program Director, Windsor Women Working With Immigrant Women).
- A facilitated discussion explored the following questions:
  - 1) How have recent & proposed changes to immigration policy shaped your work?
  - 2) How are you currently working with women with precarious status? What are your top priorities/concerns at this time?
  - 3) What challenges are there for frontline workers in supporting immigrants with precarious status?

**Discussion Themes**

While many topics emerged at the Windsor Forum, in this summary we report on the following key themes related to: temporary foreign workers, strict funding limitations, lack of knowledge or training regarding immigration policy changes, the need for public education on human rights violations.

## 1. Funding limitations for Organizations

Forum participants shared a common frustration of being unable to support their clients due to various funding limitations. Recent policy changes have made it harder to support immigrant clients due to:

- lack of resources
- strict program eligibility that prevents many organizations from working with people with temporary visas or who are non-status, and
- time constraints on service providers due to increased pressure to document “outcomes”

Organizations that provide immigrant or refugee settlement services are the most restricted with regard to supporting people with precarious status. Front-line workers shared that they could not formally provide referral services *nor* document what strategies were working, as this was outside their funding mandate. Without the means to account for clients with precarious status, there is no data that exists that can demonstrate what services these individuals require. This contributes to continued invisibility of people who have precarious immigration status as well as lack of knowledge amongst service providers as to how to support people who are outside their funded mandate.

Moreover, the various mandates that organizations must now follow are leading to institutional forms of oppression for the most vulnerable members of their community. Service providers that once offered assistance to individuals with precarious immigration status have now found themselves having to turn their previous clients away. Despite their best intentions, organizations fear losing funding; subsequently, individuals with precarious status face further marginalization and isolation as a result of recent immigration policy changes.

## 2. Temporary Foreign Workers

The increase in Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) admitted into Canada represents a significant concern in the Windsor area, particularly for service providers who work in Leamington, Ontario where there is a large presence of temporary foreign workers. It has been well documented that temporary foreign workers experience exploitation, are paid less than the average Canadian. Several community forum participants shared examples of worker abuse but noted that workers are afraid to seek help, for fear of being immediately deported if their employment is terminated. Attendees noted that even policies that penalize employers who have been found to exploit workers have done more harm for temporary foreign workers. Employers who are found guilty have been known to reincorporate under a new name and allowed to hire temporary foreign workers despite their prior charges. In contrast, workers who have been successful to bring a charge against an employer have lost their work status when the employer, who was found guilty of exploiting workers, lost their right to hire temporary foreign workers.

Attendees noted that building trust amongst TFW takes time and they have noticed that employers often pit workers from different parts of the world, as a way to hinder solidarity. For example, organizations like the Legal Assistance Windsor (LAW) have had some success organizing Thai workers over the past four years. However, one of the main employers recently started bringing in Indonesian workers, requiring LAW and the Thai workers to start from scratch to overcome language and cultural barriers as well as to build trust with the new workers.

**3. Sudden Changes in Immigration Policy**

Forum attendees noted a lack of awareness of the changes in immigration policy within the community, among their clients, service providers, and even among government officials. Many non-for-project organizations have experienced funding cuts to attend trainings, with a push towards webinars to learn about changes in immigration policy. Forum attendees discussed how the lack of face to face training opportunities prevents the exchange of knowledge among service providers who are working with similar populations. With respect to new restrictions on the Interim Federal Health Plan (IFHP), forum attendees shared stories where individuals who are eligible, particularly women and children, have been turned away from hospitals due to confusion over what support these individuals can or cannot receive. Thus while restrictions on IFP have excluded many refugee claimants from accessing health care, the lack of clear information about this policy change has increased institutional barriers for those refugees who are eligible under the current program.

**Excerpt from Windsor Community Forum**

“Systems can be challenged, or within reason, that allows people to influence policies. We may not be able to meet... with the Federal Government, but we can share our experiences, and those that have the capacity to do so, they can advocate for [those that can’t].”

-Forum participant, 2013

**4. Human Rights Must Prevail**

Forum attendees made reference to the human rights violations that are occurring as a result of the recent immigration policy changes. Attendees are concerned that the general population is not aware of the lasting impacts that these changes are having on individuals and their families. There was discussion on how to share the many stories of those with precarious immigration status with a wider audience to ensure the humanity of the stories are being heard. Currently, there is a system in place where ones access to basic human rights is directly linked to a person’s immigration status. Community members noted that it is time to change the rhetoric that currently depicts immigrants and refugees and that it is time to put human rights ahead, and not contingent upon immigration status.

**5. Working through Immigration Changes in Windsor**

The need for collaboration was a consistent theme in the forum and attendees noted that this is a key issue that service providers must find a way to support. It was noted that collaboration in these times of rapid immigration changes in difficult, and at times frightening, however, the need to collaborate is essential and the ability to create spaces of belonging is more important than the current spaces of fear that exist. Service providers and community members suggested that they must work together in order to be able to create change and support those who truly need access to services in their community.

**Conclusion**

The Windsor forum provided a space for attendees to come together to discuss concerning issues that are impacting their community. Although many conversations revolved around policy changes and the direct impact on individuals and their families, there was much discussion on working in

collaboration to challenge the rhetoric around immigrants and refugees and how to work towards separating human rights from immigration status.

### **Recommendations for Continued Collaboration and Coordination**

- Participants wished to connect with other organizations and community partners to be able to collaborate and discuss the impacts of the various policy changes and create new and concrete projects. Although this can be done within the community, it may also be beneficial to have conversation with members of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).
- Windsor attendees wish to create more forums and knowledge exchanges in order to educate themselves about strategies around supporting individuals with precarious immigration status. This can be done through creating networks within the community that support that collaboration of such projects.

The Migrant Mothers Project is also hosting forums in Ottawa and across Canada. For more information about our community forums please contact Project Coordinator, Bethany Osborne at [migrantmothersproject@gmail.com](mailto:migrantmothersproject@gmail.com)

You can also visit us at [www.migrantmothersproject.com](http://www.migrantmothersproject.com)