Bordering social reproduction: The welfare/immigration regimes of Quebec and Ontario in Canada [1]

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Source: Critical Social Policy
Format: Article
Publication Date: 4 Jan 2024

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Excerpts

A provoking question

In our review of recent immigration statistics from Canada, a question arose starkly. Why do Canada's two largest provinces, Ontario and Quebec, present such sharp differences in the uptake of two distinct sets of national immigration programs: those for parents and grandparents (hereafter PGPs) and those for home childcare and support workers? Ontarians used these programs extensively; Quebecers used them much less.

Was the answer to do with subnational immigration policy control? Immigration programs in Canada are set by the federal government, but Quebec has its own immigration policies that set targets, selection, and other specifications.

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While poor working conditions and low wages have meant that the care labour supply has been tenuous for decades, the situation worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic as workers left these sectors for better working conditions. Immigration continues to be presented as an antidote to this labour challenge (Anderson and Shutes, 2014; IRCC, 2022c). Across high income jurisdictions, immigrants are being recruited into these sectors. They are overwhelmingly women, racialized, often underpaid, and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Pandey et al., 2021; Turcotte and Savage, 2020). In Canada and elsewhere, many of these workers have limited access to social supports, welfare, and citizenship, and face difficulties in bringing their spouses, children, and parents to join them (Boccagni, 2013).

A focus on social reproduction

A feminist border analysis begins with the conceptual assumption that social reproduction is “best understood as work” (Braedley and Luxton, 2021: 1). Defined as the work involved in reproducing the labouring population daily and generationally, social reproduction is disproportionately assigned to women. It includes caring for frail and disabled adults, bearing, raising, and educating children, doing housework, transmitting culture, and sustaining community. Globally, this labour force is gendered, overworked, and undervalued, whether the work is paid or unpaid (Bakker and Silvey, 2008; Rai et al., 2014).

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Quebec's childcare programs increased employment among women, thus addressing some labour shortages, and contributed to lower poverty rates for families with children (van den Berg et al., 2017) despite a growing commercialization of childcare services (Mathieu, 2019). Created in 1997, the Quebec childcare system came with generous maternal/parental leave and targeted benefits for low-income families. The result is significant welfare support to families with children, consistent with social democratic welfare regimes.

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Distinct immigration regimes

Built on usurped Indigenous lands, Canada is a country of immigration and a settler society. It has also long relied on a strong naturalization policy. In a record year, 431,645 immigrants received permanent Canadian residency in 2022. But the country has also developed a growing dependence on temporary migrant workers who made up 4.1% of the total of the labour force in 2019 – up from 1.9% in 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

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Despite different approaches, immigration has not addressed Canada's high labour shortages (Statistics Canada, 2022e), including in Quebec and Ontario's care economy.

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While parents and grandparents come to Canada for many reasons, one dominates: to help with childcare. According to a 2014

government evaluation report on family immigration, 85% of sponsored PGPs provided at least some care and/or housekeeping for their children and grandchildren (CIC, 2014). In both Ontario and Quebec, sponsored PGPs were more likely to be women (between 57 and 60%), with the majority between 55 and 75 years. Many of these grandmothers come to care.

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The policy message is clear: while PGPs are welcome as temporary visitors and childcare providers, only some are welcome as permanent residents.

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In other words, when welfare policies distribute some social reproduction to the state, both immigrant and established families rely less on the paid and unpaid work of migrant workers and migrant grandparents. Immigrant workers, including temporary workers, may be recruited for state-organized care services, but these services are likely to be unionized, considered skilled, and lead more smoothly to permanent residency.

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At the subnational level, provinces deploy social reproductive borders in particular combinations of welfare and immigration, to mitigate care gaps. Ontario deploys market-based arrangements to attract young working age immigrants to fill its labour shortages, while keeping welfare obligations low. The province leave most care for young children, the sick, and vulnerable adults in the hands of families. The results of this racialized and gendered policy choice emerged clearly from statistics. Ontario's low fertility rate suggests that families (and women) are dealing with this dearth of social reproductive support by having fewer children. Those families who can afford to hire help or financially support parents and grandparents use immigration policy as a substitute for welfare services.

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A feminist border analysis thus illuminates whose social reproductive work is acknowledged as work, whose social reproductive work is paid and benefits from social protection, whose social reproductive work is legally protected by labour standards and done with or without citizenship status. It takes up the ways that gender, age, class, and race are implicated. Without denying welfare chauvinism, it turns the logic of dependence around. It interrogates whether and how welfare/immigration regimes bank on migrants' social reproductive labour to keep welfare costs low. Hence, a feminist border analysis does not ask: "what kinds of supports should the welfare state provide to (rights-bearing) migrants?" Rather, the question that emerges is: "how are welfare/immigration regimes sustained by migrants' social reproductive labour?"

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