



PROJECT NEWS

Workplace Wellness for Immigrant Women

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The Project: Workplace Wellness for Immigrant Women

Our research explores occupational health and safety (OHS) concerns for immigrant women and seeks to understand workplace harassment, bullying, and toxic environments on their wellbeing and health. The work will contribute to a fuller, evidence-based understanding of psychosocial hazards for English language learning (ELL) women in the workplace, their experience of these hazards, and how to prevent them. Further, by arriving at a greater understanding of the intersection of systemic and skill-based factors that contribute to, or challenge, workplace wellness, this work will help enhance professional and employer practices.

Partner Perspectives: Alberta Workers' Health Centre

The **Alberta Workers' Health Centre** (AWHC) is a not-for-profit charitable organization that develops and delivers worker-focused OHS information, education and awareness program with a specific interest in workers vulnerable to health and safety related issues. A program directly relevant to our work with immigrant women include a recently developed New Alberta Workers program. New Alberta Workers provides OHS-related education for temporary foreign workers, immigrant and refugees – people who face multiple barriers to accessing their workplace rights.

AWHC's work reveals there is a gap in understanding how the factors limiting newcomers' safe and equitable integration into the labour market intersect with one another, and with employers' awareness and perspectives. For their own health and safety, it is crucial that workers understand how this system works, the rights and responsibilities of all parties within that system, and how to trigger external enforcement or support. One of the strengths of collaborating on this project is the involvement of ELL women themselves, as AWHC's work champions the idea that workers awareness and understanding of their rights is a vital part of the process of determining the most effective ways of becoming meaningful and active participants in their own health and safety.

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Project Update: Lessons in Recruitment

As we near the end of our data collection the team is reflecting on how our recruitment process evolved. A slow start to participant recruitment contributed to expanding data collection into the fall and allowed us to adjust our methods to better suit the participatory principles we strive to embed in our work. In June we turned our attention to building relationships and broadening our networks with community members and stakeholders working on issues related to employment rights, and health and safety, for workers who are new to Canada. The result has been expanded reach for the project, including increased recruitment from our target population, as well as deeper engagement from community members who wish to join the co-creation team.

Key Concepts: Responsibilization

At the core of our research question is the applied process and concept of responsibilization, the underpinning theory that currently governs our occupational, health, and safety systems.

Responsibilization is an ongoing shift that started in the 1970s in how workplace safety rights are conceptualized and practiced. Its hallmark is the move away from placing full responsibility for ensuring safe workplaces on employers, to a focus on workers' individual responsibility for their safety and ensuring their rights are met. In this framework, employers and employees are agents who both have rights and responsibilities, and are cast as equal partners in an economic relationship.

Canadian federal and provincial OHS Acts, regulations, and codes, are based largely on the internal responsibility system (IRS), which aligns with responsibilization practices. The IRS is a self-regulation model, and it is "based on the principle that every individual in the workplace is responsible for health and safety [. . .]. The system can only function if workers are willing to speak up about hazards and demand changes. They need to exercise voice at work" (Lewchuk, 2013). A significant assumption of this system is that all workers have a voice in the workplace and should feel empowered to express it without fear of reprisal. The employee is recast as a rights based individual, responsible for ensuring their own safety and equitable treatment by asking questions, making complaints, and legally pursuing their rights if they are violated.

However, a growing body of research (that our work aims to contribute to) shows that **this ideal worker-employer relationship is not equal - that the responsibility falls disproportionately on workers who are exposed and directly impacted by unsafe working conditions.**

The impacts of the IRS on responses and strategies promoted for mitigating safety hazards in the workplace will be further explored in our next newsletter as we proceed further into our data analysis.

Suggested Reading

GRAY, G. C. 2009. The Responsibilization Strategy of Health and Safety: Neo-liberalism and the Reconfiguration of Individual Responsibility for Risk. *British Journal of Criminology*, 49, 326-342.

LEWCHUK, W. 2013. The Limits of Voice: Are Workers Afraid To Express Their Health and Safety Rights? *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, 50, 789-812.