



(IM)MIGRANT WOMEN IN CANADA:

Challenges and Changes

All non-Indigenous Canadians are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Yet the terms “migrant” and “immigrant” are often equated with racialized minorities and used to promote fear and distrust of ‘others’ who are different.

Immigration policy defines “desirable” versus “undesirable” immigrants. Historically, white, Protestant, British applicants were preferred. But policies that were obviously discriminatory were abandoned when Canada adopted a “points-based” system in the late 1960s. Unfortunately less obvious biases, which disproportionately affect women and girls, remain.

Why does immigration policy matter to women?

Many (im)migrants are women. A hundred years ago 38.7% of immigrants were women and girls, rising to 52.3% by 2011. The number of women and girls migrating from European countries decreased over the last few decades while the number from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa increased.

Immigrant women are diverse and come to Canada for many reasons. “Push” factors, such as dangerous situations like war and famine, and “pull” factors, like employment and education opportunities, play a role. Some immigrants have family in Canada who can sponsor them. Others have no ties but want to establish new lives, networks, and enterprises. Despite these differences, immigrant women share many struggles and the desire to improve their conditions.

(Im)migrant women enhance Canada socially, politically, and economically. However, they face a lot of systemic discrimination. Because more women come as dependents of men or as accompanying family members, notions that immigrant women “trail” their spouses, have few qualifications, do not engage in paid work, and are a “drain” on the system abound. Their unpaid labour remains unrecognized and when they engage in paid work it is assumed they are only suitable for “low-skill” jobs. It’s important to debunk these myths and look at the reality.

Migrant women in Canada work in temporary or seasonal agricultural jobs as well as in caregiving programs designed to fill labour shortages. In

2013 women made up 40% of the skilled worker, entrepreneur, investor, and self-employed immigration applicants. Immigrant women also contribute to the economy and society through unpaid work such as raising families and volunteering for community services. In response to injustice, many advocate for human rights and societal change. They create new resources for their communities and play key roles in both formal and informal politics.

(Im)migrant women face many challenges. Modern immigration policies favour those with money, high skills, official language capacity, and advanced education. Due to gender inequalities worldwide, women face many challenges to meeting these criteria. Income disparities mean women tend to have less money than men. Valued skills are highly gendered and racialized, and much of the work women do is not considered “high-skill”. Educational opportunities are not equal and girls and women face large barriers, especially at higher levels. Further, women are often responsible for dependents, which makes acquiring higher education, marketable skills,

Migrant vs. Immigrant

Migrants move across borders or from one region of a country to another, whereas immigrants are migrants who move to a new country with more secure status. In Canada, “migrant” is often narrowly applied to foreign workers who lack permanent residency status.



Policy4Women

Public space, public engagement

and work experience very difficult.

Women who enter Canada under the “family class” stream are dependent on their spouses to maintain immigration status. If physically or psychologically abused they may hesitate to leave, seek assistance, or report to authorities for fear of jeopardizing their status. Women sponsored by family members may also have restricted access to social programs including social assistance and housing. They have little familial support in Canada, as it is difficult to sponsor extended family members, and they often still support family members back in their countries of

origin, both financially and emotionally. Those working as live-in nannies must leave their children behind, in the care of others in their countries of origin.

(Im)migrant women frequently experience unfair treatment in the workplace. Sexism and racism can force those with professional qualifications to “de-skill” to find employment. Women in temporary work programs often face low wages, poor conditions, and sexual and racial harassment. Many work long hours without overtime pay, lack access to health care, and either have difficulty accessing or do not qualify for settlement services.

What can governments do?

Who is responsible?

Immigration is a joint responsibility of federal and provincial governments. The federal government used to take the lead, but this changed in recent decades with provinces taking a more active role in immigrant recruitment, selection, and settlement. Municipalities are also increasingly involved as tasks are handed down from higher to lower levels of government.

What has been done?

Over the last several decades, economic immigration pathways have been expanded, while pathways for family members and refugees have been minimized. While there have been efforts to balance economic priorities with family and humanitarian responses, emphasis remains on attracting the “best and brightest” immigrants.

There has been a massive increase in temporary foreign workers, along with rising concerns about the nature and effects of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. There has also been criticism of how Canada deals with its migrant caregivers. This has led to recent reform efforts, but they tend to be too little or too late.

What can be done?

Governments must:

- Balance family/humanitarian immigration streams with economic streams.
- Regularly and consistently conduct gender-based analyses of (im)migration policies and programs (including GBA Plus to account for intersecting forms of discrimination) and re-assess how (im)migration eligibility for women and men is determined.
- Design more and better public engagement mechanisms that ensure voices of (im)migrant women can be heard and acted upon.
- Ensure (im)migrant women have access to community resources by increasing support (aligned with specific concerns and resource requirements) to service providers and advocacy groups working with them.
- Deliver practical supports to (im)migrant women such as safe, affordable housing, language training, and accessible, affordable childcare.
- Tackle discrimination against (im)migrants and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

International Conventions & Human Rights

Canada also needs to sign, ratify, and abide by the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families*. Temporary foreign work programs should be scaled back, with more focus on permanent immigration pathways that will protect (im)migrants from precarious working and living conditions, exploitation, and abuse.

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