

We Deserve To Be Counted

Women Visa Students in Canada

BY MARTHA DONKOR

Cet article analyse les difficultés rencontrées par les femmes avec un visa d'étudiante inscrites aux études graduées. L'auteure attire l'attention sur la pauvreté des informations sur ces immigrantes et demande davantage d'analyses féministes globales qui rendront compte des expériences de ces femmes.

In this article I examine some of the challenges that immigrant¹ women who pursue graduate education in Ontario face and some of the ways they deal with those challenges. I emphasize the point that the “double negative” of being both a woman and an immigrant makes graduate study an especially arduous task. Although I recognize that many students, including Canadian-born and permanent residents face numerous problems, in particular funding, I contend that Canadian-born students and those on permanent resident status have some (funding) alternatives that are not available to international students. I elucidate these claims from my experience as an African woman pursuing a doctorate in an Ontario university.

The paper has three sections. First, I examine issues related to financial support and then work permits for visa students. Next, I link the issues raised in the first section with one specific area of graduate programs—the thesis—with emphasis on how the lack of financial support and/or work are problems for graduate immigrant women during the thesis stage of doctoral studies. Third, I discuss how gender puts an extra burden on female students. I summarize by drawing on feminist discourse regarding the experiences of

immigrant women. I call attention to the need for more inclusive analyses that cover the various categories of immigrant women regardless of their status in Canada.

There is a body of feminist research that points to the difficulties that immigrant women face in Canada. Research conducted by scholars such as Barbara Burnaby (1992, 1996) and Monica Boyd (1989, 1991, 1992) reveal the particular difficulties that immigrant women who are not fluent in either of the official languages (English and French) encounter. Their results largely conclude that in conceptualising the experiences of immigrant women in Canada, it is important to move beyond the familiar terrain where race, gender, and class intersect as systems that oppress women's lives. Emphasis needs to focus on women's “immigrant-ness” since it is that which largely determines women's access to resources.

Although immigrant women have attracted much scholarly attention, female immigrant graduate students who enter Canada on student visas have virtually been left out of feminist analysis.² Visa students face specific difficulties arising from their legal status in Canada. First, they are expected to assume full financial responsibility for their Canadian visit. Assuming full financial responsibility may not be unique to visa students; indeed, every adult in Canada, whatever their legal status, is responsible for their own financial support. However, unlike other Canadians or immigrants who have other classifications, female graduate visa students do not have access to some of the major resources they need to satisfy

financial requirements.

Funding cutbacks have created problems for students in general, and for visa students in particular, the problems have been exacerbated. I offer my experience during the 1997/98 academic year as the backdrop from which to discuss the limitations that some immigrant female graduate students have to deal with.

I applied for a graduate assistantship, one of the main funding avenues open to graduate students. Before I made the application I had completed all of the necessary requirements so that I could begin writing a doctoral dissertation. Nevertheless, I received a rejection letter. The lack of this financial assistance threatened to stop me in my tracks. I was at the final stage of my program, and there seemed to be no recourse.

I panicked. The fear had to do with my visa student status, a category that severely limits opportunities for financial assistance. There is no point in belabouring the fact that

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money is vital at every stage in a student's life, and at no point is the need for money more acutely felt than at the crucial stage of writing the thesis. For instance, transportation, stationery supplies, and recording equipment are basic tools needed to conduct most types of research. Without financial assistance, most

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students, both Canadian-born and foreign, would find it impossible to support themselves financially while collecting data. However, unlike visa students, most Canadian-born students and permanent residents have access to a variety of resources which they can access to meet financial requirements such as government loans and subsidized housing.

Finding and paying for affordable housing is, in fact, one of the major obstacles that visa students face. Fortunately, most institutions have residences designated for international graduate students. It eliminates the difficult task of seeking accommodation in an increasingly competitive housing market. However, not everyone is assured campus housing and students must compete with the public for off-campus sites. Rent is not uniform in Ontario. For example, in Toronto rents are higher than those in smaller cities. Thus, where a student studies may be determined by the rent they can afford.

Visa students in Ontario no longer have access to the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). In 1994, the government withdrew medical coverage for international students as part of its strategic cost-saving plan. Since that time, students must dredge up the stipulated amounts in what has become known as the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP). In the 1994/95 academic year, a single student paid \$530. The amount increased to \$579 in the 1998/99 academic year. A family of two paid \$1,060 and \$1,158 respectively. Students who do not pay UHIP cannot be registered even if they have paid their tuition in full. The status of visa students is thus dependent on their ability to pay UHIP. The inability to pay UHIP might not only result in a visa student being removed from his or her program, but it also means that a visa student cannot afford to be sick. Visa students are forced to become their own doctors, prescribing less expensive, over-the-counter remedies which many not necessarily be the ones they need.

In addition to housing and health care, international visa students are confronted with inordinately high tuition fees. Despite the fact that tuition fees for international student have been reduced since 1997, they are still approximately double the amount paid by domestic students. For example, at the University of Toronto in the 1997/98 academic year, tuition fees for Canadian-born students and permanent residents were \$3,700 for M.A. and Ph.D. programs. International students in the same programs paid \$7,500. For students in M.Ed. and Ed.D. programs, fees were \$4,580 and \$11,000 respectively. Furthermore, as stated previously, visa students cannot obtain government loans. Boyd explains that,

as student visas facilitate temporary residence in Canada for the purpose of study, persons receiving them are not designated targets of government

programmes of integration or settlement. (1989: 3)

It does happen that some visa students who initially came to Canada to pursue an academic program, for example, a Masters degree, later choose to continue and pursue a doctoral program, sometimes with the assurance of full or partial financial assistance from the admitting institution. They also anticipate being able to work and therefore earn extra money.

Recent cutbacks in educational funding in Ontario means that international visa students who look to their institutions for financial assistance cannot even hope to secure sufficient funds to support themselves. An increasing number must work to supplement the little financial support that they get by way of scholarships and bursaries. Since 1995, visa students are not required to obtain a Canadian work permit in order to work, but like other temporary workers, they can work only in the institution in which they are pursuing a program. Graduate visa students are legally ineligible to accept any kind of work outside of that which their institution offers. Meanwhile assistantships, which have always been mainstays for graduate students' incomes, are restricted to a maximum of 40 hours a month (at OISE/UT), due to the heavy load of graduate work. And they are open to all students, both domestic and foreign. This competition makes graduate assistantships an unreliable source of funding for international students.

Cutbacks to student funding have created problems for students in general, and for visa students, these problems are magnified. While all students compete for the meager resources available to them, visa students' access to certain types of funding sources is dwindling, while financial needs are increasing. Unless international foundations such as the Commonwealth Fund or Canadian International Development Aid (CIDA) fund them, visa students must

rely on their own resources or on the admitting institution for financial support. While there are foundations and agencies that fund graduate research, most restrict funding to students from particular geographical areas, national/ethnic origins, and specific programs. The Rockefeller Foundation, for instance, has a scholarship scheme for African graduate students who will undertake research geared towards development in Africa. At first glance, it appears the African Dissertation Internship is open to all African PhD students, but the choice of a thesis topic can disqualify students. For example, a student whose research is about Africans in the Diaspora may not qualify because the research will not contribute directly to development in Africa. As well, most Canadian foundations restrict funding to Canadian citizens or permanent residents, a requirement that automatically disqualifies visa students.

For most graduate students, the thesis project begins after a certain number of required years of academic residence, which most often happens to be the period within which most students obtain financial support directly from their universities. For the visa student who does not get full support after this residence period, or who does not get work, the thesis project begins in an almost insurmountable period of financial crisis. One option for such students is to work "underground" while simultaneously conducting their research, in the hope that they can finish on time.

If a visa student does not have access to the limited resources for continuous funding from the university, or cannot get work on campus, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to concentrate on their studies. They may have to withdraw from their programs, or continue against incredible odds.

Female visa graduate students face gender-specific obstacles as well. Financial problems are particularly in the forefront when students are moth-

ers and/or wives. Female visa students who are married and/or have one or more children have responsibilities in the home as well as at the university. For many female visa students, daycare is the solution to childcare while they work and/or study. The availability of daycare does not mean that all parents (read women) have equal access to those facilities. In almost all universities, there are daycare facilities for students, staff, and faculty. International students do not automatically have access to daycare places for their children. If all the spaces are filled or a student has a child who does not fall within the age range that the daycare on campus is licensed to care for (many limit their intakes to children from two-and-a-half to the five years old), alternatives must be sought out. One solution is either to get a babysitter or pay the full cost for having children in private daycare. Without any form of subsidy, one can pay up to \$250 a week for one child's daycare. For students already saddled with a heavy financial burden, paying a thousand dollars a month to keep a child in daycare has serious consequences. It can mean cutting back on essentials such as food or clothing.

Additionally, female graduate visa students who are married and suffer abuse at home cannot get help to the same extent as other immigrant women can. Female visa students can call shelters and be temporarily housed, but of course shelters do not provide financial assistance that will facilitate the completion of a graduate program. As such, students may remain in abusive relationships in order to remain in school. The mental trauma associated with abuse coupled with strenuous academic work can adversely affect academic performance. An abused female visa student finds herself in a double-bind. Leaving the marital home can potentially end her academic pursuit while staying in the marriage can prolong the period of time it takes to complete a program.

Government, as well as private agencies and organizations, provide services geared toward helping immigrant women to adapt to Canadian society. Feminist scholars have supported the effort by undertaking research sometimes in hope of capturing the attention of policy makers in order to point out the difficulties that these women experience. Research that focuses on immigrant women's language needs calls for the provision of child care for mothers in language training programs such as Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), for a daily allowance during training, as well as skills training to equip immigrant women with the necessary prerequisites to enter the job market. Some improvements have resulted, including the expansion of language programs to give more women access. The number of women entering these programs has been increasing and there is hope that immigrant women will continue to have access to them (Musisi and Turriffin).

Important as feminist research has been to raising awareness about the difficulties that immigrant women face, I do not see my experiences as a visa student reflected in the literature. The void suggests more inclusive analyses that will reflect the diversity of the category "immigrant women."

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mained in the shadows for far too long. The temporality of their status and the fact that they have to be fully responsible for their stay in Canada should not preclude analysis of their experiences. Feminist theory should relate to the reality of these women's lives. A gap is created in feminist discourse when the experiences of some immigrant women are neglected. In so doing, it assumes that some women are peripheral to the category "woman" by virtue of their status. It assumes that the experiences of some groups of women are not as important simply because they fall outside the category assigned by Canadian immigration policy as needing help. It is important for the academic feminist community to be aware of and responsive to the experiences of immigrant women in higher institutions of learning. Whether immigrant graduate visa students stay in Canada or not after they obtain their degrees, they are gaining experience that can place them solidly among international academics working for feminist and other social justice issues.

Martha Donkor is a Ph.D. candidate at the OISE/UT. Her research interests are immigrant women and education with an emphasis on African immigrant women.

¹I use the term "immigrant graduate students" to refer specifically to immigrants on student visas whose color, race, third-world origin, or accent distinguishes them from other immigrant graduate students, as well as from those who are permanent residents or citizens. The definition does not contradict the official definition of an immigrant as foreign-born, as opposed to a citizen. For a more detailed description, see Ng and Estable.

²In a report submitted to the Canadian Historical Association Bulletin, the group of women graduate students that undertook the survey identified financial difficulties, child-rearing, gossip, etc., as some of the prob-

lems that women graduates in history faced. The report is significant for an understanding of some of the difficulties women face in academia; however, it does not tell whether the women surveyed were Canadian-born, permanent residents, or visa students. For complete details of the report, see de la Cour *et al.*

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