ABSTRACT – Using an anti-racist feminist analysis, this paper demonstrates how the Live-in Caregiver program, which allows domestic workers to migrate to Canada, enables the Canadian government to capitalize on the economic inequalities of globalization while marginalizing migrant women, especially visible minority women, and contributing to the marginalization of all women through the continued devaluation of domestic labour. First, the history and structure of the Live-in Caregiver program is explored to show how the devaluation of women of colour fits into the Canadian government’s Eurocentric and patriarchal ideology. Second, a discussion of women’s individual experiences illustrates how live-in caregivers are left vulnerable to abuses and violations of their human and employment rights. Finally, this paper discusses the gender and racial hierarchies underpinning the Live-in Caregiver program, which ends up valuing some women more than others based on race and yet continues to relegate women in both sending and receiving nations to the domestic sphere.

RÉSUMÉ – À travers une analyse féministe anti-raciste, ce travail démontre comment le Programme des aides familiaux résidants, un programme qui offre la possibilité à des travailleurs ménagers d’émigrer au Canada, permet au gouvernement canadien de profiter des inégalités causées par la mondialisation, tout en ayant pour effet la marginalisation des femmes migrantes, particulièrement les minorités visibles, et la dévalorisation de la main d’œuvre canadienne. Nous explorons d’abord l’histoire et la structure du programme afin de démontrer comment la dépréciation des femmes de couleur entre dans l’idéologie eurocentrique et patriarcale du gouvernement canadien. Ensuite, en discutant des expériences individuelles des femmes, nous cherchons à illustrer comment les aides familiales résidentes sont vulnérables et s’exposent à des abus et à la violation de leurs droits de la personne et des normes du travail. Finalement, cette étude traite des hiérarchies de genres et de races qui soutiennent le Programme des aides familiaux résidants, programme qui privilégie certaines femmes plutôt que d’autres sur des bases raciales et pourtant continue de reléguer les femmes à la fois du pays d’accueil et des pays d’origine à la sphère domestique.
Canadian sociologists Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott have criticized what they term “non-immigrant countries” for treating immigrants as guest workers, denying them full citizenship rights, and ignoring their reliance on immigrants for their economic health (2003, p. 252). They imply that Canada does not share these problems. However, a closer look at Canada’s immigration policy and the Live-in Caregiver Program in particular shows that Canada marginalizes certain groups of immigrants in much the same manner as the “non-immigrant countries” cited by Elliott and Fleras.

Over the past 25 years, over 5,000 women per year have come to Canada to work as “live-in” domestic workers under the government’s 1981-1992 Foreign Domestic Movement program, and the current Live-in Caregiver Program (Stiell & England, 1997). The women who enter through the Program are largely women of colour from economically marginalized nations such as the Philippines, which rely on foreign remittances to stimulate their economy (Stiell & England).

Studies show that the “care industry” has stepped into the “traditional wife’s role” (Hochschild, 2002, p. 20) as a domestic caregiver. In both source countries, where female relatives find themselves responsible for migrant domestic workers’ children, and Canada, where women take responsibility for hiring domestic workers, the prevailing attitude is that domestic work is women’s work and should be considered “unskilled” and “demeaning.”

This paper will use an anti-racist feminist analysis to show how the Live-in Caregiver program enables the Canadian government to benefit from the economic inequalities of globalization while marginalizing migrant women, especially visible minority women, and contributing to the marginalization of all women through the continued devaluation of domestic labour. First, I will analyze the history and structure of the Live-in Caregiver program to demonstrate how the devaluation of women of colour fits into Immigration Canada’s Eurocentric and patriarchal ideology. Second, I will show how the program leaves individual women vulnerable to abuses and violations of their human and employment rights. Finally, I intend to discuss how the Live-in Caregiver program plays into gender and racial hierarchies by valuing some women more than others based on race and yet continues to relegate women in both sending and receiving nations to the domestic sphere.

DOMESTIC WORKERS IN CANADA – AN OVERVIEW

Migrant domestic workers to Canada have not always been women of colour, but they have always been primarily women, reflecting Western society’s long-held belief that women

---

17 The term “women of colour” is used to designate visible minority women, recognizing that the term was coined by these women themselves rather than white academics, in an attempt to “[celebrate] a ‘particular but heterogeneous’ community” (Ochoa & Teaiwa, 1998).

18 For the purposes of this paper, the terms “economically marginalized nation” and “economically privileged nation” are used to distinguish between those countries commonly referred to as “third world” and “first world” or “underdeveloped” and “developed.” These alternate terms resist the hierarchies and linearity implicit in the latter examples and attempt to demonstrate the inherent interdependent relation between the economic marginalization of some countries, and the privileging of others.

19 Anti-racist feminism is generally conceptualized as an approach that focuses on the intersectionality of race and gender, “challenging the idea that a common experience with gender exists” (Dua, 2003, p. 7) without privileging the analysis of one form of oppression, with the aim of exposing power relations and social inequality (Dua, 2003). As this paper will demonstrate, the issue of Live-in Caregivers cannot be adequately addressed without taking both race and gender relations into account.
should take responsibility for the maintenance of the domestic sphere. From Confederation to the late nineteenth century, most domestics migrating to Canada were British and received financial assistance from the government (Cohen, 2000). However, with more women entering the workforce and domestic workers perceived as a middle-class status symbol, the demand for domestic workers in Canada increased faster than the supply of “preferred” female migrants of European backgrounds (Cohen). Only when the Cold War made migration difficult for Eastern European women in the 1950s was Canada forced to accept “non-preferred” immigrants from Greece, Jamaica and Barbados, while treating this acceptance as a favour to these nations (Cohen; Arat-Koc, 1999). With the new group of domestic workers, who were primarily women of colour, Canada found people who, unlike their European predecessors, tended to continue domestic work even after the end of their initial contracts, largely because employment discrimination left them little other choice (Cohen).

In 1968, the Government of Canada began to issue temporary work permits to allow domestics into the country for a set period of time to work for a specific employer, essentially creating an indentured work force (Arat-Koc, 1999). In response to criticisms of the temporary permits, the government instituted the Foreign Domestic Movement Program, which ran from 1981-1992 and began to enable domestics to apply for landed immigrant status after living in their employers’ houses for a minimum of two years (Cohen, 2000). The current federal Live-in Caregiver program is a variation of the Foreign Domestic Movement Program, and requires domestic workers not only to live in their employers’ houses, but also possess the equivalent of a Canadian Grade 12 education supplemented with domestic training, effectively barring many women from economically marginalized nations from migrating due to a lack of access to Western education (Arat-Koc, 1999). These restrictions on applicants continue Canada’s history of systemic racism by implicitly preferring white, Western-educated women.

Further, because these standards only apply to (mostly) women applying through the Live-in Caregiver program, the sexism of the immigration policy, which declares domestic labour “unskilled,” is revealed. By forcing domestic workers to conform to more stringent immigration criteria than other groups, the Canadian state indicates that their work is less valuable to Canadian society and is only needed on a temporary basis.

Most workers who migrate to Canada are eligible to apply for landed immigrant status under the “point system” to gain entry and eventually apply for citizenship with the rights it entails (Cohen, 2000). However, the restrictions placed on Live-in Caregivers and the conditions of their employment often leave women susceptible to abusive employment situations for fear of deportation or denial of immigrant status (Zarembka, 2002; Stiell & England, 1997). Further, the constraints on bringing dependents into Canada means that women entering Canada through the Live-in Caregiver program often leave children behind in source countries in the care of a female family member, adding to the strain on transnational families (Salazar Parrenas, 2000).

**LIVING IN**

Despite the restrictions placed on Live-in Caregiver Program applicants, over 5,000 women per year are able to migrate to Canada in this way, with the vast majority coming from the Philippines, followed by the Caribbean, with white European women making up only a small percentage of the applicants (Pratt, 2002). White women tend to be paid more than women of colour (Pratt, 2002); therefore, most of the women coming through the program are triply marginalized by race, class, and gender. Unfortunately, the structure of the program exacerbates these issues, primarily through factors related to the “live-in” requirement.

In the best case scenarios, the live-in requirement means migrant domestic workers are susceptible to isolation, powerlessness, invisibility, and loneliness (Stiell & England, 1997). Furthermore, living-in leaves workers especially vulnerable to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by their employers. For example, Joy M. Zarembka, director of the Break the Chain
Campaign to end imprisonment of live-in domestic workers in the United States, reports on the case of a woman from Bolivia working as a live-in domestic worker in Washington, D.C. for a human rights lawyer:

Once her plane landed…her employer…confiscated her passport and forced her to work days more than twelve hours long for less than one dollar per hour…When a friend of her employer’s raped her, [her employer] refused to take her to the hospital (2002, pp. 142-143).

Although this example does not apply directly to Canada’s Live-in Caregiver program, it illustrates the vulnerability of some women caused by the live-in requirement and the constant fear of deportation due to lack of immigrant status. Closer to home, women entering through the Live-in Caregiver program report being exploited by employers who force them to work long hours without overtime pay, perform tasks not included in their contracts, refuse requests for time off, or fail to live up to the stipulations of the standards required under the program (Pratt, 1997; Stiell & England, 1997). A Jamaican live-in domestic worker interviewed by Stiell and England stated that “living in means you are on call 24 hours a day…if [the employers] feel like going to a party at 10 o’clock, then that’s OK…and you don’t get paid for that” (1997, p. 345).

Although Immigration Canada requires employers to provide the caregiver “private accommodation which ensures privacy, such as a private room with a lock on the door,” other women interviewed by Stiell and England revealed that this requirement is not always met, with one disclosing how her employers moved with her into a one-bedroom apartment and required her to sleep on a cot in the living room (1997, p. 347).

The Live-in Caregiver program makes a difficult situation even more so by placing barriers to reporting and dealing with problem employers. Anti-racist feminist geographer Geraldine Pratt in collaboration with the BC Philippine Women Centre outlined how Immigration Canada’s treatment of Live-in Caregivers as temporary workers rather than landed immigrants legitimizes “wage levels and working conditions unacceptable to Canadian citizens” while framing women who demand their workers’ rights as “greedy” (1997, p. 166). When women do complain to Immigration Canada, they face an often unaffordable $100 fee, bureaucratic delays that can last as long as two years, as well as the fear of being seen as less dependable when finally applying for immigrant status (Stiell & England, 1997). Again, domestic workers, by virtue of their gender and race as well as the type of work they perform, are denied the same protections afforded to other Canadian employees.

What Immigration Canada and many employers of domestic workers fail to recognize are the highly educated and wealthy backgrounds of many women coming through the program, who are unable to have their foreign credentials recognized to work in their chosen fields (Salazar Parrenas, 2001). High migration costs as well as increased educational requirements mean many women from lower classes in economically marginalized nations who may desire to apply to the program are unable to do so. Rapidly shifting to a stigmatized and devalued occupation in Canada can result in emotional strain and low self-esteem (Salazar Parrenas, 2001; Stiell & England, 1997). Although the same problem with recognition of credentials can be found across groups of immigrants to Canada, for live-in caregivers the issue is exacerbated due to work conditions that often mean the caregiver is unable to afford the time or money to upgrade their education or skills to enter other professions.

Further, both Immigration and employers tend to ignore domestic workers’ families at home in their source countries. Foreign professionals who enter Canada and obtain landed immigrant status are allowed to bring their immediate family into Canada, and a pilot program even arranges work placements for their spouses (Cohen, 2000). In contrast, Live-in Caregivers are separated from their families, often for seven to ten years, which often causes strain upon
reunification (Cohen, 2000) and implicitly suggests that Canada wants and needs their labour, but does not want their residency to become permanent. Moreover, when domestic workers finish their two years and are able to apply to bring family over, Immigration Canada applies a Eurocentric heterosexist definition of “family” that limits applicants to bringing over spouses and children (Cohen, 2000). When children in source countries have been cared for by grandparents or other extended family for years, this separation can often be painful and fraught with difficulties (Salazar Parrenas, 2000).

THE LIVE-IN CAREGIVER PROGRAM: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

In addition to the ways in which the Live-in Caregiver program marginalizes women of colour, it has the more insidious effect of capitalizing on and encouraging global economic inequalities while reinforcing women’s responsibility for increasingly devalued domestic work. Asian-American Studies professor Rhacel Salazar Parrenas notes that “the migration of women connects systems of gender inequality in both sending and receiving nations to global capitalism” (2000, p. 569).

Global capitalism makes the Live-in Caregiver program possible. Zarembka outlines the role of institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, dominated by economically privileged countries, in reinforcing their privilege by economically marginalizing other nations: “preconditions of loans…include cutting…services, devaluing local currencies, and imposing wage freezes…[while] the world’s poor are [left to] search for work overseas” (2002, p. 144). Advocacy organizations for Live-In Caregivers and feminist scholars such as Pratt have criticized “Canada’s opportunistic use of an economic crisis in the Philippines that leads one out of every ten Filipinos to find work overseas” (2002, p. 198). Indeed, while Immigration Canada and domestic worker employment agencies may flatter themselves that they are supporting women who should be grateful to come to Canada, in reality, many of these women are all but coerced into the domestic service by economic inequalities at home.

Global economic inequalities between economically marginalized nations such as the Philippines and economically privileged nations such as Canada create an ideal situation for the operation of the Live-in Caregiver program. On the one hand, the decreasing economic opportunities in economically marginalized nations create a need for people to travel overseas to earn a better wage. On the other, the increase in women entering the workforce in economically privileged nations means that “many of the low-paying jobs created…are considered traditional ‘women’s work’” (Salazar Parrenas, 2000, p. 564). Gender therefore becomes a determinant of migration patterns, with greater demand for female workers in economically privileged countries stimulating the migration of women from economically marginalized ones.

In addition, the Live-in Caregiver program is complicit in the marginalization of women of all classes and races in Canada as it devalues and continues to feminize domestic labour. In Canada and other economically privileged nations, the increased demand for domestic workers has been linked to women’s increased participation in the workforce, with studies indicating that women almost always take responsibility for hiring their household’s domestic worker(s) (Stiell & England, 1997). Pratt notes that “the ideology of women as caretakers continues to constrain the productive labour activities of women” by pushing women into jobs in the caretaking field and expecting them to be responsible for “emotional labour” (p. 364). The Live-In Caregiver program does not free Canadian women employers from these expectations; it merely adds a racial component. For one, immigrant women of colour are often associated with the same essentialist “feminine” traits previously employed against all women, such as their being “naturally” hard working, loyal, and “good with children”, in order to naturalize their overrepresentation in the domestic workforce (Stiell & England, 1997; Pratt, 1997). Therefore, Canadian women employers are able to rationalize the subordination of women of colour by...
using the same stereotypes “that patriarchy has used against women generally” (Stiell & England, 1997, p. 343).

Moreover, women of colour domestic workers often leave a system in their source countries wherein they are responsible for childcare and domestic work in their own households (Salazar Parrenas, 2001). Rather than escaping this gender stratification, they are pushed into a new system of stratification in Canada with the added racial and class dimensions. Meanwhile, they often leave female relatives to care for the children they leave behind, completing a process where they enable economically privileged women to escape gender constraints while “finally relegating their gender roles” to women left in economically marginalized nations (Salazar Parrenas, 2000, p. 570).

 Fathers in economically marginalized nations such as the Philippines are not always expected to take part in their household’s domestic work, even to make up for a mother gone overseas (Salazar Parrenas, 2001), creating what Hochschild (2002) terms a “care drain” whereby children of colour in economically marginalized nations are not entitled to the same level of care as children of white Canadian families. For example, Hochschild describes the situation of a Filipina domestic worker who cares for her employers’ baby in America while leaving her two children to the care of her mother, who also works long hours as a teacher, in a four-bedroom house with twelve other family members (2002, p. 16). She states that if women from economically privileged nations are “building careers that are molded according to the old male model…[with] long hours and demanding jobs…domestic workers suffer a greatly exaggerated version of the same thing” (2002, p. 20).

 Finally, programs such as the Live-in Caregiver program also enable the government to avoid taking responsibility for the shortage of childcare and instead place the burden on women (Pratt, 1997). When upper classes of women are able to purchase domestic work for roughly $900 a month plus room and board (Pratt, 1997), a system is created wherein Canadian women are divided in demanding universal, quality childcare provision from the government. The Live-in Caregiver program makes childcare a private issue to be dealt with by mothers, not a public issue to be dealt with by the government.

**CONCLUSION**

Overall, the Live-in Caregiver program reinforces and exploits racial and gender divisions of labour, both in sending and receiving nations. By ascribing “feminine” characteristics to domestic workers and leaving women in charge of hiring domestic help, women remain essentially relegated to the devalued sphere of the home and domestic labour. As well as impacting women in general, the Live-in Caregiver program takes a particular toll on its applicants, who face vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse, as well as violations of their worker’s and human rights. These negative aspects of the program are inherently tied up with the systemic racism and sexism present in Canada’s immigration policy, which devalues women’s domestic labour and creates opportunities for Western European women while creating barriers for women from economically marginalized nations.

Feminist researchers and advocacy organizations for domestic workers have outlined several concrete steps that can be taken to improve the situation of domestic workers in Canada. First, the lack of government enforcement of employment standards in domestic labour is a serious issue that further devalues the work these women provide. Immigration Canada should work with the Human Resources and Development Program and the Federal Labour Ministry to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure that women coming through the Live-in Caregiver plan have the same worker’s rights as any other employee in any other non-domestic workplace. Second, the live-in requirement should be removed (Pratt, 1997; Zarembka, 2002) to prevent women’s vulnerability to abuse and being forced to work long hours without overtime pay. Finally, male partners in both sending and receiving nations need to take equal responsibility for
domestic labour in order to increase its value and stem the “care drain.” If Canada wishes to be considered an “immigrant” country rather than one of Fleras and Elliott’s “non-immigrant” countries, it needs to stop treating women of colour as guest workers and start treating them as Canadians with equal rights.

REFERENCES


