

* RESEARCH REPORT *

*“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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We are grateful to live and work in “Tkaronto”, the traditional territories of the Huron-Wendat, Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island.

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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.

Introduction

In this report, we explore how migrant communities build capacity for resilience through collective organizing and resistance to systemic inequalities. In June of 2019, the City of Toronto released their first ever “Resilience Strategy” to promote “sustainable development, well-being, and inclusive growth” (City of Toronto, 2019). Within this multi-pronged strategy, immigrants are noted for their contributions to the region through organizing cultural festivals, such as the annual Caribana Carnival founded in 1967. Immigrants with other racialized communities are also recognized for contributing their leadership in organizing resistance to racial inequality, including the Young Street uprising in 1992, led by the Black Action Defense Committee. Despite their many contributions, the City of Toronto’s resilience strategy primarily frames immigrants and refugees as an “equity-seeking group” who face significant structural and systemic challenges that contribute to poor health and well-being.

City of Toronto’s embrace of “resilience” is part of the transnational “100 Resilience Cities” network, where urban governments seek to strengthen their region’s infrastructure and institutional supports for communities who face growing economic, environmental, and social insecurity related to globalization, climate change, and population diversity (Resilient Cities Network, 2020). Although transnational migration is often constructed as an “opportunity” for immigrants seeking a “better life” in Canada, migration is deeply embedded within systems of global inequality that give rise to the need for migrant resilience. The majority of immigrants arriving in Canada today, originate in countries in the low- and middle-income countries in Asia, Africa, South America and the Caribbean. While immigrants contribute to Canada’s economy and bring a wealth of knowledge, experience, and financial resources, recent immigrants disproportionately face the worst outcomes in every socio-economic indicator including chronic low income, precarious work, precarious housing, isolation, and poor health and mental health after settling in Canada (Block, Galabuzi-Grace, and Tranjan, 2019).

Resilience theory has commonly focused on the psychological attributes of individuals who are thriving despite risks to their well-being and the role of social institutions to help people overcome the challenges they face. Migrant resilience involves adapting to and overcoming adversities faced pre- and post-migration including traumatic experiences related to war, family separation, language discrimination, poverty, and intergenerational conflict (Anleu Hernández & García-Moreno, 2014; Carlson et al., 2012; Dubus, 2018). Recognizing that ‘resilience results from an *interaction* between individual abilities and a social environment’

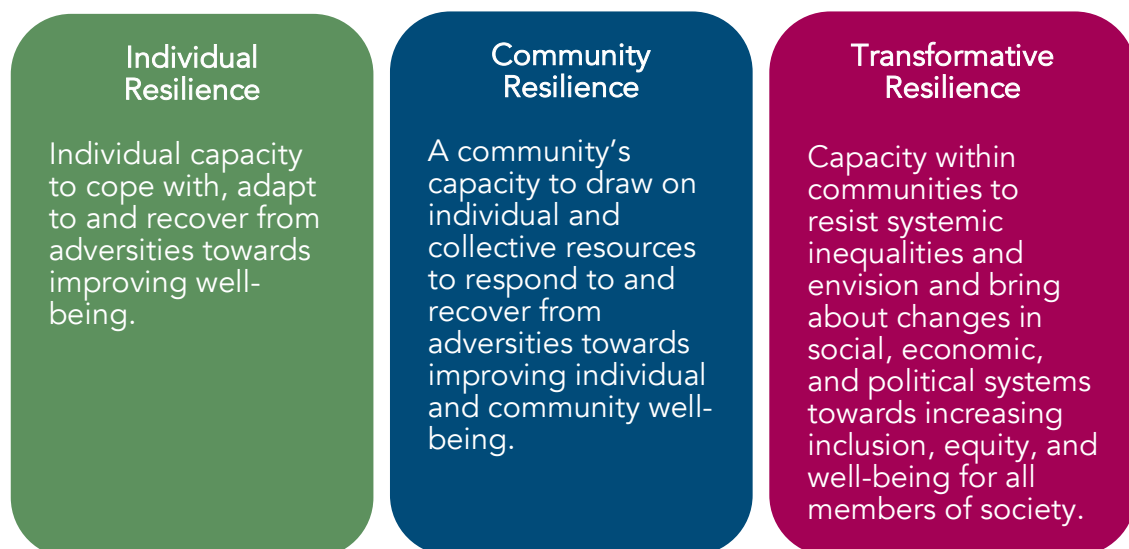
(Suarez, 2015, p. 6, emphasis added), support from social networks, government and non-profit organizations are integral to fostering individual and community resilience among immigrants (Lenette, Brough, & Cox, 2013; Nashwan, Cummings, & Gagnon, 2019).

To better understand how migrant communities build resilience within their communities and for the broader society, this report shares insights from a participatory action research study with migrant communities in Toronto, Ontario who are engaged in **collective action**. Through the case studies with two migrant communities—Tibetan immigrants living in the Parkdale neighborhood and South Asian immigrant women in the East Danforth neighborhoods—we illustrate how migrant communities leverage their cultural and place-based knowledge to work together to a) identify social issues that migrants in their communities are facing, b) link personal challenges to structural inequalities, c) provide mutual aid and support to address immediate needs within their communities, and d) envision and work towards systemic changes to promote equity, inclusion, and well-being for all members of society. Through these case studies, we illustrate how migrant-led collective action builds individual, community and transformative resilience.

Terminology

What do we mean by resilience?

In this report, we use the following definitions to understand how migrant collective actions foster individual, community, and **transformative resilience**, and build capacity among community members to respond to and challenge **systemic inequalities** faced by them in Canada and their communities in the diaspora.



Who are migrants in Canada?

Canada has an international reputation for “welcoming” immigrants, who contribute significantly to Canada’s prosperity through their labour, assets, and knowledge. Immigration today is the primary driver of population growth, with over 20% of the total population born outside of Canada, including immigrants from countries in Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and the Caribbean (Statistics Canada, 2019). While multiculturalism, equity, and tolerance for diversity are seen as cornerstones of Canadian immigration policy, systemic racism and white supremacy persist in Canada’s approach to managing immigrants in concert with colonial governance over Indigenous territories and people. Thus, despite being one of the “most diverse” countries in the world, most immigrants entering Canada today are racialized as “visible minorities” who experience disproportionate levels of poverty, underemployment, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

In this report, we use the “migrant” to refer to the variety of people who reside in Canada, irrespective of their official immigration status. Migrants include people who are displaced due to war, political conflict, economic hardship, and environmental crises. Since 2016, the federal government has steadily increased the number of new permanent residents accepted each year, reaching a high of 341,180 in 2019 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 2020), although the numbers for 2020 have likely dipped due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of permanent residents are approved through one of Canada’s economic programs, followed by the Family Class and Humanitarian programs. Canada remains a leader in third country resettlement of U.N. Convention Refugees, with 29,950 refugees resettled in Canada in 2019 (IRCC, 2020).

In recent decades, more people living in Canada have a **precarious immigration status**. In 2019, over 650,000 people resided in Canada with a temporary resident status including temporary workers, international students, and refugee claimants (IRCC, 2020). People who are considered **non-status** (i.e., undocumented immigrants) are particularly vulnerable due to limited rights, exclusion from social and health services, and the potential threat of being detained or deported from Canada.

Overview of the Research Project

This research was inspired by collective actions led by migrant communities who resist social and economic exclusion after settling in Canada.

This project began as a partnership between Yogendra Shakya (formerly with Access Alliance, Multicultural Health Centre) and Rupaleem Bhuyan (University of Toronto) with support from the Building Migrant Resilience SSRHC Partnership. Our research team also included Andrea Bobadilla, Alisha Alam, and Tenzin Chime, who are all university students who are directly involved in migrant-led collective action in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

We also convened a Community Advisory Committee with grassroots community leaders and civil society leaders working in non-profit and government organizations (see list on page 2). Our research team and Community Advisory Committee worked together to exchange our knowledge about resilience and migrant-led collective action, clarify our research questions, recruit migrant leaders to take part in qualitative interviews, analyze our data, and write this report.

Research & Knowledge Mobilization Objectives

Research Objectives: Using participatory research methods, this study aims to generate knowledge about migrant-led collective action to:

- Understand how and why migrant communities organize collective actions.
- Document the impacts of migrant collective actions on migrant communities and the host society.
- Identify institutions supports and resources that can better support migrant collective action.

Knowledge Mobilization Objectives: Through sharing the lessons, we learned from talking with migrant community organizers, this report aims to:

- Bring visibility to the migrant communities' understanding of structural inequalities in Canada
- Enable migrant communities to build and strengthen networks
- Document history of migrant community organizing for the next generation
- Highlight forms of solidarity/allyship with other communities
- Support solidarity efforts among migrant and indigenous groups who are challenging systemic inequality and settler colonialism
- Highlight the contributions of migrant communities through their collective action
- Showcase the transformative dimensions of migrant collective action, beyond their capacity to cope with and assimilate to the adversities they face in Canada.

Methods & Participants

From July to September 2019, we conducted two focus groups with migrant **community leaders**—one with Tibetan immigrants living in Parkdale (N=5) and one with South Asian immigrant women living in East Danforth (N=8). While we spoke to Tibetan leaders involved with different groups, most of the South Asian women leaders were from SAWRO who were also affiliated with other groups in the community. We also conducted 11 in-depth interviews with recognized grassroots **community organizers** working across the GTA.

Participants for the focus group and individual interviews were recruited through the personal network of the research team or community advisors. All participants were informed about the goals of this study before giving consent to take part in the interviews or focus group conversations. We have removed all identifying information to preserve the anonymity of individuals who took part in this research.

In November 2019, we hosted a community forum to bring together leaders from the Tibetan community in Parkdale and South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth. We shared our preliminary research findings and created a space for migrant community leaders to share and learn from each other, including the challenges they face when talking about taboo topics in the community.

Interview and Focus Group Questions

During the focus groups, **migrant community leaders** were asked the following:

- Why did you become involved in community organizing? Why do you stay involved?
- What do you feel are the most pressing concerns for your community members?
- What strategies do you use to address shared concerns?
- How do you come together, plan, or organize collective action?
- What are some of the collective actions you've taken part in? What impact did these actions have on you and for the larger community?
- What kinds of challenges, barriers and hurdles were faced for planning and implementing these collective actions?

During individual interviews with **migrant grassroots organizers**, we also asked:

- What role have different levels of government played in supporting collective civic actions led by migrant communities?
- What resources are available for migrant communities to collectively organize?

- How do migrant collective actions impact policy and program development?
- What institutional supports are needed to support migrant-led community organizing?

Goals for this report

We write this report for migrant communities across Canada and the globe who are looking for ways to address the hardships associated with systemic inequalities through community-building and organizing. This report highlights how migrants tap into their community assets and collective identities to support each other and advocate for systemic change. Through documenting migrants' capacity for individual, community, and transformative resilience, we illustrate the often-unrecognized strength that migrants contribute to the countries where they settle.

We hope that the lessons shared by migrant community leaders in this report will contribute to better understanding the challenges migrant communities face. Through recognizing migrants' contributions, we aim to foster greater appreciation for different forms of civic engagement that migrants bring through their critical understanding of social and economic inequalities they face in Canada and transnationally, and migrants' capacity to bring about positive social change.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Uprisings against Police Brutality

We are mindful that the research that informs this report took place several months before the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In the same year, uprisings were also taking place across Canada and the United States, to protest police brutality and systemic racism against Black, Indigenous and people of colour. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and uprisings against systemic racism have deeply impacted migrant communities in the Greater Toronto Area including those involved in our study.

Because our data collection took place during the summer of 2019, we cannot speak directly to the systemic inequalities faced by migrants during the pandemic. We will, however, include a brief reflection at the end of the report on how migrant communities are coming together to offer mutual aid and support during the pandemic crisis and what lessons we can take from migrant collective actions on how to move forward towards a more promising future.

Research Context - Community Organizing in the Greater Toronto Area

This research builds upon the long history of grassroots organizing and mutual aid within migrant communities in the Greater Toronto Area. Toronto represents one of the most ethnoculturally diverse cities in the world, with over 50% of the population born outside of Canada. While the City of Toronto's official motto is "Diversity is our Strength" and the city boasts integration and multicultural policies, racial and economic segregation continues to shape the everyday lives of immigrants, most of whom originated in the Global South (Bhuyan and Leung, 2021).

During the period of study, the Greater Toronto Area experienced marked economic and population growth, primarily driven by immigrants, who now make up more than half of all residents in this region. Despite a decline in poverty rates and low unemployment overall, the GTA remains the most expensive city in Canada with high degrees of income inequality, skyrocketing housing costs, with continued racial and economic segregation (Hulchanski & Maaranen, 2018).

Since the Ontario election of Conservative Premier Doug Ford in June 2018, communities across Ontario grappled further with dramatic budget cuts and policy restrictions that negatively impacted migrant communities involved in our research. Some of the policies introduced between 2018-2019 include (for details see Asalya 2019; Xing 2018):

- Freezing the minimum wage increase at \$14 and repealing Kathleen Wynne government's Bill 148, which gave Ontario workers a minimum of two paid sick-leave days and required employers to pay part-time employees at the same rate as full-time workers.
- Reducing the legal aid budget by 30% including new restrictions on legal aid for immigrants with precarious status.
- Increasing class sizes for high school and elementary students and eliminating 10,000 teaching positions in Ontario public schools.
- Removing rent control for new units or those not occupied before November 15, 2018.
- Hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to health and mental health care services, including cuts to autism, dementia services and removing drug benefits for children in Ontario's Health Insurance Plan (OHIP).
- Cutting the size of Toronto City Council down to 25 wards and changing ward boundaries amid the 2019 municipal elections

This policy context serves as a backdrop to the conversations we had with migrant leaders and the collective actions they organized to strengthen their communities and challenge systemic inequalities.

Cross-cutting issues: Insights from Migrant Grassroots Organizers

Before discussing our case studies, we share insights from interviews with migrant grassroots organizers working with various migrant communities across the GTA. Migrant organizers emphasize the need to understand the intersectionality of cross-cutting issues related to precarious immigration status, economic insecurity, gender inequity and racism, which compounds the oppression experienced by migrant communities. By developing a collective consciousness on issues affecting their communities, they identify ways of addressing the problems locally, regionally and nationally.

- **Targeted laws and policies:** Many of the funding cuts introduced under Premier Doug Ford, particularly to public education and legal aids, disproportionately affect people of colour and migrant communities. The changes to the Caregiver Program in 2019 also increased barriers for migrant workers to enter Canada and get permanent residence and access different supports in the country. Migrant sex workers are particularly vulnerable due to the criminalization of sex work, and surveillance and abuse from law enforcement under bylaws that fail to protect workers' rights in massage parlours.
- **Precarious immigration:** Immigration detention, poor conditions in detention centers, and their impacts on their health as well as their personal, relational and professional life of incarcerated migrants are key concerns. The precarity of undocumented migrants who experience pervasive social, political and economic insecurity was also raised and discussed.
- **Economic insecurity** is shared as a prominent issue experienced across migrant communities. Many migrants are employed in temporary and precarious jobs that have low wages and lack labour rights. With rising living cost and unaffordable housing in Toronto, economic insecurity is a major factor contributing to people's poor health and social stress.
- **Racism and xenophobia:** Migrant organizers express their concern over increasing racist and xenophobic anti-migrant sentiments in recent years, as

indicated by the increase in hate crimes but also different policies, police brutality and negative media portrayals of migrants.

- **Gender-based oppression:** Gendered inequality within migrant communities and the broader Canadian society contributes to strict gender roles, domestic violence, limited childcare support, and gender-based violence in families, as well as employer-abuse experienced by migrant women working in the Live-In-Caregiver Program. Both Tibetan and South Asian migrant leaders also stress the need to address gender inequality and create supports for LGBTQ community members.
- **Barriers to accessing resources and services** in Canada are key concerns in many migrant communities. This includes language barriers, difficulty in navigating the bureaucratic system, precarious immigration status, social stigma and repressive policies against sex workers.
- **Youth-related issues:** Migrant youth face unique social and mental health challenges due to systemic racism, social isolation, exposure to community violence, intergenerational trauma related to forced migration. There is lack of employment and leadership opportunities for racialized youth, which explains high dropout rates among high schoolers, unlawful economic activities, etc.
- **Internalized oppression:** Migrant organizers share that **internalized oppression** experienced by migrant workers often justifies and perpetuates anti-migrant framework. This can include divisions between documented and undocumented migrants and classism within migrant communities which can weaken solidarity among migrant groups.

Immigrant communities have had histories, whether it be in their countries of origin or related to the issues in countries of origin, of heavy organizing, mobilizing, political activism, involvement. We need to find a way to channel the same type of energy into fighting racism and racial impact and xenophobia around immigrants and refugees.

Migrant Grassroots Organizer

Case Studies of Migrant-Led Collective Action

In this section, we provide a brief overview of the historical and social context for each case study as background for our discussion of migrant led collective action. Community members in the Tibetan community in Parkdale and South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth mobilize their cultural knowledge, identity, and geographic location to strengthen their sense of belonging and capacity to address individual and collective problems.

After providing some background for each community's history in Toronto, we discuss key issues in the two communities; some are related to systemic inequality and shared by both communities, whereas some are unique issues that arise in relation to each community's history of migration and social context in Canada.

South Asian Immigrant Women in East Danforth: Background

Migrants from South Asia make up a sizable portion of people living across the Greater Toronto Area. The term "South Asian" refers to people who originate in countries that share a geographic proximity and political history under British colonial rule including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan; people in the South Asian diaspora also include migrants from Africa and the Caribbean whose ancestors originated in what was known as British India (Tran, Kaddatz, and Allard 2005); a few Tibetans in our study also identify as South Asian. For our study, we focused on collective actions organized by South Asian immigrant women from the East-Danforth neighbourhoods of Oakridge and Taylor Massey. While the migrant leaders we met with in this community identify as women from Bangladesh, they organize under the broader category of South Asian immigrant women, to be inclusive and have a stronger political voice.

South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth link their social and economic marginalization in Canada to the intersection of gender-based oppression in their home countries, global capitalism and gendered racism (South Asian Women's Rights Organization, 2012). Despite entering Canada as "economic immigrants" with advanced degrees in their home countries, South Asian immigrant women often have limited work experience due to rigid gender roles and the feminization of low-wage labour in Bangladesh's export industries (Frank and Hou, 2016; Mamoud 2003). Women's reproductive responsibilities persist after coming to

Canada as women disproportionately shoulder domestic and caregiving labour to support the family's settlement (Ghosh, 2007; Akbar and Preston, 2020). Additionally, they experience traumas associated with migration and social dislocation (South Asian Women's Rights Organization, 2012). South Asian immigrant women also face gendered racism when seeking employment and are often compelled to take up "survival jobs" that are characterized by low wages, no benefits, and unfair treatment (South Asian Women's Rights Organization, 2012).

Since I was younger, I've been hearing 'oh when you come to [Canada], when you're an immigrant it's harder to get a job', but now I'm realizing it's not just that, there are levels of problems like, oh your skills are not being recognized. And there are so many other barriers, like language barriers, childcare is a main barrier for immigrant women; it's those things that bring immigrant women down, away from achieving.

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

In the face of these complex intersecting oppressions, South Asian Women's Rights Organization (SAWRO) takes a lead role in East Danforth community in grassroots organizing for the social and economic inclusion of women in their community. SAWRO works closely with local settlement organizations who provide training on personal and professional skills and some financial support. They also work alongside the private sector union Unifor and collaborate with the Bangladesh Centre to host cultural and legal education events. In addition to providing mutual aid and direct services to address the immediate needs of the community, SAWRO mobilize women and young girls to take leadership roles to advocate for their themselves and the collective's interests. They organize direct actions, lobby elected officials and take part in advocacy campaigns to fight for equitable access to employment, better working conditions including paid sick leave, maternity leave, an increased minimum wage, and all-day kindergarten. SAWRO also facilitate intergenerational engagement by creating opportunities to pass-down cultural knowledge & language as well as to have dialogue on gender-based oppressions in the community.

South Asian Immigrant Women: Key Concerns

South Asian immigrant women in the East-Danforth primarily organize for equitable access to employment and the labour market. Despite holding advanced degrees from their country of origin, many South Asian immigrant women face barriers to accessing professional employment due to the devaluing of internationally educated immigrants and lack of “Canadian Experience”, which the Ontario Human Rights Commission has recognized as a human rights violation. South Asian community organizers share that to survive, many women in the community must take “the first job they are qualified for,” which is often a low-wage entry-level jobs with no benefits or job security.

While community leaders provide support and assistance to women seeking employment, precarious work, especially jobs that are arranged through temporary agencies, expose immigrant women to exploitation, unstable and chaotic schedules, workplace discrimination, and poor and unsafe work conditions. Precariously employed immigrant women are also excluded from safety-nets, including maternity leave, sick leave, and employment insurance. Moreover, workers hired through temporary work agencies have limited labour protections under Ontario employment laws, thus employers are often able to disregard their rights and dignity with impunity.

Due to the prevalence of unemployment and precarious jobs, South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth also struggle with housing, access to education or job training, accessing employment insurance, childcare subsidies, and developing language and computer skills, that exacerbate their economic and social exclusion in Canada.

South Asian immigrant women leaders who organize to create awareness about precarious work, express frustration of “not being listened to” as some stakeholders and policymakers dismissed the issues they raised as not pressing enough.

Young South Asian women also express challenges related to isolation, labour precarity as well as Islamophobia faced in schools and Canada. Hence, a significant amount of the community's organizing is focused on breaking that isolation to integrate and empower women in their families, communities and Canadian society.

Finally, South Asian women contend with rigid gender roles in the family and racist and sexist stereotypes in the broader Canadian society. Therefore, economic independence is a priority for the women to meet their full potential by challenging

patriarchal structures within South Asian communities, while also seeking decent work and living wages in Canada.

Most of these women are highly educated, skilled women but they are starting from the zero because their skills were not recognized when they came here; their skills are scanned but now they don't recognize our skill, so we have to start from the zero level with the survival jobs, labour job.

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

Tibetan community in Parkdale: Background

The Tibetan community in Canada is a part of an estimated 150,000 Tibetans living in exile around the world (Central Tibetan Administration, n.d.). The Tibetan diaspora in exile originated in 1959 when the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese occupation was brutally suppressed by the Chinese Communist Party. Soon after, Tibet's spiritual and political leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, was forced to flee Tibet and seek political asylum in India (Central Tibetan Administration, n.d.). Deprived of basic rights under Chinese occupation, thousands of Tibetans subsequently fled Tibet, with the majority living in India and Nepal.

Although both Indian and Nepalese governments granted political asylum to thousands of Tibetan exiles who have migrated since the 1950s, Tibetans are classified as "foreigners" under India's The Foreigners Act (1946), and those in Nepal have no legal status, thus face restrictions on their mobility, employment, and where they can settle (Dolma 2019). Despite living for several decades, majority of Tibetans in India and Nepal are de facto **stateless persons** who continue to face institutional barriers to acquiring citizenship and accessing rights and services (McGranahan, 2018), with thousands of Tibetans seeking third country refugee resettlement each year while continuing the struggle to free Tibet from Chinese occupation (Purohit, 2019).

Canada hosts one of the largest numbers of Tibetan refugees outside of Asia. In 2016, 8040 Tibetans were living in Canada, the majority of live in Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2019). While Tibetans have settled in different parts of the GTA, the South-Parkdale neighbourhood is home to a large concentration of Tibetans in Canada who make up a vibrant community known as 'Little Tibet,' with many Tibetan businesses and restaurants in the neighbourhood (Logan and Murdie, 2016). Many

Tibetans participate in local settlement organizations and local governance in Parkdale. In 2020, Bhutila Karpoche, the first elected Member of the Provincial Parliament of Tibetan origin representing Parkdale-High riding (CBC News, 2018), successfully introduced and passed a bill to recognize July as the Tibetan Heritage Month in Ontario.

The Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC) located in Etobicoke acts as their representative body in the GTA and serves as a hub for cultural and religious activities, community gatherings, events and social programming in the community. Local and transnational organizations like the Tibetan Youth Congress, Tibetan Women's Association, Students for a Free Tibet, Canada Tibet Committee and Dokham Chushi Gangdruk mobilize people for the Tibetan freedom movement (Karpoche, 2020).

As an immigrant group and also a very unique one, we come as refugees, with an on-going issue rather than from a country that already has its own space. So, there is a lot of anxiety about the loss of culture, loss of language, dispersion, you know. What will happen to the Tibetans who live in the West, who are outside of Tibet right? So, a lot of this leads to people being energized towards cultural preservation, language preservation.

Tibetan Community Leader

Tibetan Community: Key Concerns

As a stateless refugee community in Canada, the key issues of the Tibetans in Parkdale center around their identity as Tibetans in exile and **transnational** links to the Tibetan diaspora. The community places their transnational freedom movement against the ongoing Chinese occupation of Tibet at the core of their organizing work as they bring awareness to the violation of rights and freedom inside Tibet and take action to bring positive change in Tibet. The community also has strong transnational ties in the diaspora and often organize to support family and community members in Nepal and India, who face financial difficulties and institutional barriers to accessing rights and services.

In the Canadian context, Tibetan community leaders are concerned with the loss of Tibetan culture and language in exile due to the strong pressure to assimilate as well as the passing away of elder Tibetans, many of whom were born in Tibet and

carried the knowledge and experience of livelihood, cultural and traditional practices in Tibet.

Some of the key concerns discussed by the Tibetan community leaders in Canada include:

- **Sustaining the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre:** A few years ago, the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre was at risk of folding due to unpaid lien and the community rallied together to raise funds and protect the space that is central for the community to be together and promote their culture and language. The community members continue to volunteer at the centre and often raise funds to sustain its operation.
- **Unfair wages and Unaffordable Housing:** Members of the Tibetan community raise the issues of unfair wages at the workplace and unaffordable housing in Parkdale as they participated in the 2017 rent strike in Parkdale and workers' strike at the Ontario Food Terminal in 2016. The rising cost of housing cause a concern around the sustenance of a vibrant Tibetan community in Parkdale. They also express concerns around increasing numbers of youth, especially men in their community, engaging in high-risk behaviors due to their economic insecurity.

In Parkdale, rent is becoming very unaffordable. It feels like gentrification is never-ending and the displacement is accelerating... When we had the community meeting about the rent strike and it was mostly Tibetans that you know the second concern about how this would make Tibetans look, I said I can't speak to that, but I spoke about the long term trends in Parkdale and I said "you know, isn't it great that it's little Tibet now and we can't afford to lose it and so if we don't do something, it's not going to stay. Things are just going to get worse and rent is just going to increase.

Tibetan Community Leader

- **Precarious immigration** is one of the pressing issues that the Tibetan community experience, and also struggle with organizing because of its complexity and the stigma associated with it in the community. Tibetans whose refugee claims are rejected experience unique precarity in Canada due to their

statelessness. In most cases, they cannot be deported back to any country and are compelled to live in a state of 'limbo' in Canada with no legal status. Additionally, community leaders with families in Nepal experience great challenges in their family reunification process as the lack of legal documentation for their families in Nepal restrict their immigration to Canada.

- **The Chinese occupation and statelessness** have taken a toll on the members of the Tibetan community as they experience collective trauma, inferiority complex and identity crisis among youth, with limited avenues and tools to address those issues. They also highlight the incident of a racist attack by Chinese students at the Tibetan student who was running for student union presidency at the University of Toronto Scarborough campus.
- **Intergenerational Conflict:** Tibetan community leaders also spoke of differences among Tibetans of different generations: those born in Tibet who fled as young adults, those who spent most of their lives in exile in Nepal or India and immigrated to Canada as adults; and youth who were either born or have spent most of their lives in Canada. Different life experiences contribute to intergenerational conflict over the use of the Tibetan language as well as differing views regarding what issues to prioritize and organize for.

The following represent the key concerns raised in our focus groups with Tibetan community members in Parkdale and South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth.

Tibetan Community	South Asian Immigrant Women
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tibetan freedom movement • Language and cultural preservation • Supporting Tibetan diaspora in Nepal and India • Sustaining the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre • Economic insecurity • Precarious immigration status • Toll of occupation and statelessness • Intergenerational conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precarious employment • Underemployment • Gender inequity • Social isolation • Lack of affordable childcare • "Not being heard" by policymakers • Social isolation • Islamophobia

Motivation: What Brings People Together?

In this section, we share stories of how migrant leaders and organizers first became involved in collective action and what motivates them to stay involved.

Origin Stories of Collective Action

Migrant community leaders and grassroots organizers draw upon their lived experience with and resistance to adversity, both pre- and post-migration, as the starting point for critical consciousness and collective action. Migrant identities and communities are also sources of resilience because they provide spaces of belonging and sites where migrants learn about and challenge systemic inequality. While some community organizers are born into activist communities and families, others first become involved in community work as a volunteer, service receiver, or student.

Many [immigrants] come from very complex political structures and environments... so I think the first thing is to acknowledge the strength many of these communities bring, not just their lived experience and knowledge, but also [their understanding of] the structures that exist.

Migrant Grassroots Organizer

- **Lived Experience:** Migrant organizers draw upon their experience with colonialism and imperialism outside of Canada, to help them understand the systems of oppression that impact migrant communities in Canada. Migrant leaders from the East-Danforth and Parkdale communities – both of which are low-income, racialized immigrant communities – reflect on and learn about their experiences of adversity and inequality. Centering their individual and collective experiences inspires them to 'take ownership' of the issues as a community and organize collective actions for equitable social change.
- **Identity, Family and Community:** Migrant leaders tap into identities and existing social networks in the community as a pathway for their members to become involved in collective action. People's identities as diasporic people or migrants are influential in engaging people as they evoke a sense of responsibility and kinship towards their community members in Canada and the diaspora, but

also towards the Indigenous communities.

Existing social networks also bring people together to address immediate needs in the community as well as practice their culture and language. They foster a sense of belonging and social cohesion, which strengthen individual and community resilience.

As a Tibetan I should do something for Tibet... Back in Tibet, it's almost 5/6 millions right, so they are burning themselves up, the monasteries are closed, they are not allowed to study, they control, no human rights, so we see that urgency. So they also have look outside, they look at outside. I think it is our duty to at least to do something for Tibet.

Tibetan Community Leader

- **Volunteering or Receiving Social Services:** Accessing services from local ethnocultural or service-providing organizations led some migrant leaders to volunteer and later become involved in collective action. When migrants personally benefit from receiving services or volunteering, it motivates them to 'give back' to the community and support other members.
- **Student Life:** Youth organizers (ages 15-30) become involved through local youth programs, volunteering, and/or through clubs at their school/university. These experiences are crucial for them in developing a stronger sense of identity and kinship with their community as well as inspiring and enabling them to take on leadership roles to organize for the community and beyond.

When I was in grade 5, my mom would bring us kids along. There were childcare services. We grew up, we were all these youth I've known them a long time. We bonded and decided, 'let's do something constructive, let's create, let's do!'

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

Why Migrants Stay Involved in Collective Action

Even with the many challenges associated with community organizing (discussed later in the report), migrant organizers share individual and collective reasons for staying involved in community organizing.

- **Empowerment and Recognition:**
Recognizing the strength of community organizing and their victories empowers people and keeps them engaged. Migrant leaders recognize that their achievements, however small, have personal value and are important for their communities. Collective action also brings visibility to migrant issues that support the migrant leaders in their work to organize for their community needs and issues.
- **Individual benefits:**
Migrant leaders share individual benefits from participating in collective actions that includes building leadership skills, making connections within and beyond their community, achieving a sense of purpose and feeling of inclusiveness by having a 'voice'. However, some migrant leaders also share that their life-long commitment to challenging systemic inequalities comes at a cost to them financially and personally.
- **Better future for the new generation:**
Both Tibetan and South Asian immigrant women leaders organize various programs and events that promote their language and culture as they link their preservation of cultural knowledge and practices as integral to community. They also organize collective actions with a vision to secure a just and equitable society for their future generations.
- **Interconnectedness:**
Migrant leaders recognize the role of community organizing in developing critical consciousness on the cross-cutting nature of systemic inequalities that impact all migrants in Canada. Working together on issues and understanding their interconnectedness foster solidarity across migrant communities, which motivates the community organizers to keep working collectively for the 'greater good' of all people as they oppose a 'siloed'-version of activism.

Organizing Goals & Strategies & Actions

In this section, we discuss the organizing goals, strategies and actions shared by migrant leaders in the two case study communities. Migrant leaders engage activities that focus on community building, raising political consciousness and building capacity within their communities to address individual concerns as well as collective problems that stem from systemic inequalities, and work towards bringing changes that promote equity and well-being.

Below, we present some brief definitions for organizing goals, strategies, and activities to illustrate how these operate as a dynamic process for transformative resilience and resistance.

DEFINITIONS

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Organizing Goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aimed or desired result of working together• Reflects the concerns of the community. Address short-term needs while building towards long-term system change |
| Organizing Strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How people analyze problems, build power through working together, and identify goals to organize (See Fine, n.d.)• Processes and steps are taken to reach target audiences or create an impact.• "A plan of action that links problems and solutions and depends on ongoing assessment of the actions and the sentiments of the other actors (Mondros et al, 1994 p. 131). |
| Activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mobilize a specific type and amount of power• Are directed at a specific target• Are intended to achieve a specific objective (Fine, n.d.) |

Values Guiding Strategy Development

South Asian immigration women leaders in the East Danforth neighbourhoods shared how their values guide their approach to community organizing.

Consensus:

- Working as a group to identify from shared experience what are the problems we are facing? What are the similarities between our stories? Then deciding what activities to organize from our shared experience.
- "What's good for us, what would be better to do for our future" (South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader from East Danforth)

Impact:

- Talking with each other to understand why we are doing what we are doing? Making sure we are responding to the immediate needs of our community but also building a better future for ourselves and our children.

Centering the Lived Experience of Women in the Community:

- Migrant organizers who come from the community talk about their issues and "represent themselves"

"Suppose you are fighting for a \$15 minimum wage. It is a matter of your life and death because you cannot live below a minimum wage salary as it falls short every month. Here I am working at \$25 per hour, now you put me as a leader to fight to increase the minimum wage. I go to talk with Premier Kathleen Wynne, the minimum wage was \$11.50 and Wynne told me, 'No... I'm not going to give you \$15, I'll give you \$12 or \$13.' I asked for \$15 and they gave \$13, that's okay. When I come back to the community to say 'We won, we got \$13,' they will say to me, 'Huh?! \$13 is not enough for me!'. This is not my problem but if a community member goes there, sits down and says, 'I'm not going to leave without \$15 an hour because this is my life and death problem.' they can take the lead... All of the people at the negotiating table, who are social workers who make \$20, \$30, \$40 per hour, have to listen. So, we can be the organizers, but we cannot be the only ones sitting at the table, because we don't experience this problem."

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

Accessibility:

- Making sure the actions are approachable for all community members; that people can relate to the purpose and impact.

We have to make sure that the people in leadership roles are directly involved in the advocacy campaign...

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

Using different strategies to engage women who experience social isolation: Praxis

- Collecting stories from community members to identify patterns
- Creating accessible materials for the community to learn about their shared concerns
- Organize opportunities for consciousness-raising to "help people realize how their personal struggles are connected to the problem"
- Analyzing previous actions to better understand the identified issues
- Discussing with the community what adjustments to make moving forward.

Linking Organizing Goals and Strategies

Both the community leaders in the Tibetan community in Parkdale and South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth engage in a wide range of activities to work towards their shared goals. While some activities are ongoing and provide support, offer a service, or focus on community building. Other activities are community events that raise public awareness and create spaces for people to listen to and learn from each other. Migrant community leaders also organize demonstrations or take part in collective actions in solidarity with other groups.

The following illustrations show the linkages of organizing goals, strategies and activities shared by South Asian immigrant women from SAWRO and Tibetan community leaders from different groups. These linkages show they are interwoven such that sum is much greater than any one part:

Linking Organizing Goals and Strategies

South Asian Immigrant Women in East Danforth

GENDER EQUITY

Strategies:

- Empowering women leaders
- Affordable childcare
- Financial Independence for women
- Creating a safe space for LGBTQ people to belong
- Creating opportunities for women and young girls to develop and use leadership skills

Activities:

- Mentoring and training local leaders
- Campaigning for full-day kindergarten
- Taking part in International Women's Day March
- Offering STEM workshops for girls
- Youth producing "I am a Muslim Girl" and "I am not a zombie" videos

ECONOMIC INCLUSION

Strategies:

- Living wage
- Affordable housing
- Labour protections (e.g. sick leave; minimum hours for temp positions)
- Recognition for international education/experience
- Solidarity with other communities

Activities:

- Conducting needs assessment surveys and presenting recommendations to stakeholders, policymakers.
- Helping women find jobs & childcare
- Offering informal/mutual aid, childcare
- Workshops and forums on labour, immigration rights
- Performing skits on precarious work as part of public education
- Campaigning for \$15 minimum wage
- Organizing with Unifor (union)
- Supporting businesses of community members in cultural events
- Service delivery (legal aid support, skills and language training, career counselling)

Linking Organizing Goals and Strategies

South Asian Immigrant Women in East Danforth

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ STRONG COMMUNITIES

Strategies:

- Breaking isolation
- Fostering a sense of belonging in Canada
- Bridging intergenerational gap
- Practicing cultural heritage
- Teaching youth the history of political struggle from fighting colonization

Activities:

- Door to door organizing
- Women's circles
- Debriefing with women before and after attending a rally or other actions; "why are we doing this?"
- Community gardening
- Intergenerational groups
- Social and cultural events/festivals

BUILDING A JUST SOCIETY

Strategies:

- Solidarity with anti-racist and immigrant rights movements and grassroots networks
- Mutual aid
- Collaboration

Activities:

- Deputations on child care and precarious work to local and federal governments
- Networking with community organizations and other migrant rights groups
- Organizing international Mother's Language Day

Linking Organizing Goals and Strategies Tibetan Community

TIBETAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Strategies:

- Raising public awareness in Canada of Chinese occupation of Tibet and Free Tibet campaign
- Building capacity and coalition across different Tibet support groups networks in Canada and the Tibetan diaspora
- Fundraising for Tibetan freedom movement
- Including political actions at cultural community events
- Creating platform for young Tibetans to get involved in the Tibetan cause

Activities:

- Mobilizing university students to take action for the Free Tibet campaign
- Actions for political prisoners in Tibet: celebrating the birthday of a high profile Tibetan political prisoner and spiritual leader, Panchen Lama to raise awareness
- Providing leadership training to students and youth
- Lobby days at Ottawa: meeting MPs and Senators
- Tibetan Youth taking part in international conferences and training to become more politically involved in the Tibetan cause; learn about Tibet and its culture
- Organizing march in Toronto for March 10th the national uprising day
- Organizing events for March 12th commemoration of Tibetan women's uprising in Tibet

SUPPORTING TIBETAN DIASPORA

Strategies:

- Provide financial support to Tibetans living in Nepal and India
- Supporting resettlement of Tibetans in Canada (as sponsored family members or refugees)

Activities:

- Fundraising to provide scholarship for Tibetan students in Nepal and India
- Townhall meeting and lobbying Members of Parliament to issue a one-way visa for stateless Tibetans living in Nepal
- Community mobilization for the project to resettle Tibetans from India to Canada

Linking Organizing Goals and Strategies Tibetan Community

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN CANADA

Strategies:

- Establishing and maintaining the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre
- Preserving Tibetan language and cultural practices
- Sharing cultural knowledge and practising mutual aid through Kyidug (i.e. traditional mutual aid groups) in Canada
- Creating alternative avenues in the community to navigate the psychological toll of exile
- Joining international workshops and conferences for Tibetan diaspora
- Fighting gentrification and displacement of "Little Tibet" in Parkdale

Activities:

- Fundraising for Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC)
- Community gathering at the TCCC for social and religious events
- Offer programs to learn Tibetan language, Buddhism, performing arts, drop-in conversations on mental health, gender based violence
- Organize weekly community circle dance in Parkdale, drop in basketball
- Celebrating regional festivals like 'Phak-nying' (A summer festival in Western Tibet where people gather to celebrate what is considered as the most 'nutritious' day of the year) and passing down of folk song and dance to younger Tibetans
- Social programs for seniors: yoga, prayer sessions, health talks
- Offer arts-programs for youth to share experiences and stories

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Strategies:

- Leverage the geographic concentration of Tibetans in Parkdale
- Joining campaigns for affordable housing
- Empowering women leaders
- Advocating for workers' rights
- Social media advocacy
- Reaching out to mainstream media
- Advocacy for immigration status

Activities:

- Participating in rent strikes and rallies to protest rent increase and legal aid cuts in Parkdale
- Supporting workers' strike at Food Terminal Strike for better wages by showing up to join the protesting workers and spreading news through social media
- Building a relationship with organizations & groups in Parkdale
- Raising awareness and mobilization: lobby meetings, door-to-door knocking and flyers



Skit on precarious employment and labor market challenges performed on Int'l Women's Day.

Credit: SAWRO

I started to go to the park and sit down with the women and discuss why they are not working, what is the cause and most of the women said they don't know where to find the jobs. They don't know how they should go, because I feel like for the political work, first you have to work with people. They have the problem and I talk with some group of people, I said why not you come together to make an organization.

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

Organizing Strategies – SAWRO

- Grassroots outreach: going door to door to talk to people about their problems
- Collecting data from surveys, focus groups, and interviews
- Connecting personal struggles to shared social problems
- Empowering women through addressing their immediate needs
- Continuously engaging members so they feel connected
- Building leadership capacity within the community
- Mixing cultural events with political goals to increase community engagement
- Collaborating with non-profit organizations and academic researchers
- Writing reports to community-based research findings with community members, other service providers, and policymakers
- Developing skits to share the lived experience of economic hardship and precarious employment with community members, other service providers, and policymakers

- Offering direct services to address immediate needs
- Establishing charitable status as a non-profit organization to apply for federal, provincial and regional grants to support advocacy and direct services



Every Wednesday in summer, Tibetans gather in Parkdale for community circle dance.

Credit: Tenzin Nawang Tekan

Because of how concentrated we are in Parkdale, there is a relationship that the community people have to different offices. The MP's office has someone who is from the Tibetan community, we have a Tibetan MPP, the municipal office, Gord Perks who is also receptive to the Tibetan community, so I think that the Tibetan community made use of that kind of what little power they have and they understand how to navigate these different interests, right?

Tibetan Community Leader

Organizing Strategies – Tibetans in Parkdale

- Fundraise and organize direct actions for the Tibetan freedom movement
- Lobby public officials to highlight and garner support for the freedom cause
- Networking transnationally with Tibetan diaspora around the world: coalition for freedom movement, raise funds for emergency relief, access to education and health care for communities in Nepal and India.
- Political mobilization at cultural events: engaging with government officials, raising funds for organizing, sharing news and announcements
- Promote Tibetan language and culture to strengthen community building
- Leverage support from personal networks in the community

- Leverage the geographic concentration of Tibetans in Parkdale
- Knowledge sharing/consciousness-raising
- Build youth leadership skills through training, volunteer and work opportunities
- Organize mutual aid through networks of *Kyidug* རྒྱུད་རྒྱུ་ – Tibetan mutual aid groups that address social welfare of members and observe festivals
- Connecting to mainstream media and sharing news on social media platforms

Migrant leaders work towards goals of systemic change as they develop strategies and engage in activities that foster individual and community resilience. They organize to create a space of belonging, strengthen their identities, and provide mutual aid and direct services to address immediate needs of community members who are struggling with social and economic marginalization. They also organize direct actions, participate in social movements, and work with other communities and organizations to challenge cross-cutting issues. Providing support for individual community members to overcome their immediate needs, while also building capacity towards systemic change is fundamental to fostering transformative resilience within individuals and the community.

Impacts

In this section, we illustrate how migrant leaders and organizers understand the impact of migrant collective actions in their communities, and also on the broader Canadian society.

When discussing the impact of migrant-led collective actions, migrant leaders and organizers foreground the values that bring them together as an important framework for assessing impact. This includes attention to how their actions impact individual's sense of empowerment and well-being, community capacity to come together to offer direct support and mutual aid and collective efforts to make material changes that improve peoples' lives.

- **Political Consciousness Raising within Migrant Communities:**
Migrant organizing raises political consciousness within migrant communities of the roots causes of systemic inequality. As migrant communities develop an understanding for how their lives are shaped by global capitalism, systemic racism, patriarchy, and colonization within Canada, they develop a collective responsibility to work to address their shared concerns. This increases the community's sense of collective power to work towards common goals.

When we work with non-Filipino migrants and the immigrants that have very similar issues, it furthers our analysis of migration within the neoliberal context. Because when we say migration or the phenomenon of global migration, it doesn't happen in any vacuum, right? It's not just the Philippines, it's the flow of global migration coincides with the flow of like capitalist accumulation from the Global South to the Global North, right? So, in concrete terms, whenever we support, for example, workers from Southeast Asia or even from Latin America, workers can concretely see that, oh, regardless whether I'm from the Philippines or other countries, these countries are also dominated by foreign countries that are essentially pushing out to communities and then eventually they come and migrate as temporary foreign workers in Canada, so I think there's an impact there.

Migrant Grassroots Organizer

- **Individual and Community Resilience:**

Migrant organizing increases individual and collective capacity to ‘push-back’ against systemic inequalities. Migrant leaders demonstrate individual resilience when speaking up on issues they face in Canada and taking leadership roles within and outside of their communities to address these challenges. Migrant collective action also fosters community resilience, through creating a sense of belonging and community, as well as tapping into the community networks to better understand and challenge systemic inequalities.

- **Big and Small Victories:**

Migrant organizers recognize the importance of celebrating both “big” and “small” victories that result from collective action. Honoring these wins is an important process for people to build a sense of agency from their involvement. Some victories may be campaign-specific like when Parkdale residents organized a rent strike to protest above-guidelines rent increases. South Asian immigrant women also expressed pride from their work with a coalition of parents campaigning for full-day kindergarten in Ontario. Some organizing victories, however, may be “small” in that they are linked to individual accomplishments like helping someone find a job or get into school. It is equally important to celebrate both “big” and “small” wins, as this allows people to “see the power of many.” This gives a sense of hope that working together can make a difference, even in the face of ongoing challenges.

People when they participate in these collective actions, they see the power of many. They see that if we all stand together and we are all together, whether it's occupying somebody's office or blocking traffic or sealing off the Chinese consulate, there is power in numbers, there's strength in numbers and it would not be the same if it was just one person, whatever the issue is. So, I have seen people, almost joyful after actions. We laugh, we joke around, you can visibly see people feel empowered right, if there's such a thing you can see it. And I think its, you come together you realize that we are all connected, we are all affected by the same issues right so, I think it makes a huge difference when people do participate in collective actions.

Tibetan Community Leader

- **Building Solidarity with Migrant and Indigenous Communities:**
Migrant organizing strengthens networks across different migrant communities who face similar systemic inequalities. There is also emerging consciousness among migrant communities to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and foster deeper relationships and responsibility with the land and all forms of life.
- **Public Awareness of Systemic Inequalities Faced by Migrants:**
Migrant organizing highlights the systemic challenges experienced by migrant communities that include the growth in precarious immigration as well as continued underemployment and low wages among racialized immigrants. Migrant communities also contribute to labour organizing across Canada using an intersectional lens to the rights of migrant caregivers, migrant sex workers, and temporary foreign workers in the agriculture sector and other low-wage jobs. Systemic. This critical perspective informs grassroots responses to precarious labour, while informing policy advocacy at the local, provincial and federal level.
- **Expanding What it Means to be Canadian:**
Through bringing visibility to the concerns facing migrant communities, collective action expands upon what it means to be Canadian and who makes up Canada. This includes attention to Indigenous struggles for sovereignty and land rights and the idea of tolerance for diversity.

I think the visibility of immigrant organizing and immigrant issues means that we increasingly need to understand Canada as very diverse. We all go on and on about diversity, but what does that mean? Immigrant organizing makes people think about, well, how much diversity am I willing to tolerate? Right? Or what does it mean for people to truly challenge that whole notion of 'go back to where you came from'? All of those questions come into play when we're talking about immigrant communities and the work that they're doing.

*Non-Immigrant Community Organizer
who works in solidarity with Migrant Communities*

Resources

Migrant leaders in this research share about different resources accessible in and outside of their communities, that support and sustain their organizing work. Those resources are discussed as follows:

Community Resources:

Migrant leaders talked about their geographic location and social networks as resources that support their work.

- Both case study communities are based in specific neighborhoods in the GTA, with Tibetans in Parkdale and South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth. Their geographic concentration builds a sense of community and also serves as a great leverage to organize, raise community issues at local governance, have greater representation in settlement organizations.
- Social networks within the communities play an effective role in reaching out to the members, bringing them together and supporting them. Among the South Asian immigrant women in East Danforth, informal networks as well as SAWRO provide mutual aid and direct services to people. The Tibetan community tap into the Tibetan cultural centre as well as several *Kyidug ལྷོ་རྒྱལ་* as important networks to support community members.

Financial Resources:

Migrant communities rely on informal and formal sources of funding to support their activities.

- Migrant communities and organizations are often resourced by their community members and leaders who make individual donations, volunteer their work and organize community fundraise drives.
- Access grants from different foundations and government: Laidlaw foundation, Groundswell, Freedonia, United Way, Trillium Foundation, Canada summer jobs, Canadian Women's Foundation, City of Toronto

Training and educational resources:

Migrant leaders take part in training and workshops offered by grassroots groups and non-profit organizations. These may include:

- 'Know-Your-Rights' workshops
- Anti-oppression workshop
- Workshops on civic engagement
- Leadership and skill-building trainings

Coalition and networks: Migrant leaders partner with different settlement organizations and build network with other migrant networks.

- Mainstream service providing organizations
- Different migrant networks: OCAP, Unions (Unifor, CUPE, etc.), Migrant Worker's Network, Migrant Workers Action Center, CASSA, OCASI

Barriers to Organizing

This report documents how migrants across the GTA organize, support each other and resource their communities and grassroots organizations. While this demonstrates their resiliency, it is also indicative of their marginalization and their lack of access to resources that support their communities. Thus, it is important to highlight the challenges migrant leaders face when leading collective actions.

Individual-level barriers to participating in collective action

- **Economic and political insecurity:**
Migrants who experience economic and/or political insecurity are in the most vulnerable positions and they fear the repercussion of participating in collective actions. Low-income migrants often do not have income security and they fear losing their jobs or housing, whereas many fear losing their legal status, being arrested or even deported for their organizing work.
- **Gendered barriers:**
Migrant women experience gendered barriers in participating in collective action as they are expected to assume caregiving responsibility in the family, in addition to providing financial support. South Asian immigrant women also share that they often face resistance from their husbands who disapprove of their involvement in organizing.

- **Stigma and internalized oppression:**
Migrant leaders share their challenges in bringing people together and organizing on issues that are stigmatized in their communities. Some of those discussed issues are poverty, precarious immigration status, gender-based violence and alcoholism. In some cases, migrants internalize their own oppression and accept views and policies that justify anti-migrant framework.
- **Reluctance to resistance:**
Migrant leaders and organizers share that migrants who have left difficult situations in their countries of origin often compare their living conditions pre- and post-migration, which prevents them from fighting inequities in Canada. Migrants' reluctance to participate in collective action also stems from the idea of upholding "good image" for their community as they do not want to appear rebellious, or in case of the Tibetan community, seem "ungrateful" by voicing their problems and challenges in Canada.

Our parents' mentality comes from just striving to survive in India because there, it wasn't about being involved in Indian politics, it's about living as a refugee, going farming, putting together a house and feeding the children, right? So, it's a very different reality here where.. you should be involved in other larger spheres and it still needs a lot of work.

Tibetan Community Leader

Group and community-level barriers to organizing collective action

- **Lack of resources:**
Grassroots migrant organizations across the GTA function out of a scarcity of resources that are essential for their work. Lack of resources limited and unstable funding, overstretched manpower and capacity building opportunities for organizers are significant barriers to collective organizing.
- **Institutional barriers:**
Migrant organizers raise their concern over various institutional barriers that restrict and undermine their work. Many grassroots organizations who receive government funding are restricted from political organizing that critique the system. South Asian immigrant women express their frustration over the reluctance among some stakeholders and people in power to accept certain issues as 'big issue'. Members of Tibetan community point to lack of mainstream media coverage on their collective actions for Tibetan freedom movement in Canada.
- **Internal division** within the community as well as the organizations are seen as challenges that weaken the community organizing. Some of those include intergenerational conflicts, differences in prioritization of issues and division among documented and undocumented members of the community.
- **Challenges in building network:** Migrant organizers face various challenges in building solidarity across migrant communities and organizations due to lack of resources, limited networking capacity and differing priorities and analyses of issues. Some organizers note that the 'divide, rule and conquer' strategy leave the migrant communities to contest for the limited resources available to them, which causes a barrier to working together.

All ethnic groups should come together, but we don't know who is going to create that glue for us, we do not have any resource to organize and glue up all organizations together, and government I know definitely will not... because there is fear, so they will never resource us to connected.

South Asian Immigrant Woman Leader

Transformative Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant communities who were already experiencing multiple layers of oppression and inequalities, faced exacerbated social isolation and 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.

Though our research activities took place before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while writing this report we learned how migrant communities involved in our study were well prepared to organize mutual aid and to provide various forms of support to their community members and beyond. Below we highlight excerpts from conversations with advisory members, to illustrate the continued manifestation of transformative resilience during the pandemic.

Some examples of community responses to COVID-19 led by the two communities included:

South Asian Immigrant Women in East Danforth

South Asian Women's Rights Organization

- Distribute face masks, shields, sanitizers and food supplies to the members
- Provide support to people seeking access to emergency financial assistance
- Youth help elders and others in the community to navigate online services and platforms
- Invite medical professionals to offer online info sessions in Bengali language to share information COVID testing, vaccination and other health-related information
- Support with accessing legal aid for housing, immigration and domestic violence during COVID as an expressed need
- Organize cultural and social events virtually
- Organize online discussion for community members to share experiences and impacts of COVID-19 in the community
- Partner with East Toronto and Scarborough Health Network community to discuss vaccine strategies and disseminate information

Tibetans in Parkdale

Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre

- Partner with local Tibetan restaurants to deliver fresh meal to frontline healthcare workers and homeless people in encampments in Parkdale and across the city
- Invite public office holders for virtual info-sessions on refugee claims and accessing COVID-relief assistance
- Provide food rations and personal protective equipment (PPE) to seniors in the community
- Organize virtual daily prayer sessions as well as circle dance every Wednesday

Tibetan Women's Association of Ontario

- Sow and distribute cloth masks and scrub hats to healthcare workers, seniors, community centers
- Offer virtual wellness and recreational sessions including yoga, meditation, children's ballet classes
- Organize free virtual income-tax clinic/consultation for low-income families
- Organize info-session in Tibetan on immigration, legal and settlement services, seniors' benefits

Thoughts from Youdon Tenzin Khangsar, Tibetan Women's Association of Ontario

"The past pandemic has taught us a lot, where we emerged even more resilient and stronger as a community. Especially all the community organizations and leaders surrounding Parkdale-High Park. There was a point when we had weekly 'Parkdale Mutual Aid' community zoom meetings/conferences. This was very pleasant and amazing to watch, as there were multiple community organizations and leaders of various ethnic backgrounds that came together to aid, discuss and inform each other about all the resources that are available in the light of pandemic and ongoing struggles that have been there, prior to the pandemic".

Thoughts from Sultana Jahangir, South Asian Women's Rights Organization.

"When the pandemic hit, Canada was not ready. There was no emergency system to support racialized immigrants who lost their jobs and didn't have money for housing and food, many who were excluded from federal emergency assistance because of their precarious work. The Covid infection rate, the loss of life, these impacted us first and the hardest because of pre-existing systemic inequality.

As immigrants from Bangladesh and Tibetan refugees, we arrived in Canada with emergency disaster experience. We drew upon our experience to act even before the government, to offer mutual aid to support each other, bring food to people, and find out how seniors are doing. When the government started to take action, they recognized that small community-based organizations like SAWRO have an important role to play because we are very close to the community and understand their concerns. When we received funding for pandemic relief, we distributed this aid immediately, while bigger organizations that were unaccustomed to working remotely, moved more slowly to offer essential aid and support.

Pandemic is showing us the importance of community organizations like the Tibetan community and SAWRO who provide "social love." All of the smaller ethnic community organizations are the social glue in times of crisis. Even though we have different histories and points of view, we stand with the community, working tirelessly to take people to hospital, drop off food, help people not to panic, because we have experience in disaster management from our own backgrounds. When we take care of our neighbors and see how everyone is doing, we increase social love and the communities' capacity to overcome systemic inequalities. These are the skills that we bring from our own community, when we do collective action".

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.

Glossary

Barriers: In the context of collective action, barriers refer to group norms or institutional challenges that impede/prevent people from participating in or groups organizing for social action.

Collective action: Groups of people working together to address shared concerns in the community, through consistent social and/or political activities.

Community organizing: Community organizing involves the mobilization of a group of people to empower themselves by identifying their needs and taking collective actions to address shared issues and concerns.

Economic insecurity:

- “the anxiety produced by the possible exposure to adverse economic events and by the anticipation of the difficulty to recover from them” (Bossert & D’Ambrosio, 2013, p. 1018)
- According to Osberg (2010, p. 23), “[A] definition of 'economic insecurity' which reflects the common usage meaning of the term 'insecure' might be: 'the anxiety produced by the lack of economic safety (Bossert & D’Ambrosio, 2013, p. 1018)

Empowerment: Becoming or feeling increased confidence to control one’s life and feel capable of doing something to improve one’s life.

Ethnic communities: communities with a high concentration of immigrants from a particular background. These geographic areas are often visible as immigrant destinations, due to the many ethnic-specific businesses and organizations.

Immigrant: A person who has settled permanently in another country (CCR)

Institutional/Systemic barriers: Policies, procedures, or practices that unfairly discriminate and can prevent individuals from accessing resources, opportunities or participating fully in a situation (The Responsible Consumer, n.d.).

Internalized oppression: When people of oppressed groups accept and justify dominant values, beliefs and attitudes that oppress them.

Kyidug སྐད་སྐྱེད་ : Translated in English as ‘in times of joy and sorrow’, kyidug are Tibetan welfare groups that usually connect people with common geographic and

cultural ties in Tibet to observe festivals and address social welfare of members (Swank, 2014).

Lived Experience: Real experiences of individuals that is the source of their knowledge.

Migrant: A person who is outside their country of origin (CCR).

Mutual Aid: Community members exchanging support and services for mutual benefit.

Newcomer: landed immigrants who came to Canada up to five years before a given census year (Statistics Canada)

Non-status: A person who does not have a legal status which allows them to live and work in Canada. Including people or who remained in Canada after their visa has expired (CCR).

Organizing Goal: Aimed or desired result of working together that reflect the concerns of the community.

Organizing Strategy: "A plan of action that links problems and solutions and depends on ongoing assessment of the actions and the sentiments of the other actors (Mondros et al, 1994 p. 131).

Place-based struggle: Grassroots organizing for specific needs of people in specific geographic location.

Political consciousness: Awareness and critical understanding of one's social, economic, or political identities and different forces that shape them

Praxis: Developing ideas or theories through action, engagement and reflection

Precarious immigration status: Precarious status means forms of legal status characterized by any of the following: lack of permanent residence or permanent work authorization, limited or no social benefits, inability to sponsor relatives and deportability. In Canada, precarious status describes people with authorized temporary status (such as temporary workers, international students and refugee claimants) and people without authorization to work or reside in the country (including those with expired permits or denied refugee claims, those under

deportation orders and people who entered without authorization). (Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard 2009, as cited in Goldring & Landolt, 2012).

Refugee: A person who is forced to flee from persecution and who is located outside of their home country (CCR)

Resources: A diverse range of materials and assets, such as finances, knowledge, tools, networks, and materials

Social actors: Key stakeholders involved in collective action; decision-makers related to issue; factors of influence; people with lived experience

Social and economic exclusion: Forms of social, economic and political disadvantage or discrimination and the lack of collective capacity to address the conditions that produce disadvantage

Stateless person: A person that no state recognizes as a citizen (CCR)

Structural/systemic inequalities: A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations and social norms contribute to and reinforce various forms of inequalities ()

Transformative resilience: A conceptualized/critical framework to investigate how migrant communities simultaneously adapt and cope with host society conditions while resisting unequal relations of power

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