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NEO-LIBERAL POLICIES AND IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN CANADA

1. INTRODUCTION

Under neo-liberalism, commodification has emerged as a major issue of concern for those studying immigration and immigrants. The term ‘commodification’ refers to market relations where services are bought and sold. According to Burke, commodification under neo-liberalism shows ‘an increasing reliance on the market’ for the financing or delivery of services (Burke, 2000: 180). This is certainly true for Canada, where both federal and provincial governments increasingly rely on the global market for a constant supply of domestics, especially from the Philippines, for childcare and eldercare financed by private employers. Social democrats expect domestics’ work to be a regulated arena. However, in Canada the absence of government regulations as well as the lack of private bonds and obligations has created an unregulated, neglected area where labourers are mostly at the mercy of their employers. Immigration statistics from 2001 show that under the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP), about 4,000 workers entered Canada in 2000. The Vancouver Philippine Women Centre newsletter brings this statistic to life: ‘As of 1996, there were over 50,000 Filipino women in Canada who entered as domestic workers under the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). Over 6,000 of these women work in the Lower Mainland area and most are between the ages of 20–35 with at least a two-year university level education’ (The Centre Update, 1996: 1–2).

This chapter explores the socio-economic relationships between employers and female im/migrant employees in a private but commodified social sector, i.e., the family/household, in British Columbia (BC), Canada. The BC government’s labour regulations are either inadequate or non-existent, and the federal government’s controlled immigration rules make female im/migrant workers vulnerable in several ways and place them in exploitative situations. In 1992, the federal government, through the LCP, endorsed a two-tier immigration system. Those who are well educated, skilled, and privileged in wealth (i.e., entrepreneurs) are welcomed to Canada as independent immigrants and enjoy social rights and entitlements immediately. Im/migrants who lack these qualifications enter Canada as

an underprivileged class, to be treated as second-class citizens. In the short run, the LCP transforms female im/migrant domestics into low-paid housewives and surrogate mothers; in the long run, the LCP puts up bureaucratic barriers that erode immigrant women's original skills and educational credentials.

To explore the consequences of commodification of immigrant women, this paper starts by looking at the meaning of commodification and examining underlying assumptions of various scholars who have analysed the concept. Then, the paper examines the different levels of commodification experienced by female im/migrant domestics originally from the Philippines. Next, the paper demonstrates the meaning of de-skilling, linking it to the commodified but invisible private sector, i.e., the family/household, where lack of government regulations is the norm. Finally, the paper reveals the multifaceted dimensions of de-skilling and the exploitative relations between many im/migrant domestics and their employers. Throughout, the paper also reveals several layers of the bureaucratic control mechanisms carried out by the federal and provincial governments.

2. WHAT IS COMMODIFICATION? ITS ORIGIN AND CURRENT USAGE

According to Esping-Andersen (1990), the concept of commodification is the centrepiece of Marx's explanation of the development of class; for Marx, the commodification of labour power indicates alienation. Many scholars overlook the distinction between the concepts of labour and labour power, but conventional Marxists distinguish between these two terms. Thus, Vosko argues that labour is 'the activity of work' and labour power is 'what workers sell to employers in exchange for money' (Vosko, 2000: 288). According to Vosko (2000), labour power is a commodity in conventional Marxist terms. Burke (2000) further argues that a commodity is not an object, but carries hidden social relationships. The narrations of women who came to Canada from the Philippines under the LCP make such hidden social relationships clear. As commodities, domestics enter into an exploitative social-economic relationship in a pre-, under-, and non-commodified sector that transforms them into captives of their employers. In the twentieth century, before the introduction of the Federal Domestic Movement Scheme and, later, the LCP, all households in Canada were either non-, pre-, or under-commodified; i.e., domestic helpers were recruited privately and temporarily without any government sanctions. The LCP has transformed some privileged households/families into commodified sectors where social relationships are based on state-authorized contracts rather than on private bonds and obligations.

Vosko also points out that the appearance of labour power in the market brings about the growth of 'free wage' labourers, meaning that these labourers have 'legal rights to dispose their labour power', but are not entitled to own the