



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF IMMIGRANTS: A CASE STUDY OF BANGLADESHI WOMEN IN CANADA

Chowdhury, F. D. (2025). The impact of COVID-19 on the employment of immigrants: A case study of Bangladeshi women in Canada. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, 36, 193-207.
<https://doi.org/10.14288/workplace.v36i1.187159>

FARAH DEEBA CHOWDHURY
YORK UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

The Canadian economy has been suffering from the damaging impact of COVID-19. The adverse impact of COVID-19 on employment and income has been unevenly affecting different socio-economic and demographic groups in Canada. Labour market impact of COVID-19 disproportionately affected immigrants, particularly women as they are overrepresented in low paid and precarious work in Canada. Although federal emergency benefits were provided such as Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), marginalized workers were excluded from these benefits as they were not able to meet the eligibility criteria. Based on the interviews of 20 women from the Bangladeshi community in the Greater Toronto Area my research finds that neoliberalism contributes to the rise of precarious employment and labour market insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the stark contrast in divisions in the labour market between workers with relatively secure jobs and the ability to work from home, those without the ability to work from home (especially in precarious jobs) and those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. My findings show that a majority of immigrant Bangladeshi women in the Greater Toronto Area who were employed were working in precarious jobs that were low-paying, temporary or contractual in nature. I find a high level of job loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately experienced by immigrant Bangladeshi women as they are more vulnerable and marginalized in Canada.

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian economy has been suffering from the damaging impact of COVID-19. The adverse impact of COVID-19 on employment and income has been unevenly affecting different socio-economic and demographic groups in Canada. Particularly, immigrants have been disproportionately affected by the devastating labour market impact of COVID-19 (Gingrich and Mitchell 2020a). The negative effects have also been experienced by women differently than men as women are overrepresented in low paid and precarious work in Canada (Gingrich and Mitchell 2020b). Women in Canada are predominantly employed in healthcare, personal care, education and retail. Marginalized women mostly work in long-term care homes, childcare centres and they also work as cleaners and grocery store clerks. In these sectors remote work is not feasible and there are increased risks of exposure to COVID-19 (Robson et al. 2022, 8-9). Very low labour standards exist such as low minimum wage, absence of paid sick leave, part-time, temporary and contract work (Robson et al. 2022, 41).

Neoliberal policies constructed a two-tier system in the job market, which is divided “between highly secure employees (that is those workers who hold permanent full-time contracts) and highly insecure or flexible work mostly appropriated by migrants and women” (Umaigba, 2017, 51). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the sharp divisions in the labour market between workers who work from home as a result of their secure and stable jobs, those without the ability to work from home (especially in precarious jobs) and those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. About 40% of the Canadian labour force was working from home by April 2020, which was three times higher than the pre-pandemic level (Black 2022, 132). These workers included managers and professionals who had higher levels of job security with high income. The possibility of being exposed to the virus was less likely for these workers. Experiencing layoffs or a loss in income or

work hours was also less likely for them compared to low paid workers without job security (Black 2022, 132). Cases and deaths resulting from COVID-19 in Ontario were concentrated in racialized areas where material deprivation is very high. Individuals in these neighbourhoods are less likely to pursue post-secondary education, and their population includes high number of low-income families, recent immigrants and racialized communities (Aquanno and Bryant 2021, 513-514). Racialized and gendered class inequalities were intensified by the pandemic in paid and unpaid work, and the lockdown impacted the sectors where majority women were employed. Low-paid workers who are mostly women experienced high level of job losses and their recovery in employment and work hours was very slow (Black 2022, 132-133). During March and April 2020 women in Canada lost around 1.52 million jobs while men lost 1.46 million jobs due to pandemic-related lockdowns. Women made up 48% of the workforce before March 2020, but they lost 58% of jobs during the lockdown. In February 2021 it was found that the burden of employment loss increasingly fell on women (Sharma and Smith 2021). Three million people became unemployed, and another 2.5 million people lost a majority of their work hours since February 2020 (Macdonald 2020a). Half of the workers who earned less than \$16/hr became unemployed or lost their work hours. The unemployment rate in Canada was 13% in April 2020 (Macdonald 2020a). On the other hand, the richest 10% of the workers who earned more than \$48/hr experienced only 1% of job loss or work hour reductions (Macdonald, 2020a). A majority of renters who were in low paying jobs did not have enough income and they were not able to pay rent. Mortgage holders were able to defer their payments, but no federal support was provided to renters. Only eviction was postponed when rent was not paid (Macdonald 2020a).

The risk of contracting COVID-19 was high when workplaces opened again. Many workers were women in low paid positions and were compelled to work even though it was dangerous (Macdonald 2020b). High rates of job loss were disproportionately experienced by different populations who are more vulnerable and marginalized, such as women and racialized immigrants. Although federal emergency benefits were provided such as Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), marginalized workers were excluded from these benefits as they were not able to meet the eligibility criteria. Eligibility requirements excluded workers who did not get proper documentation from employers, workers in cash-based or criminalized economies (for example, sex workers), people without lawful status or a valid Social Insurance Number, people who did not file a recent tax return, and people who did not have 'employment and/or self-employment income of at least \$5,000 in 2019 or in the 12 months prior to the date of their application' (Robson et al. 2022, 41; *Canada Emergency Response Benefit*). People who were unemployed or who worked reduced hours in 2019 were also not eligible to receive emergency benefits.

In this context, I conducted research on the impact of COVID-19 on the employment of Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada. I use a political economy framework from a gendered perspective in my research and argue that neoliberalism contributes to the rise of precarious employment and labour market insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted immigrant Bangladeshi women as they are overrepresented in precarious employment in Canada.

METHODOLOGY

Participants were recruited from two well-known Canadian Bangladeshi Facebook groups called "BCCB – Women" and "Bangladeshi Canadian - Canadian Bangladeshi (BCCB)". Permission from the moderators of the two Facebook groups was obtained. A call for participants was posted in these two Canadian Bangladeshi Facebook groups. Female participants of Bangladeshi descent residing in the Greater Toronto Area who were employed, self-employed or unemployed and interested in sharing their perspectives on the Covid pandemic's impact on their work, including experiences related to job seeking were eligible to participate in the study. I focused on Bangladeshi immigrant women in the Greater Toronto Area as they are disproportionately overrepresented in low-waged, precarious, and gendered sectors that were adversely impacted by the pandemic. Moreover, Bangladeshi immigrant women often face intersectional challenges including language barrier, non-recognition of foreign credentials, and systemic racism which intensified their labour market vulnerability. Their experiences reveal how neoliberal labour market restructuring and racialized divisions of labour marginalize immigrant women workers. As I have extensive experience conducting research on Bangladeshi women, I found that more attention needed to be paid on the impact of COVID-19 on Bangladeshi women. I interviewed 20 women from the Bangladeshi community in the Greater Toronto Area over the phone. Participants were recruited from direct responses to the Facebook posts, and I also asked participants to encourage other Bangladeshi women to participate in this research by directly contacting me through phone, email or Facebook messages. In-depth interviews were conducted through

friendly conversations and open discussions. A questionnaire was developed and these questions helped guide conversations with research participants. I asked about their age, income, education, employment status and wanted to know whether COVID-19 had an effect on their employment. I also asked about receiving CERB or employment Insurance and whether it helped them with paying the rent, buying groceries or other bills. Interviews were conducted from May 2021 to February 2022.

Table 1

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Respondents (n=20)	
Marital Status	
Single	3
Married	15
Divorced	2
Length of Time in Canada	
3-5 years	4
6-10 years	4
11-15 years	7
16-25 years	5
Educational Background	
Education in Canada	5
Education in Bangladesh	12
Education in Bangladesh and Canada	3
Employment Status	
Full-time Permanent	6
Low-pay, Temporary or Contractual	8
Unemployed	6
Salary Range	
\$0- \$10,000	6
\$11,000-\$29,999	8
\$30,000-\$49,999	2
\$50,000-\$70,000	4
CERB Recipient	
Yes	7
No	13

I used pseudonyms to maintain the privacy of participants in my research. The information provided by the participants was written down in a notebook. The age range of the participants was 25-57 years. Out of 20 respondents, five had received education from Canadian universities. Among the five, three had Undergraduate degrees, one had a master's degree and one was a master's student, but she was fully dependent on her job as she did not receive any scholarship or financial assistance. Twelve respondents had academic degrees from Bangladesh. Among the twelve, three had obtained medical degrees and one had a dental degree from a Dental college. Three respondents had master's degrees, three had bachelor's degrees and only one had a higher secondary certificate from Bangladesh which is equivalent to Grade 12 in Canada. Three respondents received education in both Bangladesh and Canada (Table 1). Among them two respondents had master's degrees from both Bangladesh and Canada. One respondent received a Master's in Bangladesh and completed a diploma from a college in Canada.

Among the 20 respondents, 14 were employed and six respondents were unemployed (Table 1). Respondents who were employed worked in private companies, research institutes, financial institutions, pharmaceutical companies, retail stores and restaurants. Among the 14 respondents, six worked in full-time jobs. One respondent worked at a pharmaceutical company, one respondent worked at a financial institution, two respondents worked at private companies and two respondents had jobs in research institutes. The remaining eight respondents were employed in precarious jobs that were low-paying, temporary or contractual in nature

and included jobs such as a delivery driver, security guard, retail store sales associate, waitress at a restaurant and worker at a gas station.

I use a political economy framework from a gendered perspective in my research. Political economy deals with the relationship between politics and the economy, and it is defined in many different ways. Adam Smith defined political economy as a science which manages a nation's resources to generate wealth. Marx defined political economy as 'how the ownership of the means of production influenced historical processes' (Weingast and Wittman 2009, 3). Political economy is also considered as a methodological approach (Weingast and Wittman 2009, 3). This interdisciplinary approach draws from sociology, economics, and political science and focuses on how politics, public policy, and political institutions influence a country's economic situation. Taking a political economy approach from a gendered perspective, I examine the relationship between neoliberalism and precarious employment and analyse how COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted immigrant Bangladeshi women as they are overrepresented in precarious employment in Canada.

NEOLIBERALISM AND PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

Neoliberalism in Canada emerged in the 1980s after the fall of the Keynesian welfare state, which led to an increasing number of precarious jobs (Bernhardt 2015, 1). The standard employment model suggests that a worker should only have one employer, work full-time throughout the year on the employer's premises with satisfactory statutory benefits and rights, and remain employed indefinitely (Vosko et al. 2003). However, the term 'precarious employment' highlights labour market insecurity. Rodgers suggests four dimensions of precarious work: uncertainty in continuing work and high risk of job loss; work insecurity due to workers' lack of control over work, working conditions and wages; lack of workers' protection by law or through collective organizations or customary practices; and low wages leading to poverty and insecure social insertion (Rodgers 1989, 3). Precarious employment can be characterized by unusual employment contracts, few social benefits and rights, job insecurity, part-time or temporary or non-permanent work, low paid work, poor working conditions and high health risks (Vosko 2003, 1; Frade et al. 2004, 9-10). Self-employment, home based work, on-call work and the absence of collective representation are also included in precarious forms of employment (Fudge and Owens 2006, 12). Non-unionized workers especially have a lack of control over the labour process, which makes the work very precarious (Cranford et al. 2003, 13). Precarious employment is shaped by employment status, form of employment, dimensions of labour market insecurity and social context and social location (Vosko 2006, 3).

Neoliberalism creates labour market insecurity and precarious jobs. It focuses on "the 'free' market, economic efficiency, and unfettered competition" (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2008, 48). Neoliberalism is committed to "privatizing property, utilities, and social programs, to reducing state expenditures and bureaucracy, increasing efficiencies, and to individual freedom from state regulation" (Bernhardt 2015, 6). It is an ideology of governance which focuses on free market enterprise for the well-being of its citizens and in this process, the market controls the distribution of wealth and very few restrictions are put on the ownership of businesses and their activities (Gill 2021, 486). Harvey explains, "While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being" (Harvey 2005, 65). Self-sufficiency in economic terms is expected from citizens, and it reduces the responsibility of the state for providing welfare support to citizens. In a neoliberal state, the government is only interested in creating job opportunities for citizens regardless of the precarious nature of certain jobs (Gill 2021, 487). Gill writes, "This ideology prompted cuts to unemployment insurance and establishment of short-term employment programs in order to push recipients into the labour market faster, but into increasingly precarious jobs rather than stable ones" (Gill 2021, 488-489).

Many of those who are working class are now uncertain about their economic situations as neoliberalism reconstructed welfare and labour relations. In Canada, Ontario Works is an example of a social assistance program for those in financial need in the province of Ontario. Ontario Works guidelines emphasize the need for participants to take up employment opportunities as fast as possible. "Any job is considered a good job" by Ontario Works guidelines and this is reinforced in their information sessions attended by Ontario Works participants in order to be eligible for the program. Participants are assisted with searching for jobs quickly and they must get involved in activities which support the easiest and shortest path to employment (Evans 2007, 35-36). Maich writes:

Although welfare payments are intended to act as a safety net for people who cannot find a job, unemployed people find themselves stuck between the choice of entering an insecure employment relationship which could end at an unknown point or staying on welfare and taking the risk of being removed from the program (Maich 2018, 1).

To continue receiving payments, Ontario welfare policy requires an individual to look for work or participate in job training, although most of the jobs which are available are not full-time and permanent jobs and have very unpredictable schedules (Maich 2018, 1). In Ontario, job security is very uncertain among the working-class population and most of them are always scared about the security of their incomes (Maich 2018, 2). The neoliberal nature of employment legislation in Ontario is responsible for the increasing number of precarious jobs. Employers are not generally punished when they do not abide by the Employment Standards Act unless a person complains about an incident (Maich 2018, 15). Many workers are reluctant to complain formally due to the fear of job loss or the retribution of the employers. Many employers do not follow the Employment Standard legislation and pay less than minimum wages. Many employers also do not pay overtime and fire employees without giving any payments or notice. These make jobs very insecure and precarious (Maich 2018, 15; Vosko and Thomas 2014, 636).

FINDINGS

COVID-19: Employment Among Bangladeshi Women in the Greater Toronto Area

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the Canadian economy into a “medically induced coma” in March 2020 by closing businesses and schools and employees started to work from home in order to prevent the spread of the virus. The pandemic caused a decline in employment and weekly working hours. Employees experienced job losses in mostly low paid and non-unionized occupations (Lemieux et al. 2020, 55-56) where more than half of the employees consist of women (Sharma and Smith 2021). In my research, I found that out of 20 respondents a majority of them were not satisfied with their jobs. Among the 14 respondents who were employed, ten respondents did not have job satisfaction. Out of the ten respondents, two were in permanent, full-time positions and the remaining eight respondents were in precarious jobs. Although the two respondents had full-time positions, compared to their educational backgrounds they did not get the positions they were qualified for. One of the respondents, Bonna, was working at a private company, but due to the pandemic she was laid off. She then found another full-time job, however her new job was not a high paying job. Bonna said:

I live with my family, so I don't have many financial problems. Some of my family members still have jobs. Everyone didn't lose their jobs at the same time when the pandemic started. My job is not well paying, so it's not possible for me to live on my own. I completed my master's in Bangladesh, and I had a high position in a bank in Bangladesh, but now I'm working in a clerical position here in Canada. I'm frustrated with my job, and I don't want to show my face to the community and mix with Bangladeshis anymore.

Shomi was a doctor in Bangladesh. When Shomi came to Canada she had the dream of practicing medicine here, but after a while she realised that it was not as easy qualifying to practice medicine in Canada. It made her frustrated and depressed. Shomi expressed, “If you're not looking for a high paying job, then everyone will welcome you. But if you want a job that pays well, then there are many challenges in Canada.” Shomi is a single mom and has been working as a full-time employee at a research institute since 2016. Shomi said:

I used to commute to the office on the TTC (public transit in Toronto). After the pandemic hit, I was scared about whether I would be safe. We started wearing masks, but it wasn't clear how serious COVID was. My job is very important for me to survive financially, but would I be safe commuting on public transit? I felt guilty that I could probably expose my family to COVID, but I had no choice but to work. I only have one son who is 16 years old, and I was so scared of the virus that I bought a car to protect me from COVID. Buying the car caused me a lot of financial pressure and stress. When the pandemic started, we panicked and did so much grocery shopping. My expenses increased, because I did three months of grocery shopping all at once. Before buying the car I also used Uber to do groceries, because I was scared of getting the virus. I was also concerned about my son's mental health in the pandemic, so I had to order food to cheer him up. Usually, I don't order food. He was doing online classes all day. He used to play sports, but now he's stuck at

home. I even bought a Netflix subscription to make him happy, but how much time can you spend watching TV right? My income is limited, so I had to use my credit card to pay for all of these extra expenses and keep my son happy.

There are different reasons for workers being quarantined, such as after being tested positive for COVID-19, after traveling or sometimes when employers ask workers to stay home despite having no symptoms (Macdonald, 2020c). Low paid workers are most likely to take unpaid leave during the quarantine period. Therefore, working from home or receiving paid leave were not realistic options for a majority of workers (Macdonald, 2020c). David reports:

In 2019, only 14% of the leave taken by workers in the lowest income decile was paid, while those in the top decile had 74% of their leave covered by their employer...Much has been made of the possibility of working from home while in a quarantine situation. That's fine for a lot of so-called knowledge workers who can teleconference as needed. However, most of Canada's lower- and lower-middle-income workers are in professions where this simply isn't an option (Macdonald, 2020c).

Catering, cleaning, caring, cashier and clerical jobs are the five lower to middle income jobs where a majority of women are employed, but only clerical jobs can be done from home and in other professions individuals have to do in-person work (Macdonald, 2020c). The COVID-19 pandemic has mostly affected the employment of women in six sectors. Between February 2020 and February 2021, women constituted 50% of retail trade employees but lost 91% of employment. In other services (except public administration) women composed of 51% of employees but lost 79% of jobs. In information, culture, and recreation women made up 42% of employees, but lost 64% of jobs. In business, building, and other support services women made up 43% of employees, but lost 72% of jobs. In accommodation and food services women consisted of 55% of employees but lost 56% of jobs (Figure 1). More than 73.7 thousand female employees were compelled to leave their jobs, while the number of males forced out of the labour market was 6.1 thousand between February 2020 to February 2021 (Women in a COVID-19 recession).

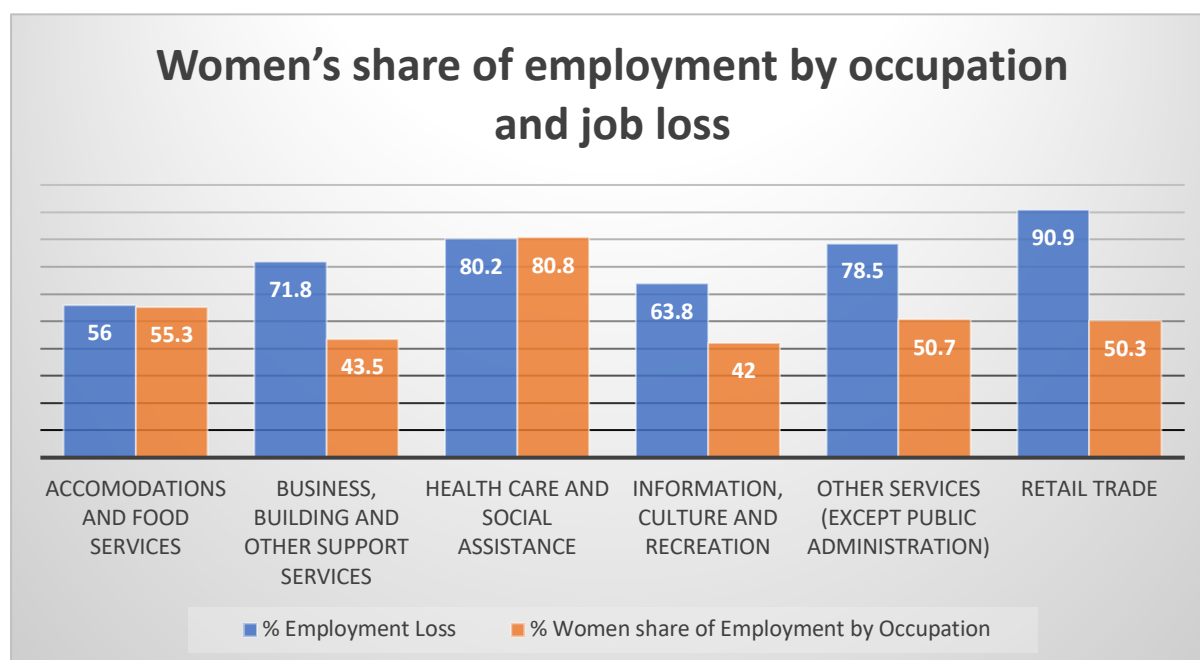


Figure 1. Women's Share of Employment by Occupation and Job Loss.

Source: Women in a COVID-19 Recession: Employment, Job Loss and Wage Inequality in Canada, Online: <https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Women-in-a-COVID-19-recession-Canada-and-economic-impacts.pdf>.

A study conducted on high-skilled immigrant women found that out of 50 respondents, 41 were impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic. Immigrants who arrived recently to Canada had a delay in starting their careers. Because of layoffs or a lack of short-term opportunities some women "experienced a reversed

career trajectory” (Hari and Nardon 2020). The careers of some women were interrupted because of increasing family demands, a lack of opportunities for a work-from-home environment and little social support. The delays, reversals and interruptions in careers prevent immigrant women from gaining the required work experiences to be able to advance their careers and as a result, these women find themselves stuck in low paying positions (Hari and Nardon 2020). Many South Asian women even started online businesses to survive and help their families when their employers reduced their work hours (Ghosh 2021). Out of 20 respondents from the Bangladeshi community only four respondents were satisfied with their jobs as their jobs and income were not affected by the pandemic. One of the respondents, Rifat, worked at a private company in a permanent, full-time position and was satisfied with her job. Due to COVID-19 she and her husband were both working from home. Rifat said:

Because of COVID our job and income didn't change, we're lucky in that sense. Working from home gave me a lot of flexibility. I have a lot more time to spend with my family which I didn't have before. The lockdown gave me the opportunity to balance my work and family life. Now I like working from home. If my company wanted me to work from the office, I would quit this job and try to find a new one which allows me to work from home. I used to work a 9-5 job, and it took me an hour to go to my office and another hour to come back home. Social distancing because of COVID reduced a lot of stress that I previously had to go through every day. I had to drive to work before. If the weather was bad, then it would take me longer to go to work. Working from home, I am now saving money and time.

Among the other respondents, Hasina, Lamiya and Rupa were also satisfied with their jobs. Lamiya worked as a full-time employee at a pharmaceutical company. Her job and income were not affected by the pandemic and therefore she was fortunate enough to avoid thinking about how she would survive and get by during the uncertain times of the pandemic. She was living with her husband in a rented apartment. Hasina and her husband were working as full-time employees at a financial institution. They were living in their own house and did not have any problems paying their mortgage. Rupa graduated from a Canadian university and found a full-time job at a research institute during the pandemic. Her husband was also a highly paid employee at a private, multinational company. During the pandemic, they were able to save money as they did not go on vacations or spend on dining and entertainment, especially when there was a lockdown. They were saving up for a downpayment to buy a house.

This reflects a two-tier system in the labour market between the workers who hold permanent and full-time contracts and those who are in highly insecure or flexible employment. The sharp divisions in the job market are exposed by the pandemic between workers who work from home due to their secure and stable employment, those who are unable to work from home because of precarious jobs and those who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. The workers who were not represented by unions, who were in temporary low paid jobs and paid hourly had the least amount of bargaining power and were impacted in the cruelest ways by COVID-19 (Lemieux et al. 2020, 63). Extremely high levels of employment precarity was observed because of ‘multiple short periods of employment and lengthy periods of unemployment between jobs’ (Premji et al. 2014,128). Many racialized immigrants work full-time under legitimate employers, but receive less than minimum wages, are not given any benefits and protections and thus experience insecurity. Many racialized immigrants who are women engage in informal work to supplement their incomes, such as cleaning, cooking or babysitting and they are poorly paid (far below the minimum wage) (Premji et al. 2014,129). It was found that “racialized Canadians were twice as likely as white Canadians to stop looking for paid work or reduce time spent on paid work as a result of increased domestic responsibilities” (Dessanti, 9). Many Canadian Bangladeshi immigrants find that their educational qualifications and work experiences are not valued when they look for paid employment in Canada. Despite having higher levels of education, Bangladeshi immigrant women generally do not even get called for job interviews. Many immigrants from Bangladesh do not get permanent or high paying jobs (Akbar and Preston 2023, 2824). Some women join part-time and temporary jobs which are very poorly paid. One of the respondents, Sabina said:

I started working at a financial institution, but after a few months my work hours were reduced and my income went down. My job is very low-paid, temporary and lacks employment benefit. In Canada, racialized populations face difficulties in obtaining desirable employment.

A lack of job security and insufficient income compel many women to start their own businesses. Some women start home-based businesses of different kinds, for example, childcare, catering, home-based beauty

salons, tailoring, home decorating, computer programming, etc. (Akbar and Preston 2023, 2825). Bangladeshi women are also involved in businesses outside their homes. On Danforth Avenue in Toronto, Canada, which is popularly known as Bangla Town, women from Bangladesh operate retail and service-based businesses, such as restaurants, beauty salons and clothing stores (Akbar and Preston 2023, 2825). Immigrants from Bangladesh join paid work in Canada which is very insecure and low paid due to their financial hardships. For example, they work at grocery stores, fast food restaurants, factories, security companies and supermarkets in which Canadian education and experience are not required (Akbar and Preston 2023, 2826). In many cases, they work under the table for cash. I found that out of 14 respondents who were employed, eight were employed in precarious jobs that were low-paying, temporary or contractual in nature such as delivery drivers, security guards, retail store sales associates, restaurant waitresses and gas station workers. Liza said:

I do food deliveries for Uber Eats and parcel deliveries for Amazon. It was difficult in the winter because of the snow, so one of my friends told me to do a course to become a security guard. I completed all the lessons and took the test. I then got a job through an agency. They gave me 12-hour shifts in a condo building on Saturdays and Sundays. From Monday to Friday, I look for jobs and go to job interviews and at the same time I do deliveries for Uber Eats and Amazon. I want to work multiple jobs, because the jobs I am getting are low-paid, temporary and without any employment benefit.

Low paying and menial positions are offered to immigrants, which are precarious in nature with “part-time, flexible hours and no security or benefits and employment in these sectors is a highly gendered and racialized phenomenon” (Man, 2004, 140).

Support from the State: CERB and Employment Insurance

In neoliberalism, the role of the state is very limited and its support programs “target those who are considered most destitute and most deserving of support and aim to meet only immediate needs. There is no commitment to reducing long-term insecurity or inequality” (Bryant et al., 2020, 24). In response to the pandemic, the federal government in Canada announced the introduction of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Its purpose was to provide economic support to Canadians who were employed or self-employed and affected by COVID-19. CERB paid \$500 per week to those eligible and the maximum payment period was 28 weeks from March 15, 2020 to September 26, 2020. To become eligible to receive CERB, individuals needed to have a minimum income of \$5000 in 2019 or in the last 12 months before making a CERB application or income below \$1000 during the 4-week eligibility period or those who had a loss of income because of COVID related reasons, such as reduced work hours or having to stop work or being unable to work due to COVID (*Canada Emergency Response Benefit*). Out of the 20 respondents, seven respondents received CERB and three were on Employment Insurance. Liza had a full-time job, but it was not well paying. She was temporarily laid off due to COVID-19 and received CERB. Liza said:

The amount I received from CERB wasn't enough for me as I was laid off from a full-time position. My mortgage, property taxes, car insurance, credit card bills, other bills - there were so many things I had to pay. When I was on CERB, I had to use my credit card to pay my bills.

Sabina said:

I came to Canada in 2019 as a permanent resident. My job was at a medical clinic, and it was on a contract basis. After the pandemic they didn't want to renew my contract and I received CERB. I managed my living costs by living in a shared apartment. I had extreme financial problems.

The number of jobless Canadians without any support from Employment Insurance or CERB was 1.4 million in April 2020 (Figure 2). An additional 904,000 workers gained access to CERB when the income threshold came up to \$1000 per month. However, 199,000 Canadians who earned less than \$1000 per month and did not have an income of \$5000 in 2019 were not able to receive CERB (Macdonald 2020d). The following are the main reasons behind non-eligibility in receiving CERB or Employment Insurance in April 2020: 549,000 Canadians became unemployed before March 15, 2020 and were not eligible for Employment Insurance; 466,000 jobless Canadians were not eligible for CERB as they did not earn \$5000 in 2019; 232,000 jobless Canadians did not qualify for CERB as they quit their jobs and were not laid off (leaving jobs for health reasons is included, but it excludes quitting jobs to look after children); and 165,000 jobless Canadians faced

difficulties with the application and did not receive CERB. Later, the government declared that workers who earned up to \$1000 per month were eligible for CERB. Workers were able to receive CERB when they earned zero dollars. 37% of Canadians earned under \$2000 per month in March, 2020 (Macdonald 2020d).

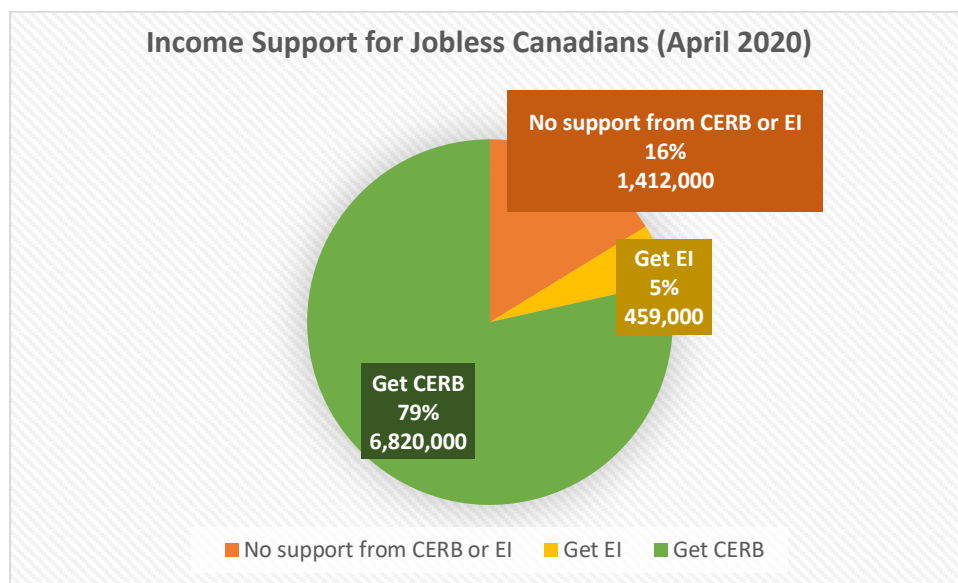


Figure 2. Income Support for Jobless Canadians (April 2020).

Source: Macdonald, David. 2020d. 1.4 million Jobless Canadians getting no income support in April. *The Monitor*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, April. Online: <https://monitormag.ca/articles/1-4-million-jobless-canadians-getting-no-income-support-in-april/>.

Maria had a precarious job at a retail store which was part-time and temporary and paid very low wages without any benefits. She used to earn \$1300 per month before the pandemic and had to share an apartment with her friend. Maria said:

I barely survived with this income and after the lockdown I was laid off. I was happy to receive \$2000 per month from CERB. After stores reopened, I started working part-time again. I'm applying to full-time jobs, but I still didn't get a full-time position yet.

Mita worked at a gas station and earned \$1800 per month. As gas stations are considered an essential service, Mita did not receive CERB as she was not laid off. Mita's husband was unemployed during the pandemic and also did not receive CERB. In most cases in low paid jobs, employees do not get any benefits or leave from work. Mita was scared that if she caught COVID, she would lose her job and always prayed for good health. Sonia and Laila had part-time jobs and worked only for a few hours in retail stores. They did not receive CERB because of their low income due to reduced hours in 2019. Neoliberalism aims to decrease unemployment insurance and allows short-term employment programs in order to find job opportunities so that individuals can enter into the labour market faster. However, it does not consider the precariousness of certain types of employment (Gill 2021, 4-5). Economic self-sufficiency is expected from citizens, which in turn decreases the responsibility of the state in providing support to its citizens.

Covid-19: Unemployment and CERB Support

Ninety thousand more women left the labour market by the end of 2020, and this number is more than triple the number of men who became unemployed (Black 2022, 133). This was caused by 'the impact of lockdowns and the recession on feminized sectors and women's increasing responsibility for unpaid care work. Mothers left their jobs to take care of their children, and this number is 12 times higher than the number of fathers who left their jobs to look after their children (Black 2022, 133). A high unemployment rate exists among South Asian communities in Canada. More than 17% of the South Asian population in Canada was unemployed and three quarters of South Asians were negatively impacted by COVID-19, which made them the most vulnerable racialized group in Canada (Thobani and Butt 2022, 2787). Among 20 respondents, six were unemployed. One of the respondents, Alisha, was unemployed. Alisha came to Canada when she was two years old and completed her undergraduate degree from a very prestigious Canadian university with good grades. She applied to many jobs but did not get any interviews. Even before the

pandemic, she applied to many part-time jobs at retail stores and fast-food restaurants, but her job search was unsuccessful even when looking for precarious, part-time employment. Alisha was finally hired by a retail store at a mall, but she was given work lasting only a few hours a week. She worked at the retail store for three months and after three months all of a sudden, the store informed her that they did not need her anymore. Alisha was left unemployed despite the fact that she was raised in Canada, had a Canadian university education and spoke in a Canadian accent. When the pandemic started Alisha was one of the unfortunate individuals who did not receive CERB, because she was only given a few hours of work at the retail store in the previous year and earned less than \$5000 in 2019. Alisha had to live with her sister because she was unemployed.

Shima was raised in Bangladesh. After immigrating to Canada as a permanent resident she completed her master's at a Canadian university. She found work after graduating but has been unemployed for three years. She worked at a non-government organization but had to leave her job in 2018 as her contract was over. She has been looking for jobs since then and when the pandemic started, similar to Alisha, Shima also did not receive CERB as she did not make \$5000 in 2019. Another respondent, Tisha, came to Canada during the pandemic and started looking for jobs. She completed her master's from a Bangladeshi university and had work experience as an executive in a private telecommunications company. When she first came to Canada, she was hopeful that she would get a job because of her experience, but her hope was slowly diminishing every day as experience from other countries is not valued the same way in the Canadian labour market. Tisha explained:

The government should've included those who are unemployed in CERB. It was so uncertain when the pandemic started and I didn't have money. I didn't qualify for CERB because I was unemployed in 2019. It's not that I don't want to work, I've been looking for jobs. I applied to many jobs, but I didn't get called for any interviews. I'm starting to feel like I need a Canadian degree to get a job. My husband works at a bank, which makes it easier for me. But sometimes I feel like even if I had some money that I earned myself I could have bought whatever I wanted and ate whatever I wanted. My parents were rich in Bangladesh, and they gave me everything I wanted, but now I can't buy everything I want with my husband's income since he'll keep asking me if I really need it or just want it. I'm also planning on having a baby and thinking of getting myself a part-time retail job, but I know if I get a job like that, I won't get any maternity leave.

The impact of neoliberal economic policy on Canada's labour market is felt deeply by racialized groups. Precarious jobs became a significant characteristic of Canada's labour market from the beginning of the 21st century. A greater number of people were "either on contract, self-employed, or doing temporary work" by the end of the 1990s than at the start of the decade (Galabuzi 2006, 12). Galabuzi writes:

The dramatic increase in temporary, contract, part-time, piece work, and self-employment has had a dramatic impact on racialized group members, especially racialized women. Not only do disproportionate numbers of racialized group members depend on precarious work, but also the work is largely unregulated, involving long hours and low pay. The effect is an intensification of work, with many either working longer hours or working multiple jobs. Many of the workers in the service sector and light manufacturing industries increasingly find themselves on temporary contracts from employment service agencies, which pay them a fraction of what they earn in the jobs to which they are assigned, and hold them to those contracts even when their employers require their services permanently (Galabuzi 2006, 12).

Settlement agencies in Canada provide knowledge and contacts and also talk about employment strategies which can both help and obstruct access to jobs. Employment programs in Canada are designed to ensure the entry of new immigrant workers into the lowest tier of the Canadian labour market. These raise questions about the role of the government in integrating immigrants and ensuring their economic success in Canada (Creese and Wiebe, 2012, 59). Creese and Wiebe point out:

Not only do settlement agencies help to channel immigrants into low-wage work, but they also provide some of the language through which experiences of settlement are framed. The very discourse of 'survival employment' common among immigrants can be traced to settlement counselors urging immigrants to take any job they can find (Creese and Wiebe 2012, 59).

Runa, one of the respondents, and her husband were both dentists in Bangladesh. When they immigrated to Canada, they had a daughter who was two years old. In Canada, Runa and her husband were not able to work as dentists, because dentistry is a regulated profession which requires licensing. Runa's husband started doing deliveries for Uber Eats and tried to study for the exams to become licensed to practice as a dentist in Canada. Runa looked after her two-year-old daughter and as a result could not do part-time work. She had a son after a year of living in Canada. She was busy with her two young children and could not find the time to prepare for the exams to become a licensed dentist in Canada. As Runa was unemployed in 2019, she also did not receive CERB and during the pandemic it was difficult for Runa and her family to survive without any form of financial support from the government.

The unemployment rate was high among women who had children between the ages of 6 and 17 (Dessanti, 10). It is observed that mothers of young children face difficulties with their employment and have substantially reduced work hours. The absence of childcare and in-person schooling made it more difficult for mothers to join the labour market (Lemieux et al. 2020, 63). Similar to Runa, Dolly was also unable to work because of her two young children. Dolly explained:

I used to work at a bank in Bangladesh and my husband worked for a private company. After coming here, he completed his Master's. When we first came, my husband worked at Walmart. It was very difficult for us to pay for rent, groceries and other bills and I couldn't get into full-time or part-time work, because I couldn't send my kids to the daycare. Because of the pandemic schools are closed and one of my kids is doing online classes, so I have to stay at home with him. The sad thing is I didn't get CERB because I was unemployed last year. During the pandemic my husband lost his job, and he received CERB for a few months. Now he has a new job, but we're just surviving. My son is doing online classes at home, and my husband is also working from home. Space is a problem and we need more rooms in our apartment, but that's not possible because of our income. We don't have the ability to buy a car or live in a nice house or condo right now.

The state deliberately excludes immigrants from the highest tier occupations in order to "reserve these occupations for Canadian-born and Canadian-educated workers" (Bauder 2003, 699). Deskilling is an effect of losing access to jobs which were previously held by immigrants in their home countries due to the non-recognition of foreign education and credentials (Bauder 2003, 701). Bauder writes:

De-skilling particularly affects new arrivals in the skilled-workers category and prevents them from reaping the full benefit of their skills and of the nominal amount of their education. Ironically, immigrants in this category are selected by a point system that gives credit to education and credentials that are not recognized in Canada (Bauder 2003, 708).

Despite their high levels of education and experience, immigrants are considered a source of cheap labour in a neoliberal state. Finding high skilled jobs takes longer as these require "specific qualifications, training, or licensing within Canada" and immigrants generally require further testing and training to qualify for these jobs in Canada (Frank 2013, 98-99).

Jori, one of the respondents, was a doctor in Bangladesh, but after immigrating to Canada soon became unemployed. Jori expressed:

After I came to Canada at first, I started working as a clinical research assistant part-time, but my contract was over and I lost my job. During the pandemic I received CERB. I found another job, but the income I was getting wasn't enough. I became unemployed again and now I'm on Employment Insurance. I need to go to the dentist, but I can't afford it. I'm single and I live in a shared apartment with other roommates. I'm applying to different jobs, but I still didn't get any interviews. Every month I have to cover some of my expenses with my credit card.

It is observed that racialized immigrants face difficulties in obtaining employment and they find their desired or pre-migration jobs at a slower rate (Frank 2013, 94). Sabina said, "In the Bangladeshi community, I heard that many families have no jobs at all. One of my friends lost her job and wasn't able to pay rent for her apartment and then she had to start living at her relative's house." Women in racialized communities faced longer periods of unemployment and instability during pandemic.

CONCLUSION

As a result of neoliberal policies, the Canadian labour market is starkly divided between secure and stable full-time employment and precarious work that is largely unregulated, flexible, low-paying and often taken on by women and immigrants. The COVID-19 pandemic further helped expose the differences in the quality of life based on employment between workers who work from home as a result of their secure and stable jobs, those without the ability to work from home (especially in precarious jobs) and those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. My findings show that a majority of immigrant Bangladeshi women in the Greater Toronto Area who were employed were working in precarious jobs that were low-paying, temporary or contractual in nature. I found a high level of job loss, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately experienced by immigrant Bangladeshi women as they are more vulnerable and marginalized in Canada. Although the federal government in Canada introduced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to financially support Canadians during the pandemic, many Canadians (including many immigrants Bangladeshi women) were excluded from receiving this due to their low income as a result of reduced work hours or unemployment in 2019. Mothers with young children also faced difficulties in joining the labour market due to the lack of childcare and the absence of in-person schooling. Despite having higher levels of education and experience, immigrant Bangladeshi women are largely viewed as cheap labour and their qualifications and work experiences are discredited in Canada. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, many immigrant Bangladeshi women had difficulties finding a job and even when employed they worked in precarious jobs with low job satisfaction. The findings in this study illustrate the gaps in the government program CERB and points to structural inequalities present in the labour market. This study focusses on the experiences of immigrant Bangladeshi women in the Greater Toronto Area and contributes new empirical evidence to the study of underrepresented communities in Canadian labour studies. By focusing on their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, it extends existing research on the gendered and racialized nature of precarious employment. Although the study provides valuable qualitative insights into a marginalized group, its scope and representativeness are limited. The small sample size and focus on a single ethnic group restrict the transferability of findings across immigrant populations in Canada. Despite limitations in terms of generalization, the findings are still very useful and relevant for informing future policy reform and development. Future studies could adopt a comparative approach across different immigrant communities in Canada to explore how policy frameworks and labour market conditions differ. Longitudinal research could also be conducted to analyse the trajectories of immigrant women's employment after the pandemic and the systemic challenges which persist or shift over time.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Laban, Yasmeen and Gabriel, Christina. 2008. Selling (out) Diversity in an Age of Globalization. In M. A. Wallis and S. Kwok, eds., *Daily Struggles: The Deepening of Racialization and Feminization of Poverty in Canada*. Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Scholars' Press, pp. 47-57.
- Akbar, Marshia and Preston, Valerie. 2023. Entrepreneurial Activities of Canadian Bangladeshi Women in Toronto: A Family Perspective. *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies*, 49 (11): 2817-2836.
- Aquanno, Scott M. and Bryant, Toba. 2021. Situating the Pandemic: Welfare Capitalism and Canada's Liberal Regime. *International Journal of Health Services*, 51(4): 509-520.
- Bauder, Harald. 2003. 'Brain Abuse', or the Devaluation of Immigrant Labour in Canada. *Antipode*, 35 (4): 699-717.
- Bernhardt, Nicole S. 2015. Racialized Precarious Employment and the Inadequacies of the Canadian Welfare State. *Journal of Workplace Rights*, April-June, 5(2):1-13.
- Black, Simon. 2022. Essential but not Empowered: Reflections on the Working Class in Canada Under COVID-19. *Studies in Political Economy*, 103 (2): 130-152.
- Bryant, Toba et al. 2020. Unequal Impact of COVID-19: Emergency Neoliberalism, and Welfare Policy in Canada. *Critical Studies*, 15(1): 22-39.

- Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html>
- Creese, Gillian and Wiebe, Brandy. 2012. 'Survival Employment': Gender and Deskilling among African Immigrants in Canada. *International Migration*, 50(5): 56-76.
- Cranford, Cynthia J. et al. 2003. Precarious Employment in the Canadian Labour Market: A Statistical Portrait. *Just Labour*, 3: 6-22.
- Dessanti, Claudia. THE SHE-COVERY PROJECT Confronting the Gendered Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario. Online: <https://occ.ca/wp-content/uploads/OCC-shecovery-final.pdf>.
- Evans, Patricia M. 2007. (Not) Taking Account of Precarious Employment: Workfare Policies and Lone Mothers in Ontario and the UK. *Social Policy and Administration*, 41(1): 29-49.
- Frade, Carlos et al. 2004. Precarious Employment in Europe: A Comparative Study of Labour Market Related Risk in Flexible Economies." *Final Report, ESOPE Project*.
- Frank, Krystin. 2013. Immigrant Employment Success in Canada: Examining the Rate of Obtaining a Job Match. *International Migration Review*, 47 (1): 76-105.
- Fudge, Judy and Owens, Rosemary. 2006. Introduction. In Judy Fudge and Rosemary Owens eds., *Precarious Work, Women, and the New Economy: The Challenge to Legal Norms*. Oxford: Hart Publishing, pp. 3-27.
- Galabuzi, Grace-Edward. 2006. *Canada's Economic Apartheid: The Social Exclusion of Racialized Groups in the New Century*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Ghosh, Sutoma. 2021. In Toronto, the pandemic is turning South Asian Women into entrepreneurs Facing unemployment and a loss of income, a growing number of women are setting up online trading businesses. *Open Democracy*, July 13, Online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/pandemic-border/toronto-pandemic-turning-south-asian-women-entrepreneurs/> .
- Gill, Jessica K. 2021. Unpacking the Role of Neoliberalism on the Politics of Poverty Reduction Policies in Ontario, Canada: A Descriptive Case Study and Critical Analysis. *Social Sciences*, 10(12): 485-505.
- Gingrich, L. G. & Mitchell. A. (2020a). *The Story So Far: COVID-19, the Canadian Labour Market, and Immigrants*. Brief No. 1, York University, GLRC.
- Gingrich, L. G. & Mitchell. A. (2020b). *The Story So Far: COVID-19, the Canadian Labour Market, and Immigrants*. Brief No. 2, York University, GLRC.
- Hari, Amrita and Nardon, Luciara. 2020. Immigrant Women are Falling Behind During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *The Conversation*, November 2.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lemieux, Thomas et al. 2020. Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Canadian Labour Market. *Canadian Public Policy*, 46: S55-S65.
- Macdonald, David. 2020a. The Unequal Burden of COVID-19 Joblessness. *The Monitor*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, May 8. Online: <https://monitormag.ca/articles/the-unequal-burden-of-covid-19-joblessness/>
- Macdonald, David. 2020b. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Which Workers Are Most Vulnerable When Their Workplaces Re-Open Amid COVID-19? *The Monitor*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. May 15. Online: <https://monitormag.ca/articles/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-which-workers-are-most-vulnerable-when-their-workplaces-re-open-amid-covid-19/> .
- Macdonald, David. 2020c. COVID-19 and the Canadian Workforce: Reforming EI to Protect More Workers. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, March. Online:

https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/2020/03/CCPA%20Report_COVID19%20and%20the%20Canadian%20Workforce.pdf .

- Macdonald, David. 2020d. 1.4 million Jobless Canadians getting no income support in April. *The Monitor*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, April. Online: <https://monitormag.ca/articles/1-4-million-jobless-canadians-getting-no-income-support-in-april/>.
- Maich, Grace. 2018. *Precarious Work and Communities: The Impact of Neoliberalism on Working Class Politics*, MA Thesis (Unpublished), Department of Sociology, Brock University, Canada.
- Man, Guida. 2004. Gender, Work and Migration: Deskillling Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27 (2): 135-148.
- Premji, Stephanie et al. 2014. Precarious Work Experiences of Racialized Immigrant Women in Toronto: A Community Based Study. *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society*, 22: 122-143.
- Robson, J. et al. 2022. *Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women in Canada*, Royal Society of Canada.
- Rodgers, Gerry. 1989. Precarious Work in Western Europe: The State of the Debate. In Gerry and Janine Rodgers eds., *Precarious jobs in labour market regulation: The growth of atypical employment in Western Europe*. International Labour Organisation (International Institute for Labour Studies), pp. 1-16.
- Shrma L and Smith J. (2021). Women in a COVID-19 recession: Employment, job loss and wage inequality in Canada, Online: <https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Women-in-a-COVID-19-recession-Canada-and-economic-impacts.pdf>.
- Thobani, Tijhiana Rose and Butt, Zahid Ahmad. 2022. The Increasing Vulnerability of South Asians in Canada during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19 (5): 2786-2790.
- Umaigba, Karina Ivie. 2017. A Critical Literature Review of the Impact of Precarious Work on the Mental Health of Immigrant Women in Canada, Major Research Paper (Unpublished), Graduate Program in Health, York University, 2017.
- Vosko, Leah F. 2003. Precarious Employment in Canada: Taking Stock, Taking Action. *Just Labour*, 3:1-5.
- Vosko, Leah F. et al. 2003. Precarious Jobs, A New Typology of Employment. *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 15(4).
- Vosko, Leah F. 2006. Precarious Employment: Towards An Improved Understanding of Labour Market Insecurity. In Leah F. Vosko ed., *Precarious Employment: Understanding Labour Market Insecurity in Canada*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 3-39.
- Vosko, Leah F. and Thomas, Mark. 2014. Confronting the Employment Standards Enforcement Gap: Exploring the Potential for Union Engagement with Employment Law in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 56(5): 631-652.
- Weingast, Barry R. and Wittman, Donald A. 2009. The Reach of Political Economy. In Wittman, Donald A. and Weingast, Barry R. eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-26.
- Women in a COVID-19 Recession: Employment, Job Loss and Wage Inequality in Canada, Online: <https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Women-in-a-COVID-19-recession-Canada-and-economic-impacts.pdf>.

AUTHOR

Farah Deeba Chowdhury is a Visiting Associate at the Global Labor Research Centre. She received her PhD from Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, Canada, and specializes in the areas of gender and work; Islam, gender and law; gender and politics; and gender and development. She served as an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, and has also held a SSHRC postdoctoral fellowship at Queen's University, Canada. A revised version of her PhD dissertation has been published by Routledge. Titled *Islam and Women's Income: Dowry and Law in Bangladesh*, the book takes a socio-legal approach to analyze the changing nature of the dowry practice and its relation to women's increasing paid labour force activity. Farah's work has appeared in the *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*; *African and Asian Studies*; *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*; *Asian Journal of Social Science*; *International Journal of Social Welfare*; and *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. Currently, she is focused on conducting research on globalization and its impact on both migrant women domestic workers from Bangladesh and women workers in the Bangladeshi garment industry. Farah is also working to conduct research on the impact of COVID-19 on the employment of Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada.