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# The Land of Milk and Honey?

## Transnational Workers and Canada's Live-in Caregiver Program

**Denise L. Spitzer**

*"Work in Canada and Live Your Canadian Dream!"* exclaims one of the numerous ads that can be found in Philippine newspapers, on website banners, and across billboards throughout the country. The text goes to read: *"We are currently recruiting nurses, teachers, caregivers for our Canadian Live-in program Work permit. Then apply for permanent residency after 2 years."* [1] And over the years, thousands have responded. Indeed since its inception in 1992, Canada's Live-In Caregiver Program[2] (LCP) has attracted over 58,000 individuals, primarily women from the Philippines, to work in private households caring for children, the elderly, or persons with disabilities with the short-term goal of remitting funds to help sustain their families at home and the long term objective of settling permanently with their immediate family in this country. But has working in Canada enabled workers who entered the country under the LCP to "live their Canadian dreams"?

For more than 13 years, I have collaborated with various NGOs, community groups, and government agencies to uncover the experiences of current and former LCP workers across the country, in both rural and urban settings. Often I heard informants say that they thought Canada would be 'the Land of Milk and Honey.' To learn more about the impact of the LCP and its attendant policies on the life trajectories and settlement experiences of former LCP workers and ultimately to ▶

1 Worldwide Recruitment Specialists (advertisement). *Philippine Inquirer Dec. 2011, p. 6.*

2 Notably Canada has been engaged in the importation of foreign domestic labour for over 100 years; the LCP is simply the most recent iteration.

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determine if Canada was indeed the 'promised land,' I launched the study, *The Land of Milk and Honey? After the Live-In Caregiver Program.*[3]

## Becoming a Live-In Caregiver

Despite being well educated—56% of participants had Bachelor's Degrees, 10% Graduate degrees, and 16% had completed some post-secondary schooling—the lack of remunerative work in their home countries and the desire to assist their families financially provided the impetus to enroll in the LCP. Most hoped to reunite with their families and re-claim their previous careers once settled in Canada.

Live-in caregivers are required to be employed under the LCP for 24 months within, at the time of data collection, a 36-month period[4] during which time they had to reside with their employers and refrain from taking on other employment. Moreover, they are limited in their ability to further their education. After completing Program requirements, they can apply for an open work permit that allows them to leave their employers' home and seek other employment, and for Permanent Resident (PR) status that enables them to bring their family members to Canada and to pay Canadian post-secondary tuition fees should they choose to enroll. But have their post-LCP trajectories allowed them to 'live their Canadian dreams' as promised in the ads?

## Life after the LCP

For the informants in our study, life after the LCP was often fraught with financial stress. Former LCP workers could live independently in Canada, but that independence had a cost. Now they were responsible for paying rent, food and utilities on their own, while trying to save for the immigration related expenses including landing fees, medical examinations, and travel costs for family members migrating to Canada. Additionally, they continued to send remittances that were still required for daily needs at home. Finding a job, however, that was sufficiently remunerative to cover these expenses was a significant challenge and most were relegated to precarious, low wage positions regardless of their education or their "Canadian experience" working as a live-in caregiver. As Pia[5] said:

> We're basically paid $8 to $10 an hour and it is the minimum wage. It's kind of how are we going to budget this one if you want to save at least 50% or 40% without compromising your lifestyle?

Indeed, 40% of informants reported an annual household income of under $20,000; many worked multiple part-time jobs and 25% were unemployed at the time of their interviews.

Time pressure also figured into the stress reported by some former live-in caregivers. Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC] policy allows LCP workers to be joined by dependents who are defined as spouses and children who are either under the age of 22 or who are full time students. There was urgency, therefore, to either have adult children join them before they exceeded the age limit or to set aside enough money to keep them in school until the papers could be processed and funds for immigration expenses saved. But this is a juggling act at which not all succeed. Annie had been separated from her family while she worked in Hong Kong and later in Canada. Processing the paperwork for her children's immigration took years and she had difficulty sustaining tuition for her eldest son during one term—and that was when her file was processed.

> They [CIC] said, 'Your children are already granted, but your eldest son is denied.' So I have to phone my son and explain everything and then he was upset and he was crying… I said, '…this plight we are in now is bad, really bad. We have to grab everything that we have now, but don't be disappointed because as long as we are still alive, there is always hope.

Additionally, many informants were too absorbed by working in full-time or in multiple part-time, low-wage jobs that they have no time to process their credentials, the first step to being able to re-claim their previous educational and employment status. Furthermore, financial demands from relatives at home or those awaiting immigration to Canada greatly influenced their decisions regarding investment in their own education. These multiple claims on their personal and financial resources often led workers to give up or lose interest in pursuing their education. As

3 We conducted 51 interviews and five focus groups, and collected 104 surveys in the three urban centers.
4 This provision has now been changed to 48 months throughout Canada with the exception of Quebec.
5 All names are pseudonyms.

Serena said, "You forgot the way that 'Oh, my dream to study here again.'"

Those who did pursue accreditation in their fields were often told that they would need to start from scratch as their education and their work experiences were not recognized in Canada. Some who persisted in pursuing education found it difficult to obtain student loans particularly if they had completed a degree in their home country, even though that degree provided them with few transfer credits and carried no weight in the labour market. Significantly, the few informants who were successful in securing student loans for university were generally those without dependent children. Some workers, however, made use of short-term loans to train in occupations that were in high demand but offered low wages such as resident care attendant, personal support worker, and early childhood educator. Notably, there were a few more opportunities for informants who had a nursing background as Filipino women's organizations in some provinces were successful in working with professional accreditation bodies and unions to push for a recognition process that included refresher courses to help former LCP workers meet provincial nursing criteria.

## Family Reunification

For those who successfully reunited with family members, the initial euphoria was often followed by tension or disappointment. Children sometimes missed their former caregivers, often grandparents or aunts. In addition, familial and gender roles often changed, requiring adjustment that was not always easy. Sometimes male partners had a difficult time finding employment and resented being reliant on their female spouses, or children had taken on care-taking roles of younger siblings who continued to seek them out rather than turn to their mothers. Meanwhile, the sacrifices made by the women who enabled their migration and continued to support them in multiple ways were invisible. The need to work multiple jobs made reconciliation more difficult as there was simply no time to re-connect. Melodie's sentiments resonated with many that were shared:

> They didn't really know me and I don't know them, too. So it's kind of tough getting connected. I come home, I am so tired and I can't even sit them and say, "How was your day?"... And even over the weekend, I hardly see them. I work, too. At some point my kids told me: "You're too far away. You're here, but you are too far."

Many informants spoke of experiencing emotional stress, depression and anxiety, which they attributed to separation from family—followed later by the stress of family reunification—, and to financial difficulties due to precariousness of employment and its negative effects on find good housing, food, and covering transportation costs, the pressures of remittance-sending, and for some, student debt. Cora described her situation:

> I get depressed when I think of my parents in the Philippines and I'm facing a big amount of student loans in the future. So I think mentally that is affecting me; psychologically that's affecting me. What else? Like having a part-time job only. I only get $300 a month, so how will you be able to survive with that kind of money?

## Social Support

Despite the hardships, former live-in caregivers also found ways of coping with their stressful experiences. Some informants found solace and joy by engaging in volunteer work with agencies helping live-in caregivers or by going to church. Importantly, the friendships and social support they received from other former live-in caregivers were vital especially as many did not want to burden their families by disclosing the challenges they faced as LCP workers. Moreover, regardless of the problems associated with the adjustment, almost all spoke of being re-united with family as the most critical component to their happiness and well-being. Finally, despite often tremendous obstacles, downward mobility, vulnerability to structural and systemic violence, loss of self-esteem and dashed dreams, there were also many stories of newfound confidence, the development of new friendships, the joy of making contributions to others in their community, and hope for the future.

## Conclusion

Are former LCP workers able to 'live their Canadian dreams' or are they compelled to adjust to what could be a Canadian nightmare? While under the LCP, live-in caregivers are denied the freedoms that other Canadians and economic immigrants enjoy—they are constrained in their choices of residence, employment, education, and social engagement. The contribution of live-in caregivers to the Canadian economy is clear: they provide high quality services to children, persons with disability, and the elderly; ▶

Working multiple jobs meant there was no time to re-connect. Melodie's children told her: "You're too far away. You're here, but you are too far."

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however, the restrictions placed by the two year live-in requirement is a high price to pay, and one that negatively impacts the integration of these workers into Canadian society. These restrictions constrain live-in caregivers' integration by compelling LCP workers to undergo two separate processes of integration into Canadian society as part of a two-step process wherein they enter as temporary foreign workers who may subsequently be allowed to become permanent residents. Moreover, the Euro-centric definition used by CIC of what constitutes a dependent, particularly with reference to adult children, places undue pressure on former LCP workers and threatens to permanently fracture families. Subsequently, these migrants may have reduced access to the social and material support that family networks can provide, and may potentially result in diminished allegiance to this country for compelling these difficult situations.

As Canada has become increasingly reliant on temporary foreign workers whose numbers now exceed those of permanent immigrants, there is a critical need for a public discussion of these issues. The LCP is the only temporary foreign worker program that enables all workers who complete the Program and meet other basic criteria to apply for permanent residency status. As such, many advocates for temporary foreign workers view it as a model for facilitating permanent settlement for those who have thus far been deemed 'good enough to work' in this country, but apparently not 'good enough' to stay. But is this two-step process a solution? I would assert that the cost to workers, their families, and ultimately Canadian society is in fact too high and that there are other options available to us. There is an apparent need for flexible childcare, and a growing demand for home-based eldercare and services for persons with disabilities. While an expansion of publicly-funded services could go a long way in addressing these needs, at present the work of live-in caregiving falls to foreign-born individuals whose capacities are officially classified as low-skilled although they are better-educated on average than those who enter Canada as economic immigrants,[6] thereby enabling employers to benefit from the value-added skills of their educational and professional backgrounds while paying the wages of a domestic worker. Re-classifying caregiving work as skilled labour and allowing individuals to enter Canada as permanent residents for these positions would greatly reduce the burdens currently borne by current and former LCP workers and their families. Being able to immigrate with or bring their families whenever they wished would both enhance the well-being of workers, reduce the risk of children 'aging out' of their family, and contribute to more positive thoughts about Canada thus fostering greater social cohesion. Moreover, freeing both employers and workers from the constraints of the live-in requirement would enable both parties to negotiate a residency situation that best suited each employment context. As permanent residents cannot be tied to an employment sector; it would be incumbent upon employers to ensure that the salaries and employment conditions were sufficiently attractive to retain workers in the field.

Immigration policy is a balance between economic and humanitarian interests, but it is also an essential part of nation-building. Recognizing the contributions and skills of those who professionally care for some of the most vulnerable and cherished members of our families and society by allowing them to immigrate permanently, would go a long way in making this country a 'land of milk and honey' for workers, care recipients and their employers. ■

6 Kelly, P., S. Park, C. de Leon, and J. Priest. (2011). *Profile of Live-In Caregiver Immigrants to Canada, 1993-2009. TIEDI Analytical Report 18.* Toronto: Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative.



**Dr. Denise L. Spitzer** is the Canada Research Chair in Gender, Migration and Health, Professor in the Institute of Women's Studies, and a Principal Scientist in the Institute of Population Health. In addition to undergraduate studies in Biology, Chinese, and Music, she holds a M.A. and Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Alberta. Her edited volume, *Engendering Migrant Health: Canadian Perspectives* was published by the University of Toronto Press in 2011.

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