

Racialized Women in Canada:

Is COVID-19 the Turning Point to More Equality?

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to show that currently, the most important issue in gender and politics in Canada is the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on racialized and immigrant women. I use political economy approaches, critical race feminist theory, and Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality' to evaluate Canadian case studies in order to demonstrate my argument. In doing so, I show that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and worsened the inequalities experienced by racialized and immigrant women in Canada. This topic is important to address because in the midst of the pandemic, it can be easy to disregard or forget the particular injustices experienced by racialized and immigrant women. However, by revealing the direct impacts of the pandemic on such women, this paper draws attention to these injustices and advocates for more equality in Canadian society.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, gender, immigrant status, intersectionality, political economy, race

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the drastic disparity in inequalities experienced by racialized and immigrant women in Canadian society. Given that women primarily occupy jobs within the service industry, they have been the most strongly affected by the economic recession triggered by the shutdown of service sector jobs (Yalnizyan 2020). In fact, the recession is considered a “she-session” (Yalnizyan 2020). Through the execution of COVID-19 related policies, the pandemic’s unfair effects on women, especially women of color, is evident. I argue that the most important issues in gender and politics today are the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrant and racialized women. In order to address and resolve the ongoing problems for immigrant and racialized women in Canada, it is crucial to study how COVID-19 exacerbates these injustices. It is also an opportunity to advocate for the equality of racialized and immigrant women. I will use political economy approaches, critical race feminist theory, and intersectional analysis to support my argument within the Albertan and Canadian context.

Political Economy Approaches

Janine Brodie (2008) posits that neoliberalism has replaced post-war social liberalism as the dominant political rationale in Canada (154). Neoliberalism is based on *Homo economicus*, which translates to economic man, and assumes that individuals are self-interested, always rational, and act to better their utility (The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy 2008). Consequently, neoliberalism in practice eliminates social safety-nets that post-war social liberalism had established and expects all citizens to be entrepreneurial and self-efficient (Brodie 2008, 148). The sexist nature of neoliberalism is also obvious in the translation of *Homo economicus*. Subsequently, Brodie argues that neoliberalism policies have “disproportionate and deleterious impacts on women, especially those marginalized by economic and social difference” (148).

Brodie’s claim supports my argument because the pandemic has proven the need for greater social support. Due to lockdown measures, non-essential services were/are forced to shut down, leaving many people unemployed. More specifically, leaving many women unemployed. The 2016 Canada Census reveals that 18.6% of immigrant women have low-income status compared to 13.3% of non-immigrant women with low-income status (Statistics Canada 2016). Racialized and immigrant women are more likely to be working in low-income jobs than non-racialized women, so

when these jobs shut down, racialized and immigrant women have little support to maintain their livelihood. This demonstrates how neoliberal policies are even more disproportionately detrimental to marginalized women. Government aids such as the CERB, which aim to alleviate Canadians’ financial struggles through government support, represent the residual forces of post-war social liberal practices of providing economic relief. The circumstances of COVID-19 have challenged the significance and efficacy of neoliberalism for all people because it has shown that government support is necessary.

Critical Race Feminist Theory

The dominant way of studying gender, culture, and diversity in Canada is through the liberal multicultural approach. This approach tries to accommodate diversity while establishing white culture as “normal and dominant” and all other cultures as “abnormal and... inferior” (Dhamoon 2009, 10-11). I reject this approach because it encourages locating gender inequality in the “other” and reinforces white supremacy. Instead, I prefer the critical-race feminist theory because it examines racial power struggles that lead to inequality and go beyond scapegoating perceived cultural “flaws” for racialized women’s injustices. Using this theory, I examine Quebec’s COVID-19 mandatory mask policy as a case study and argue that it reveals the blatant inequalities of Bill 21 for Muslim women.

Dhamoon (2009) says that in the liberal multicultural framework, the dominant white culture has the power to dictate and construe culture to their liking. Subsequently, another’s culture can be a means to pursue a racist and sexist agenda (19-20). In the case of Bill 21, which banned religious symbols in workplaces, it disproportionately inhibits the autonomy of Muslim women who wear a face-covering because it limits them from pursuing career opportunities and advancements. COVID-19 exposes the sexist and racist nature of this bill because face coverings are banned when Muslim women wear them, but they are mandatory when it aligns with the circumstances and interests of the dominate culture. This shows that Bill 21 really is not about wearing a face covering or not. It is instead about alienating and disempowering Muslim women who wear head coverings. The mandatory mask policies in Quebec have highlighted the hypocrisy of the province’s government. It reveals that Bill 21 promotes racism and the isolation of these women in society. In another case study within the Albertan context, Jason Kenney recently blamed the South Asian cultural “tradition to have big family gatherings” (Villani 2020) as the reason for high COVID-19 cases in the commu-

nity. However, most members of this community are public sector workers who cannot work from home and are therefore more at risk of the virus (Villani 2020). Nonetheless, the Premier would rather blame cultural traditions of the minority group to justify the high cases. Contrary to what Jason Kenney's statement insinuates, "Traditional family gatherings" are not unique to any culture. That being said, it is also unlikely to be a justification for high cases in the dominant white culture. As illustrated by this case study, a close examination of the pandemic's effects reveal how ethnic minorities are blamed and have to shoulder the heaviest burdens; this is even more true for the racialized women within those minorities.

Intersectional Analysis

Intersectionality is a Black feminist concept coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw. It analyzes the unique experiences of discrimination and subordination of Black women based on the simultaneous interaction of sexism and racism (Crenshaw 1989, 140). Without an intersectional analysis, a Black woman's experiences of discrimination cannot be fully realized. I will use the concept of intersectionality in a broader context to discuss the experiences of all racialized women during the pandemic. For a comprehensive analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on all racialized women and their struggles, an intersectional analysis is necessary.

The recent Canadian federal Speech from the Throne says that as a result of the pandemic, many women have been "shouldering the burden of unpaid care work at home" (Speech from the Throne 2020). This statement suggests that women working in domestic care jobs with low or no income is an occurrence unique to the pandemic. However, Canada has a history of relying on racialized women for domestic labour with unfair compensation. From 1955-1967, Black women were brought to Canada to be domestic workers as part of the West Indian Domestic Scheme (Raphael 2020). Jean Augustine, the first Black woman to serve as a cabinet minister, immigrated to Canada as a part of this program. The women who worked under this program received minimal pay and faced intersectional discrimination (Raphael 2020).

Additionally, in her examination of the second wave of feminism in Canada, Lois Harder (2006) says that the government is more willing to respond to mainstream women's needs (66), which refers to the needs of middle-aged, married, white women. This bias continues to be true in Canada, as evidenced by innately racist policies like Bill 21 and the lack of policy promoting

racialized and immigrant women's equality. As Armine Yalnizyan (2020) observes, "women, youth and non-whites disproportionately populate the lower-paid category of workers," and struggle the most to get back to work due to obstacles like the lack of access to childcare service. As a result, it is evident when looking at the pandemic through an intersectional lens that racialized and immigrant women are disproportionately affected in terms of unemployment and re-entering work. The systemic barriers to women of color that exist in Canadian society have been worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic and have further separated these women's experiences from the 'mainstream woman'.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have asserted that the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on racialized and immigrant women are currently the most important issues in gender and politics. To support my argument, I used three means of analysis to demonstrate how the pandemic has worsened the inequalities felt by these women. Though my argument is relatively novel, its significance cannot be understated because the inequalities experienced by racialized and immigrant women in Canada are real and should not be tolerated any longer. The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased and accentuated these inequalities. Opposition to my argument may consist of claims that the life-threatening circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic are not the platform for discussions of gender, race, and equality. But I ask, if not now, then when? The COVID-19 pandemic has had too great of an effect on racialized and immigrant women to be ignored. It is imperative that we use this opportunity afforded by insight from the pandemic to fight for more equality in Canadian society for racialized and immigrant women.

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