

RACISM IN CANADA - MAY 14, 2009

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COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Vanessa Kirunda and her son Sean, who live in Mississauga, have been stung by racism. "And it's not just white European people," she says. (May 10, 2009)

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IMMIGRATION REPORTER

Vanessa Kirunda is the last person you'd expect to be looked down on.

Poised, articulate, educated and confident, Kirunda, a black woman, can dissect and analyze why Canadians treat her differently.

But all bets were off when schoolmates called her 10-year-old son Sean a n-----. Three times. Three different children.

"I anticipated this would happen, but it breaks my heart. Something is wrong when children say these things. On top of everything, I'm not going to have my child degraded," said the Mississauga resident.

The "everything" she refers to includes being sent to an Adult Learning Centre when she arrived, even though English is her first language, and getting passed over for a college spot

in favour of a white friend. "I've never understood people who believe they are more superior. It's based in idiotic ideologies. And it's not just white European people."

Kirunda and her son, Canadian citizens who emigrated from Kenya six years ago, face exactly the sort of walls a major study of multiculturalism and society pinpoints.

Crunching thousands of numbers from 41,666 people interviewed in nine languages, the just-published study found skin colour – not religion, not income – was the biggest barrier to immigrants feeling they belonged here. And the darker the skin, the greater the alienation.

"We were surprised that religion didn't have more effect," said lead author Jeffrey Reitz. "It came down to race, with Asian people reporting some and with young black males the most stigmatized. The data is consistent with that.

"We tend to believe racism is a minor problem in Canada, of little consequence. Someone looked at them funny. Or that many immigrants are doing well, so it must be their fault if they aren't. There is a reluctance to investigate the issue."

The University of Toronto professor of ethnic, immigration and pluralism studies added that a lack of trust was also higher among the successful, Canadian-born, Canadian-educated children of visible minority immigrants.

The problem isn't multiculturalism, spawned in 1971 by then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau, the study concluded.

"A lot of people in Canada revel in diversity. They were happy to say goodbye to liver and onions, hello stir-fries and samosas," said Reitz. But the original idea of multiculturalism saw integration as the marker of success: A second generation equally accepted in the mainstream and in the ethnic community.

The study found:

The more discrimination someone faced, the more they were likely to identify with their ethnic group, rather than as Canadian.

Visible minorities identified themselves much more strongly by their ethnic origin through the second, third and fourth generations.

While 65 per cent of recent black immigrants, 70 per cent of South Asians and 52 per cent of Chinese felt they belonged in Canada, those numbers dropped to 37 per cent, 50 per cent and 44 per cent in the second generation.

A third of Chinese, South Asians, Filipino and Southeast Asians reported discrimination; half of blacks did and 40 per cent of Koreans and Japanese did. In fact, a schoolyard fight in Keswick that made national news involved a Korean boy retaliating for a racial slur.

Discrimination was most common in applying for jobs and at work; a store, bank or restaurant were the next most frequent.

"We need to address these feelings of isolation," said Reitz.

"Among minorities born in Canada, blacks have the lowest sense of belonging, the lowest level of trust in others and the weakest sense of Canadian identity. They are the least likely to vote," Reitz and Ryerson University assistant professor Rupa Banerjee wrote in the book

Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion. "Among recent immigrants, blacks have high levels of volunteers but among the second generation this has disappeared."

Should we worry?

Reitz pointed out that the first wave of migration of blacks from the south in the United States were embraced for their culture and differences in the north, creating places such as the prosperous, dynamic Harlem in New York City.

A few generations later, Harlem was a ghetto that exploded into race riots.

"I'm not saying that is going to happen here. But we have indications of social problems in communities. There is the perception of a crime problem. Some children of immigrants have high dropout rates. We ought to be asking why."

The study used data from Statistics Canada's 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey. In the last seven years, said Reitz, "attitudes have improved in race relations. But they aren't reflected in reduced discrimination. Better is not good enough."

Kirunda, a registered nurse who is taking graduate nursing courses at Ryerson University, would agree.

"I'm a single black mum with a black boy. In Canada, there is more compassion for that than in the States. Here, I knew I was going to be supported." She pauses. "If I did most of the hard work."

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One of the biggest issues

is that Canadians by and large don't believe themselves to be prejudiced. The evidence speaks against them. Just look at the discrimination faced by Native Canadians - of course, we took their land so it's in our best interests to see them as somehow inferior. Also: if the Tamils currently protesting the genocide in Sri Lanka were light-skinned, would they get more support? I suspect they would.

Submitted by Northern Cynic at 7:57 AM Thursday, May 14 2009