

Background

This is a brief summary of the community consultation that took place in Toronto on March 26, 2015. The consultation was hosted by the Migrant Mothers Project and included 25 people who engaged in dialogue about some of the challenges faced by temporary foreign workers and sponsored spouses/partners with conditional permanent residence. Service providers shared some of the challenges they face when supporting immigrants along with recommendations for improving service delivery. Forum attendees included educators, front-line workers, lawyers and community organizers working in the areas of immigration, refugee settlement, anti-violence against women and community development.

The forum agenda included:

- An overview of previous research findings of the Migrant Mothers Project
- An outline of the new study - “How Conditional Settlement Impacts Immigrant Women”
- A brief report on recent CIC data regarding the entry numbers of sponsored spouses/partners and changes within the Live-in-Caregiver program.

Discussion Themes

The second part of the community consultation involved several small group discussions. Attendees talked about some of the impacts of recent policy changes and what they hope for this study to accomplish.

1. Fear of Losing Status

The attendees identified the sense of fear as one of the main issues surrounding sponsored spouses and temporary foreign workers affected by the new changes to immigration policies introduced by the Harper’s administration. Many attendees noted that due to fear and the complex nature of the systemic changes, immigrants are not coming forward to report the abuse from their partners or employers. Rather, women are “going underground” or avoiding shelters, an issue that is increasing their precariousness. It was also discussed that service providers are limited in their capacity to help individuals since these changes resulted in overall confusion and fear for people to leave their abusive relationships.

2. Lack of Information

Recent policy changes and the lack of information around these very same changes are not only preventing sponsored spouses from seeking safety, but are also limiting the quality of services provided by legal counsels. On the one hand, women that do not have access to legal representation do not know their options in regards to domestic violence exceptions under the conditional PR, since the legal language is difficult to understand without legal advice. On the other hand, there is a lack of consensus among lawyers regarding the way the domestic violence exception of the conditional PR can be applied, which can lead to misunderstandings and subsequent negative effects for the victims of violence.

3. Barriers to Seeking Safety

The Toronto community consultation attendees noted many barriers to seeking safety among individuals with conditional immigration status and provided a number of examples. Although Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has provided a help-line for those who are experiencing partner abuse, it was discussed that people might not easily use this line due to fears of triggering an investigation which can lead to their sponsorship breakdown and possible loss of immigration status. In addition, women that claim the domestic violence exception under the conditional PR, might also face a number of issues with the eligibility hearing because CIC is “not always” satisfied with the documents provided by the victims.

4. Temporary Foreign Workers

Among the different topics of discussion, it was noted that there is an increased concern about the abuses of the temporary foreign workers, as they wait to complete the mandatory work period. Attendees discussed that despite the removal of the live-in requirement, there are further issues arising for those employed under the Caregiver program, such as employers charging rent. Attendees also stressed the ongoing negative impact of family separation and the lack of information regarding working conditions and rights before their arrival in Canada. It is within such context that recent policies, such as the Bill C-51 and the 4x4 law, which are geared towards greater enforcement, could lead to arrests and mass deportations of temporary foreign workers.

5. Suggested Goals for this Study

At the end of the discussion the attendees shared their suggested goals for this study:

- To create spaces for community stakeholders to exchange knowledge and learn from one another;
- To develop and share knowledge that people can access across different sectors, including CIC statistics and any other dissemination of information that highlights the challenges faced by immigrants across Canada;

- To educate government workers and health care practitioners, such as CIC officers and emergency room workers, in how to provide adequate support for people with precarious or temporary immigration status who are facing abuse or difficulties;
- To gather information regarding changes to the Caregiver program: who has been impacted by these changes and who has the ability to access permanent residence;
- Propose policy recommendations that would improve the situation of sponsored spouses/partners and caregiver workers.

Conclusion

The MMP is grateful to those who attended the community consultation and engaged in such lively discussions. In the summer of 2015 we will be conducting interviews with key stakeholders to inform our analysis of policy changes related to spousal/partner sponsorship and the Caregiver program.

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