NAVIGATING SETTLEMENT: FOSTERING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND COMBATING RACISM IN SETTLEMENT SERVICES

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In August 2023, the Association for Canadian Studies launched the "Identifying Best Practices in Combatting Discrimination in the Settlement Process: A Qualitative Assessment," a year-long project funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The study sought to explore the challenges faced by racialized newcomers in accessing settlement services and aimed to identify effective strategies to combat discrimination. Settlement services play a crucial role in helping newcomers integrate into Canadian society. This article explores the experiences of racialized newcomers when accessing settlement services, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. Drawing on thematic analysis, the study identifies key areas of satisfaction, such as employment support, basic needs assistance, and community-building efforts. However, newcomers also encountered challenges, including discrimination, inadequate support, and a lack of cultural sensitivity. Recommendations for improving these services include enhanced communication, personalized support, and fostering cultural sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

Settlement services in Canada are designed to assist newcomers in navigating their new environment, offering resources such as employment training, language classes, and housing support. However, racialized newcomers often face unique challenges when accessing these services, ranging from discrimination to unmet expectations. This article evaluates the efforts of settlement organizations in fostering anti-racism practices and creating inclusive environments for newcomers in Canada. This paper discusses the importance of proactive measures, such as anti-racism training, clear reporting mechanisms, and community engagement, to ensure that settlement organizations can effectively support newcomers and create discrimination-free environments.

METHODOLOGY

120 racialized newcomers from five regions (British Columbia, Manitoba, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec) shared their lived experiences, with a specific focus on the racism and discrimination they encountered. Additionally, 31 settlement

workers were interviewed to provide insights into the efforts made by organizations to address these issues and highlight areas where further improvements are needed.

Using semi-structured interviews with both newcomers and staff from immigrant-serving organizations, the study identified key barriers, knowledge gaps, and shortcomings in service delivery.

ASSESSING ANTI-RACISM EFFORTS IN SETTLEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

The settlement workers were asked about their organizations' commitment to anti-racism. While most felt that efforts were being made to create racism-free environments, many acknowledged that significant gaps remain.

When asked if their organization is committed to anti-racism practices and policies, 90% of respondents (n=28) said yes. For these respondents, all highlighted diversity as a key indicator of anti-racism initiatives by highlighting the visible presence of anti-racism messaging and a diverse, multi-national team within their organizations.

A few participants mentioned that their organizations have zero-tolerance policies against racism. However, in some cases, the zero-tolerance policy is a three-strike policy before any action is taken to let someone go.

> "If they hear that you have misbehaved against a client, then you have to have a meeting with the manager and you get a warning. Next time he writes down. So you have it on writing that you have misbehaved or something like that. Then the third time I think they kick you out". – Settlement Worker, Toronto

The settlement workers who felt that their organizations were leading the way in fostering environments committed to anti-racism are those who actively educate and engage both their staff and the broader community, fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated, and inclusion is deeply embedded in their operational practices.

However, some settlement workers, particularly those who are racialized newcomers themselves, expressed a reluctance to heavily emphasize anti-racism policies and programs. One worker suggested that overemphasizing racism could inadvertently magnify the issue, preferring instead to downplay it.

> "My personal thing is that if you put so much emphasis on a problem, it becomes a bigger problem. That's my thing, so I don't put too much pressure on it... I'm not too keen on like, you know, making policies. Like there are policies already set, but I'm not going to make a big deal out of it, because once you make a big deal, that's when people actually make a bigger deal out of it".
> – Settlement Worker, Prince George

This attitude may stem from concerns that overemphasizing racism could magnify the issue or foster a sense of victimhood rather than empowerment. Some fear that poorly implemented anti-racism policies could lead to tokenism instead of genuine inclusion. Additionally, there is concern that focusing too much on racism might divert attention from other essential newcomer needs, like employment and housing (Banerjee, Verma, & Zhang, 2023).

Another participant pointed out that merely having a diverse team might not be sufficient to address systemic issues of racism and discrimination

> But I think as a service provider we need a lot of training to unpack a lot of internalized racism or even our own biases and prejudices of stereotyping people…..I think at this time we are moving a lot forward in terms of providing training to the staff on understanding, anti-oppression framework and working from that lens. However, we all get caught up in our day to day, and it really just trickles down to you as a person, how you're going to mitigate or behave with your client who's in front of you. (TOR-003)

Finally, a settlement worker in Montreal explained that she often feels the need to navigate her clients to more specialized cultural settlement services to protect them from potential discrimination.

> "We do refer them to resources and settlement organizations that also work with racialized people and that they can refer them properly to the neighbourhoods that are mainly racialized people. As you know, Parc Ex, a mostly immigrant neighbourhood and we have resources there that allow other people to access their basic needs without being racially profiled. And I think it's sad because you should be able to refer them to all the resources available and there are so many, but we just rely on those that we know are gonna be safe, are gonna be open, are also gonna give them the information that they need".
> – Settlement Worker, Montreal

While many settlement organizations are committed to fostering inclusive environments, there are significant areas for improvement. Fostering inclusive environments requires more than just diversity; it demands ongoing education, consistent policy enforcement, and proactive engagement with both staff and the broader community. Only through these comprehensive efforts can settlement organizations effectively support newcomers and combat discrimination.

EXPERIENCES OF RACISM WHEN ACCESSING SETTLEMENT SERVICES

The majority of newcomers interviewed expressed positive experiences when accessing settlement services and reported no discrimination/racism in settlement services. However, 11% of newcomers interviewed throughout this study shared experiences reflecting both overt and subtle biases when accessing settlement services. When interviewing settlement workers, 95% reported that they had not witnessed or heard of any racism or discrimination within their organizations, insisting that any discrimination and racism faced by newcomers was solely outside of settlement organizations. However, the accounts shared by newcomers indicate a different reality. It is possible that newcomers experience higher levels of racism and discrimination within settlement services than is currently understood, as they may not feel comfortable reporting such incidents in the very environment in which they occurred. Moreover, during our interviews, settlement workers noted the lack of clear reporting mechanisms or structures for addressing these issues, begging the question that if settlement workers themselves are uncertain about where and how to report instances of discrimination, how are the newcomers expected to navigate the process?

RACIAL BIAS AND STEREOTYPING BY SERVICE PROVIDERS

One form of discrimination encountered by newcomers is racial bias and stereotyping by service providers.

For example, a newcomer of Chinese descent recounted an interaction with an employment counselor. The counselor dismissed the newcomer's aspirations to switch to a career in education.

> "So as I said, most of the people are helpful and friendly. But, the last experience [accessing settlement services] was with a little bit racist. I went to get employment information because I wanted to change careers. My employment counselor said "You're Chinese, you're good at math, you can only do an office job, you should not change to the education system because you wouldn't be good at it, that is not what Chinese people are good at" which I heard from a Korean lady…. I think it's not really makes sense because you won't know if I don't try. You won't know. I'm not qualified for that job, right?" (VAN – 002)

UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES AND PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT

Real or perceived inequality in service delivery also exacerbates feelings of discrimination. Newcomers have observed that certain groups receive preferential treatment.

> "But, you know, [redacted] I observe that the government providing the settlement program differently for different groups of people. I saw that there are many new Ukrainian newcomers and they got more support. They got job immediately, they got housing immediately. But we are struggling to find those kinds of services… I don't know if it be because they are white and blond and blue eyes or not, but…" (VAN-003)

One newcomer recounted her difficulties with intracultural discrimination she experienced directly from settlement workers when she arrived in Calgary. Her story highlights the need for more equitable and culturally sensitive practices in settlement services to ensure all refugees receive the necessary support for a successful integration process.

> **Newcomer:** But then, last year, the English was not good. But I asked him, my English is not good how can I ask? But he told me, here [are] some people from your country, they come to help with you because they are understood your language. But one Friday because we lost a big bag in Toronto airport. Inside this bag was my son's clothes, diapers and baby formula. He was almost six months. But also, I was pregnant one month. He used baby formula. I called this phone number, and he answered me. He was from our country. But the language is different. Our country is different people. For example, different tribes. I don't know if you heard about that but each tribe ha a genocide. I am Hazara but in our country it is different than Pashtun, but Pashtun is Taliban. He was Pashtun. When he understood I am Hazara, he told me, oh, we don't have baby formula. Why, he is a six month old baby, how can I find baby formula for him?
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> We didn't know where the market is, how can we find it? We didn't have phone to call for ask someone. Yeah, it was so bad. My son was so crying. I called again, please, we need formula for my son and also we need diapers for him. He was saying we don't have formula. But my husband was going to the reception and my husband told me, oh, they gave another lady two packets of formula. My husband followed her and he knocked the door and asked her how can you find the formula? [She said] here is formula, you can go to reception, there are agents…
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> But I talk to a counsellor… I can't stop crying because it was so bad. For one day, my son didn't have formula. He was so crying. But she [the counsellor] was asking me why? What happened here? We have more formula. Why? What happened? But she emailed the manager. The manager came here and knocked on the door and said what happened? I think he was also from my country. It was same language which is Pashtun. But I [told him] I don't have formula. I asked him [the man at the

reception] three or four times and he told me we won't have formula for baby tomorrow or after tomorrow, you need to wait. But he [the manager] is saying to me "Oh, it is so bad I apologize, please forget it" and he brought me a bottle of formula and diapers and he asked me, please don't talk with anyone. Don't share this with anyone.

HOW TO FOSTER INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS IN SETTLEMENT

1. Develop Extensive Anti-Racism Training for Settlement Workers

    - Implement mandatory, ongoing anti-racism training for all settlement workers. This training should focus on identifying and mitigating implicit biases, understanding cultural diversity, and promoting equitable treatment of newcomers.

    - Create detailed training modules incorporating case studies, role-playing, and interactive discussions. Training should be regularly updated based on new research and feedback from participants.

2. Establish Clear and Accessible Reporting Mechanisms for Racism and Discrimination

    - Implement a transparent system for reporting incidents of racism or discrimination within settlement services for both settlement workers and newcomers. This system should allow all reporting to be done anonymously as well as be easy to access and navigate, ensuring newcomers feel safe and supported when raising concerns.

    - Develop an online reporting platform with multilingual support.

    - Make sure there is a structured follow-up process to address reported incidents promptly and effectively.

3. Create Accountability and Feedback Process within Settlement Agencies

    - Create mechanisms to hold settlement agencies accountable for addressing incidents of racism and discrimination, including regular audits and feedback loops from newcomers. This will ensure issues are identified and resolved promptly, enhancing trust and efficacy.

    - Introduce anonymous surveys for newcomers to provide feedback on their experiences, using the data collected to inform continuous improvements.

4. Integrate Anti-Racism Policies into Settlement Services Frameworks

    - Embed anti-racism policies into the core operational frameworks of settlement services. These policies should clearly outline standards and practices for equitable service provision and be actively implemented and monitored.

    - Develop comprehensive anti-racism policies in collaboration with experts and community stakeholders. Regularly review and update these policies to address emerging issues and incorporate best practices.

5. Promote Awareness of Cultural Nuances Among Settlement Workers

    - Enhance training programs to include education on cultural nuances and regional differences among newcomers. Settlement workers should understand that individuals from the same country may have distinct languages, customs, and cultural practices.

    - Incorporate modules on cultural nuances into existing training programs. Use case studies to illustrate potential misunderstandings and provide practical strategies for addressing these issues effectively.

6. Encourage Community Engagement and Intercultural Dialogue

    - Encourage initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue and engagement between newcomers and local communities by organizing community events, cultural exchange programs, and discussion groups that bring together newcomers and long-term residents.

7. Strengthen Advocacy and Legal Support for Newcomers

    - Establish partnerships with legal aid organizations to offer free or low-cost legal services. Provide training for settlement workers on how to support newcomers in accessing these resources effectively.

8. Create Safe Spaces for Newcomer Voices

    - Establish forums and platforms where newcomers can share their experiences, concerns, and suggestions regarding racism and discrimination. These spaces should be confidential and action-oriented, ensuring that newcomer voices are heard and valued.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while settlement organizations in Canada are making efforts to foster inclusive environments, significant gaps remain, particularly in addressing systemic racism and discrimination. Newcomers continue to face challenges, including implicit biases and a lack of cultural sensitivity in the services provided. The experiences shared by both settlement workers and newcomers highlight the need for more comprehensive anti-racism training, improved reporting mechanisms, and stronger accountability measures within these organizations. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative approach, with ongoing engagement between settlement agencies, the government, and communities to ensure that all newcomers feel supported, respected, and empowered throughout their settlement journey.