

* EXECUTIVE SUMMARY *

***“To solve these problems,
we have to get to the root.”***



**Transformative Resilience through
Collective Action: A Study on
Migrant Organizing in Toronto**

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***Building Migrant Resilience in Cities/
Immigration et résilience en milieu urbain***

Executive Summary

To solve these problems, we have to go to the root. It is time to get to the root of the problem. We are in the root of the problem, so let us work together, helping to hold each other up and build something. You and I as organizers can be the glue-makers. Activists can be the glue-makers. Policymakers who think that something needs to be done where everybody can benefit can be the glue makers, connecting all of the solutions.

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

On March 17, 2020, one week after the World Health Organization announced the spread of the Coronavirus COVID-19 to be a pandemic, Ontario Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency and issued temporary closure of all non-essential businesses, schools, and restrictions on public gatherings to reduce the spread of the virus. In the face of this global public health crisis, migrant communities mobilized to offer mutual aid and assist those within their communities who were experiencing economic hardship due to job loss, unpaid leave, and the stress of working in front-line essential jobs or living in high density housing with limited options for social distancing.

The pandemic and related economic, social, and humanitarian crises have magnified multiple layers of marginalization and inequality in Canada, especially for Black, Indigenous and racialized communities. Racialized immigrants disproportionately work in essential jobs where they earn low-wages and face increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 but are also less likely to have access to health care or have pre-existing health conditions that increase the health risks associated with COVID-19.

As governments have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic through public health measures and economic aid, there has been renewed attention to the role of civil society to work together to foster resilient societies that are capable of maintaining health and well-being when faced with economic, social, and environmental adversities (Rippon et al., 2020) While there is attention to underemployment among migrants, in this report we draw attention to the knowledge and wisdom of migrants whose capacity for transformative resilience illustrates the power of civic engagement through collective action.

The concept of resilience has received emerging attention in Cities across the globe, as a strategy for developing infrastructure and supports that promote social well-being and sustainable growth in response to social, economic, and environmental threats (Fitzgibbons and Mitchell, 2019). In the context of immigrant settlement and integration, resilience often refers to the capacity of migrants to “settle, adapt and prosper in their new country” (Broughton & Shields, 2020) with support from government and non-profit settlement services (Akbar, 2017).

As migration scholars, activists, and migrants ourselves, we set out to examine what resilience means from the perspectives of migrants living in the Greater Toronto Area who leverage their cultural and place-based knowledge to provide mutual aid to members of their community, while organizing collective actions to advocate for systemic changes that advance equity, inclusion, cultural preservation, and Indigenous sovereignty.

We were inspired by frameworks for understanding social and community resilience that emphasize the capacity of communities to work together to “respond to and influence change, sustain and renew the community and develop new trajectories for the future, so they can thrive in a changing environment” (Rippon *et al.*, 2020). While a resilience approach emphasizes the strengths of migrants to overcome the adversities they face pre- and post-migration, we also wanted to explore how migrants’ collective action to challenge systemic inequality that fuels transformative change in society in ways that contribute to social equity and inclusion for society as a whole.

Under the guidance of a Community Advisory Committee, we used a case study approach that was grounded in community-based research principles (Access Alliance, 2012), to learn from migrant community leaders in: A) the Tibetan community living in Toronto’s Parkdale neighborhood and B) South Asian immigrant women living in Toronto’s East Danforth neighborhoods.

Research Questions:

1. How and why do migrant communities self-organize collective actions?
2. What are the effective strategies for organizing within migrant communities?
3. How does migrant collective action promote individual, community, and transformative resilience?

Our case studies on migrant-led collective action shed light on the broader social and political context, including cross-cutting issues that impact migrants from diverse backgrounds in the Greater Toronto Area.

Community-Based Research Methods

This research grew out of a collaboration between University and Community-based researchers and migrant community leaders in the Greater Toronto Area. Between June and August 2019, we conducted focus groups with the Tibetan community in Parkdale and South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth, along with qualitative interviews with community organizers working across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In this report, we highlight the key concerns shared by community organizers and migrant community leaders, how they link personal struggles to systemic inequalities, and their efforts to build stronger communities and to advocate for systemic changes to improve the rights and well-being of members of their migrant communities and the broader Canadian society.

Report Highlights

Migrant-Led Community Organizing Strengthens Individual & Community Resilience

- Across the case studies of two communities, migrant community leaders strengthen individual and community resilience by tapping into social networks in their communities and supporting each other through mutual aid, direct services, and advocating for policy changes that address shared concerns.
- Most of the Tibetan community in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) immigrated to Canada within the past 15-20 years as refugees. Tibetan immigrants maintain close ties with each other through their shared culture and lived experiences and with the Tibetan diaspora who settled in India and Nepal after fleeing Chinese occupation.
- Many South Asian immigrant women residing in East Danforth entered Canada as economic immigrants from Bangladesh who have faced employment barriers after settling in Canada. South Asian immigrant women organize with other residents by going door-to-door to introduce themselves, build a sense of community, and empower women through helping them find decent work, childcare, and access to education.

Identifying Shared Challenges is Key to Individual & Community Resilience

- Working together to understand and challenge the root causes of systemic inequality is fundamental to develop individual and community resilience.
- Tibetan community members and South Asian women in East Danforth share concerns that stem from **structural inequalities** including a) isolation as new immigrants, b) economic insecurity that results from low-wages, precarious work and the rising cost of housing; c) discrimination and violence stemming from anti-immigrant sentiment and racism; and d) exclusion from social services and legal aid due to provincial funding cuts.
- Tibetan Freedom Movement brings Tibetans who live in Toronto together to take part in transnational resistance to ongoing Chinese occupation of Tibet.
- Working together to preserve language, cultural and religious knowledge in the diaspora fosters individual and community resilience, including resistance to assimilation to settler colonialism in Canada.
- South Asian immigrant women experience barriers to accessing labor market due to the complex intersection of gender-based inequity in their home country and racialized systemic inequalities in Canada. These shared experiences were the starting point in organizing work for their social and economic inclusion.

Cross-Cutting Issues that Contribute to Migrant Exclusion and Inequality

- Migrant rights leaders across the GTA identified several cross-cutting issues that impact migrants from different backgrounds including **precarious immigration** status, barriers to family reunification, lack of decent work and affordable housing, and barriers to accessing higher education and health care.
- Racialized migrants face discrimination at school, work and in the criminal justice system due to systemic racism, Islamophobia, sexism, and other intersecting oppressions.

- Some cross-cutting issues are harder to address due to stigma within migrant communities including gender-based violence, safety for migrant sex workers, and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, queer, and transgender people.
- Migrant leaders from the Tibetan community especially expressed urgency to work in solidarity with Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, rights, and respect for the land.

Organizing Strategies & Goals that Foster Individual and Community Resilience

- Migrant leaders engage activities that build capacity within their communities to address individual and collective problems and work towards systemic change.
- Some of the activities focus on recovering cultural knowledge and strengthening identity as immigrants in Canada.
- Migrants take part in social movements that address structural issues that contribute to economic insecurity of migrant communities (e.g. \$15 and Fairness minimum wage campaign, Parkdale rent strike in 2017, and the workers' strike at Ontario's Food Terminal in Etobicoke).
- Migrants also lobby their Members of Parliament to assist family members to immigrate from Nepal after the 2015 earthquake or when testifying before Parliament about their experience of precarious work and economic hardship.

Building Transformative Resilience: Lessons from Migrant Collective Action

- Through organizing direct actions and participating in social movements, migrants foster their **transformative resilience** to cope with adversities they face in Canada while building capacity to transform themselves, build stronger connections within their communities, and bring about systemic changes that increase equity and well-being.

7 LESSONS FROM MIGRANT COLLECTIVE ACTIONS

- 1) When migrant communities come together, they create spaces of belonging, draw upon their individual & collective experiences of inequality, and build a sense of responsibility towards the community and future generation.
- 2) The way people come together matters. It's important to create space for community sharing, to link history to the present, and nurture and provide opportunities for shared leadership.
- 3) Migrant-led **community organizing** strengthens individual and community resilience by collectively identifying shared challenges, tapping into community assets and networks, and building collective capacity through mutual aid, direct services, and advocating for policy changes that address shared concerns.
- 4) Through organizing direct actions and building solidarity with the larger migrant community, migrant leaders foster transformative resilience within their communities and advocate for systemic changes in Canada and transnationally.
- 5) Limited and unstable funding strain community leaders and resources.
- 6) Government and non-profit organizations can play a vital role to support migrant-led community organizing. Some forms of support may include:
 - a. Space for communities to come together.
 - b. Workshops or training on grassroots leadership development, public education, and community capacity building.
 - c. Funding to support grassroots initiatives, where community-based organizers can work within their own communities.
 - d. Amplifying community-led concerns.
 - e. Including migrant community leaders in community and program development
- 7) Migrant collective action promotes social cohesion and civic engagement through resisting assimilation to settler colonialism, practicing cultural and spiritual knowledge; and envisioning and working towards a society where all people can thrive.