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The strategies of Polish immigrant women in their search for entry into the professional labour market in Canada

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**THE STRATEGIES OF POLISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THEIR SEARCH FOR
ENTRY INTO THE PROFESSIONAL LABOUR MARKET IN CANADA.**

by

Magdalena Maria Kazmierczak, BSW, Ryerson University 2003

A Major Research Paper
Presented to Ryerson University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In the Program of
Immigration and Settlement Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2008

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Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores strategies of five Polish immigrant women in their search to enter the professional labour market in Canada. This study focuses on the most effective methods these women utilized in order for them to become successful. This study found that, despite their challenges and experiences, their way to success was strongly influenced by four main strategies they used to overcome these barriers. These are: use of Canadian government and other employment services/programs; networking within own ethnic community; improving their proficiency in English; and perseverance in the process of searching for employment in Canada. This major research paper shows that there is much to learn from the strategies used by these Polish professional immigrant women's for entering the professional labour market in Canada. The results will be presented in the form of research implications and practical applications for policy-makers, non-governmental organizations, and researchers.

Keywords: Polish professional immigrant women, employment experience, strategies to enter Canadian labour market

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I dedicate this study to my family and friends and especially to the Polish immigrant professional women whose life experiences, despite challenges, are great examples of success. Your stories are encouragement to others!

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THE STRATEGIES OF POLISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THEIR SEARCH FOR ENTRY INTO THE PROFESSIONAL LABOUR MARKET IN CANADA.

1. INTRODUCTION

Immigrants to Canada have been coming in waves, partly as a result of changing socio-political conditions in their countries of origin, and partly as a result of changes in Canada's immigration policies. Polish immigration to Canada began in the middle of the eighteenth century, shortly after Russia, Prussia and Austria partitioned the territories of Poland. Religious persecution and a poor economy further stimulated the out-migration of Poles at this time (Heydenkorn, 2008). Those who arrived in Canada at this time either worked on farms or in coal mines; the majority were poorly educated and "entered into the lowest socio-economic rungs of society in the new setting" (Radecki, 1979). The largest and most recent group of Polish immigrants who arrived in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, however, was highly educated and expected to enter the professional labour market upon their arrival in Canada.

Entering the professional labour market is a difficult challenge for all new immigrants, but particularly so for women (Status of Women, 2000). Many of them arrive in Canada as dependents of men, and are much less familiar with English or French, or job-search strategies in the new environment. In addition, they have to play dual roles of family care-givers as well as income generators. Their role as family care-givers becomes more difficult because of the acculturation stress the family goes through as a result of migration. They are usually the ones who support

the men and the children as they settle down in Canada. The women are also under greater pressure to begin generating income because it is much more expensive to live in Canada than in countries they come from. As a result, many of them end up taking 'survival jobs' which require minimal skills, little or no proficiency in English or French, and pay very little. These are usually temporary or short-term jobs but require long hours of physical work. As a result, they leave little time or energy for the women to re-train or to look for professional jobs more suited to their education and experience. As pointed out in the Status of Women Report (2000), once women take on such jobs it gets even more difficult for them to break out of this cycle of oppression which keeps them working in unskilled, low-paid, and precarious jobs. However, some women do manage to break out of this cycle. These are the women I wanted to study to find out what strategies they used to become successful professional women in Canada. Documenting their success stories will help other women in similar situations figure out what is helpful and what is not in seeking professional employment in Canada.

In the following study I will describe and analyze the experiences of five professionally trained Polish women who migrated to Canada in the 1980s and 1990s and were successful in entering the professional labour market. Unlike other studies that focus on the challenges immigrants face in finding suitable employment, this one focuses on strategies the women used to find such employment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Leaving your home country to start a new elsewhere is obviously a life-changing event. Newcomers tell us about wanting a better life for themselves and their families. Their decisions are often prompted by political and/or economic factors. They have heard of great opportunities in Canada and consequently their expectations are high".

(Sparks & Wolfson, 2001)

Newcomers to Canada face many barriers which prevent them from attaining full participation in Canadian society. One of the most important barriers to their economic participation in this society is their inability to find appropriate jobs, commensurate with their prior education, training and professional experience. Most immigrants report underemployment and loss of career-related socio-economic status upon their immigration to Canada (Duff et al, 2002; Tyyskä, 2007).

Writing about newcomers' access to appropriate jobs, Shields (2004) points out that public policy in Canada has increasingly been influenced by 'neoliberal theory' that places jobs and employment as a central public policy goal. However, the author claims, "...the Canadian labour market is marked with high unemployment and a 'flexibility' that promotes greater polarization, job insecurity, and exclusion for workers. At most risk, however, are immigrants" (p.1). Although, the Shield's paper does not apply directly to immigrant women, it relates to the broad issue of the labour market and immigrants in Canada. This study further examines the impact of social policy on immigrants' entry into the labour market in Canada and argues that growing inequality between immigrant and the Canadian born is due to the lack of immigrants' access to jobs that fit their educational qualifications and experience. The author suggests that recent immigrants face great difficulties integrating into Canadian

society as a result of their unemployment or underemployment. He states that cuts in funding of programs that facilitate information about and preparation for seeking jobs have further jeopardized the few supports that immigrants had in gaining entry into the labour market.

Dan Hiebert is another scholar who has studied the integration of immigrants in the labour market in Canada. Based on his various studies (1997, 1999, 2000) Hiebert concludes that immigrants' participation in Canadian labour market creates explicitly risky situation where women, immigrants, particularly ethnic minority groups all get low earnings, relatively to their education level, in comparison with Canadian born white men. Furthermore, the situation is complicated by the fact that immigrants entering Canada come from a wide spectrum of class positions. Thus while the incomes of recent immigrants, on average, are lower than those of non-immigrants, these averages conceal huge variation among their incomes.

Duff et. al (2002) list four main reasons for immigrant women's lack of integration in the Canadian labour market and hence Canadian society: finding appropriate employment, getting access to training programs, acquiring vocational level proficiency in English, and addressing immigration related stress. According to the Status of Women Canada (2000) language barriers, social isolation, racism and sexism are some of the key factors in immigrant women's inability to find suitable jobs. Almost two decades ago Ng (1990) pointed out that lack of proficiency in official languages is a major impediment to immigrants' entry into the labour market. The situation has not changed much since that time. Most immigrant women arrive in

Canada as dependents of their male sponsors, who are the principal applicants. In 2004, among permanent residents only 18% of principal applicants spoke neither of the two Canadian official languages, while 50.9% of spouses and dependents did not speak either language (Kilbride et.al, 2008).

Immigrant women's lack of proficiency in the official languages does not necessarily mean they are poorly educated. Among permanent residents who are 15 years or older, 72% of males and 68% of females had 13 years or more of schooling, including 49.5% of males and 42.1% of females who had one or more university degrees (CIC, cited in Kilbride et. al, 2008). However, in addition to the above mentioned factors their entry into the labour market in Canada is made more difficult because they are also responsible for the care and well-being of their families. As Rose (1997) claims, "women typically perform the work of integration by taking a primary role in raising their children, and interacting with neighbours, schools, and settlement organizations" (p. 58).

There are multiply problems faced by internationally educated professionals including lack of recognition of foreign credentials, lack of Canadian experience, limited official language proficiency, lack of knowledge about Canadian workplace practices prior to immigration, etc. (Li, 2003; Reitz, 2005). According to Reitz (2005) one of the most frequently named obstacle immigrants face in obtaining employment in Canada is the language barrier. Harvey (2001) also points out that employers generally assess job seekers' language abilities during the interview process and

some recruiters express their concern with immigrant job hunters' ability to comprehend English

Upon arrival in a new country newcomers often struggle with accessing employment due to unfamiliarity with labor market rules and accessibility to employment. Therefore, they often rely on building and using their own social networks to access employment opportunities. In a comparative study of four ethnic groups of immigrant women i.e. Latin American, Polish, South Asian and Vietnamese, Chicoine et al. (1997) asked them to reconstruct their network of contacts of 'strong' (family, kin, and friends) and 'weak' (acquaintances, neighbours who are not close friends) ties. The researchers found that the development of social networks varies between different ethno-cultural groups. For example, South Asian women relied primarily on strong ties for support while Polish women had much more extensive networks of weak ties. The authors of this study contended that the type and geographical range of these networks is crucial to the integration process. Immigrant women who have few weak ties tend to form closely-knit but isolated groups, while those with many weak ties integrate more fully with other ethno-cultural groups.

In another comparative study of Polish, Portuguese, Caribbean, Korean and Somali immigrants in the Toronto area, Lo, Teixeira and Truelove (2002) found that a significant gender imbalance in entrepreneurship. They found that women faced more discrimination than men in their efforts to start up and run their own businesses.

Man (2004) studied the experiences of Chinese immigrant women to find out how their subjective experiences articulated with larger socio-economic and political conditions in Canada. She found that by and large these women were being deskilled in Canada as a result of their unemployment and underemployment. The author pointed out that "gendered and racialized institutional processes in the form of state policies and practices, professional accreditation systems, employers' requirement for 'Canadian experience' and labour market conditions marginalize Chinese immigrant women" (p. 1). An earlier study by Preston and Man (1999) reported similar results. To identify some of the factors affecting immigrant women's employment, the researchers explored the job-search experiences of four groups of women who had immigrated recently to Toronto from Hong Kong and Mainland China. The authors pointed out the Canadian government pursued a highly selective immigration policy that meant recent immigrants were better educated than the average Canadian, the majority arrived with some knowledge of English or French, and increasingly, higher levels of skills, work experience, and financial resources. However, immigrant women continued to earn less than immigrant men and Canadian-born women and men, a trend that was well established in the 1980s. The authors claimed that "the marginalization of recent immigrants is typical of contemporary industrialized societies [...], however, in the Canadian context, it is unexpected" (p.14).

Although none of the above studies focused specifically on Polish professional immigrant women, or even women from Eastern Europe who tend to be generally

well-educated, often professionally trained, and having some work experience, they do help to locate the study reported below.

In the following section I will report on the methodology for this research project, followed by sections on the findings and then the conclusion.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research question that guides this study is: What strategies did Polish immigrant women use to enter the professional labour market in Canada?

The approach to investigating any question is located in a broader framework or paradigm. According to Neuman (2006) a paradigm is "A general organizing framework for theory and research that includes basic assumption, key issues, models of quality research, and methods for seeking answer" (p.81). Of the paradigms listed by Guba and Lincoln (1994) critical theory best fits with the purpose of this study, the assumptions made by the researcher, and the approach taken to the inquiry. "Critical theorists locate the foundation of truth in specific historical, economic, racial and social infrastructures of oppression, injustice, and marginalization" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 148). The purpose of the study is to identify barriers of Polish immigrant women and their access to the Canadian labour market. This is based on the researcher's feminist assumption that women, especially those who are marginalized because of their gender and newcomer status have as much right to access the labour market as Canadian born men do.

It is well documented in the literature that immigrant women are marginalized on the basis of their immigration status, gender, and race (Ng, 1996). In most of the academic literature on human migration, women have been either invisible or treated as 'accessories' to men. The neglect of women as active participants and social agents in immigration and settlement has been problematic historically as it has led to partial and distorted understanding of these processes. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the strategies professional Polish immigrant women used to enter the labour market in Canada, despite all the challenges they faced in doing so.

3.1 Approach

The qualitative approach used in this study generates conceptual categories that can provide new insides into the experience of immigrant women seeking employment in Canada. "A qualitative research is any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantifications" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.35). Findings from this study cannot be generalized to other women but insights gained are useful in and of themselves as they help us understand and appreciate the strategies other professional immigrant women could use to enter the Canadian labour market.

"Qualitative researchers explore problems and phenomena about which little is known [...] and generate new theory from the observation of a special phenomenon and situation" (Royse, 1999, p. 279). This qualitative research aims at providing an in-

depth, interpretive understanding of the social and material circumstances, the experiences, perspectives and histories (Ritchi & Lewis, 2003) of the participating women.

3.2 Strategy

“Stories help us to structure and make sense of the events in our lives. Because stories pertain essentially to human affairs, intentions, and actions, the thought we engage in to produce them — narrative thought — is particularly well suited to interpreting social interaction”.

(Smorti et al., 2007)

Our daily lives are full of stories and we tell stories because “whether consciously or otherwise, we all employ the power of narrative” (Daya & Lau, 2007, p. 63). To collect the required data, this study used narrative inquiry. It was selected as the most appropriate method to use since it “enabled the collection of data from the subjects who had experienced in actuality the effects of the problematic” (Clandinin & Connely, 1994, p. 116). Narrative inquires are distinctive by the depth to which they go in order to study the subject and the various factors that are related to the problematic (Clandinin & Connely, 1994).

According to Smith (1998) “the narrative inquiry speaks directly to the ideas of the ‘Other’, exploring the narratives of power that not only create the relationships of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ but in fact produce those very identities within specific contexts” (p. 49). Therefore, “They do not seek simply to contribute to or expand dominant narratives but in fact challenge them directly, refusing their claims to truth, exposing their false assumptions, and addressing their conclusions” (p. 53). In this way,

researchers “open up ways in which existing power-knowledge may be creatively re-worked, re-imagined, and re-told, and by insisting on the importance of contextualized, sensitive, and reflexive knowledge production, they build a new conceptualization of narrative as necessarily grounded in cultural, political, economic and environmental materialities” (Daya & Lau, 2007, p. 53).

At the heart of narrative inquiry there are three intertwined elements: “First, narrative inquiry embeds the study of social science in rich contexts of history, society and culture. Second, it resituates the people whom we study in their life-worlds, paying special attention to the social locations they occupy. Third it regards those who we study as reflexive, meaning-making, and intentional actors” (Marecek, 2004, p.78) and therefore, the story telling is important.

Narratives are restructured stories of experience through which the researcher and the story tellers interpret the narratives. The researcher is not concerned with the accuracy of the recall, but the meaning given to the events of the narratives.

3.3 Sampling

The purpose of qualitative research is not to study the frequency of a problem that is relative to the whole of the population, but to target a specific segment, which appears to be particularly affected by the problem (Royse, 1999). Qualitative research contains samples that are small in scale and purposely selected on the basis of salient criteria (Ritchi & Lewis, 2003). The participants in this study were

selected on the basis on their origins and their sex, criteria which are shared by the researcher, hence her interest in this particular sub-group of immigrants to Canada.

The sample was five professional Polish immigrant women who came to Canada during 1980s – 1990s. All five participants were recruited through the researcher's circle of family and friends from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). As a result of the social connections and common experiences shared by the researcher and participants recruitment of the participants was easy. Many women in the researcher's social circle willingly and enthusiastically offered to participate in this study. The only challenge was to select five out of many eager potential participants, which was resolved by selecting only those who were available for an interview within the limited time the researcher had to conduct the interviews.

3.4 Data collection

An individual interview as a data collection method was selected as it is most suited to capture a person's story (Royse, 1999). Semi-structured interviews were used to animate the telling of narratives by the participants. All interviews were loosely guided by a list of questions developed by the researcher (see Appendix 3). During the interviews the questions were continually modified as the researcher gained more information from the participants about their experiences and the significance of each experience.

The participants were interviewed in person at a mutually convenient time and place. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All the participants are proficient in English. Therefore, all the consent forms and letters to participants were provided in English (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) and all of them were interviewed in English. During the interviews the participants were asked to share their background information such as reason for immigration, year they immigrated to Canada, their professions, employment experience, challenges or difficulties which they had confronted and above all, strategies they had employed in the process of securing the kind of employment they hoped to have as a professional. All the interviews were audio-taped and then fully transcribed. They were conducted between May and end of June in 2008, shortly after the approval of the research proposal by the Research Ethics Board at Ryerson University of Toronto.

3.5 Analysis

Strategies for qualitative analysis were employed to “extract themes or generalizations from evidence and organize data to present a coherent, consistent picture” (Newman, 2006, p. 157). First, the researcher read the interview several times and identified a few major themes (to be discussed in the following sections). This categorization allowed the researcher to identify similar data in all of the transcribed interviews. At the same time a re-reading of the literature was used to identify and/or elaborate the themes.

3.6 Researcher Location

Being a professionally trained Polish woman myself, I closely identified with the participants in my study. I wanted to understand the strategies they used in entering the labour market for my personal interest, as much as for addressing the public need for such a study. As a result of our commonalities it was easy for me to develop rapport with my participants. Knowing about our shared histories, they readily shared with me details of experiences they may have hesitated to share with another researcher. Despite my general familiarity with the phenomenon they described to me, listening to their stories substantially increased my respect and admiration for their inner strength, perseverance and accomplishments. At the same time, this was a self-affirming experience for me as I recalled and re-lived my own personal experiences in gaining entry into the professional labour market in Canada.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section I will first introduce the research participants who will be referred to by numbers based on the sequence of their interviews i.e. Participant 1 - 5. Following that, I will identify and discuss four major strategies they used to gain entry into the professional labour market in Canada.

Participant 1 and her family came to Canada in 1991, as a landed immigrant. The family migrated directly from Germany, where they had temporarily landed,

escaping the communist regime in Poland. Participant 1 was educated and trained as an architectural technologist in Poland where she had practiced her profession. She had no English proficiency before migrating to Canada. Currently, she is successfully working in her professional field. However, because her credentials were not initially recognized, it took additional training, time and effort to secure her job in Canada. It should be noted that she experienced many struggles on the way to obtaining professional employment.

Participant 2 arrived to Canada in 1984, sponsored by her future husband who had originally escaped Poland shortly before December 13, 1981 at the beginning of the internal cold war. She was educated as an agricultural engineer. However, upon immigration, she realized that there were not many opportunities to find employment in her field especially in Toronto. She had some proficiency in English prior to her migration to Canada. Participant 2 obtained new education/training in the field of banking and is currently successfully working in a managerial position in a commercial bank. However, securing employment in Canada required much effort and time.

Participant 3 immigrated to Canada in 1991. She and her two children were sponsored by her husband, and they all came to Canada as landed immigrants. None of them had English proficiency prior to immigration to Canada. Her educational background in Poland was in nursing and aesthetics, she had successfully practiced both professions for a few years. She is presently working in a

different field, in a front desk managerial position. Like the other participants, she obtained this position after struggling for a long time.

Participant 4 immigrated to Canada in 1983 with her child, having been sponsored by her husband. She was educated and trained in Poland where she had worked as a government worker for several years. She had no English proficiency prior to migrating to Canada. Both her previous education and profession in Poland were completely different from her current occupation. After multiple challenges/experiences in the process of seeking entry to the labour market in Canada, she took a six months course to get a license as a travel agent. She is now successfully practicing her new profession.

Participant 5 immigrated to Canada in 1992, directly from Spain, where she had landed after escaping the communist regime in Poland. She knew Spain was not the country she wanted to stay in. After two years of living there she was sponsored by her family and migrated to Toronto. She had completed her education and training as a registered nurse in Poland where she had also worked professionally for five years. She did not have any proficiency in English prior to migrating to Canada. She was retrained in Canada and after four years of education and training she completed her degree in nursing. She has been working successfully as a registered nurse for twelve years.

In the following table I have listed the participants and their professional training and experiences prior to and after their immigration to Canada.

Table 1: Categorization of Participants

PARTICIPANT	PROFESSIONAL TRAINING IN POLAND	WORK EXPERIENCE IN POLAND	PROFESSIONAL TRAINING IN CANADA	CURRENT PROFESSION
1	Architectural technologist	Yes	Auto-Cad (Centennial College; Jobs Ontario)	Architectural technologist
2	Agriculture engineering	No	Banking (Ontario Career Action Program)	Commercial banking
3	Nurse Aesthetician	Yes Yes	None (Some aesthetic courses at Seneca College)	Front desk manager
4	Government worker	Yes	Travel agent (International Institute of Travel)	Travel agent
5	Nurse	Yes	Registered nurse (Mohawk College; The College of Nurses of Ontario)	Registered nurse

The participants were interviewed about their experiences in the process of entering the professional labour market in Canada. The data suggests that the key barriers they faced were: their foreign educational and occupational credentials were not recognized by employers in Canada; they had limited English proficiency which curtailed their ability to communicate in professional settings; and their lack of Canadian work experience made potential employers doubtful about their professional skills.

The four main strategies they used to overcome these barriers were: use of Canadian government and other employment services/programs; networking within own ethnic community; improving their proficiency in English; and perseverance in the process of searching for employment in Canada. Each of these is discussed and elaborated below with illustrations from the data.

4.1 Use of Canadian government and other employment services/programs

Two of the women, Participant 1 and Participant 5, took further training in their original professions. Participant 3 took courses in one of her professional fields. Two others, Participant 2 and Participant 4 were re-trained for new occupations.

This section will present participants' experiences in their efforts to get their credentials assessed; use of employment agencies; further training in fields for which they had already been trained; and training for new occupations.

4.1.1 Assessment of credentials

Participants 1 and 5 had experienced various barriers in the process of assessment of their Polish educational and occupational credentials in their respective professions. Participant 1 stated that her assessment was not an easy process and she was required to be re-trained in order to be considered eligible to practice her profession. She attended numerous meetings with various employment organizations in the hope of landing a job in her field. She said:

I tried to talk to people in different organizations like the Immigrant Women's Job Placement Centre, Immigrant Women's health, employment centre and some government programs but it was extremely frustrating because no matter what, I couldn't get a job

Participant 5 stated that although her Polish education seems to be generally considered as equivalent to Canadian education in nursing, her credentials were not accepted for direct entry into her professional field. Like Participant 1, she experienced barriers in the process of having her Polish educational and professional credentials assessed and needed to be re-trained at Mohawk College and accredited by the College of Nurses of Ontario. However, to do this she needed first to get approval from the Canadian employment centre, which first needed to assess her English language ability. After years of struggles with various jobs she applied and eventually got admission into a nursing program.

Recognizing that the process of credentials had improved a lot since then, Participant 5 stated:

If you truly wish to work as a nurse in Canada, all you have to do now is to enter web-side of the College of Nurse of Ontario, read the application requirements and apply for assessment – all can be easily researched and conducted via internet now.

4.1.2 Employment agencies

Participant 1 approached another government program called Jobs Ontario in the hope of getting into her profession. She said:

I went to employment centre and spoke to the worker there who informed me about the government employment program [...] that

suppose to help immigrants to find a job. I got into this program and had 4 weeks of school where I was taught about basic computer skills and then got employment for 3 months.

Despite the training and temporary job placement she obtained through this course she still didn't land a permanent job in her profession. However, she maintained contact with her employment counselor who continued to inform her of job postings in her profession. Eventually, she sent a resume in response to one of the employment advertisements, and she reported:

Although, I had no appointment I was able to have a meeting with him (potential employer). I went and offered to do a project for him for free to present my skills, abilities and knowledge. He and his company were happy with my project and they invited me for a practical interview. After doing more drawing to my project I was offered a job and started working there shortly after.

She stayed in this job for 10 years and is the only woman who is well known in the industry doing design and detailing in the mechanical engineering field.

Participant 5 sought help from various employment agencies to inquire about how to enter her professional field:

I went to employment center and had initial interview with employment counselor. I asked him about a nursing program and how to apply for it telling him that I was a nurse in Poland and would like to work as a nurse in Canada. He told me that I needed to start with English school for a couple of months and then I can apply for a nursing program. [...] I had to write an English exam and [...] I went again to this employment counselor and he helped me how to get through this program (nursing).

Other women, however, were not as successful as the one reported above.

Shortly after her arrival to Canada, Participant 4 also went looking for government employment services/programs. She said:

I was looking for some government programs [...] but I wasn't qualified [...] as I was over 25 years old and these programs were only for women under age 25 so I couldn't get any help.

Participant 4 also recounted her struggles in accessing government employment programs. She said:

By going to employment government agency I realized that these workers didn't do anything to help me to find a job. All they did was for me to look for employment ads that they had in their office and just come back to see worker once a week. Nobody helped me to find a job.

4.1.3 Further training in the same professional field

Participant 1 stated that she couldn't land a job because of her lack of Canadian experience. She decided to look for professionally related courses to obtain Canadian certification that would help to upgrade her skills and better prepare her to enter the labour market in Canada.

I found an auto-cad course via Centennial College and took three different night courses allowing me to get Canadian education in my profession and to get a certificate in hope that it will help me to find professional employment.

Participant 5 explained that she took her nursing program at Mohawk College for fourteen months. She got government financial assistance (as she was unemployed at the time) and was approved for entry into the nursing program by the

Canadian Employment Centre. In the nursing program, she was required to pass seven courses, followed by a final exam conducted by the Ontario College of Nurses.

I really wanted to get into this nursing program [...] got more English classes and got myself in [...] the course was through Mohawk College for 14 months and [...] I completed all. Then I had to apply to Ontario College of Nurses for a final exam to become a nurse and [...] I passed my exam.

4.1.4 Change in professional field

Participant 2 decided to change her profession realizing she would not have the opportunity to find employment in the field for which she had been educated in Poland. She found that her credentials would not be recognized in Canada and decided to become a banker. Through networking she found a program run by the Ontario government.

I remember it was called the Ontario Career Action Program and I signed up and I was told that government would pay for my training but it was up to me to find employer and [...] to find a job or up to employer to offer me a job.

She found an opportunity for entering this program at the Bank of Montreal. Her salary was paid by the government for 4 months of training, and then the bank hired her on a full time basis. She was employed on a contract basis first, and after three years she obtained a permanent position.

Participant 4, after many years of various employment experiences decided to be re-trained for a different profession. Her husband helped her to make the decision

to become a travel agent. Despite the recession in Canada at this time, the travel business was booming and she decided to get a diploma in travel services.

I got to the private school on a full time basis, needed to take a government loan [...], attended classes for around 6 months and got my travel diploma.

Participant 3 had not been able to access a job in the nursing profession, or to be re-trained in Canada. Due to many constraints, such as financial status, age, and her family situation, she needed to work to support her family. She was not able to pursue the recognition of her Polish nursing credential, or to seek employment through the available services/programs in Canada. However, she was able to practice her second profession as aesthetician. Her credentials didn't require validation but she took some additional courses in aesthetics at Seneca College. She worked in two salons for a short while but eventually resigned due to low earnings.

I struggled financially by working as an aesthetician. The problem working in the salons was that they paid me only 50% of the earnings and often the owners asked me to rent a room in the salon to have my own business/clientele and of course pay them for utilizing their space. At this time it was difficult to make money as beauty business wasn't that much popular like today.

After various Canadian employment and life experiences she realized that she could utilize her 'people skills' in a different way. She eventually landed a front desk managerial position in which she is currently employed.

I still have nursing and aesthetics in the back of my mind, but you need to look from the positive point of view and now I'm enjoying life and work because I work with people.

The above data show how the participants utilized whatever opportunities they could get for further training and/or credentials in their professions. Some of them also moved to other professions as a result of the difficulties they encountered in obtaining appropriate training or employment.

4.2 Networking and family/friends support.

The importance of networking as a strategy was underscored by the interviewees. The Polish immigrant women utilized their own ethnic community connection as a source of information for job opportunities and better understanding of the Canadian employment system.

All of the participants emphasized the importance of networking/support from their own ethnic community, family and friends. Participant 1 said:

I spoke to [...] other Polish immigrants I knew from school, playgrounds [...], building I live in; someone whom I met at school, again Polish immigrant, told me about the program through the government a co-op like placement that suppose to help immigrants to find a job; I was looking into Polish newspapers and continued talking to people, other Polish immigrants in hope that something will come out of it.

Participant 2 recalled:

I started networking first and I got information mostly through the 'word of mouth' from other Polish immigrants from my own Polish community. Basically I started talking to people in my ethnic community, other Polish friends who were in Canada for 2-3 more years or those who immigrated after me and everybody shared their information.

Participant 3 emphasized the importance of associating with others in her own ethnic community by stating:

I started talking to our friends, other Polish people (immigrants) who were here a bit longer then me and I got a casual, weekend job as a waitress.

Participant 4 said her connection to her own ethnic community was very important as it helped her land her first Canadian job. She said:

I spoke to people from my own ethnic community like other Polish immigrants so one of them told me about the job in a Polish store. I went there, just walked in, talked to the owner and got a job. So my first job was in a Polish delicatessen and I got this job 8 months after I came to Canada.

This participant depended on her network of family and friends from her Polish ethnic community. She said:

My sponsor helped me a lot. He helped me to look for [...] jobs and, through my sponsor I met this young boy who helped me and walked with me to different factories. We just walked in and [...] if they had position available he helped me with application. We were looking at different factories in the local newspapers and talked to other Polish people.

She emphasized great help from her future sister-in-law regarding her profession as a nurse. She recalled:

I started talking to people and met this girl, Polish girl who is now my sister in law. She was working as a nurse at the time she helped me with information. She told me [...] I can apply for the nursing program [...] and I can fill up the application for the nursing program at the College of Nurses of Ontario.

While most of the women relied on connections to their ethnic communities, some also tried to build their connections with those who did not necessarily belong to this community. Participant 5, in response what did she found helpful in her search for employment stated:

People, talking to people, my friends, other Polish immigrants and people from all over the world... It's always difficult when you come from another country. I was trying to do my job the best, the fastest but it doesn't work. You need to go the way it is here'.

Participant 3 obtained a job in the aesthetics profession through networking with a client who was not from her own ethnic community. She said:

Actually my first job in aesthetics was through my client who talked to the owner of the salon [...] and then this person hired me. The owner was also an immigrant so she understood me more.

As these data show, connections to one's own ethnic community were very helpful in facilitating the immigrant women's entry to the labour market in Canada, but networking with members of other communities was helpful.

4.3 Improving proficiency in English

The data showed that immigrants' ability in English played an important role in their efforts to enter the labour market in their new country. All participants emphasized that proficiency in English was imperative for success in landing a professional job. Although, Participant 3 had some proficiency in English it was not good enough to gain access to a professional job in Canada. As most of these women had to start working soon after their arrival in Canada they ended up working in unskilled professions. Realizing that they would need to be proficient in English at a professional level, they sought opportunities to learn/improve their English to become more proficient in their communication.

Participant 1 recalled that shortly after her arrival in Canada she began to learn English. She said:

First I went to school and took English classes and studied English for two years. After that I took computer courses and then after four years I was looking for a job.

Prior to this, she said:

I had odd jobs like waitressing and cleaning houses because I didn't speak English.

Participant 2 talked about her experience regarding English proficiency:

I had my basic English so I didn't feel I needed to start from scratches but decided to improve my English first and took some courses [...] that I attended for 6 months. Then I felt comfortable about my English and that it was sufficient enough so I started looking for a job.

Furthermore, she recalled:

I had some basic English good enough to start talking however, sometimes I felt that I was not understood. The most difficulty was to start talking but by keep talking, little by little it was easier to communicate and be understood. I found people here in Canada very nice and understanding, people were used to talking to others with different accents so it was easier to go through this process knowing that I'm not alone though, it was a bit stressful.

Participant 3's experience was similar to that of others:

I didn't start looking for a job immediately after coming to Canada as my first obstacle was English. I didn't speak English at all so I decided to go to school to speak English first before I could start thinking about my career in Canada.

Although this participant was determined to find employment in the nursing profession she could not do so right away because she didn't have proficiency in English. As she recalled the most challenging factor in her search for a job was:

English, or lack of it. First, I had only basic English after being in English school for about 6 months. I knew it would not be possible for me to look into nursing profession because of this barrier.

Participant 4 shared similar experiences with others and stated:

First of all the biggest obstacle was my language as I couldn't speak English. Also, because my English was not so good [...] I went to the government agency with my Polish friend or other Polish people who helped me communicating.

She emphasized that initially lack of English proficiency prevented her from obtaining employment in her profession and she needed to start working in a different field as an unskilled worker.

Participant 5 stated that she didn't speak English upon her arrival in Canada. She was able to communicate in Spanish which she had learned while staying in Spain for two years prior to immigrating to Toronto. However, that was not helpful in Canada. She now felt that instead of postponing her acquisition of English, she should have gone straight to school to learn English. She said that she wanted to enter the field of nursing in Canada but her lack of English proficiency prevented her from pursuing her dream. She became de-skilled and took various factory jobs. However, she was so determined to become a nurse in Canada that she continued improving her English skills by taking several courses. She first took courses in the evenings, after her work at the factories. However, she realized that instead of relying on courses offered in the evenings, she needed to get English courses that were available during the day time so she could improve her English faster. She could not afford to leave her factory

job, but was eventually laid off. Following that, she applied to a government program which started with an English course:

I started with [...] ESL program for around 3 months but after this time they told me that my English was good enough. I was upset because my English was limited and not good enough to apply for nursing program. [...] I was told by this employment counselor that I needed to go back to the candy factory.

She decided not to go back to another factory job, survived a bit longer without employment, took more English classes and finally got herself into a nursing program.

The above data show that learning English was an important step in getting entry into the professional labour market in Canada. However, access to English courses, especially those that prepare women for professional jobs, was not easy. Furthermore, the pressure these women felt to start generating an income prevented them from using the limited opportunities they had to learn English.

4.4 Perseverance

Despite their many challenges, all of the participants benefited from persistence and perseverance in their efforts. They said that by continuous efforts to enter the professional labour market in Canada they eventually became successful.

Participants 1 and 5 obtained further education in their original occupations in Canada, and are currently successfully practicing their professions. Participant 1 noted:

I felt that nobody helped me [...] and I was so frustrated [...] but I continued to look on my own and started to look for jobs in my profession through local newspapers and I just walked in to some employers trying my best to find opportunities to get into interview with hopes to land a job.

Furthermore, when Participant 1 was asked what was helpful in searching for a job, she responded:

I need to say it was my perseverance, continuous networking with other Polish immigrants and following up with all information regarding courses, employment, job openings, etc. It was difficult but just by having a 'drive' and believiness that I would get a job in my profession I succeeded.

Participant 2 similarly claimed:

Every day I kept going and searching for an opportunity to get training employment. [...] I had to find a personal strength to overcome my shyness and to ask to talk to manager of the bank's branch. [...] I would say positive thinking and every day motivation believing that I would be able to find employment allowed me to overcome the barriers. It was hard but worth it at the end. I feel now that people in the bank [...] were helpful, supporting and accepting so I wasn't alienated and slowly but surely I got more security and [...] more confidence in my professional field.

Two other participants also stressed the importance of being persistent.

Participant 3, when asked of what was helpful in searching for a job, replied:

I would say to have friends from the same ethnic background who helped me to get a job. Also, it was just the fact that I kept trying and hoped for the best. [...] For some people it takes longer or lesser to reach their dreams but, if you persevere and if you know who you are, you should still go for it and you'll be successful.

Participant 4 mentioned that being persistent was the key to success:

I just kept walking into different places, asking for opportunities with hope of getting a job. I needed to be persistent and continue trying. [...] I just had my own network, looked for ads in daily newspapers in hope that I would find a job. I didn't find anything helpful other than having my friends, other Polish immigrants, talking to them as we

helped each other with sharing information or just supporting each other, especially in the process of looking for employment. [...] the other thing was that kept trying and didn't give up.

All participants stressed the importance of being persistent and said that it is imperative to persevere in the face of many difficulties to overcome the barriers to the professional labour market in Canada.

DISCUSSION

Data from this study show that the participants utilized various strategies for entering the professional labour market, and despite many barriers and challenges, eventually obtained successful employment. These strategies include use of government employment programs/services, networking, improving their proficiency in English, and perseverance.

These findings show that government employment programs, or training opportunities funded by the government are essential for entry into the labour market because without the basic information, training opportunities, and job placements they provide, it would be very difficult for women such as my research participants to enter the professional labour market. Not all of the government employment services or training opportunities were equally helpful in their search for a job. However, without them the women could not have moved into their professional jobs at all. The fact that all of the participants, except one, had to get some form of Canadian training shows that it was critical for their entry into the professional labour market.

Cuts in funding for programs that support immigrant integration (Shields, 2004) are likely to have a particularly negative effect on professional immigrant women. As it is, these women are constrained in their effort to make full use of such programs because of their need to generate incomes, as well as to care for their families. Instead of reducing funding for these programs, more opportunities should be made available, in multiple forms and at multiple levels, so that such women can access them more easily. The opportunity to learn English is one critical area that has a huge impact on professional women's settlement experience in Canada. Without proficiency in English at a professional level, they are unable to work in their professional fields, get credit for their prior professional training, get acceptance into further training programs, or be hired in their professional fields.

The significance of networking within the ethnic group (Chicoine et. al, 1997) was confirmed in this study. Women who participated in this study had little knowledge of the job market. Polish friends and acquaintances who had been in Canada longer, and understood the Canadian market better were the main sources of helpful information. However, networking beyond the ethnic group was also found very useful by some participants, as demonstrated by the participants who were helped in their search for employment by an employment counselor, a client in a previous job, and a co-worker who was not Polish origin.

Something that previous studies have not discussed is the remarkable perseverance of professional women in their search for appropriate employment. Despite the many barriers these women encountered, their determination, willpower,

and perseverance made them eventually successful in obtaining professional employment in Canada. Stories of women such as these, need to be told to inspire other women like them. These stories can also help those who influence institutional policies and practices learn to respect the tenacity of these women, and try to better support them.

In the following section specific recommendations and suggestions are made to various sectors of the government, non-profit organizations and other employment and immigration related services. This is because I believe in Kirby & McKenna's suggestion that "It is important not to let the generated data sit idle, the information has to be transferred and put into action" (1989, p.17).

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was based on a small sample of Polish immigrant women's strategies for entry into the professional labour market. Given that there are many more immigrant women likely to go through similar experiences, qualitative studies with more participants from different ethnic groups, and quantitative studies with large samples need to be done. Collectively, they are more likely to influence societal perceptions, as well as policies and practices that could help to integrate women such as these into the labour market, and hence into Canadian society, faster and less painfully. This will be good not just for the immigrant women and their families, but also for the Canadian economy.

Advocacy groups can use this and future studies like this one to help reduce the barriers to the professional labour market. Information from such studies needs to be presented to the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and other related government bodies. Programs established for ESL training, employment agencies, credentialing bodies, settlement agencies and services for community networking can also benefit from this work. Researchers who conduct these studies can also publish and present their findings at conference to influence policy makers and the media who shape public opinion and societal consciousness.

In conclusion, this major research paper shows that there is much to learn from the strategies used by these Polish professional immigrant women's for entering the professional labour market in Canada. There is also much to admire in these women who, despite all the difficulties they encountered upon their migration to Canada used all government supported sources of information and training, their ethnic and other networks, opportunities to learn English, and above all their inner strength and perseverance in their search to find the jobs they were educated and trained for.

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M.A. Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies
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Consent Form

I understand that I am invited to participate in the research of Magdalena Kazmierczak, the Graduate student of M.A. Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies, Ryerson University, Toronto.

Accordingly to the information received by the researcher in the written form, the objectives of the research have been explained to me as well as nature of my participation in this study. I do understand that the researcher is interested to obtain the information regarding my experiences regarding overcoming barriers to the labour market in Canada.

I understand that I have full rights to clarify any concerns and apply any questions that may occur in regards of my participation in this research.

I authorize my permission to the researcher for the session/s to be audio/videotaped. Also, I agree that she can use collected data information for finalizing this study and for other purposes such as composing the publications and presentations regarding related subject of this research.

I have full understanding that my identity and my story will be confidential and fully protected. It is also my understanding that in case of my disclosure that may be in any way harmful to me or others, the researcher has right to provide supportive services and notify adequate social services.

I understand that I can withdrawn from being a participant of this research at any time and that would not cause me any problem. Then I give the permission for my full and willing participation.

Name of research participant _____

Signature of research participant _____

Date: _____

Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Appendix 2

Invitation to participate letter

Re: Participation in Research

Dear Participant,

Your assistance is requested in completing a confidential research study. I am conducting research with Polish immigrant women in the area of overcoming barriers to the labour market in Canada. The research would involve a maximum commitment of 2 hours face to face with the participant. While participating in this study and as a token of gesture, you will be provided with refreshment from the Polish bakeries to create the most natural social setting commonly used in the Polish ethnic 'get-together' events. It is hoped that the result from this research can be use to help other immigrant women who find themselves in situations where they require support and guidance.

Should you be interested in participating, I will be providing further information in telephone briefing session that would take approximately half an hour (0.5 hr). In this session you would be advised with respect of the nature, format, timing and the location/s of this study. Should you choose not to participate, no one will contact you further.

Your participation in this research and any information you provide will remain confidential. Your participation is voluntary and you will not be forced to participate in this study.

Should you be interested in obtaining further information please feel free to contact myself at (416) 877-1531 between hours of 9:00 AM – 9:00 PM. All calls can remain anonymous and no further contact would be made with you should you choose not to participate.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Magdalena Kazmierczak
Graduate student in M.A. Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies
Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Appendix 3.

Interview questions

1. When did you immigrate to Canada?
2. What barriers have you encountered in search process to find employment?
3. What was the most challenging for you?
4. What steps did you take to overcome obstacles?
5. What was the worst experience you had in searching how to enter Canadian labour market?
6. What was the best experience in searching for a job?
7. How many days/weeks/months/years took you to enter the employment?
8. How do you feel about the process you went through?
9. How did you start searching for employment?
10. What was helpful to find a job?
11. How did you feel about the process?
12. How many people/places did you seek help/assistance from?
13. What steps did you take to find a job?
14. How are things different when you work?

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