GENDER DYNAMICS OF TEMPORARY PLACEMENT AGENCY WORK: (IM)MIGRANTS, KNOW YOUR PLACE!

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For newcomers to Canada, placement agencies (or temp agencies) are a common path into a labour market that is difficult to access. It is widely documented that temp agencies are linked to precarious work conditions, dangerous occupational health conditions, racialized and gendered division of labour, and the exploitation of precarious immigration statuses. Our study shows that gender plays out strongly in (im)migrants' experiences of temp agency work. Regardless of their previous education or experiences it is their immigration status, race and gender that seemed to dictate the types of work available to them. We discuss five elements of workers' experiences that were strongly shaped by gender: their sectors of work; their tasks within the workplace; gender-normative bullying; sexual harassment and assault; and their management of work-life balance.

Pour les nouveaux arrivants au Canada, les agences de placement (ou les agences de placement temporaire) sont une voie commune vers un marché du travail difficile d'accès. Il est largement documenté que les agences de placement temporaire sont liées à des conditions de travail précaires, à des conditions de santé professionnelles dangereuses, à la division du travail racialisée et sexuée et à l'exploitation de statuts d'immigration précaires. Notre étude montre que le genre joue un rôle important dans les expériences des (im)migrants dans le travail temporaire. Indépendamment de leurs études antérieures ou de leurs expériences, c'est leur statut d'immigration, leur race et leur sexe qui ont dicté les types de travail disponibles. Nous discutons de cinq éléments de l'expérience des travailleurs qui ont été fortement façonnés par le genre : secteurs de travail, tâches sur le lieu de travail, intimidation sexiste, harcèlement sexuel et voies de fait, et gestion de l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée.

When temporary placement agencies, or temp agencies, first emerged they originally focused on casual female clerical workers who filled in for regular workers on vacation or sick leave. Today, however, temp agencies are ubiquitous in the labour market and the profile of their target employees has expanded far beyond the young, white, female clerical worker. Employers in all sectors (private and public, unionized and non-unionized, white- and blue-collar, male- and female-dominated workplaces) now hire temp agencies and the 'temporariness' of the contracts is often debatable. For newcomers to Canada, temp agencies are a common path into a labour market that is widely documented to be tough to gain access to with foreign credentials and work experience.

In this article, we begin with a brief review of the literature before introducing our three-year longitudinal study looking at the trajectories of (im)migrant agency workers. We then share our findings illustrating the racialized gender dynamics at play in agency work, underscoring how gender stereotypes are imposed on workers and exploited for employer profit. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for policy, practice and future research.

THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING FOR A TEMP AGENCY

The key distinguishing feature of temporary placement agencies is their introduction of a triangular employment relationship. Workers are hired by the temp agency (their official employer), yet their day-to-day work is contracted out by the agency to be performed on the premises of and under the supervision of the client company (Vosko, 2010; Salamanca Cardona, 2017). Under normal employment relationships, it is the company directing and overseeing the daily work that would be responsible for work conditions and occupational health and safety (OHS) (Lippel et al, 2011). The triangular relationship of temp work puts such safeguards at risk because identifying the party responsible for worker protection is not straightforward (CNT, 2013). The result is that agency workers are often paid less than their non-agency co-workers, face the most risk of workplace illness and accidents, and report serious difficulties related to the unstable nature of the work (CTTI, 2016; Underhill & Quinlan, 2011; Lippel et al, 2012).

Despite these problems, in the Canadian labour market temp agencies are common and increasingly so since 2000 (Choudry & Henaway, 2012); in 2013 they represented a $12.5 billion industry (Statistics Canada, 2015). In Québec, the site of our research, it is estimated that there are more than 1,000 agencies in operation (Choudry & Henaway, 2012), yet in the absence of any legal licensing framework it is impossible to have an accurate number (Bernier, 2012, 2014). It is widely documented that temp agencies are linked to precarious and dangerous work conditions with poor occupational health protections. They are also prominent in racialized and gendered divisions of labour and in the exploitation of precarious immigration statuses (Bernier, 2012; Choudry & Henaway, 2016; Salamanca Cardona, 2017). This is a trend that intensified in the early 2000s (Theodore & Peck, 2002) as agencies were hired by an increasing array of employers looking to cut costs and avoid longer-term legal commitments to employees (Gonos & Martino, 2011; Choudry & Henaway, 2012; Van Arsdale, 2013).

Recent scholarship has documented some of the means by which temp agencies are leveraging racialization in order to provide labour to employers; for example though the use of spatial and geographic segregation of temp workers from the broader community (Gonos and Martino, 2011; Peck and

Theodore, 2002) and targeted recruitment based on ethnicity, migrant status and language proficiency (Canek, 2016; Villarrubia-Mendoza, 2016; Vaillancourt, 2014). For racialized immigrant women, working in temp agencies intensifies the effects of systemic discrimination already experienced in the labour market through, for example, professional segregation (Cognet & Fortin, 2003; Chicha & Charest, 2013), lack of equity payment (Déom & Beaumont, 2008; Beeman, 2011; Chicha & Charest, 2013), and professional disqualification (Chicha, 2009). The precarious nature of temp agency work makes it more difficult to manage family care needs, which disproportionately affects women (Grant & Nadin, 2007, as cited by Chicha, 2009).

For (im)migrant workers facing discrimination in the labour market (Galabuzi, 2006; Block & Galabuzi, 2011), temp work remains accessible, and temp agencies become their first Canadian work experiences (Choudry & Henaway, 2016). The conditions of work are very difficult and often in violation of labour standards and OHS regulations (Calugay, Henaway & Shragge, 2011).

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT

Gender	44% women	56% men
Age	73% prime working age, between 26-44 years old	
Family situation	49% single 68% have children	51% married 43% of these children in their country of origin
Language	85% speak French	65% trilingual (French, English, other)
Education	80% have post-secondary education	20% have post-graduate education 88% would like to study in Canada
Immigration Status	53% citizens or permanent residents	47% precarious status (including 17% undocumented) All continents except Australia

HOW DOES WORKING FOR A TEMP AGENCY AFFECT THE SETTLEMENT TRAJECTORY OF (IM)MIGRANTS?

Inspired by the temp agency casework and organizing experiences of the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montréal, our research team embarked upon a three-year longitudinal study. Our objective was to examine to what extent engaging in temp work helped or hindered (im)migrant workers in achieving their broad settlement objectives. We followed 40 workers employed in five different sectors (warehouse, food transformation, health care, professional work, and day labour). Table 1 outlines the participants' socio-demographic profile.

(IM)MIGRANT WOMEN AND MEN AGENCY WORKERS: KNOW YOUR PLACE!

Here we report on the ways in which gender played into the experiences of these agency migrant workers. Regardless of their previous education or experiences, their interests or aptitudes, it was their immigration status, race and gender that seemed to dictate the types of work available to our participants. We discuss five elements of workers' experiences that were strongly shaped by gender: their **sectors of work**; their tasks within the workplace; gender-normative bullying; sexual harassment and assault; and their management of work-life balance.

To begin, there was a clear gendered division of the sectors of work. While three of the sectors included in our study employed both men and women – the most precarious sector (day labour) and the two with the best conditions (healthcare and professional work) – two other sectors were heavily gender segregated. The warehouse sector included almost exclusively men and the food transformation sector encompassed disproportionately women. For the workers in these sectors, it was absolutely clear that their agency would not easily hire across these gender lines. One of our male participants describes the agency representative hiring for a new food transformation job:

> They say, "There is going to be work tomorrow: Friday. Who wants to work?" And I lifted my hand, but they told me "Not you. I just want her and her and her." All women.

Within any particular workplace, it was the norm that individual **job tasks** were assigned according to gender stereotypes. Men are called upon to do lifting and work with heavy machinery because they are supposedly stronger and have more physical endurance. Women do the fine-detail packaging, repetitive fine motions and light assembly because their supposedly delicate hands and eye for detail make them more trustworthy in this work. Such gendered task division was visible in the mixed warehouse workplaces (almost exclusively heavy lifting and heavy machinery for men) and in food transformation (attention to recipes, cooking for women). While the agencies and the client companies assign tasks along these gendered lines, the workers themselves are sometimes uncomfortable if they are asked to cross the gender dividing line, as we hear in this woman worker's description

of when a man comes to her workplace:

> Men don't like to go there too much because they are lazy! Ha ha ha... There are some men that came there and they don't like to stay because it is little money and it is a lot of work. So there are some tasks they don't like to do… to sweep. This one man got really upset… He said he didn't sweep at his home, so why should he at work?! Ha ha ha!

In all sectors, agency workers also reported significant **gender-normative bullying**, harassment directed towards women and men that questioned their gender identities and sexual orientations or pressured them to adopt more gender-normative appearances or behaviours. One man working in food transformation shared:

> Many times, I felt that the people just stayed staring at me, and I felt ashamed. There are many things I heard near the end. The three main things I heard from people about me are (a) he looks like a gay, (b) he seems to be sexually obsessed, (c) something must have happened to him. Then, one never can be with tranquility.

In the food transformation sector women were also pressured to fit the norm, as illustrated in this woman worker account about a friend:

> One day that [supervisor] asked her "What do you have on your face?" Because she was wearing makeup. She is almost never with makeup […] Well, this time she put some makeup on her eyes and this woman told her, "It is a little weird because you look like a bitch." And my friend said, "What?" I told her what that word means and that I know in English that word is used a lot… It is like passive aggressive. Half true, half joking.

Finally, women agency workers reported instances of **sexual harassment** from both the agency representatives responsible for the attribution of contracts and for the distribution of pay, and from supervisors in the workplace. Instances of women being led to understand that "dating" the supervisor ensured easier job tasks and more stability in the contract, as well as unwanted touching and sexual comments in the workplace, were reported across the sectors. In the health care sector, where women workers are called upon to provide services, often solo in private homes, there were also two instances reported of attempted **sexual assault** by a male family member of the care recipient. In both situations the workers escaped, but only after being physically assaulted. Both workers reported the assault to other family members and to their agencies, but nothing substantive occurred. Rather, each woman was advised on how to 'keep herself safe'. Despite these incidences, both felt they needed to hang onto the job and kept working until they were finally able to find another opportunity.

The final major gendered phenomenon we found in our research was the gender differences in terms of their need to find a **work-life balance**. Here, the pattern follows the common traditional household division of labour with men occupying the role of primary breadwinner and women occupying the role of the primary family caregiver. We often heard, therefore, of women trying to secure contracts with schedules that accommodated their caregiving responsibilities or, if unable to do so, taking great effort to ensure that children or other dependent family members were cared for in their absence. As a result women generally worked fewer paid hours than men. In the absence of any security in scheduling, men described taking on multiple shifts to make as much money as possible, sometimes combining this with studies. Any caregiving responsibilities at home were primarily looked after by their female partners.

CONCLUSION

Gender is a key factor layered onto others, such as race and immigration status, in explaining the experiences of (im) migrant temp agency workers. While it is widely recognized that temp agency work is deeply problematic and lends itself to exploitation of workers, a gender lens brings to the fore how the experience plays out differently depending upon one's social location. Regarding sector of work, the gender of a worker can determine the type and amount of work made available to them. Gendered work tasks shape the kinds of health and safety risks people are exposed to. Gender-normative bullying and harassment shape work environment interactions, promoting traditional gender stereotypes and heteronormativity, as well as exposure to violence, resulting in further marginalization. Lastly, gender also shapes the ways in which workers conceive of the costs and benefits of temp agency work, for example in relation to family responsibilities. While such dynamics exist in other forms of employment, the temp agency sector is so precarious that workers feel they have little choice or recourse. Given the ubiquity of temp agency work as first employment for newcomers to Canada, it is essential for those who work in the field of immigration – whether as policymakers, frontline workers or as scholars – to understand the role of racialized gender dynamics in temp agencies, and how that frames settlement and integration experiences.

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