CONTEXTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF RACIAL PROFILING ON WOMEN: RESULTS FROM A COMMUNITY SAMPLE

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This paper presents data from interviews with racialized women in Toronto who have experienced racial profiling in a variety of contexts. Women recount the impact that racial profiling has had on them individually, the impact of such practices on the community more broadly, and their thoughts on how to confront the practices.

In the past decades, we have seen narratives on racial profiling move beyond simply documenting such practices to those which emphasize the institutional, legal and political contexts which enable and sustain them. While these have provided critical frameworks for understanding the nature and extent of profiling practices, limitations implicit in these frameworks persist. In particular, narratives reflect the widespread assumptions that the targets of racial profiling are almost exclusively men, and the agents of racial profiling are primarily state security workers. Women's experiences with racial profiling, and the impact of profiling practices have on them, are rarely part of those narratives.

In this paper I describe results from an interview study of women's experiences with racial profiling. From this data, we can see the importance of dismantling the gender-free analysis of profiling practices in order to accommodate the routine and regularized ways in which women experience them.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This research was conducted with the support of the African Canadian Legal Clinic (ACLC), a provincially-funded legal clinic with the mandate to address anti-black racism in Canada (http://www.aclc.net/). Women who self-identified as racialized, and who had experienced racial profiling participated in a confidential, private, face-to-face interview. For the purposes of this study, racial profiling was defined as "being subject to additional scrutiny or surveillance or closer examination because you are a racialized woman". Women were asked about their experiences with racial profiling across a variety of contexts - by public police, at border crossings, by private security, by social, income support and child welfare workers, in the education system and any other context in which it may have occurred in their lives. Women were also asked about how they responded in each specific situation,

the impact of racial profiling on them individually as well as on their community more broadly. Finally, women were asked about strategies for moving forward, and dealing with the realities of racial profiling.

Twenty-three self-identified racialized women were interviewed for this study. They ranged in age from 16 to 62 years old, with an average age of 33. All were residents of Toronto or a community nearby. 70% of the women had children and a third of the women had a spouse. 74% had some college or university, and 9% went to graduate school. 70% of the women were working either full-time or part-time. Three were receiving disability benefits and two were receiving general social benefits. All of the women were Canadian citizens or permanent residents; indeed, two thirds were Canadian born. Fifteen women self-identified as African Canadian, Afro-Canadian, Black, Afro-Caribbean or of Caribbean descent, one women self-identified as Japanese Canadian, one woman self-identified as South Asian, one woman as "mixed Arab and White", one as Chinese and one as "mixed".

THE CONTEXTS FOR RACIAL PROFILING OF WOMEN

Analysis of the geographic and social spaces in which women reported being racially profiled suggest that the pretext of "security" is inadequate for capturing the full range of women's experiences. Four women recounted experiences of being racially profiled by the police while driving. Six women spoke of being racially profiled by police in their own neighbourhoods. Ten women recounted experiences of being racially profiled while trying to cross the border, either at the airport or at a land crossing. Women recounted having their children's diaper checked when trying to enter Jamaica, being pulled aside at the border because the family has a very traditional Middle Eastern name or, for another woman, because she and her boyfriend both had dread locks.

At the same time, the most frequently recounted experiences by the women in this study occurred by private security workers. Over half of the women interviewed reported being regularly racially profiled in retail stores. Indeed, for racialized women, these experiences are routine, even routinized and are rarely about violence, disorder or threats to public safety. Whether women are directly approached under the guise of "helping" them, or closely monitored from the minute they enter an establishment, they know that their racialized status means they are inherently suspect.

Three women reported being racially profiled by income support workers. That is, when making an application to receive social benefits, or when checking in with their benefits worker, they were not seen as being truthful about their financial need or their educational achievements. One of the women was racially profiled by child welfare authorities, whom she believed acted hastily and without proper grounds when they permanently removed her son from her home. In her experience, this is a frequent occurrence.

Women had experiences with racist practices and racial profiling in the education system, both when they were children and as adult learners, as well as with respect to their own children. In some cases, the profiling was linked to presumed limited abilities of racialized children, or over-reacting to the behaviour of racialized children for being "disruptive".

IMPACTS OF RACIAL PROFILING ON WOMEN

The impact of these experience on these women is profound. Repeated incidents have widespread, long-term personal effects on racialized women. Women identified how racial profiling negatively shapes their self-esteem. "You're still human right but sometimes people don't see you as human just because of your colour." One respondent, who is attending graduate school, felt less confident in presenting her ideas to her peers, while another woman noted that "you start to accept a lower standard of living than you should." Some women did not feel like they could be themselves, or had to negotiate a public persona, in order to manage the inevitability of being racially profiled, and to negotiate entrenched stereotypes of racialized women, as "the angry black woman".

Women spoke of how repeated experiences marginalized them, "othered" them, made them feel "out of place in some way" and made it difficult for them to feel fully engaged in society, as individuals, on their own terms. "So I sort of do live in that perpetual state of being aware that I'm not like everyone else."

Perhaps most troubling is that some women do not themselves feel protected by those very agencies that suspect and mistreat them. Such routine and negative experiences undermine their confidence that they could turn to policing authorities, either public or private, when in need themselves. Incredibly, one participant who was a university student at the time of the interview, felt that the priorities of campus security did not include racialized women during heightened concerns over sexual assaults on campus when she was told that "you don't need to be protected, like, they're not going to go after *you*."

RESPONDING TO RACIAL PROFILING

Women offered a range of strategies to confront racial profiling both in the moment, as well as a general approach to challenging the practices. Some women indicated that they adopt a general strategy of compliance in order to make themselves "as acceptable and as non-threatening as possible", regardless of the context.

While racial profiling by private security is the most common experience reported by the women in this study, it is also, in some ways, the situation in which the women expressed feeling the most freedom to resist, often by taking their business elsewhere. Action, organizing and educating future generations were seen as some of the more hopeful courses of action, regardless of the context.

CONCLUSIONS

This research gives voice to women's experiences and confirm that these experiences are embedded in women's everyday lives in routine ways. The profoundly negative impact of even a single incident of racial profiling rings loud and clear. This sample of women is fully engaged in the community – virtually all had post-secondary education, most worked, and many volunteered in various capacities in the community. Yet they feel excluded from civic life, "othered" by everyday encounters with both state and non-state authorities, and are often not confident that they would be protected in a time of need. As confident as they are that the source of the problem is elsewhere, they were, at the same time, profoundly aware of the consequences of resisting or challenging in the moment. While they acknowledge an arsenal of strategies, experience tempers them.

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