

Immigrant Enclaves and Residential Segregation: Voices of Racialized Refugee and Immigrant Women

by Sylvia Novac

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Abstract

Are immigrant enclaves in Canadian cities the product of racism and exclusionary practices such as housing discrimination or immigrants' choices and desire for familiar community? The experiences and commentary of racialized refugee and immigrant women reveal aspects of all these factors.

I had left Vietnam for Hong Kong in 1988. As soon as I arrived we were locked in the Chimawan camp, the "forbidden" camp, where I stayed for more than two years. My son and I were given only one bed - this was our home, one bed.

These are the (translated) words of Kim, a political refugee who was sponsored by the Association of Vietnamese Women. The Association supported her financially during her first year in Canada while she took classes to learn English and French. She had no work permit and was not allowed to be employed.

One of the first major challenges that most refugees and many immigrants face on arrival to Canada is finding a place to live. Yet, there has been very little Canadian research on racism in relation to the housing system or racist discrimination in housing, as well as on the housing conditions or issues of new immigrants (Bernèche). The literature on sexism and housing discrimination is new and sparse. Unfortunately, there is a strong tendency in the existing research on housing discrimination in western advanced industrial countries to focus exclusively on either the effects of racism or the effects of sexism, and more often on the former. There is only a tiny body of literature addressing both racism and sexism (Hulchanski).

Are immigrant enclaves in Canadian cities the product of racism and exclusionary practices such as housing discrimination or immigrants' choices and desire for familiar community? This article explores the experiences and commentary of racialized refugee and immigrant women which reveal aspects of all these factors. Canadian housing literature does not yet adequately account for the complexity of these women's locations or the varied mechanisms that result in residential segregation, including racism, and its implications.

Based on her work with women from Ethiopia, Helene Moussa noted that finding their first accommodation in Canada was especially hard for single refugee women. For some, it is difficult to find an apartment without assistance due to their inability to communicate adequately in English or French. But that is not the only barrier. When a woman from the sponsoring organization assisted Kim to find an apartment, they both learned that landlords were unwilling to rent to a Vietnamese immigrant woman.

She contacted a few landlords for me, but they replied that they did not like renting to Vietnamese people, especially if they are recent immigrants. There are no guarantees that we have money to pay the rent. They demanded eleven post-dated cheques for the year's rent.

According to the relevant provincial legislation, the demand for post-dated cheques was illegal, but Kim felt that a formal complaint was pointless in her position.

For the next five months, Kim and her son shared one room with another Vietnamese woman. Their room was part of a three-bedroom apartment where a total of eight people lived, most of whom were strangers to each other. Kim described how the lack of privacy and facilities made her life difficult.

There were eight or nine people all packed in the same apartment. There was only one bathroom, which is sometimes embarrassing because people always need to use the washroom at the same time. Also, to prepare meals – there wasn't enough room for people to do it at the same time.

When she was interviewed, Kim was living with her son in a one-bedroom apartment that was costly for her, but provided what she believed was most important – improved opportunity for her son to study and find friends. She was satisfied with her landlord, who is also from Vietnam, despite the fact that the old house required major repairs that he was slow to make.

Kim was most pleased with her Vietnamese immigrant neighbourhood, as an island of cultural familiarity, friendliness, playmates for her son, and freedom from the discrimination and overt racism she faced whenever she left it.

This area is fine because there are Vietnamese children around the same age as my son, and he can play with them and feel less lonely. Most of the neighbours are pleasant. There is only discrimination in the metro, on the bus.

Due to blatant housing discrimination, Kim had little real choice over where she and her son could live. And by living among a concentration of Vietnamese immigrants, companionship and a buffer from racism by “whites” made daily life more comfortable.

Changing Expressions of Discrimination

Discrimination by landlords narrows women's housing options and contributes to their paying more for less, as do the heightened safety and privacy concerns that lead women refugees to pay higher housing costs than they can afford for “safe” housing and neighbourhoods, and making it all the harder to meet other needs. An interplay of discriminatory bases, such as gender, national origin, “race,” presence of children, employment status, and income level, helps to explain how racialized immigrant women's households are the most disadvantaged in our housing system.

Housing discrimination is a serious problem that has become harder for individuals to challenge, partially because forms of rental discrimination are changing from overt to covert and mediated expressions (such as income-related selection criteria). Kim's experiences of rental discrimination were both overt and mediated. Hester, a young woman born in Jamaica, offered an example of more subtle discrimination. When she and her husband looked for an apartment in a predominantly “white” neighbourhood, they were not openly refused, yet the message of exclusion was clearly conveyed.

The lady was very sceptical of us – my husband is very dark. She looked at us with a “What are they doing here” face, [as if to say] “this building is not for you.” The way she looked at us, I knew right away what she was thinking. We went there two times, and she said she couldn't show us the apartment. So I called again and spoke to a gentleman, and he said come and see the apartment. We went back, but he wasn't there. He had told her two people were coming; she wasn't expecting us again, but had to show us the apartment. It was a very nice place, but it was expensive. We were planning on sharing it, but the way she was acting made us look for another place.

Although aware of her legal rights, Hester decided not to contest the discrimination because it would only escalate the tension with the housing gatekeepers (building superintendents and landlord) and would not address the discomfort of social exclusion, antagonism, and fear of retaliation on a daily basis.

Many women do, nevertheless, complain and contest discrimination. A major anti-discrimination agency in Ontario reported that women make more calls and file more formal complaints than men, and that many immigrants and refugees call because they are harassed and discriminated against by landlords. Immigrants' lack of English language skills, vulnerability, lack of knowledge about their rights, and the lack of advocates in the housing community all contribute to their housing difficulties (CERA 1992, CERA 1993).

One study of new immigrant households in Montreal revealed that they are more likely to include children and have difficulty finding housing suitable for larger families. A scarcity

of French-language classes are part of the backdrop of communication problems that contribute to the two most commonly identified problems faced by immigrants: lack of information and discrimination. Immigrants frequently lack information about the rental market, the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants, and avenues of recourse when there are problems. They also face discrimination and widespread biases about the financial viability of specific immigrant groups (Bernèche).

Landlord and Tenant Relations

Many refugee and immigrant women experience cultural, economic, and linguistic alienation when they come to Canada, all of which makes it more difficult to negotiate their relationships with landlords. Residential insecurity and vulnerability cause hardships that include frustration and anger over oppressive situations and behaviour, high levels of stress in facing the unknown, and diminished vitality to deal with the demands of everyday life.

According to the results of a survey of female tenants in Ontario, almost half of them reported having no familiarity with basic human rights legislation against discrimination and harassment by landlords or their agents, and about one-third of them were unaware of their rights regarding landlord entry of their unit (Novac). Widespread public education is required, with special efforts to reach various immigrant and language groups. Unfortunately, even those refugee and immigrant women who receive the appropriate legal information from a community agency are reluctant to challenge landlords on their behaviour. This highlights the inadequacy of a human rights system that relies on individual complainants to challenge illegal behaviour.

Landlords are most likely to take advantage of naive tenants, since they can do so with little risk. Inadequate maintenance by property owners wishing to lower their costs is a frequent problem for tenants, and one that again puts the onus on the tenant to complain. Unsatisfactory compliance is the source of much landlord and tenant strife. Frequently, refugee and immigrant women will move or simply put up with poor maintenance and service rather than pursue an inequitable struggle.

There is a flip side to this difficulty in that recent immigrant tenants are also unaware of their obligations in law (for example, moving without giving proper notice). And this leads to further landlord-tenant problems which are likely to cost immigrants dearly, not only financially but by adding to their sense of loss of control, and perhaps add to suspicions that they are being targeted for exploitation, even if invalid.

Immigrants' lack of information on basic landlord and tenant law contributes to the effective erosion of their rights and increases the odds that they will unknowingly violate their contractual agreements. But the knowledge itself will not prove an effective deterrent to mistreatment if it is not backed up by appropriate assistance from advocates who can act directly with the tenants and unfortunately, this kind of direct counsel is rarely available for immigrant tenants, who, for the most part, cannot afford to pay for a lawyer's services. The need for advocacy is particularly critical for those who have language barriers or who are overwhelmed by traumatic circumstances.

Residential segregation

Income level and wealth certainly have a predominant effect on housing tenure, conditions, and neighbourhood choice. Social class is not, however, the only factor in residential segregation. Sexism and racism also create and reinforce patterns of poverty and wealth. For example, female-led, racialized and immigrant households living in poverty are increasingly concentrated in urban public housing, frequently in neighbourhoods that are ghetto-like, unsafe, and stigmatized. Such neighbourhoods are an enduring spatial expression of class, gender, and racial hierarchy and oppression. But residential segregation is also evident for immigrant groups who have high incomes and wealth.

Canadian cities can be read in terms of identifiable immigrant neighbourhoods. How do we understand these spatial manifestations? According to the Italian-Canadian writer Nino Ricci, they reflect a physical boundary between the dominant norm and "otherness." British housing analyst Susan Smith suggests that we have little understanding of how historic racist immigration practices relate to residential segregation other than to talk about cultural preference and autonomy, as Ricci does, or class differentiation and formation.

Certainly, part of the difficulty lies in the need to better understand the interplay of racism or racialization and cultural differences. While acknowledging that some aspects of intra-community residential differentiation are authentic expressions of cultural variety and preference, Smith argues that residential segregation may reflect many things, but that fundamentally, it is an expression of racial inequality.

Segregation and Community

For racialized immigrant groups, segregation may guarantee a social distance that reinforces unequal positions, but it also allows for a pocket of safety from the daily indignities woven through a "white"-dominated society.

Growing up near Chinatown where most of the people you see and go to school with are Chinese, you're a little sheltered. I guess some people would call it a "ghetto" - I'd call it a community with all the support networks (Chinese Canadian National Council 82).

This quote from an interview with Shirley Chan reveals the "outside" and "inside" views of a neighbourhood that is socially and spatially segregated from the dominant "white" society. Her Vancouver neighbourhood was slated for urban renewal that would push out residents, while the proposed public housing would split up extended family households into smaller units of modern nuclear families. Chan's future as an activist began when she and her mother campaigned among their neighbours to resist the city's plan to redevelop Chinatown. This story of racial segregation and community destruction echoes earlier experiences of "black" communities in the Maritimes, such as the Bog and Africville (Hornby; Africville Genealogy Society *et al.*).

The comforts of cultural familiarity and potential for supportive community appear to stand in contrast to questions of racial segregation and its formation. By turning to cultural or ethno-racial homogeneity, are immigrants simply choosing a supportive affiliation, or are they making the best of segregation imposed by a dominant social group with its many messages of exclusion and social distance?

Feminist theorist bell hooks notes that systems of domination (i.e., sexism, racism, capitalism) cause stress for “black” people by disrupting their capacity to fully exercise self-determination, and she remarks on the “tragic irony that many more black people suffer undue anxiety and stress as a result of racial integration” (54). While racial integration is a mark of liberal progress, it seems that “black” people have paid a high price in giving up their old neighbourhoods as spaces for deeply resistant and healing consciousness.

[C]oming home to black neighbourhoods that were not controlled by a visible white presence provided black people the necessary space to recoup and regain a measure of sanity. The power of these segregated communities was that they were places where black folks had oppositional world views that helped us sustain our integrity, our very lives. There are many segregated communities still but they are not often constituted as communities of resistance (hooks 54).

hooks believes that “black” neighbourhoods of the past provided a regenerative space, and that women, despite sexism, played key roles in such neighbourhoods that garnered them significant status.

Without romanticizing, it may be difficult to credit the potentially supportive aspects of racially segregated communities to create pockets of resistance, when “black control of black communities will not mean freedom from oppression so long as the black communities themselves are subservient to an outside society which is exploitative” (Allen 33).

British researchers have more rigorously explored the dynamics of housing inequality for “ethnic minorities.” Some have concluded that there is a complexity of factors involved and that further analysis is necessary to understand how the inequalities are realized.

[E]thnic disadvantage in housing stems from a combination of cultural choices, economic differences, institutional policies and practices, and racial or cultural discrimination.... [T]he problem that confronts researchers is to clarify how they combine and how such apparent opposites as cultural choice and economic determination are in practice mutually reinforcing (Sarre *et al.*39).

The experiences and views of racialized refugee and immigrant women could provide an excellent basis for exploring this interplay. Instead, we find that documentation on the housing situation of immigrant women is quite sparse and reflects a hierarchal pattern of silencing or exclusion.

The more prominent, prestigious, and influential vehicles for the production and dissemination of housing research – government agencies, academic forums and periodicals, and industry research – consistently ignore analyses that address gender and “race.” On the other hand, some racialized immigrant women have organized and developed projects of various kinds dealing with housing issues. Their voices and issues can be found most often in community-based research. Urban social service agencies, for example, have reported that immigrant women face not only serious problems of housing affordability, but also a myriad of other issues that result from the changes in their lives: different ways of organizing domestic labour; language barriers that limit their social contact and increase their isolation and dependence on male partners; an absence of extended family support, especially for childcare; devaluation of their education, knowledge, skills, and credentials; poverty in an expensive urban economy; and spatial restriction to the home in an alien environment where there are no public spaces of their own (Rockhill and Tomic).

At a time when Canadian senior governments view housing as a business in which they will not “interfere,” there is an increasing stratification and polarization of our society that encourages social insularity and the erosion of community of all kinds. Refugee and immigrant women will find that Canada is indeed a cold country.

Note

Racialization: The concept of racialization is adopted from Miles (1989) who describes it as a “dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons which reproduces itself biologically” (76). Regarding terminology, I use single quotation marks around words such as ‘race’ and ‘black’ to mark them as having disputed meanings. On the one hand, there are actual social and material results of racism, and to speak of this is difficult without designating people by ‘race’ and by who is considered ‘white’ and ‘black,’ and so on. On the other hand, the concept of ‘race’ is a socially constructed one that has no scientific validity, that is, there are no actual ‘races’ of people. Racism exists primarily as a mechanism for creating and sustaining difference and inequality, and for this reason, I prefer to highlight its terms and designations as problematic.

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