



## Storied Lives

### Episode 2: Quota

Full Transcript

#### Introduction

Narrator: *Please be advised that the following podcast explores intersecting themes of poverty, racism, and xenophobia. You may find some scenes distressing.*

*Before you continue, if you haven't already, please complete our listener participation survey by following the links in the show notes.*

Welcome to Storied Lives. A podcast that looks at the lived realities of poverty from an intersectional lens. This is episode two. Quota.

*[musical intro]*

#### Story

Composite Storyteller: My husband's face looks sunken and drained, his hand limp in his lap, wound tight like a boxing glove in his plaid button up. I cradle his arm and ask what happened? He tells me, "Sometimes the machinists throw scrap metal into the regular office bins. I cut my hand when I was doing my garbage rounds." He says 'rounds' like he's still a doctor in the ER back home. His manager can't understand us, but he puts his hand on my collar bone and pries me away. "He cut himself — it's not a big deal." I ask, "have you called an ambulance?" The manager stops me from unravelling the shirt, tacky with coagulated blood. "No...no, no." He sighs, tips his glasses forward, and pinches the bridge of his nose, "Look. Sometimes, people, they get lazy at work. Tell him he has to —" he megaphone-cups his hands around his mouth and aims at my husband, "— stay focused!" My husband understands English mostly but doesn't speak it very well so the manager's always calling me to

translate. I ask, when did this happen? “Does it matter? We’re short-staffed today and your husband already took a whole sick day this month. He had to finish the shift.” My husband whispers up at me, “I tried to tell the man, I need stitches.” He motions sewing up his palm. The manager snorts, “I can’t understand you two! Look, he did the safety training, right? *He* should know how to stay safe on the job.” In English, I manage, “Please. Get him an ambulance.” The manager shrugs, “I’m not authorized to do that after a shift has ended.” I glare. The manager rolls his eyes, pulls out his phone, and mumbles, “I’ll call you an Uber.”

In the emergency waiting room, I dial through a list of neighbours for someone to watch our son. I’m nearly out of options when the lady at the end of the hall picks up, saying, “of course, sweetie.” I exhale, “You’re a godsend. He’s with the family one floor down. Bring your boys over for haircuts anytime. On me.” She asks, “by the way, have you heard from your sponsor family?” I think about all the promises that were made. They all said, Canada has services to help refugees get ‘settled.’ I only feel unsettled. And the settling we’ve done — it feels like settling *for*. The government couldn’t do much about jobs or housing or anything really. We have no family here, no history, so, no references. Our sponsor found us a place with one of their previous families, it was supposed to be temporary. They even took my son to school a couple times. But when he had another episode — PTSD, from the war — I think it was too much for them. “No,” I tell her, “not for a while.” She says, “It’s not your fault, love. That’s how it goes for most of us.” I remember, the family we share our one bedroom with is visiting relatives out of the city, so I tell my husband, he’ll have the night to himself — it will be the first time since we arrived.

From the hospital — and pretty much anywhere else in the city — the bus takes over an hour to get to work. And then there’s the 20-minute walk from the bus stop — praying I don’t get obliterated by the cavalcade of transport trucks thundering up dust inches from the cramped gravel shoulder. I’m 17 minutes late which means all the lockers are taken so I stuff my coat under the bench by the door. The manager doesn’t bother looking up to hand over my tablet, “You know this means no paid 15 today right? And I’m docking you that extra two minutes. That’s time theft.”

My tablet starts the countdown to my first pick and I plot a course across the warehouse towards the aisle number, track down the coded bin, fumble around for the item, scan it, send it off to shipping, and the countdown starts again. We’re not allowed phones on the floor but sometimes I sneak mine in anyway. It tells me I average twelve kilometers a day, 15,000 steps. I learn quick that my job hangs by a thread — and if my metrics drop, if I don’t make my quota — snip. When they hired me, they said I’d work my way up, but now they say they want to keep me on the floor because I can translate for other workers. The pay sounds decent, but they only hire through temp agencies that claw back wages off every paycheck and leave me with barely minimum wage.

By lunch, my knees are aching and my back is stuck, pitched at 15 degrees, and I press my thumb to the fingerprint scanner punch-clock to start my 30 minutes ticking down. From there, it's 203 steps towards the sour breakroom. Sometimes when my friend is working, she'll drive us to get the only food close enough — pizza. 12 minutes there — 12 minutes back. If we eat in the car, and we're lucky, we can make it in 29. Unless the parking lot fills up, then it's bad news. We don't usually risk it. I fall asleep for the 8 and a half minutes the ancient microwave takes to scorch the top of my frozen lasagna. I dream of back home. Towering citadels with ornate stone-carved archways, buttresses and spires. Buzzy marketplaces. Palm-lined thoroughfares, cafes and sweet shops flickering under gas lamplights. I dream about walking through sprawling public squares, by booming clocktowers and domed cathedrals, marble fountains and reflecting pools. I dream I'm speaking to my architecture students from behind a familiar lectern and watching them nod along.

The supervisor leans into the lunchroom and barks me awake, 'HR wants to see you.' I filed a complaint about him months ago — every time he walks by, he waits for when I'm lifting something heavy so he can hump my ass. HR leans her elbows on the desk and laces her fingers. "So, if you hate it here so much, maybe this isn't the place for you. We're a family. Yes? And families stick together. Yes? Oh, one more thing, that anti-corporate vandalism in the women's room?" She means the pro-union graffiti. "If you hear anything about who did it, you'll let us know, right?" I shut her door behind me.

It's 38 minutes since I clocked out for lunch. The supervisor screams across the loading dock, 'That's another 8 off your pay, Mamacita!' He knows I'm not Spanish, but if you're not white, you're mamacita. I can't afford to finish the lasagna. I lose another three minutes trekking to the punch clock. On my way, I pass my friend and tell her to help herself to the microwave dinner. From nowhere someone screams, "Quit with the gossiping! Get to work!" When I punch in, my metrics are dipping. I'll have to work through my other break. I rush off to my first pick. A disembodied voice behind me screams, "no running!" When I finish, I realize I left my phone and my wallet in my coat. I look for my coat under the bench. It's gone. It's all gone. I lost everything.

*[musical interlude]*

### **Interview with Jasmine Ramze Rezaee**

Jasmine Ramze Rezaee: So my name is Jasmine Ramze Rezaee. I'm the Director of Advocacy and Communications at YWCA Toronto. Our work broadly maps onto gender equity, racial justice, and poverty reduction. And many of the communities that we work with are survivors of violence, newcomers to Canada, refugees, racialized community members, and folks who do experience intersecting barriers and lack of access to certain services and structural inequities. My first thoughts in reading this story is that it captures the experiences of many of our community members who come to Canada and have trouble having their credentials recognized, face labour market discrimination, and then when they secure employment, it's often precarious employment, and so they don't really have

access to the same kind of workplace protections. It's just becoming increasingly difficult for a newcomer or an immigrant to build a stable, safe, dignified life here in Canada.

So newcomers face multiple challenges and barriers when accessing employment. The first set of barriers refers to their credentials being recognized here in Canada. So, many newcomers are professionals back home, and when they move to Canada have to undergo a rigorous process in order to have their credentials recognized. And that process could take multiple years. In the meantime, there are bills to pay and ends that need to be met. And so, while newcomers are going through the process of having their skill sets recognized in the Canadian context, they have to take on these survival jobs in order to make ends meet. The second problem is that when newcomers come to Canada, they don't have Canadian work experience. And there's a lot of discrimination based on that whole notion of — although you are in Canada, although you have a lot of relevant work experience, it's not Canadian work experience. And so, employers discriminate based on that. And so, what we find is that a lot of newcomers who are very qualified, they're trapped in these precarious minimum wage jobs with few benefits and very little job security.

*[musical interlude]*

David Hulchanski is a professor at the University of Toronto; his research highlights how there is a lot of segregation that is happening along the lines of race and neighborhoods. We can all speculate as to why that is. But one of the realities are because newcomers and racialized folks do face systemic labour market discrimination in accessing well-paying jobs, their rights just aren't as protected, their labour isn't as valued, they're treated and viewed as lower skilled, because oftentimes, they are people of colour, and the system of white supremacy is still alive and well here in Canada. I think for racialized workers, particularly those that are trapped in these perceived 'lower skilled jobs,' they do face compounding discrimination. It is heightened, absolutely, for the women. The women face gendered and racial discrimination — it's reflected in the fact that there are these huge wage gaps. On average, 52 cents is earned for a racialized women for every dollar earned by a white man. It all compounds the experiences of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and of discrimination in the workplace, and this feeling of 'my voice doesn't matter or isn't as protected as the voice of others, because I have an accent, because I'm new, because I really need this job.'

*[musical interlude]*

Employment Standards are provincially regulated — every province has its own Employment Standards Act. But what we're finding with these emerging technologies and industries is that many workers don't even have access to these minimum basic employment standards because they are classified or misclassified as independent contractors. So many workers who are employed by the temp agency system — because they face systemic discrimination in accessing a full-time job with security — they end up in these temp agency systems, and when they go and are matched with an employer, they're

not actually an employer of that company. They are a temporary, casual worker, truly the most expendable kind of labourer with access to almost no, or very few, employment protections. So, if something happens, say there's abuse, say there's harassment, say there's an injury, these workers don't actually have full access to legal recourses or the system that has been outlined in the Employment Standards Act. The problem with the way our labour laws are set up is, oftentimes, the onus is on the employer to enforce certain rights, rather than the government, for example, doing random audits of employment agencies; they're waiting for an employee to bring forward a concern to the Ministry of Labour. And the truth of the matter is, a lot of employers are getting away with really terrible working conditions, because their employees don't know what rights they are entitled to. They may not even know that they have certain rights. A whole portion of the population don't have access to any legal status — they're undocumented workers. These workers may have submitted their papers and are just waiting and biding their time and don't have any protections. During the pandemic, our immigration processes really slowed down and backed up. So, there were folks waiting for their permanent residency card for 18 months, 24 months. In the meantime, they have rent to pay, they have responsibilities, they may have children.

*[musical interlude]*

Working poverty in Ontario is on the rise. Wages are becoming disconnected from the cost of living. So, individuals, whether they're in single households or joined households, have to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet, because a minimum wage job is woefully deficient for our current housing market. In fact, a minimum wage worker would have to work 102 hours per week in Toronto to be able to afford the rent of a one-bedroom apartment. By the province's own account, there are about 400,000 Ontarians who live in poverty. A lot of those folks, if they are employed, are employed in these precarious work situations in temp agencies by these exploitative employers who do not respect their rights. And it is a lot of women, frankly, it is a lot of racialized folks and newcomers.

It's actually more difficult for a newcomer in Canada today to build a life than it was 20 years ago. And the primary reason for this is the cost of rent is so high and the cost of living is so high and so disconnected from wages, that when a newcomer now comes to Canada to build a life, they need a lot of capital. What we're finding is just a lot of newcomers in Canada — refugees or not — are just struggling to make ends meet. And you can't really engage in long-term planning about your life for your future when you're worried about your next bill. You know, when everything costs a lot, I mean, you're gonna make a very different kind of choice about education or your future because you have these bills that are pressing and you have to deal with right now.

*[musical interlude]*

There's one notion of poverty reduction that's really focused on the role of employment in reducing poverty. But ultimately, a job is not an income security program. And for a newcomer or a refugee to

be able to access employment, they need housing first, they need to be in the right sort of mental space to go find employment, they need to have access to childcare so they have the free time to look for a job, they need to be able to navigate the workforce and have their credentials or expertise or experiences recognized, and they need to have employers that then support their well-being. So the supports that are provided for refugees and newcomers need to be an integral part of this life stabilization approach: helping folks to get to a place where employment is even a possibility. Housing is critical — you can't have a good job without having access to housing. There are actually some folks who are in our shelter system, or who are couch surfing with friends who have a job. But I mean, what kind of life is that really, if your work can't even afford you to secure housing? That's why we talk about housing being a human right: every resident of Canada should have access to safe and dignified housing. And that should be a condition of you being a human being in this country, and not be contingent on employment or income.

Childcare is critical. A lot of individuals in precarious working conditions are working shift jobs, or they're working non-traditional hours. And these folks, especially women, still have caregiving responsibilities at home, so they need to access daycare that is affordable and flexible. Anyone who's interested in poverty reduction should really understand how important access to affordable childcare is to women's labour market participation, to... really, the economic security of families and particularly women-led families, and how a national socialized childcare system also benefits children. Because the quality of education actually improves for these kids who have access to educational opportunities, and then life opportunities throughout the life course.

Mental health services are absolutely critical, and they need to be culturally responsive. A therapeutic environment can only really be provided by a counselor or therapist who has some kind of understanding about your lived experience. So ideally, someone from your own cultural background. Some refugees come to Canada, again, having escaped war, abuse, persecution, violence, and have access to very few mental health supports. Mental health services as a whole is not really protected in our socialized healthcare system.

*[musical interlude]*

Sometimes people think that these issues are so large and so intractable that they can't be solved. But the truth is, policy changes can have a positive impact in addressing low wages and reducing poverty in our province. I can think of three specific examples of policy recommendations that could substantively improve the lives and well-being of a huge segment of Ontario's population.

First, is modifying the Employment Standards Act such that (a) no worker is excluded from the act, so that it doesn't matter if you are an independent contractor, working at a temp agency, a migrant worker, whomever, that everyone is, first and foremost, protected by the act and that no one is excluded from these basic legal workplace protections. And improving minimum wages to reflect living

wages. Same thing for paid sick days, we need at least 10 paid sick days. Why are we expecting folks who have injuries or who have illnesses to come into these low-paying frontline jobs or do the same thing for caregiving responsibilities, right? If they have a child at home who may be experiencing these difficulties? So, basic human dignity and just fairness would require us to completely overhaul the Employment Standards Act. It's completely doable. And I think there's a strong moral and even business imperative for us to do that. So that's one policy change.

The second one, of course, is another policy change that we can absolutely enact as a society and as a province is to improve and raise the rates of both OW, that is the Ontario Works program, and ODSP, the Ontario Disability Support Program. The pandemic has revealed that governments can take *speedy* action when they want to do so. With the CERB program and this \$2,000 a month benchmark, we're finding that, hey, our provincial social assistance systems are really extraordinarily inadequate in meeting the basic needs of today's world. For a single recipient of Ontario Works, \$733 doesn't actually help them find housing or pay for food or any of that. Both systems are woefully inadequate in meeting people's basic needs. What we're finding out at YWCA Toronto is that we have a lot of folks in our shelters who had to access emergency shelter for whatever reason, and then months, sometimes even years later, are still trapped in the shelter system, because the waitlists for affordable housing are seven years long, and they're receiving \$733 from the government. And it's not enough.

The third policy change: I think we need some kind of guaranteed livable income program. From where I sit, and the work that we do with our community members and the conversations that we've had, the number one thing that folks say is, they would like to have access to more money because money equals safety, particularly for a woman. So, I think there's a real compelling argument to make for a guaranteed livable income program that all residents of Canada can have access to. And I think that dividends for, especially women, would be extremely high.

And I guess the fourth thing, now that I'm on this topic, is to give undocumented workers just a real path to Canadian citizenship. Because these workers have no legal protections, their needs are invisible and the harms that they experience has been erased from our public consciousness. It is within the policy realm to do this; I think it would go so far in protecting and advancing Canadian Human Rights.

*[musical outro]*

## **Conclusion**

Narrator: Thanks for listening to *Storied Lives*. If you haven't done so already, please complete the follow up survey by clicking on the link in the show notes. To create the story that begins this episode, we invited people living with poverty to share their stories with us. During a series of focus groups, participants revealed their unique experiences and how these are impacted by multiple overlapping and compounding oppressions. Using their testimonies, we composed four composite stories, including the one you just heard. These are fictional stories based on real experiences. Every scenario in these

stories happened or was informed by themes that emerged in the focus groups. This four-part Podcast Series is a collaboration of the Guelph and Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination and the University of Guelph's Live Work Well Research Centre and Community Engaged Scholarship Institute

Stories by Aidan Lockhart

Producer Zoey Barrett Wood

Please see the show notes for a list of all the people involved in the creation of these podcasts.

This podcast was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and received ethics approval from the University of Guelph research ethics board.

We deeply appreciate the guests who spoke with us and the people experiencing poverty who shared their stories.