

Interview with Sayema Ahmed – Community Action Leader*

Michelle Hayman (MSW Student – Access Alliance): We're here today to talk about your family's experience with employment and temporary agencies in Canada. To start, what kind of work did you and your husband do in Bangladesh?

Sayema Ahmed (Community Action Leader – Access Alliance): I was a dentist in Bangladesh. I completed my postgraduate training in oral surgery and I worked as a dentist in a private dental office. My husband was a lawyer in Bangladesh.

Michelle: Since arriving in Canada, what kind of work has your family found?

Sayema: We arrived here as skilled immigrants. As professionals you can't have the job you did in your home because they are licensed jobs. Apart from that, if you're looking for any other job, they look for two things. One is Canadian experience. The other is work experience or you need references.

So when we arrived in Canada, we were going nowhere. My husband looked for some clerical jobs, office jobs, some kind of assistant jobs. Even the cashier jobs in the groceries needed references. We didn't find anything for a couple of months; we couldn't find any kind of paid job. My husband volunteered for a legal firm for three months without payment.

Michelle: Is that why your husband signed up for work at a temporary help agency?

Sayema: Yes, because we could only live off our savings for six months. Then we had to survive, to run our family. We have a kid, now she's three years old. Back then, when we came to Canada, she was only 10 months. So, the survival was the main thing at that time.

My husband saw an ad for general labour work at a temporary agency. There were no specific qualifications for general labour. Then he signed up for the temp agency.

Michelle: What kind of work did your husband do for the temp agency?

Sayema: At first, he got a packaging job. Then, after he was laid off from that position, he worked in a food company. There he had to lift flour sacks from one place to another, most of the time it was heavy lifting. If you are very fortunate, you can get a packaging job. They are less stressful. But for any of the general labour positions you have to be physically fit.

Michelle: What kinds of issues did your husband experience working for a temporary agency?

Sayema: It was the first time we'd heard of a temporary agency job. Because we were professionals back home, we didn't have any experience with this kind of job or this kind of agency, how they work, or how they pay. He just needed a job.

The first issue you experience is uncertainty. You never know whether you will have a job next week. You sign up for the temporary agency and they don't give you any commitment that you will have any work for one month or two months. You could be working for them for two weeks, three weeks and then they say there is no work because of layoffs.

The second issue is that you never know what the employer is actually paying you. The temp agencies just tell you a certain amount that you will receive, for instance, 11 dollars. Usually they stick to the minimum wage. At that time, the minimum wage was 10.25, so my husband always got 10.25. Regardless of what the employer is actually paying.

Michelle: How did working for a temp agency affect your husband's health?

Sayema: It affected both his physical and mental health. Physically, he got high blood pressure. One time he had to pull more weight than what he was told he would. In his commitment, he was told he would only lift 40lbs, but the employer asked him to lift weights of 80lbs. He was so afraid that if he didn't do it he would lose his job, so he did it. He had back pain and muscle pain for almost three months.

Mentally, working for a temporary help agency is so depressing and stressful. When you were a professional, this was not the kind of job you were doing back home. At the same time, the pay is not good. Even if you're working 8 hours, or more than that, you can't earn a good life for your family. So it was both physically and mentally stressful. So, it was bad for me and my family.

Michelle: How did it affect your family's physical and mental health and well-being?

Sayema: When you are on minimum wage, 11 dollars, after you're done paying the rent and for the TTC, there is nothing left for your groceries or your food costs. The rent is so high and the TTC is so expensive. So you have to maintain your family by using your child care benefit. You can't have a fair life or good life or decent life when you're working for minimum wage. It affects the whole family. Not only the person who is working for the temporary agency, but also all the people who are related to that person. All the time that you are depressed, you are stressed, it affects your family. After working so hard for a week, eight hours a day, you don't even know after paying my rent, after paying my TTC, how can I have my groceries done? You don't have any money for recreation. You can't think of any luxury or travel, like any vacation. When I went to the shopping centres, I didn't even think of buying any toys for my kid. That was so stressful. You can't have a fair or decent life.

Michelle: Do you have any suggestions for policy changes that would help protect people working for temporary agencies like your husband did?

Sayema: One thing is that there should be a limit on the percentage of pay that temporary agencies are allowed to take and they should report on what the temporary workers were actually paid.

Another suggestion is that employers should be equally responsible for the pay, benefits, trainings and liabilities of the temp workers. Also if a temp worker becomes sick while working, the employers should be equally responsible for all the things that happen to the temp workers.

There should be assurance that the temp agencies will find you replacement work if you are laid off or at least they should give you termination pay. So if you go to work one day and they tell you that there's no work today because of layoffs, you don't know what kind of work you will find or where you will find it, so there should be a payment for sudden termination.

And there should be a guarantee that temporary workers have a minimum guaranteed period of work, like 6 months, to help address uncertainty.

Michelle: Do you have any ideas for changes that would help new immigrants find stable work outside of temporary agencies more easily in Canada?

Sayema: The first issue for skilled workers from licensed professions, like doctors, dentists and lawyers, is that they have to do the licensing exam and study for that. There should be specific funding for that so that you can sit for the exam, because at the same time, you have to survive. So there could be some on job paid trainings where you're doing a relevant job. For me, for example, I am a dentist. I cannot practice directly as a dentist over here. But, when I came to Canada, it would have been good if I could have gotten a job in any kind of dental office like an assistantship or a paid intern or a kind of paid bridging program. At the same time, there could be specific funding for professionals so you could pay for preparing for exams and for buying books, so it will be easier for professionals.

On the other hand, there are other skilled jobs which are not regulated licensing jobs. You know, BBAs (Bachelor of Business Administration), MBAs (Masters of Business Administration), Human Resources managers and other public administrative jobs. For them, the same suggestion is there should be on job training after arriving in Canada so they don't have to go here and there (looking for work). The government could pay the offices that are hiring these immigrants or give tax credits to these companies so that they hire these people and count their experience that they counted when they applied for the immigration system.

When we applied for the immigration system as a skilled immigrant, they count our experience, but as soon as we arrive in Canada, the experience is zero. They are looking for Canadian experience; they are looking for a Canadian degree. How can I have Canadian experience if I don't work in Canada? So there should be specific on job training so that after coming to Canada I have a job or internship. The pay might not be much, but enough that I can survive, I can maintain my family and at the same time I can have training to upgrade my skills. It would be helpful if there was funding for that.

Michelle: Why do you think it's important to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour?

Sayema: My opinion is very clear on this issue. The government is raising the minimum wage to \$11.25 this October. If you calculate when I'm getting \$11.25, if it is raised to \$15 and I am working 8 hours a day. It is almost a four dollar raise. Four dollars per 8 hours per day is almost thirty dollars, a week is 150 dollars and a month is almost 600 dollars. So, if you do simple math, this six hundred dollars, I can think of my groceries after paying my bills, after paying my rents. I can think of a decent life, a fair life. It's not that people are thinking of luxury, of doing luxurious things. This is the basic needs. If you raise the minimum wage to fifteen dollars, you will have a decent and fair life. At least I don't have to cut my daughter's child tax benefit to maintain my groceries. At least I can think of some recreation. At least after paying my rent, TTC, I can think of think of a little vacation, I can think of a little toy for my child. That is a basic thing. The main thing is, if you raise the minimum wage to 15 dollars, you can have a decent and fair life. At least you can live above the poverty line.

**Answers have been edited in some places for clarity*