

FROM CAREGIVER TO PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKER: CANADA'S CAREGIVER PROGRAMS AND LABOUR MARKET SEGMENTATION AMONG FILIPINA WOMEN IN TORONTO

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Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

I graduated from my Honours Bachelor of Arts in Human Geography and Urban Studies at the University of Toronto in 2020. As an undergrad student, I worked alongside faculty members in the Urban Studies department on research related to the neoliberalization of public infrastructure in Toronto's Moss Park neighbourhood¹, as well as the intersections of religion, youth, and urban planning in Regent Park².

I initially considered a career in urban planning, but my interests shifted at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as I witnessed my mom – a personal support worker (PSW) in a long-term care home – struggle to provide the best care possible to her residents in abysmal working conditions and a lack of institutional support. The discourse about 'healthcare heroes' in the PSW sector shed light on a history of austerity that contributed to these working conditions, while also highlighting the racialized and feminized nature of the workforce. In Toronto, for instance, 78.7% of the PSW labour force is comprised of racialized immigrants³. It was during this time that I became more deeply interested in the geographies of precarious care work and the processes that lead Filipina women like my mom into PSW roles.

Tell us about your dissertation and how it relates to the study of Canada.

I use a feminist economic geography perspective to explore how precarious legal status can result in labour market marginalization and segmentation among Filipina caregiver immigrants. My thesis research explores the experiences of Filipina PSWs in Toronto who migrated to Canada through a temporary migrant caregiver program, such as the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). Active from 1992-2014 and part of a wider institutionalized landscape of temporary migrant labour, the LCP was a temporary foreign worker program with a pathway to an open work permit and permanent residency in Canada after 24 months of live-in care work. Filipina migrants dominated the LCP, accounting for almost 90% of the 89,970 arrivals⁴.

Although the pathway to permanent residency was a key part of the LCP's appeal, the possibility of gaining full citizenship was conditioned by severe restrictions on the rights and mobilities of participants. This included the mandatory live-in requirement, the inability to migrate with children or spouses, and a range of restrictions on the types of services and supports caregivers could access. When caregiver immigrants completed the LCP and entered the labour market, they had

to contend with significant financial and familial pressures, leading many to remain in caregiving occupations they felt offered more financial stability regardless of their educational and professional backgrounds. It is in this context that PSW work may emerge as an accessible labour market option.

Culturally essentialist stereotypes about Filipina women as 'natural' caregivers are sometimes used to explain the concentration of Filipina immigrants in caregiving and healthcare roles like PSW, but these discourses obscure Canada's historic and ongoing reliance on temporary migrant labour in creating these segmented and precarious labour markets⁵.

How did you come to choose this topic?

As I mentioned, I was inspired to pursue this research by my mom's lived experiences as a Filipina immigrant. She migrated to Canada under the LCP in 1993 and almost 20 years later, started her career as a PSW. The LTC home my mom worked at experienced one of the most brutal COVID-19 outbreaks in the spring of 2020. The corporation she worked for covered the cost of quarantine hotel rooms for workers until the wave of infections passed. Despite how emotionally and mentally distressing it would be to be separated from us while coping with the extreme challenges of working during the pandemic, my mom took this opportunity to protect our family.

Although this separation lasted only 2 months, I thought about how this was the longest period of time I was ever separated from my mom, and the longest period of time that my parents were apart since she left my dad in the Philippines to come to Canada as a caregiver in 1993. Similar stories about Filipina PSWs and healthcare workers emerged throughout the pandemic⁶, and these experiences caused me to reflect more deeply on how and why Filipina women

like my mom end up in devalued caregiving roles like PSW work. This process of labour market segmentation forms the central focus of my thesis.

What are the main takeaways you want others to come away with?

1. Filipina caregiver immigrants' experiences of differential inclusion collided with their responsibilities related to settlement, family, and social reproduction in ways that constrain their ability to pursue non-care work roles. However, remaining in care work was not due to a lack of ambition, skill, or agency. In the context of labour market marginalization produced at the intersections of precarious legal status and precarious work as live-in caregivers, pursuing PSW roles became a strategic choice for navigating financial and familial pressures.

2. The co-ethnic networks of Filipina caregiver immigrants shaped their post-caregiver program labour market experiences in ambivalent ways. On one hand, these networks functioned as sources of empowerment, where caregiver immigrants felt encouraged by each other's pursuits of a PSW certification to do the same. However, these networks were not always supportive, and some of the women I interviewed described being exploited or discouraged by their co-ethnic ties while navigating these occupational transitions.

3. The idealized PSW subjectivity is constructed through racialized-gendered stereotypes that also conflate a stereotypical "Filipina femininity" with traits like compassion and deference. While some Filipina PSWs strategically embraced these identities, they simultaneously critiqued how these tropes obscured the structural inequities they encountered on the job. Nevertheless, Filipina PSWs navigated workplace subjectivities in diverse ways, actively

resisting, negotiating, or selectively conforming to gendered and racialized expectations tied to their identities as both Filipina women and migrant caregivers.

4. This is not to suggest that the overrepresentation of Filipina caregiver immigrants in the PSW labour market is inherently problematic or negative. The caring labour PSWs engage in is vital, skilled labour that warrants social recognition and equitable financial remuneration. Rather, I wish to problematize how precarious legal status constrains caregiver immigrants' mobilities in the labour market in ways that may impel them to reorganize their goals and reconfigure their economic livelihoods away from their initial personal aspirations.

Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.

Something I had to navigate while conducting this research was my positionality as an insider/outsider to my work. I am firmly an outsider in the sense that I did not directly experience the phenomenon that I am studying. At the same time, my lived experiences in relation to this topic have been central to my research from the beginning. In line with feminist thinking about identity as multiple and fluid, however, I am cautious about the binary suggested by the insider/outsider dichotomy as my understanding of these identities is constantly shifting.

I tried to navigate these simultaneous subjectivities by externalizing my reflexive practice in an ongoing way. Throughout data collection, analysis, and the writing process, I took seriously Ellen Kohl and Priscilla McCutcheon's (2015) notion of kitchen table reflexivity⁷ – referring to practices of informal everyday talk with friends, family, and colleagues

– to understand my relationality to this work and interrogate how my personal lived experiences and family histories might inform my research and analysis. Externalizing my reflexive practice in this way helped me grapple with the tensions between proximity and distance while also taking care to ground my analysis in participants' narratives rather than my own assumptions.

What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?

- Get involved in a research community with a mandate that relates to your work. Doing so is a great way to enrich your grad school experience while also meeting others who you might not have crossed paths with.
- Nourish all aspects of your life, not just your commitments as a grad student. It is so easy to lose yourself in the process of completing a graduate degree, but your degree should not be an excuse to neglect your community, family, or hobbies.
- Use a citation manager, like Zotero, to streamline your reading and note-taking process.

What are the next steps in your research?

I recently defended my thesis and passed with no revisions! While I am thinking about how to mobilize my research to a wider community, I am also looking forward to taking some time to rest and reset.

Notes

1. St. Louis-McBurnie K., Pagaling, N.M., & Roberts, D. J. (2023). The work of crisis framing: Claims of social justice obscuring a history and, likely future, of uneven investment in Moss Park, Toronto. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 45(1), p. 17-34. DOI: 10.1080/07352166.2020.1863816
2. University of Toronto x Regent Park Focus: A Collaborative Media and Research Initiative. <https://www.uoftxrpfocus.com/>
3. Turcotte, M., & Savage, K. (2020). The contribution of immigrants and population groups designated as visible minorities to nurse aide, orderly and patient service associate occupations (No. 45280001; StatCan COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada, pp. 1-7). Statistics Canada.
4. Lightman, N., Banerjee, R., Tungohan, E., de Leon, C., & Kelly, P. (2021). An intersectional pathway penalty: Filipina immigrant women inside and outside Canada's Live-In Caregiver Program. *International Migration*, 60(2), 29-48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12851>
5. The Philippine state also has a highly coordinated labour export bureaucracy that contributes to gendered patterns of labour market segmentation. See *Migrants for Export* by Robyn Rodriguez (2010) for a detailed exposition on this history.
6. Matatag: Filipina Care Workers During COVID-19. <https://filipinacareworkers.com/>
7. Kohl, E., & McCutcheon, P. (2015). Kitchen table reflexivity: negotiating positionality through everyday talk. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 22(6), 747-763. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.958063>