

GENDER AND IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES WITH VOLUNTEERING: TREADING THE TENSIONS BETWEEN AGENCY AND STRUCTURE ON THE PATHWAYS TO INTEGRATION

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Voies vers la prospérité (VVP)



Research objectives

- Critically improve understanding of the complex and contradictory role of volunteering as a mechanism for newcomer integration in Canadian society by:
 - Examining the implications of (im)migrants' gender and differences in legal/migrant status, class, ethnicity/race and language skills in shaping their volunteering
 - Bringing to the forefront newcomers' agency, their motivations, innovations and expectations of volunteering
 - Uncovering the social relations and power dynamics that structure newcomers' volunteering through examination of the organizational and institutional context of the settlement sector

Conceptual framework

Citizenship

social participation, civic
engagement, citizen
responsibility

Geographies of care

care ethics,
gender/race/migrant
status, nonprofit and
voluntary sector

Intersectionality

migrant status, class,
gender,
ethnicity/race,
language, religion...

Labour geographies

agency/structure,
production/social
reproduction,
flexibilisation, precarity...

On contradiction

- “...when two seemingly opposed forces are simultaneously present within a particular situation, an entity, a process or an event.”
David Harvey, *Seventeen contradictions and the end of capitalism* (2014: p.1)
- Migrant volunteering
 - Positive & negative experiences
 - Useful & not useful for integration
 - Empowerment & subjectivization and exploitation
 - Voluntary & forced/obligation
 - Agency & structure
 - Care & commodification
 - Paid & unpaid work
 - Sphere of production & sphere of social reproduction
 - Spaces of neoliberalisation & autonomous spaces

Methodology

- Feminist qualitative mixed methods approach
- **Stage 1: Context of settlement agencies**
 - 5 settlement agencies and one NGO in Ottawa-Gatineau
 - Semi-structured interviews with representatives and first-line workers ($n=14$)
 - Immigrant women working in settlement agencies ($n=8$)
- **Stage 2: Why do newcomers volunteer?**
 - 4 focus group discussions with newcomer men and women ($n=40$)
 - 2 in French, 2 in English; 1 in Gatineau and 3 in Ottawa
- **Stage 3: Individual experiences with volunteering**
 - Semi-structured interviews with newcomer women ($n=11$) and newcomer men ($n=10$)

“Volunteer process”

- Omoto & Snyder (2002)
 - Spatial and temporal context
 - Role of individual differences

| | Individual | Organization | Community | Society |
|--------------|------------|--------------|-----------|---------|
| Antecedents | | | | |
| Experiences | | | | |
| Consequences | | | | |

Motivations to volunteer

- Previous experience in home country
- Religion
- Strategy to escape isolation
- Social participation
- Community care
- Strategy to gain Canadian experience, referrals, social and professional networks, language training, skills/training, integration

Gendered
dynamics of
migrant
volunteering

Different
attitudes
towards
volunteering
by men and
women

- **Women: Strategy to break free from isolation**

“It’s an opportunity to meet new people. I’m a single mother and life is quite difficult here. I don’t have too much time to volunteer but **I enjoyed because it’s the only way I can meet new people and to know each other.**” (FG#3)

Women: Strategy to build networks

« Quand on est arrivés au Canada, j’avais d’autres priorités. J’allais avoir un enfant, j’ai eu mon enfant et j’étais enfermée dans ma maison. Je me sentais isolée. C’est quand j’ai commencé à sortir dans les maisons de quartier, et j’y ai fait du bénévolat, c’est dans les maisons de quartier que j’ai appris. Mais pendant que je faisais le bénévolat, j’ai compris que y’avait d’autres volets, y’avait pas seulement le bénévolat. C’est ça la différence qui fait entre le Canada et mon pays. Chez moi, vous faites le bénévolat, y’a pas de bénéfices. Ici aussi on le fait avec le cœur, mais je me suis rendue compte qu’il y a beaucoup de bénéfices. Sur l’aspect social, ça me permet d’élargir, de créer d’abord un réseau, que j’avais pas. **Si je n’avais pas fait de bénévolat, je n’allais pas connaître d’autres gens de mon pays. Ça m’a permis d’abord d’élargir mon réseau et ça m’a permis de commencer à bâtir aussi mon réseau professionnel. Sur le plan social, moi-même, ça m’a comme sortie de mon isolement.** » (FG#1)

Gendered dynamics of migrant volunteering

Different attitudes towards volunteering between men and women

- Men: Reluctance to unpaid work/feelings of exploitation

“I saw that companies that have money, have volunteer. It’s so strange for me. It’s really strange. When you go to volunteer in a house with old people, or children, or poor people or to help a sick person, this is for me, volunteer. **Not to go in a company that makes money and don’t pay anything for you to do something. This is really strange for me.**” (IM#3)

- Men: Related to hobbies or personal interests

“It’s because my religion is Protestant and I chose this church because I have some family here with this kind of church. Because in Brazil attended a Christian church and I would like to serve in this same association, in the same organization to contribute as a member at that church.” (IM#6)

- Place of worship
- Soccer club
- Rowing club
- Automobile show
- Marathon

Newcomer volunteering experiences

BARRIERS

- Institutionalized/formal nature of volunteering
- Transportation
- Child care
- Language

EXPERIENCES

- Positive:
 - Socializing, building networks, caring and giving back to the community
- Negative:
 - Unpaid work, costs & time, exploitation

Experiences of Volunteering

A contradiction: Care vs. Commodification

Ambivalence: Both positive and negative experiences

“For me there are two kinds of volunteering: for pleasure and to gain experience. In either way, the feeling is different.” (FG#3)

- Getting involved in the community
 - Helping people
 - Build professional and personal networks
 - Learn/practice the language
 - Gain Canadian experience
 - Integrate in Canadian society
-
- Realisation that social outcomes outweigh economic or employment outcomes
 - Feelings of rejection
 - The weight of the formal procedures
 - The lack of opportunities in their professional field
 - Exploitation

Agency vs.
structure in
migrant
volunteering

Forced to
volunteer, but
agency in how
volunteering is
instrumentalized

“In my opinion, volunteering is divided in two types. The volunteering that gives us pleasure, which is the true volunteering, and another type of volunteering which forces us into job commitments. **In fact, the system is forcing us into volunteering so, I think it’s not volunteering anymore.**” (FG#3)

“On another side, **reference is very important to get a job.** And volunteering can help you get people say a word for you, so it’s a good motivation for volunteering also.” (FG#3)

« Je vais pas mordre à la langue de bois... pour moi, pourquoi j’ai fait du bénévolat : **Je l’ai fait pour trouver de l’emploi.** » (FG#1)

Newcomer women volunteers

- Strategies
 - *Instrumentalize* volunteering
 - Multiple volunteering activities
 - But limited opportunities and stuck in the nonprofit / community / care sector?

“So I believe that the entry level, for me, it will be through the community centers, to understand the communities, the types of projects that serve the communities and I believe if I get a job, that community centers, after a year or two years, I can move. So I can get my Canadian experience. (...) Even if I get a job in a community center, if I want to proceed with my professional development, I have to, because the community center is not my objective, I want to work either with a profit organization or a not-for-profit organization and project management.” (IW1)

Discussion and conclusion

- Complex notions of volunteering among immigrants
 - Links between citizenship and volunteering
- Intersectional approaches
 - Intersections of gender, migrant status, class, ethnicity/race, language, religion, etc.
- Contradictory nature of volunteering
 - Agency/structure
 - Empowerment/subjectivization & exploitation
 - Care/commodification
 - Spaces of production/social reproduction
- Deconstruct impacts of neoliberal restructuring and search for more just and caring alternatives

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THANK YOU!

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