



Mirna Carranza, a McMaster University social work professor, believes the stories and experiences of immigrants are not represented adequately in Canadian culture and society. WOMEN'S PRESS

Where are the voices of immigrant women?

McMaster social work professor Mirna Carranza speaks about her experience and research.

By Alyssa Lai

Canada's immigration level has increased in recent years. Citizenship and Immigration Canada reported that 257,515 newcomers entered Canada in 2012, which is a jump from the previous year's total of 248,751.

Yet, for McMaster University social work professor Mirna Carranza, this slight spike in numbers does little to highlight the actual stories and experiences of immigrants. At a community level, she believes the voices of immigrant women are not heard or presented. Rather, Carranza thinks immigrants are misunderstood and regarded as "burdens" to the system.

"How come the resiliency of immigrant women (and people) are not presented in Canadian literature?" she asked.

That question guided her to begin research on immigrants and refugee families more than 15 years ago. Originally from El Salvador, Carranza came to Canada with her partner, sister, brother and child when she was only 25 years old. She escaped from the country that was facing political turmoil and civil war.

Being an immigrant woman herself, Carranza understands how trauma and depression faced by immigrants in their settlement country are inextricably linked to countries at war. Her previous experience as a social worker in El Salvador has further informed her understanding of displacement felt by refugees. She learned that the settlement challenges immigrants are facing have deep roots; however, this is hardly highlighted in literature.

"The depression was linked to the torture they had endured. The narratives from the women (are about) how doctors were pushing pills and medication and they did not want to do that," she said. "They wanted to heal differently according to the tradition."

That led her to research families and how they try to integrate into new societies, specifically as a family unit. But as she explored the topic of acculturation, Carranza discovered a gap. According to Carranza, little has been said about acculturation happening at a family level.

"At a community level, the voices of immigrant women are not heard or presented."

Immigrants encounter challenges when integrating into a new culture that often relate to their country of origin, the professor explained. An immigrant from Central America is more likely to face not only systemic, but

language barriers as well, particularly when compared to a newcomer from Europe. Each person and family is unique, she said.

While there must be increased resources and services to support the immigrant population, meaningful employment is also necessary. A rise in the number of employed immigrants does not translate to better futures for them, Carranza added.

"Their job is not meaningful. You have a nurse. In her country of origin, she is a practicing nurse. But here, she is sweeping floors," she said, emphasizing the need for more meaningful employment, not just employment for survival.

"That (meaningful employment) has an impact on mental health, their sense of identity," she said. ■

Definition of ACCULTURATION

: cultural modification of an individual, group or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture; also : a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact

Definition of RESILIENCY

: an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change

FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

What did Carranza's experience as a social worker help her understand about refugees?

Discussion: How could the stories of immigrants be more represented in Canadian culture?



INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

Want to be part of something great?

Interested in engaging your community on HIV/AIDS?

The AIDS Network is currently looking for volunteers to participate in the **WOMEN'S COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

Opportunities available:

- Community Event Planning & Support
- Resource & Promotional Design
- Peer Education & Outreach

Let's work together for a great cause!

If you would like more information, please contact:

Heather Lynds, Women's Community Development Worker
905-528-0854 x 245 hlynds@aidsnetwork.ca
www.aidsnetwork.ca



YOU ARE NOT ALONE

