

**“Start from Zero”:  
Immigrant Women’s Experiences of the Gender Wage Gap**

**Ontario Women’s Health Network**

**April 2017**

## **“Start from Zero”: Immigrant Women’s Experiences of the Gender Wage Gap**

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### **Funding:**

This research project was supported by a grant from the [Pay Equity Office](#), Ministry of Labour, of the Government of Ontario. This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the Province.

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### **How to cite this document:**

Ontario Women’s Health Network. (2017). “Start from Zero”: Immigrant Women’s Experiences of the Wage Gap. Toronto: OWHN.

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## Acknowledgements

This project would not have happened without the participation of women in four Ontario communities who shared their inspiring stories with us and ideas on the changes that need to happen to make Ontario more equitable and inclusive of immigrants. Thank you for spending time with us to share your personal experiences and insights.

We are also grateful to staff at the four participating organizations who recruited participants and coordinated the focus groups in their respective Ontario communities, including:

- Immigrants Working Centre, Hamilton
- Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre
- Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services, Mississauga
- Windsor Women Working with Immigrant Women

Thank you to the women who shared their knowledge through key informant interviews:

- Pat Armstrong, Professor, Department of Sociology, York University
- Rukmini Borooh Pyatt, Tutor Program Coordinator, Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre
- Fay Faraday, Social justice lawyer, Visiting Professor, York University; Co-chair, Equal Pay Coalition
- Tracey Jastinder Mann, Advocacy Coordinator, Decent Work and Health Network

We would also like to thank Brenda Roche, Director of Research, Wellesley Institute, for providing advisory support to the project.

Finally, we express our gratitude to the Pay Equity Office for funding this project and for their continued attention to gender wage gap issues in Ontario.

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## Overview

Ontario's Pay Equity Act marks its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017. The act was created to ensure equal pay for work of equal value, in particular to address gender-based disparities in pay. In the intervening years, significant gains and increases in awareness have been made in addressing the wage gap. Yet, as statistics and evidence, including community based research, demonstrates, the gender wage gap, and systemic employment inequities that facilitate the gap, continue to be pressing equity and human rights issues today.

According to Statistics Canada 2013 Canadian Income Survey, a woman in Ontario makes 70.6 cents for every dollar earned by a man, or a wage gap of 29.4 percent (Cornish 2016). During the writing of this report, Equal Pay Day was acknowledged in Ontario. This day symbolically recognizes the extra time—over three months—that women have to work to earn the same pay that men earned in the preceding year for work of equal value. For many women though, in particular those who experience marginalization, the reality is that they will have to work even longer to reach a so-called equal pay day.

The Ontario Women's Health Network (OWHN) carried out this project to learn about the intersecting determinants that shape immigrant women's experiences of the gender wage gap; the facilitators and barriers to equitable employment that they face; and the discriminations they experience in seeking to enter Ontario's labour market. This project's contribution to a rich body of grey literature and academic evidence regarding immigrant women and employment in Canada is to share the personal stories behind the systemic issues that perpetuate the gender wage gap. This work shines a light on the lived experiences and perspectives of immigrant women related to settlement and employment in Ontario and the impacts of these experiences for themselves and their families. As well, this project sought to offer women a space to voice what they see as the solutions to the barriers they face to equitable inclusion in Ontario's labour market—and ultimately in Canadian society.

We also sought to engage with specialists from varying sectors who would contribute to this discussion, including Pat Armstrong, Professor, Department of Sociology, York University; Rukmini Borooah Pyatt, Tutor Program Coordinator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre; Fay Faraday, Social justice lawyer, Visiting Professor at York University and Co-chair of Equal Pay Coalition; and Tracey Jastinder Mann, Advocacy Coordinator for the Decent Work and Health Network. These key informant interviews allowed us to bring additional voices into the discussion to share their perspectives on the trends in Ontario's gender wage gap, the intersectional barriers to equitable employment experienced by immigrant women, the implications or inequitable labour conditions on women's lives and the actions needed to address the systemic discrimination and barriers to inclusion experienced by immigrant women.

The severity of the wage gap is determined by the intersection of gender, race, immigration status and other determinants, which has been addressed in recent Canadian and Ontario-based literature (Austin et al. 2016; Block, & Galabuzi 2011; Cornish, 2016; Fuller & Vosko 2008). The literature, and indeed the project's key informants, emphasize that immigrant, and racialized women in particular, disproportionately experience the gender wage gap and related employment inequities. During her interview, Fay Faraday pointed to the depth of the wage gap that these population groups face:

The gaps are profound. For women who are recent immigrants, the gender wage gap is 57 percent and for women who are immigrants but have been here for a longer period of time, the wage gap is 39 percent and overall for racialized women, whether they are immigrant women or women who were born in Canada, their wage gap is around 32 percent so that what you see is often when we talk about the wage gap a really generalized figure of 30 percent is given but the reality of that is that the wage gap is much much deeper for immigrant women and for racialized women in particular.

And as Faraday further pointed out, the wage gap remains persistent, is staying wide and is not closing.

Canadian statistics indicate that immigrant women tend to have higher levels of education than Canadian-born women, however they face higher unemployment numbers and are more likely to be working in jobs that require less education. The statistics also show that newcomer women, who have been in Canada for less than five years, had the lowest employment rate at 49.1 percent, with this rate improving for women who have been in Canada longer than ten years (Hudson 2016). Statistics also demonstrate that compared to immigrant men, immigrant women are paid lower wages and have less job security than immigrant men, figures that are exacerbated when a comparison is made between the income of racialized women immigrants and non-racialized immigrant men (Block and Galabuzi 2011; Shields et al. 2010).

Women immigrants in Ontario are overrepresented in precarious, low paying employment which exacerbates the gender pay gap. Fueled by the non-recognition of foreign credentials and professional experience in addition to systemic discrimination in the labour market, deskilling is a typical experience for women immigrants who find themselves seeking “survival jobs” in order to support themselves and their families (Sakamoto et al. 2010; Sethi 2014). This employment does not match their qualifications, and is typically characterized by low wage, contract and unstable positions (Creese & Wiebe 2009).

The challenges that immigrant women experience accessing employment can be further compounded by such factors as gendered caregiving roles and lack of accessible child care, language barriers, and racism and lack of transparency in hiring processes. The health implications of women’s exclusion from the labour market and experiences of precarious employment and social exclusion are explored in a number of publications (Asanin Dean & Wilson 2009; Khanlou 2010; Ng 2016; Premji 2014; Sethi 2014).

This project set out with the goal of exploring immigrant women’s experiences of the gender wage gap, including the barriers and facilitators to employment equity through an intersectional lens. And as the project listened to women’s stories and engaged in key informant discussions, the intricate ways in which pay equity is connected—and perpetuated—by the larger systemic equity issues that immigrant and racialized women experience, came vividly into focus.

Ultimately, the barriers that prevent women from participating in equitable and meaningful ways in the labour market are also preventing their full social inclusion. In conversation, Tracey Jastinder Mann referred to the multiplicity of ways and interlocking forms of oppression that women experience: “...really when it is so tightly woven that it is a wall, it is a wall that excludes people from full participation into community.” One of OWHN’s core principles is the translation of research into action

that addresses the social determinants of health and transforms the conditions at the root of poverty and exclusion. As such, through this report we offer recommendations based on the project's discussions with immigrant women and key informants, intended to support policy makers and employers, as well as other stakeholders, in taking critical steps for addressing Ontario's gender wage gap, and the systemic issues that facilitate this gap.

## **Methodology**

This project's research methodology is informed by Inclusion Research methodology, a form of community-based research (CBR) co-developed by OWHN with a particular focus on engaging women who experience marginalization through peer-led research. While the scale of this project did not allow for the participation of peer researchers, we followed the principles of Inclusion Research to ensure participants felt respected and heard, all project materials are clear, accessible and shared widely, and that women's voices inform the development of recommendations for policy and practice to address gender wage gap issues experienced by immigrant women in Ontario.

OWHN staff facilitated four two-hour focus groups with a total of 33 women. The focus groups were hosted by four community-based organizations, including Immigrants Working Centre, Hamilton; Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre; Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services, Mississauga; and Windsor Women Working with Immigrant Women. The participating organizations were responsible for recruiting participants and coordinating the focus groups, which were held on site at each organization.

The focus group recruitment criteria included women who are currently employed or looking for employment, are between the ages of 18-65, and have lived in Canada for up to 10 years. As the focus group discussion and forms were in English, it was also necessary that participants be able to read and speak English, though some translation between participants did occur during two focus groups. Participants received \$25 honorarium, refreshments, and child care and transit stipends (as needed).

For the project's key informant interviews, OWHN connected with content and regional experts in the fields of gender, immigration and settlement, pay equity, employment and social determinants of health.

The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. We used thematic analysis to examine and identify common themes and differences emerging within the data. Demographic information was collected from focus group participants to help us better understand who participated in the project. This information was gathered through an anonymous written survey distributed at the beginning of each focus group and was analyzed using descriptive statistics. This project was reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Board, Kitchener, Ontario.

## About the Focus Group Participants

Participants each completed a background questionnaire at the beginning of the focus groups that allowed us to understand a bit more about the people who participated in the project whose voices are heard throughout this report. The criteria for participation in the project was quite broad as we sought to learn from diverse women's lived experiences and perspectives, which is reflected in the demographic findings. Below is a brief overview of the demographics of the focus group participants.

The age range of the participants was spread fairly evenly between the project's age parameters (18-65), although only three women were under the age of 25. The countries of birth also varied, representing a variety of countries across Central and South America, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the European Union and the Philippines. About one quarter of the participants were born in Iraq, and a further 15 percent were born in India. There was some variation in place of birth among the participating community sites. For example, Iraqi born women were present only in the groups in Windsor and Hamilton.

In response to the demographic question around racial identity, participants responded as follows: seven women identified as Arab, five as Black, two as East Asian, six as Latin American, four as South Asian, two as South-east Asian and five as white/Caucasian. Three women described their race as Assyrian and one woman identified as African. As well, the women reported belonging to 28 different ethnic groups demonstrating the great diversity among participants.

When asked about family status, over half of the group indicated they were married or living with a partner, one third were separated, divorced or widowed, and three reported being single. Sixteen of the women reported having children under 18 years old, seven reported having children, but all over age 18 and ten did not have children.

While there was great variety in the way the women came to Canada, over one third was family sponsored. The remainder were split fairly evenly between skilled worker class, either as dependents or primary applicants and refugees, both government sponsored and refugee claimants. One participant came to Canada as part of the live-in caregiver program and two came as international students.

The participants were generally highly educated. Almost 72 percent had completed trade school, university, college, or had advanced degrees. Only four of the 33 had not completed high school.

This education level is reflected in the range of occupations women held prior to coming to Canada, including students, customer service workers, retail workers, financial services, social workers, teachers, physicians, psychologists, university administrators, engineers and lawyers. In Canada however, of the 33 participants, including over half of whom had been in Canada more than five years, only 14 were employed and 10 of those were employed on a part-time basis. A further seven of the participants indicated that they are currently studying ESL or taking college courses to upgrade their Canadian qualifications.

The participants currently employed in Ontario were generally working part time hours in jobs unrelated to their field of study and work prior to arriving in Canada. Only three were working in areas related to their training and previous work and two of the three felt that their Canadian employment was entry level for their field and not commensurate with their education or experience.

## **Project Limitations and Future Opportunities**

This project explores diverse immigrant women's experiences and perspectives of the gender wage gap and barriers to equitable employment. As the demographic analysis shows, the participating women are of a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, ethno-racial identities and ages, and entered Canada under varying immigration paths. Given the intersectionality of the barriers to equitable employment and inclusion that women face, there is an important need for continued qualitative research that engages with specific population groups that experiences marginalization to learn from their experiences in order to inform the development of meaningful policies, practices, programs and services.

The scope of the project allowed for the inclusion of four communities in the Greater Toronto Area and Southwestern Ontario, further research could be carried out to learn about women's experiences in other regions and communities across the province.

All focus groups discussions and forms were in English, and as a result, English language capacity was one of the focus group recruitment criteria. While some simultaneous translation did occur to support participants in two of the focus groups, this criteria could have limited the inclusion of women who do not speak or read English.

As has already been demonstrated by a number of recent projects looking at immigrant and refugee women experiences of settlement, employment and health, there is an important opportunity to carry out future research in this field using Inclusion Research or CBR methodology. Engaging peer researchers supports the inclusion of women who may be isolated or harder to reach, and ensures that women from participating communities are research partners and help develop and disseminate the project findings and recommendations.

## Key Findings

The project's key findings are shaped by the experiences and perspectives that women shared in the focus groups regarding their experiences related to the gender wage gap and the systemic issues that perpetuate the gap, the immigration system, the non-recognition of foreign credentials, the barriers they face to equitable and meaningful inclusion in Ontario's labour market, and the impacts of these experiences for themselves and their families. The findings also highlight their suggestions for employers and policy makers and settlement supports, in addition to advice that they would pass along to other women considering immigrating to Canada.

It is through the personal experiences and insights that focus group participants share with us that we are able to understand the extent and implications of the structural and systemic discrimination found in the Ontario's labour market. Women's voices dominate throughout the report, offering glimpses into women's journeys through immigration and the realities of seeking work and employment in Ontario. Intersecting with these stories are the gendered responsibilities that women shoulder; their experiences of overt racial discrimination, among other "isms;" the stress related to providing for their families while un- or underemployed in a new country; and the personal consequences of these realities.

Through the analyses of the focus group discussions, the project identified central themes that inform the key findings, including:

- The "Promise" and the Reality of Canadian Immigration
- Canadian Credentials Required
- Seeking Employment in Ontario – "Survival Job"
- Pay Disparities, Minimum Wage and Precarious Work
- Experiences of Racism and Exclusion
- Impacts on Women and their Families
- Women's Suggestions for Increasing Employment Equity

Quotes from the women who participated in the focus groups are included in purple text throughout key findings. The voices of the project's key informant interview participants are also woven throughout the findings. Together, these perspectives shape the report's key recommendations for immigration and employment policy and practice to address the systemic barriers to immigrant women's equitable inclusion in Ontario's labour market.

### • **The "Promise" and the Reality of Canadian Immigration**

Seeking to amplify the information gathered through the demographic background survey, the focus groups started by asking women about their current employment status and about their work experience prior to and post immigration, if indeed they are currently employed in Canada, and whether their work is reasonable for their qualifications and experiences. As participants shared this information about themselves it became clear that Canada's immigration system is integral to any conversation about immigrant women's experiences of the gender wage gap and employment equity.

Emerging from the focus group discussions is a picture of an immigration system that is disconnected from the reality of the labour market and perpetuates the discrimination, devaluing and deskilling that immigrant women face in employment or while seeking employment. Many women spoke of feeling misled by immigration officials who promote Canada as a place where they would have opportunities to pursue their careers and seek a “better life.” They also described what they perceive to be a misalignment between who the system is seeking for immigration, in particular skilled professionals who have high levels of education and experience, and the reality of the employment sectors they have a chance of entering upon immigration:

**“The immigration isn’t really aligned with who they are bringing in and what they are looking for and the type of work that someone is getting. They are not aligned properly.”**

**“It [the information she received from immigration officials] was not accurate. They say come here for a better life, but I was having a better life in India, definitely.”**

**“Where are the job opportunities? Why are you giving immigration to people if you don’t have jobs? You want labourers, then please get labourers, don’t give people immigration in professional categories...the immigration people, like all those officers, they give you such flowery picture and they make a fool of you that you come here with such beautiful dreams and then they are shattered. Now if anybody asks me I say ‘please don’t come.’ There is no point in coming unless you are prepared to struggle, to study again...”**

**“... the government is actively recruiting new people to immigrate, with, I don’t want to say false promises, but definitely promises of we want to use your skills in our country, and you get here and it is zero.”**

Prominent in the discussions around the divide between the immigration system and labour market is the value affixed to an immigrant’s education and professional qualifications for the purposes of immigration and the disregard of these credentials once in Canada. This discrepancy is addressed by Tracey Jastinder Mann, whose words echo those of the focus group participant above:

Recognizing that Canada, basically under false promises, lures families, usually families or individuals with this false hope. The whole points system, the way that the application and recruitment process is structured, really convinces people prior to arriving that their skills are in demand and that it will be an easy transition from going from the exact position that they have in their country of origin.

Faraday also raised this issue, stating: “...our immigration system is predicated on valuing those skills but then the translation into whether women can actually work in their professions, work at a level that actually recognizes their skills is a real barrier.” The experiences of and frustrations with this disconnect were vividly conveyed by many focus group participants:

**“Our education is taken into account and our experience is taken into account when we apply as skilled immigrants, but once we arrive in Canada our experience does not matter, our education does not matter. It is like zero.”**

“When we got the immigration for here, I was the primary applicant and all the points I was getting were for my education ... so on the basis of those points I was very confident...But as a teacher, I didn't think I would have to face this struggle... and it is not really very good for your sense of self-worth.”

“They count points for a skilled worker and all. If you don't have that job, if you don't have employers who can put those people in jobs, why do you keep that points system? It doesn't mean anything for you.”

“We have to show our eligibility, we are paying all the amounts, we have to show our fund balance, so everything we are bringing to the Canadian economy. Still, we don't have a right to get a good job, then why are we here?”

- **Canadian Credentials Required**

The issue of non-recognition of foreign credentials in Ontario's labour market is a significant barrier to immigrant women's equitable inclusion in employment, namely the opportunities to pursue career opportunities in line with their qualifications. As Faraday argues: “The barriers around credential recognition and educational recognition and then the Canadian experience requirement, these are all patterns and structures that sustain systemic racism.” In her interview, Pat Armstrong pointed to the employment barrier of non-recognition of foreign credentials:

...immigrants do better the longer they are in Canada and senior immigrant women end up doing better than senior Canadian born women...so getting the jobs tends to be a major issue. What we also know is that on average immigrant women have higher levels of education - higher levels of formal education - and the real barrier is whether those credentials are acknowledged or not.

Women who were hoping to pursue their professions in Canada described how their pre-immigration qualifications, including their education and professional experiences, are of little or no value here, and that all that counts is Canadian experience:

“A major barrier is your experience and your qualifications.”

“I started looking for a job, but it wasn't possible because I don't have Canadian experience.”

“I have 20 years of experience ... but it is not acknowledged.”

“They compare us with high school students.”

“...When I came here I was told it is no good, you have to start from this country, we don't consider you have the education at par. I was teaching at one of the best schools of my country and when I came here I was told this. It was very disheartening...”

“In my case, one of the barriers is Canadian experience. Usually for any position, especially financial areas in banks, they ask for Canadian experience, we need to have Canadian experience in customer service...I have a lot of experience back home and a good reference from my country but we need to

have the reference from Canada. Also sometimes it is necessary to have a Canadian diploma, a Canadian certificate, even though I have a degree...They prefer people who have these references of these experiences in Canada than from other countries.”

“I think it is hard for people my age who have been in middle management and the top management back home and they have accumulated a lot of experience and they don’t have certificates from Canada or the US, you face a lot of problems.”

“I just don’t understand. They keep crying that the health system, they are lacking doctors, they are lacking nurses, but they are making it so difficult for people to go in...why are they making it so difficult for people to get into the system when they are lacking doctors, they are lacking health professionals?”

### **Building Canadian credentials**

The implications of the non-recognition of foreign credentials are profound for women’s ability to secure meaningful employment, forcing women to enter employment in sectors and at levels that are mismatched for their qualifications. This practice also requires women to seek to build their Canadian credentials, processes that are time consuming and expensive. As argued by Faraday:

When women come they have to be able to find employment. There is real systemic discrimination in the labour force, in the labour market, which prevents women from getting hired into jobs that they are qualified for, again a burden that falls more heavily on racialized women. So they take jobs at levels that are below their skill levels and at low rates of pay, but then when there’s a barrier to their real skills being recognized, there’s an added expense on them of having to go through quite expensive programs to get those credentials recognized which is quite difficult to do if you are being paid minimum wage.

As Faraday notes, the Canadian credential requirements that are required upon immigration results in women spending significant amounts of money and time pursuing certifications, diplomas and documentation as well as volunteering. Further, they are shouldering these expenses while marginally employed or unemployed and balancing work and/or job searching and family responsibilities. These issues were frequently raised by participants, and as some women pointed out, there is no certainty that these investments will lead to meaningful employment:

“The process of validating internationally trained professionals is a super long process...someone with six years of university and 20 years working then comes here and it is like a 10 year process right because first you have to validate your university... then you have to volunteer, but then you also have to work to uphold your family so that might take like 10 years. And at the same time you could have just gone back to university and started anew in another profession in like half the time it takes you to get back into your own chosen profession.”

“You are doing these courses, you are digging into your savings to do that. I did the ESL certification, I have done TESL Canada certification...I can’t keep on shelling out my hard earned savings...Every year I

pay for renewal of that certification [at regional and national levels], how long can I keep doing that when I'm not really getting anything."

"I took many programs, got certificates, but no help to lead to jobs."

"I think basically in this country they want you to get an education. I'm not being cynical or anything, but as you go into the system it generates money, you're going to school and this and that....you pay them money right. So of course they are going to say 'oh we need a diploma, we need this, we need that.' But once you get there, they don't use your education, they don't use that diploma...and the fact is a lot of times it is best that you learn on the job because each job you go to is different."

"In this country, doctors, professionals, teachers, they end up doing labour jobs. Or they sit home without any jobs. Or they end up studying and spending more time, the money that they brought from home to spend to have a better lifestyle, they have to spend on education."

One woman who discussed doing a bridging program for teachers said "I have done everything!" and that her husband, a doctor, had done one as well, but this also did not lead to employment for either of them: "Even they said that you know, you may write the exam and even if you pass the exam, statistically speaking, the chances [of employment in their fields] are slim."

Some women also raised the difficulties they have faced trying to obtain documentation related to their education from universities outside of Canada:

"Canada requests all of this documentation from your university back home, but often times the universities are not used to that and have no idea how to go about doing that....I was able to do it because I was a professor at my university back home, but not everyone in the world has those connections to explain to their home university what they need in Canada."

"I also am just going through evaluating my master's from the UK, in Canada, no joke. But they requested my degree and my transcript from the UK straight to the [Canadian university], and I called up my university and they were like "oh we don't issue degrees, there's only one copy in our system, we don't do that' ...And I told the [Canadian university] that they literally won't do it, and they were like, 'Oh, it's the UK we'll just take their transcripts.' And I'm like I'm glad it's just the UK, but what about somewhere that's not the UK."

"Here, everything works under the assumption that the rest of the world also works the same way..."

## **Volunteering**

A large number of focus group participants indicated that they are currently volunteering or have volunteered in order to increase their Canadian experience and gain Canadian references, both typical requirements of employers. During the discussions, it became clear that volunteering is a common step for immigrants:

"First, I am volunteering. I know this is another step that we need to do to have Canadian experience or Canadian reference. I am volunteering right now at two institutions and I am looking for a job in the same area, in customer service."

“I would like to work and take some courses and when my children go to school I would like to be a volunteer here, in one place that would bring me a lot of experience, and next I will work to apply for a job with this experience.”

“I did a professional course so that gives me a bit of confidence, a bit of feel for working in a Canadian organization. After I did the course, which was mandatory to have six weeks volunteering in a non-profit organization, after I did my six weeks, they gave me a volunteer position for six months.”

While many women viewed volunteering positively for the experience, connections and daily structure it offers, it remains unpaid work that relies on immigrant women’s time, skills and experience. And as with the educational upgrading women are pursuing, volunteering can be a time and financial burden, a challenge amplified for women with child care responsibilities:

“It is very long, I have 500 volunteer hours for two years when I also have to work.”

“When you are still looking for work and you don’t find a job then your CV or resume remains with some gaps and that causes a lot of problems for you. Then you have to either be volunteering, but for me if I am volunteering I have to get a subsidy for my child because I need to travel...And if I am volunteering I don’t get a child subsidy...”

As one participant described, volunteering can build up women’s hope that their unpaid work will lead to employment within the organization:

“To find a job that you are interested in you start off as a volunteer, like specifically what you would like to do, and then go from there. They see the effort you put into it and how you are interested and then there’s a chance they might hire you...”

Another participant warned though of volunteering at for-profit organizations in particular. She spoke of the risks of being exploited by companies who take advantage of volunteer’s time and skills, and of being falsely led into believing the volunteer position could result in a paying job:

“I hear from friends who have had bad experiences [volunteering] because they take a lot of advantage of them and say ‘oh ya volunteer for this time and we’ll give you a job’ but then there’s no job but you’ve spent your time and all of your efforts as a volunteer. Many companies take advantage of volunteer people, so I think you need to be careful when you volunteer, especially in a company. People get hope and they believe [they will get a job], but at the end they are waiting and waiting and give passion to get that job and never get it... when I hear of people who go every single day for hours and they only give you a bus ticket, how do you expect them to live, right?”

### **Canadian references and connections needed**

It is a typical expectation of anyone seeking employment in Ontario that employers will require references that demonstrate a person’s work experience and capacity. However, the need to have Canadian-based references, which many women raised as an expected requirement to enter the labour market, can be an additional barrier to employment. Further, it is generally accepted in Canada that a person’s network and connections can support them in finding job opportunities or connecting with

potential employers. As Rukmini Borooah Pyatt acknowledged: “Connections, professional connections, that is very important. It is all about who you know. At the end of the day it doesn’t matter which society you are in.”

For women immigrants who do not have established networks in Canada, both the need for Canadian-based references and connections are significant barriers:

**“I have heard so many times ‘do you have a reference?’ and I say ‘no I am new to the country so how can I have a reference?’”**

**“...reference, no one should ask us because you are new, how can you have someone?”**

**“They want connections, but we are immigrants, where do we get the connections from?”**

**“I feel in Canada you get jobs only if you know somebody. You can’t get a job based on merit unless you know somebody...Knowing somebody is more important, that is what I feel.”**

**“You have to actually know someone from within...you have to know somebody internal...”**

**“It is very important to build up a network, you have a reference. You go back to [settlement agency] or wherever your place that someone will write that you are good.”**

Many women spoke of attending networking groups for immigrant women organized through settlement and community agencies, and it was suggested that these organizations could be supportive in terms of securing references. But, in regards to building professional networks one woman commented: **“As far as attending those networks, the only networking you will do is with the same group of women, how will they help you to find a job?”**

### **Language barriers**

The issue of language as a barrier to social inclusion and employment was often raised by participants, as well as the time and financial commitments that women have invested into learning and/or furthering their English language comprehension. Women acknowledged the difficulties of not speaking English at the time of immigration and how building their language skills supported their process of settlement and reduced isolation:

**“We speak the language well, but the people who don’t speak the language it is so hard on them.”**

**“When I came to Canada I couldn’t speak English. I understood that this was the first step that I have to do. And I started to study English. Now that I feel confident, I can understand and people can understand my language, right now I am looking [for work].”**

**“When I came to Canada I was very afraid and worried about what I can do...Went to school to improve my English.... and volunteering, happy now, improved English.**

Many participants identified as being fluent in English when they arrived in Canada and some described the frustration of having to take English language classes to upgrade their qualifications or eligibility for college admission, only to find themselves overqualified for the programs:

“For people who don’t speak English it is a help [to have to go through the English programs]. But for people that we try to speak a little bit of English, we are stuck in a level of English and it’s frustrating. Because I am stuck in grammar, but not even [native-born] people speak properly English so why do immigrants need to speak so properly? It is so frustrating because I have to achieve that level.”

“One thing I have noticed is that there are so many courses, occupation related language courses...but they are all based on the assumption that your English is not there at all, at zero level. So when you go there it is like ‘what am I doing here.’ I did a three month course and the coordinator was like, ‘really I don’t know what you all are doing here, you are overqualified...’”

## Seeking Employment in Ontario – “Survival Job”

As discussed in the Overview, Statistics Canada data on immigrant women, and in particular women who have immigrated more recently, suggest that their conditions improve over time. But as Armstrong highlighted, nearly half of respondents report that their jobs don’t meet their qualifications and that while this experience isn’t exclusive to immigrant women, it is a systemic issue and they often feel the impacts more. The level at which immigrant women, including skilled professionals, are typically able to gain employment access was described by Borooh Pyatt:

Canada does have firstly a colour coded labour market, wherein especially racialized visible minority, immigrant women occupy the lowest rung and that is very much a reality. Part time, flexible work and non-recognition of foreign credentials still and then the unpaid work that they have to do too within the family...the beginning is always from entry level...

It was a common theme across focus groups that the women generally found themselves in the position of having to seek “survival jobs” in Ontario, employment that does not match their qualifications, in order to support themselves and their families. Women described the intense efforts they put into trying to find work and the experiences of working in jobs for which they are overqualified. The path to securing even this work, often in gendered professions such as housekeeping, retail and service industries and caregiving, is filled with varying barriers which are discussed throughout the key findings:

“We have handed in our applications for so many places...we didn’t get a single call and whenever we called for follow up it was just “oh sorry we don’t have an opening.” We didn’t know what to do, how to get hired in this market and the same scenario for my husband... it was very disappointing for us and I thought let’s go back home...”

“After arriving here we [she and her husband] started looking for jobs from day one...Within one month [of immigrating] I got a survival job in a [grocery store] as a cashier... but I didn’t stop my job search and I didn’t lose hope. I wanted to start my career in my field, I was working in the accounting field back home, so I was thinking to try in this country, but I don’t have Canadian degree. I do have my back home degree, but I heard from so many people that without [a Canadian] degree you will not be able to crack a single interview.”

“Back home I worked as a physician, I was working for six years. I came here to Canada last year...I had a baby here and it has been challenging especially to work as a physician here...I am looking for a

job just to support myself because my husband is back home and I am alone here with my son. Yesterday I went for a job interview as a caregiver. They said they would pay me minimum wage. It is just a start and I know especially coming from being a physician and now just being there and cooking for a client, you know, it's going to be hard...But we do what we have to and I don't want to give up my passion, I know one day I will be able to practice as a doctor here."

"...Even for a simple job you see so many applicants that every time you are like ok there's no way I am going to pass like through the screening. Every time you get rejected you don't even get a call or anything and you start losing hope, like slowly."

"I just don't understand. They keep crying that the health system, they are lacking doctors, they are lacking nurses, but they are making it so difficult for people to go in...why are they making it so difficult for people to get into the system when they are lacking doctors, they are lacking health professionals?"

"When you are very educated, you think that you will probably have to go one or two levels below your employment level, but not to the bottom again, minimum wage."

"It is demeaning, you know. It's like a person is worthless, being treated as something worthless."

"One thing I know being an immigrant is that we don't want to go on assistance or welfare, we don't, but they make it easier to go on welfare than to help you find a job. So what is that, there's welfare and then the person wants to go to a job and you make it so hard for them, help them to find it."

Ironically, given that their education and experiences are not valued enough to allow women to work in their professions, some women described their credentials as a barrier to being hired by employers who perceive them as being overqualified:

"I was told 'don't put you PhD, don't put your master's, don't even put your bachelor's degree' if you are applying for a position that does not require a degree, just say high school or something because otherwise you will not even be looked at."

"I didn't get selected for [a large retail chain] because I have a master's and I mentioned it so they said I was overqualified."

### **Lack of transparency in hiring process**

A lack of transparency in the hiring process was frequently cited by focus groups participants as a frustration and a barrier to employment by participants. Women shared concerns about never hearing back from employers about why they were not hired or what the selection criteria was; job postings that were a façade where internal candidates were already being considered and postings that reappear online after being told the positions were already filled:

"I feel there is no transparency in the selection process, in the beginning in the shortlisting procedure or the selection procedure, there is no transparency...Also you can never ask why you weren't shortlisted. There is often no feedback provided, and it is not clear what the criteria for hiring are."

“It is so clever, they just put it [job posting] there for a day, and by the time you say “ok my resume is ready” and upload it, it is gone. So that means there is something going on in between. They just show it to show to the system “ok we are hiring” and then it is gone.”

“...I applied and the next day I called them to follow up and they said no that position is already filled... and the next morning I got the same position with a different date, a fresh date. I applied again and I did follow up, same answer. There were four to five companies where I experienced this kind of thing. That was a fake job because they have to have a posting because of the internal hiring.”

“When we apply online, we saw so many jobs for \$25 or \$27, starting, but when we apply it’s like “Oh sorry we don’t have any of those jobs,” and then the next day the same postings come up.”

In her interview, Armstrong also raised issues around the lack of transparency in hiring processes and the need for strategies that address employment practices in general, including having a transparent hiring process where applicants are informed of how the hiring practice works and whether they are short listed or not, at a minimum.

Job fairs are one tool that many women use support their employment search, but in one focus group, the value of these events was discussed:

“Why do they have all of these job fairs while they don’t have vacancies? I know that a lot of people go with some hope, they prepare, they dress up and you stand up in those lines but the employers they know for sure that they don’t have any of those positions. No calls, no nothing.”

“I highly agree, but the job fair is where I got my job but it took 14 months and a lot of tears and “100” fairs to get current job...”

### **Gendered roles and generational sacrifice**

A recurring theme throughout the focus group discussions was the impacts of the gendered family roles on their ability to pursue their careers in Canada, typically without family or other supports they would have had prior to immigrating, and in the context of high day care costs in Ontario. For example, the struggle of balancing family care while working in low paying jobs and/or looking for work and trying to build their Canadian credentials. Women described the challenges they experience in shouldering these responsibilities, often having to make these sacrifices to benefit their husband’s career or because of their husband’s refusal to look for work outside their profession. Women also spoke of the impacts of caregiving on their capacity to establish their careers in Canada and having to work in “survival jobs” in order to support their families. The sacrifices that women are making in order to settle their families in Canada, provide for them and offer their children secure futures are profound and far-reaching:

“Women are more adaptable, men can be stubborn and won’t take survival or menial jobs not in their field. Wives often have to take survival jobs and look after the house, even while working.”

“When a couple comes, the wife might be more adjusting that she tries to change her path. She opted for a shorter course, ...but her husband might not cooperate [and look for a job outside his field]...Then at home, it is another struggle because the wife doesn’t know whether to go out for a

survival job, to come home and do the house work, take care of the children. She, poor lady, ends up studying and job and everything.”

“After a couple of fails you start going I guess I will take the survival job because you have to pay your rent. And just keeping that in mind it keeps you going and giving you strength. That was my support because I didn’t want to end up going to the shelter with three kids or going back home because you still need money to buy the tickets. So that was keeping moving you forward.”

“That balance [between work and home] is very tricky and a lot of time you just want to give up because ‘oh my goodness it is just too difficult’ and then other times it’s like ‘no I can’t.’ You are going back and forth...but the money part of it is just so hard...”

“For me the impact for my family is change of plans because before coming here...I am the one with the degree and my husband is not yet finished school so the plan is I am going to work and he is going to study. But then coming here, and trying to find a job it is ‘oh you need to complete three years of study in an industrial engineering course with Canadian standards.’ And for me, being a mom, I cannot do those three years because it is too long and it is expensive...So I took a short path, I took a short course so I can look for a job. So for me the change of plan is a very crucial thing because we have kids and this is something that you have to consider when you have kids.”

“It is especially difficult for women with children who don’t have family here, because you’re the only person. When you are a part of a couple, the man gets paid more than the woman...and works more, so makes more sense for the woman to stay home with the kids.”

“My son sometimes says to me ‘mommy why do you [work] so hard for your studies and your work?’ I say everybody must work hard and study hard. I want to be a good example for my son, I hope he studies hard and works hard in the future.”

“When you come as an adult with children, it is one generation sacrificing for another...”

The impacts of gendered caregiving roles and responsibilities were also raised during the project’s key informant interviews, echoing the experiences described by women. As expressed by Borooah Pyatt:

It is still the case that most immigrant women, according to the literature, which is true, do come in under the family class and they are the ones sacrificing for their husband’s career, they stay home and either take care of the children...That is still very prevalent and if they do find work it is usually retail work or service industry, but at the lowest entry level even though they may have a PhD or a master’s.

Mann also spoke of the barriers and sacrifices particular to women experiences related to caregiving:

...Women in particular who quite often take on child and elder care responsibilities in the family. Because of these responsibilities may not be readily able to afford or take the time to translate their skills into a Canadian context by meeting the requirements to what they call ‘upgrading your skills.’ So I think a lot of those experiences, especially for racialized migrant women means they don’t get to pursue careers that match up with their skills, experience and expertise.

There was general recognition among many women in the focus groups that they are making sacrifices so that their children will have an easier path. It is a common story among immigrant families that first generation Canadians will make these sacrifices for the “next generation” and is generally assumed that this sacrifice is an acceptable experience of immigration. Yet, as Fay Faraday argues, this is a privileging and destructive narrative that does not recognize or address the systemic discrimination that normalizes the deskilling and impoverishment that occurs through the immigration system and says “well, we’ll make it up in the next generation.” As expressed by Faraday:

It makes us very complacent and comfortable in the structures of systemic discrimination that exists and it excuses us from having to address it. So like those women that you are talking about who are saying “why can’t I be recognized for the skills I have,” they are absolutely right that they shouldn’t have to wait a generation to be integrated into the labour market for the contributions that they can make.

- **Pay Disparities, Minimum Wage and Precarious Work**

### **Lack of pay transparency**

One of the challenges that this project considered in carrying out research into women’s experiences of the gender wage gap, and indeed addressing pay equity issues at a policy and enforcement level, is the lack of transparency around wages in the workplace. How do you establish a discussion with women around their experiences of pay inequities when wage levels within an organization are typically not shared by employers? Faraday identifies this lack of transparency as “one of the drivers that facilitates the wage gap,” enabling employers to pay discriminatory wages through lack of any mandatory disclosures around wage structures. The issue around the lack of pay transparency was raised by one focus group participant:

**“There is no transparency as for the pay, what the other person is getting. You are never told. There is absolutely no transparency in the system.”**

Socially, wages and income are topics that tend to be viewed as personal and private, and are not often discussed at individual levels, posing another challenge to women in understanding what others in comparable positions are paid. It is important to note that this social more is not isolated to immigrant populations and that it is not the responsibility of individuals to make personal disclosures about their pay to others. However, as one participant raised, this reality is that this does make it harder to understand what other are being paid:

**“As for pay, a lot of immigrants are very sensitive about pay, so we never really talked about it so I don’t want to ask them, even my very close friend, she is not going to talk about it.”**

### **Pay disparities**

In spite of the lack of transparency around pay, a number of women were able to identify instances where they knew they were being paid less than men in their workplaces. However, their need for

employment, and relative lack of negotiating power and/or familiarity with pay equity laws in Ontario left little recourse for them to pursue equal pay:

“Women, they should be paid equally because it is the same time, the same job... For me, pay was the minimum, but for guys I think it was \$12 or \$13. Why? For same job, same job! \$1 or \$1.50 more...”

“I had a co-op program, so I was supposed to work, and I’m just curious, usually they don’t put how much [you will be paid] for the work. You cannot ask about it before they actually accept you, so why is it like that? And I remember for my position it was from \$16-\$21 and they gave me \$17 so it was ok, but I asked my classmates, as I was the only girl in this program, and all of them were paid \$20-\$21...I was like ‘ok, guys get more.’”

“And even in the acting field, in that field, men got paid more than women did and I could never understand that, but at the time I was working so I was like ‘ok forget it’ and just kept going.”

“There hasn’t been any change in the 7 years I have been here...it is still the qualifications, the requirements are the same. Women and men are hired on same qualifications and the pay is different...”

Many women also identified other experiences with pay disparities in their workplaces and challenges they faced in addressing these issues with employers:

“Basically, I don’t mind to go into a position in some field with the minimum payment if I know that there is room for advancement and that I am going to, slowly as I get better, increase in the level. But if I’m going into that job and they start me at minimum and just kind of cap me there and then they are hiring new people on top, which happens all the time, and those new people they are getting paid more and moving up and you’re still down here. That to me is a no-no and it is happening way too often.”

“When I was working in the public library, I got hired by a work agency, which is a different contract for the job, and the pay was \$15 an hour. And then later on I found out after seeing internal job postings, the pay was supposed to be \$24 an hour for the job I was doing. I spoke to the manager about it, but she basically said she couldn’t do anything about it because that was the contract I had already and the union. I don’t know if it had something to do with being an immigrant and not knowing how to research these kinds of things before taking the job.”

“I was working in the clothing industry, I was the assistant manager, I was working hard, but for some reason they were paying me the same amount as the part time girls that just came in...I wrote them a letter and addressed that ... and they wrote something like the company just can’t afford certain things, all these excuses, but what they wanted was to get labour for free...”

“I don’t think it is fair whatever salary I am getting there because I know people who have more experience, more years working there, but they don’t have the education that I have and they make a higher salary than me. The only difference is that they have worked there a longer time.”

“Some people have benefits at their job and other don’t have them, when do you get these benefits? And because [I] just started a job they pay you for two hours even though you worked for four hours

because you are in training... And especially with a lack of language ability you can't really stand up for yourself..."

"One of my biggest problems is understanding my bargaining position for my position. If I knew people who are not immigrants maybe that would help."

### **Working for minimum wage**

In her interview, Faraday raised the role that minimum wage plays in sustaining the wage gap, drawing attention to the overrepresentation of immigrant women, and especially racialized women, in minimum wage jobs that leave them below the poverty line. As has already been discussed, many participants described having to take on minimum wage or "survival jobs" in order to support their families. What they also made clear is that even with full time hours, minimum wage is not enough to make ends meet and does not reflect the reality of the cost of living in Canada:

"I think wages are not very high in Canada compared to the US or Europe. Many people are literally living hand to mouth over here."

"I am looking right now for a job. Every day I get emails from different websites and the payment is just ridiculous, it's just ridiculous. You can't survive on this money. It is still minimum wage, like \$11 or \$12. If it is \$13 it is like 'wow' ..."

"Maybe it's not that you deserve [higher pay], it is how the prices are going up and what you are spending for food and education and all other expenses. I think it is still a little less than what we are supposed to be paid. I'm not saying that I deserve to be paid more, and it's not like we're buying expensive things. I still have to go through all of the flyers to see where the cheapest place to go to buy the food, just to find a way to save on food, and it is still not enough while being a full time employee."

"Students are getting lower than basic wage."

"Boss always wants free labour. I never knew I would be a free worker."

"When they have the average wage, the table shows 'this is how much an admin. assistant makes,' but then the range is huge. Even when you look at the job posting you see two long lists of pay ranges and they require so much and then you look at the pay range and say 'really?' They don't give you any motivation. You feel so discouraged, like 'oh if I stay home and I get Ontario Works and I don't spend on gas and I don't pay the car insurance, I can just stay home.'"

"You can't survive on this money"

Women juggling child care with employment spoke of the issue of high day care costs and having to make decisions about whether it is worthwhile or even affordable to work outside the home:

"I just came back from mat. leave and we literally had to make the choice...the pay that I will be making when I go back to work it will be just enough to pay for the day care and pay my utility costs and the car insurance, that's it. So there is no point in going back to work and leaving your child with the day care... but still you have to go back to work because you don't want to lose your spot."

“A huge issue for women is day care, even when subsidized it is not free. Women have literally done the math, ‘I going to go out, I’m going to work and going to make minimum wage and I’m going to come home, but I’m paying for day care. I might as well stay home.’”

“When my husband was on a trip and I needed to call a babysitter, I literally paid the babysitter more than I was making at that time, but I needed to go to work.”

### **Precarious employment**

As Armstrong pointed out in her interview, the statistics do not indicate the employment numbers in precarious work, not does it capture that precarious work is increasingly becoming the norm. Faraday also addressed the issue of precarious employment, including the impacts of this type of employment for women and its relationship with the wage gap:

Unpredictable scheduling, the lack of guarantee of hours, all of that precarity that prevents women from being able to organize their lives in a way that is sustainable or even enabling them to get a second part time job. The protections around guarantee of hours, of scheduling certainty, without those it is impossible to get child care and ensuring that there is affordable childcare at the hours that women need it. All of those feed into sustaining the wage gap.

Additionally, Armstrong raised that women working in casual or contract positions are not protected by many of the employment standards regulations, which is why companies hire in this way: “Then they can categorize you as self-employed and have no responsibility for you.” This lack of basic labour protections increase women’s risk of workplace discrimination and exploitation.

One participant’s experiences while working in her second year under the caregiver program underscores the lack of employment protections immigrant women can face: “**...when I got pregnant they fired me, because I was pregnant.**” With the support of a former employer though, she was able to take legal action and won her case.

Many of the focus group participants described experiences of working in precarious employment—work that is casual, contract or on-call. They spoke of the stress of being in temporary contracts, of having no income or job security, and of not being able to structure their time while waiting for a potential call from work as well as the implication of contract work on their immigration status. When asked whether they feel they have stability in their jobs, the women in one group burst into laughter, underscoring women’s shared experiences of employment precarity:

“It was two years that I stayed there and it [the contract] was every six months, three months, three months. And before the end of the three months or six months I did not sleep for a week, I was shaking, I was always like, ‘oh my god please I want to stay here, please I want to stay here. I need a job, I need a job.’ It is so stressful. And finally after two years, they let me go. It doesn’t matter how hard you work, how good you are, how nice you are, how smart you are. I was so hopeful that I would stay with them...and he told me ‘you knew you were hired only for three months, but I kept you for two years.’... It is so stressful these contract jobs. You are praying and you are crying and you don’t know what to do, but it doesn’t matter, if they decided to let you go they can let you go, done.”

“I still don’t get permanent status at my job, even after five years of work.”

“No, there is no security, because with all these cuts every year they say before they renew the contract they say everything depends on the budget approval...Something is always happening that makes you less and less secure, ‘oh will I be in the list of cuts or will they keep my position or am I going to lose my job, what is going to happen, how am I going to survive?’ Obviously when you have four kids you have to think about that because everything here you have to pay for.”

“You can’t even plan your day [when you are on call] because they could call you at any minute.”

“...Most jobs are on a contract basis, but for immigration purposes, you can’t get a permanent residence, they require an open ended contract. Now in what field at this time...can you choose your contract for ever more, here you go?”

- **Experiences of Racism and Exclusion**

The experiences of racial discrimination that women participating in this project have faced while trying to seek employment came through clearly across the focus groups. Some women spoke of being excluded from interviews because of their names. Others spoke of getting through to an interview only to be judged by their accents. What came through very clearly in the focus groups is that overt experiences of racial discrimination, intersecting with other “isms” in the labour market are prevalent for immigrant women and a significant barrier to employment:

“I wonder it is just assumed that people with names like ours are just not good enough for those jobs.”

“I was told a couple of times that I should change my name, but I’ve had this name for all of my years, I’m not changing it now. I know I’m in Canada, but I look at other names and I say ‘no my name is not that hard to pronounce.’”

“There is very little chance that you will be called for an interview, just because of your name.”

“I have had interviews when I was looking for a job. What they didn’t like, when they heard my accent, they made assumptions about which country I came from. So, it’s not good, it’s a kind of discrimination right, judging people by their accent.”

“I did my master’s in Australia and I feel that that has helped me get more calls because it is an English speaking country and it is very similar culturally to Canada. But then after they interview I don’t get a reply back. And then in the interviews I have gotten questions like ‘where did you learn English?’ ...I feel like a big barrier for me is making an employer trust that I can work as any other person who was born here, who grew up speaking English.”

“People are always asking ‘where are you from’ when I’ve been speaking English for 20 years.”

One woman described a friend’s experience of racial and gender discrimination in looking for work in her profession and on the job:

“I have a friend, she used to be a banker back home... she always looks for jobs and when they see her resume they call her because she has a lot of experience...but once they call her for an interview and hear her accent they won't give her a job...She did get a job for a year, and got a job in a big bank, rose into management but then was suddenly laid off... [she] knows that she was laid off because she is a women among men and she is an African.”

Ageism, coupled with racial discrimination was described by another participant as a barrier to employment that she has experienced:

“And age sometimes...I see more appreciation for interview with a young girl. She's young and Canadian, I'm old and speak with an accent.”

Some women described the experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion they experienced while on the job. For one woman, it was the experience of her colleagues going quiet and not acknowledging her when she greeted them, treatment that led her to leave the job after three months:

“I was new [to an organization] and I was a new immigrant. I am Indian, so I am not white. I don't know if that was the difference or what, but I felt so many times insulted... I felt like, 'what is this? I am not part of your organization? I am not part of your friendship?'”

Other women discussed being channeled into particular sectors due to perceptions about their culture and not having the trust of employers to work in communications:

“I think somehow the employers minds are already made up...if they see Indian men, the only thing they understand they are good enough for is software engineering. Other than that, there is nothing in Canada for them...maybe they think their brains work only that way, but in other jobs, especially where communication is involved, when it comes to speaking and communications, all that sort of work, they don't transfer you, you will not see many immigrants in management jobs, in the public sector you will not see many immigrants, but in the IT world, that is where you will find immigrants.”

“Even when working I've had a co-worker correcting [my work]...I had to have someone else read it for me before I sent it just to make sure my English was right. Or I've had the manager change one word, like synonyms, which was perfect English... I feel like making employers trust my English level has been a barrier.”

## • Impacts on Women

“There is a lot of burden in people's hearts”

This project sought to hear from women about the impacts that the barriers to employment have had on themselves, their families and communities. What are the personal implications of realizing that their credentials are not valued, of the barriers to finding employment, experiences of discrimination and of working in precarious, low wage, deskilled jobs while balancing education, volunteering and family responsibilities, all while adjusting to life in Canada?

The disappointment, frustration and lost dreams that women have experienced as they settled in Canada and encountered numerous barriers to entering the labour market emerged strongly across the

focus groups. Women described their feelings upon realizing that they would not be able to work in their trained professions, and for some, to even secure minimum wage work. Some women described needing to change themselves and their professions in order to fit in:

“I came to Canada as a skilled immigrant, family applicant, and I have never been able to get a job over here. I mean, nobody even bothered to reply to my applications, so to tell you the truth I am very disappointed in this country. I feel cheated because I left a very good, very good paying job and I was really enjoying the work that I was doing and even [donut/coffee chain] doesn't bother to call me, so you know it's very disappointing.”

“Dreaming that you can continue your experience, your work experience, only to find out when you get here that you can't do that right away.”

“... when I came to Canada, at first I was very ambitious and have good dreams and have a lot of expectations, but I find all my past experience and all my study currency finished...The first year is very, very tough. Everything is very difficult then after the first year, our expectations and dreams are down, down, down and I began to find out how to make a living.”

“I am a positive person so I am still trying after all of these years. I think ok maybe I should stop now, but I really feel that I want to be a part of the field of education and that I can do it well and I look around and I feel that ‘I can do that too, just give me a chance.’”

“Sometimes I must change my attitude of life. It is different than I thought [in Canada]...”

“... it almost seems like in Canada when you have that dream and you've trained for it you should be able to receive it, but instead, they're kind of like ‘no, that's not what you should be doing, you should be doing that’ ...I've almost had to reinvent myself and let go of my dream....”

“I changed my language, my country, my profession. I don't know who I am anymore.”

For one woman, the process and cost of trying to upgrade her diploma and become certified as a teacher was so extensive and prohibitive that she ended up letting go of her dream of teaching: “...so at that point I'm like ‘ok I don't want to do it anymore’ and after that I changed my profession and went back to college.”

Many women described the impacts of these experiences on their mental health and well-being. They associated stress, depression, and questioning of their own value and self-worth with their experiences of immigration, deskilling and being unemployed in their new country:

“I think you really have to be mentally and physically strong...being young you have to start from zero and then you go all the way to the top. And then coming here from back home you come back to that same point because here they ask for Canadian experience. They ask that you have to be qualified, you need a degree and then you feel like you are starting all over while you're not that young anymore and with all the 20 plus [years] experience you feel like you are starting over again. And after five plus years here I feel like I am at the same point. For some people it takes a toll.”

“...You have a culture shock and homesickness on top of all that. So I think you really have to be mentally prepared, you really have to be mentally strong to go through all of that. For some people, it really breaks [them]. ...some people they really break like they get a nervous breakdown or they are getting all kinds of emotional sickness. It is really hard. Even if you do get full time employment, you still feel something inside is broken because you leave everything behind. Whatever you earned, you worked for and then you go to a different country and you start from scratch...It is very, very hard and I admire those immigrants who go through all of that, especially women that come with kids...”

“You just feel redundant, you feel like you are not really moving an inch...And that sometimes makes you feel so, you end up having a much more inferior feeling within yourself and you feel like nothing’s working.”

“I think there is one thing we don’t speak a lot about is mental health. Stress takes a lot from us...sometimes you come to Canada you have already accumulated a lot of stress and then you come and find the place is not what you thought about it. Living it and integrating within it is not something you can be taught about, you have to live it. So if you are not prepared, it is also difficult...mental health for newcomers is very difficult.”

“With all of that money that you were saving to immigrate to Canada you come and spend that money you just feel hopeless like you can’t go back because then they will say ok so where have I ended up. Like I brought all the money and spent it here, I can’t go back because I sold the house...that’s why some people feel so desperate that they just stay here and they have no other option but to go on Ontario Works. You have no other option because you need to pay the rent. It is not like back home where you just owned an apartment or you don’t pay the rent, it is very different here.”

“I feel I am wasting my time over here. What am I doing?”

The stresses related to women’s exclusion from the labour market, over such factors as money, loss of independence and career sacrifices they have made, often result in increased stress on women’s personal relationships with partners and family members. This finding was particularly true for focus group participants who had immigrated to Canada as a result of their partner’s choice or job prospects:

“I am a positive person, but I’m also very also very sensitive so all of this [stress] had been going on for years. Initially I was busier, helping out my husband to deal with the situation because he was actually depressed [as he was unable to work as a surgeon in Canada]. But now, more and more I feel that there are days when this whole situation of not being productive really gets to me and sometimes I feel that then I get in that mood when people around me are also kind of bearing the brunt of that whole thing. And I realize it and I try to fight it, but then there are some days when it is just too overwhelming. And especially knowing that probably I don’t see any light at the end of the tunnel and that probably I am already at the end of the tunnel. It is depressing for your self-esteem and for your self-worth...It is not good for you, it’s not good for your family.”

“I came here because my husband is Canadian, so when I am having a hard time getting a job doing what I studied, it’s like ‘well I would be doing great in Mexico, but I am here because of you’...Here I don’t feel independent...”

One woman who left her career in order to immigrate to Canada with her husband described the frustrations that she has experienced:

**“Sometimes I get really angry and I fight with my husband also... I have to rely on him for every penny, so it’s not that good... and every weekend for those four years while he was studying we were having a fight. It wasn’t his fault, but I said ‘because I got married to you, I came here and I don’t have a job’ ... It’s frustrating.”**

Women’s access to extended family member and other supportive relationships can also impact on women’s well-being and settlement experience. For one participant who described having a large number of extended family members who had also immigrated to Canada, the benefits of that family support system and personal relationships were obvious. For many participants, who did not have extended family in Canada, that distance, isolation and lack of family supports, including child care, can exacerbate the challenges they face. And for some women, the lack of understanding or misperceptions relatives have about life in Canada was also difficult for them:

**“But some people think, especially in my country, ‘oh take me to Canada.’ They think money is growing on the trees.”**

**“No sympathy for the struggles in Canada.”**

**“As an immigrant, if your family isn’t here, like if you aren’t married or anything, there is the pressure that because you are young and you cannot ‘find your way’ people back home tell you ... ‘oh just come back because now you are an expert,’ but that’s not true because there are no jobs there either.”**

In her work with immigrant women, Borooah Pyatt described the toll that she has seen women’s experiences of the labour market take on them, including depression, isolation and feelings of unworthiness because their years of training and work they have done are not recognized here. As she states, the implications of these experiences reach far beyond the woman herself: “...And then what happens with that kind of isolation and that jaded feeling that happens, your children suffer, your marriage suffers, your community suffers. That demotivation touches on everyone.”

Mann also addressed the higher levels of depression and anxiety among people working in precarious labour or jobs that don’t match their skill sets than individuals in decent work, as well as the lower visibility or recognition of these mental health issues among populations that experience marginalization:

And so some of the costs, especially racialized women, is that they will experience some mental health challenges which is also a part of the migration process. And unfortunately we’ve noted that racialized communities and women are less likely to be diagnosed for these health concerns as well so there is a double barrier, so there is a bias in diagnosis and then there is the exposure to greater amount of risk to experience greater depression and anxiety.”

While physical health issues were not a focus of this project’s focus group discussions, the health impacts of immigrant women experiences of employment have been explored in recent community

based research projects (Ng et al. 2016; Premji et al. 2014; Sethi 2014). Mann raised the physical health implications of the exclusion of immigrant women from the labour market in her interview:

And so people are then having to internalize these narratives about their position in society as being less than and I think the health consequences are experiences like hypertension, diabetes, especially coupled with lower income, so less access to fresh fruit and vegetables. What we are creating is a public health crisis by the mistreatment of people based on designation of immigration status through racialization and gender and also probably through mental health stigma.

A number of focus group participants described the positive impacts of being employed, for some even in work that doesn't match their qualifications, such as building confidence, experience and respect, and financial stability:

**"If you are professionally happy, you are personally happy."**

**"I have more and more confidence for myself, even my language improves and I have work experience in Canada."**

**"...I was working cleaning and I was happy because I had an opportunity and I need this job. I feel good that any job is important and you have respect. No matter what you are doing, people respect you."**

**"If financially stable, you feel good"**

## • **Women's Suggestions for Increasing Employment Equity**

**"I feel that unless there is transparency in the system, there will be never be equality."**

Central to OWHN's research principles is amplifying women's voices to shine a spotlight on their experiences and perspectives and to give women an opportunity to make suggestions to policy and decision makers about what needs to change in order for their access to the social determinants of health to improve. For this project, focus group participants were asked to share what they would like to say to employers and government officials about what changes to employment and immigration policy and practice needs to occur to take action on the gender wage gap and barriers to equitable employment that they face. We also asked women to share the advice that they would give to other women considering immigrating to Canada and looking for work. These suggestions, coupled with the experiential stories women shared with us, inform the project's key recommendations.

### **Immigration Policy and Practice**

Women were clear that the immigration system needs to offer a much more realistic picture of the employment situation that immigrants face upon arriving in Canada. The women made a number of suggestions for improving the system including the clarity on what employment sectors have employment opportunities, and what the barriers are to pursuing their careers in the current labour market:

“When you apply as skilled to immigrate to Canada, I think it could be more realistic, because people think that money grows on trees in Canada so you are going to come here and become rich and all that. I think they could focus on making it more realistic about what people are going to face when they get here.”

“There should be some rules and regulations laid down to ensure all immigrants, skilled immigrants, they should be given the correct picture of what they are facing in Canada. So it’s the choice of the skilled immigrants of whether he or she wants to go or doesn’t want to go.”

“They could put ‘this job, we have this much percentage of this job,’ or ‘we are already filled with this job.’ Like teaching, we don’t have this [positions available], so why do they keep on calling teachers.”

“I wish that there was more honesty in the process of immigration for us all, like who is coming here and who is asked to come here. But at the same time, honesty in terms of the labour market, what do you need? ‘Well, actually what we need is more constructions workers or more trade professions...’ But we are still by the bucket loads bringing in people with PhDs or doctors or master’s, clearly not what the labour market is in need of. So I feel there is a huge misalignment there that should be adjusted because this is a roomful [of people], but you are going to have thousands of people saying you know ‘I gave up a great career to come here to work’....”

### **Employment Policy and Practice**

When asked about what changes needs to happen to improve employment conditions and opportunities for immigrant women, one woman answered **“everything needs to change”**, offering a telling statement on the employment market that women immigrants encounter in Ontario. Their suggestions for employers and government address issues of discrimination and exclusion; the need for transparency and enforcement of employment; recognition of qualifications and establishment of equivalency or upgrade bridging programs that will allow immigrants to pursue their careers here without having to **“start from zero”**:

“Just having laws in place is of no use, unless it is ensured that those laws are implemented. Just by saying, ‘oh you should not insist on Canadian experience,’ unless that is implemented. But nobody sees whether that is being implemented or not.”

“[Pay equity laws] are only as good as enforcement.”

“I really hope the government will take into consideration that the pays are not equal between men and women. Just thinking about how much sacrifice women do compared to men, [we get paid less] and we still have to go back home and clean the house, cook dinner, take care of the kids ... which is not paid.”

### **Inclusion of Immigrant Women**

“The first thing I think is, don’t judge me by my accent, everyone has accents...”

“Don’t discard CV just because of their name.”

“[Employers need] to keep an open mind.”

“They have to recognize that women are talented, women have education, women can think. I feel like sometimes they think because we are women that we’re just going to cry on the job or break down on the job or something like that. If we can manage the home...being in the workplace is easy. And to recognize that we can do those jobs and to be paid for it.”

“I would want to hire that person [who has immigrated] because I know that that person coming from another place with all that struggle and still want to do work in their field, that’s an incredible person to have that. But they don’t think like that.”

“If you help your workers, whoever is working for you, if you really help them and integrate them into your business, that person will feel like they are part of that company...If you as an employer try to help those that are working for you, with special training or helping them, and certain companies will do that, that person working for you will never forget that and they’ll work even harder for you...”

“I want to do work, I have ability. I am very eager to work.”

“I feel that I have a lot to offer.”

“I think it is a loss to Canada that our skills are not being used.”

“Canada can also benefit from us, not just women benefiting from Canada.”

### **Recognition and Equivalency of Qualifications**

“Employers are having this trouble that this education is from this country or this country, they can make this compulsory so that it will be better for everyone. It will be a bit pricy, but you have to put the equivalency of the Canadian. You don’t have to put which country you come from, you have to put ‘my education is equivalent to this Canadian education’ ...That would give a fair chance for everyone...finish with the systemic racial discrimination because no one has to write ‘I have this from this.’ Just ‘my education is equivalent to this Canadian education,’ that’s it. So in that way, maybe employers would be more open minded.”

“... if you come as a psychologist you already have the mindset of a psychologist you don’t need to relearn these things, you just want to learn about the difference in operations or how things function differently here. That doesn’t mean you have to go back to zero and learn how to be a psychologist or learn psychology.”

“Select on the basis of their qualifications, not without that. Because when we see the qualifications, [we believe] ‘yes we can fit in that.’ But when we apply they say, ‘no, no, you are overqualified or you are underqualified.’”

“All these rules and regulations for professions, obviously they are necessary, but it is a complete inflexibility. If I am fulfilling nine of the ten criteria, then the door is closed in my face the same way it is for someone who is not fulfilling any or maybe half of those. So for whatever profession, not just teaching or medical, maybe if you feel someone is fulfilling a majority of whatever your criteria is, then have some kind of committee for that particular profession and give them a chance to interview.

Let them work and don't pay them anything. Let them work under some sort of supervision for a few months...At least give a small look to let the person prove himself or herself..."

"I think experience, whether you come from one country or another, your experience is always your experience. It doesn't change because we come from one region or another. We all basically want the same things. So if you are a nurse in one country and you come to another one, you are still going to be a nurse, you just now have to learn the new technology in that place..."

"If someone's education is from somewhere else, please give them one chance...if you see that their qualifications are more than the people who have started in Canada. We are paying taxes here in Canada...so at least give them one chance."

"They have to change the system. Why are some countries more valuable, some education [considered] much better than in others? I don't understand. I know my country is not the richest one, but we have a lot of smart people and we try our best but you come here and you feel zero... I think if people have experience, why do you have to make it zero?"

### **Hiring Transparency**

"There should be feedback...I think what would be the criteria of selection? What would be the criteria for shortlisting? And if the person isn't qualified, I think there should be some system of providing feedback, why you were not shortlisted, why you were not selected."

### **Employment and Settlement Supports for Immigrant Women**

Women also made a number of suggestions about services and supports that would ease their transition into Canada, help address the isolation and stress many experience, assist with practicalities such as transit access and support them in finding employment. Many spoke highly of local community services that they have accessed, such as settlement agencies, organizations supporting refugees, community health centres, women's centres and other community-based agencies. Suggestions include:

"Need to be more bridging programs so everyone can have a chance."

"There should be bridging courses. A short course or one semester..."

"Language school should also teach how to prepare a resume, banking and other general knowledge for newcomers."

"As the people land, give them bus passes for a month so that they don't have the extra burden of transportation. Give them one month comfort. And also some housing, subsidized housing, which we could use right away...just for a month or two weeks, give them some housing..."

"There is no guidance for the new immigrants when we arrive here. Some of us are totally lost and we don't know what to do, where to go. When we got here for the first time we didn't even know how to catch a bus..."

“Some newcomers when they come, they don’t know anything [about living here]. They need somebody to come to tell them ‘hi,’ just ‘hi.’ They need help, program outreach. The immigrant women’s centre or community health centre, they have many programs, they are very good for immigrants...”

“Mental health [services] for newcomers is what is needed.”

### **Advice for Other Women**

The project also asked women to share their advice for other women around immigration. Women made practical and encouraging suggestions that cautioned about immigrating if one is already well established in their career, offered tips for building their credentials, and about how to keep moving forward when facing the barriers to inclusion they will experience in Canada:

“If you have a good income, then you must not come here because you are settled over there and why stop there and start like a baby.”

“It depends on what level you are...if you are already experienced in your own country you don’t want to start here at minimum wage.”

“I think actually that Canada is for someone who has dreams and they haven’t accomplished them yet.”

“If you are just a bachelor [education], do some college here to help you get a job...”

“Volunteer in [your] specific area, it opens more doors, instead of volunteering in something else that is not the job that you did or what you studied.”

“Need a second door open always, there is no safety net. You need to be ready to have another option...”

“Never give up.”

“This is a country where we can fulfill our dreams, but we have to struggle a lot.”

“You need a high tolerance for frustration. Don’t leave your dreams behind that you came with. And when you are faced with reality, don’t buy a flight back. And don’t forget your origins and your background.”

“No matter what your passion is don’t let anyone take that dream away from you. And it is going to be hard and there are going to be people who say, ‘no you cannot do that.’”

“I would say keep trying and I also believe one day you will get the job you are interested in, just believe in it and keep trying.”

“My advice, even to myself, is that who you are is not based on what job you have.”

## Key Recommendations

The project's key recommendations are intended to provide policy makers, including federal and provincial governments, employers and other stakeholders, with experientially based counsel on how to address the gender wage gap and the systemic facilitators of this gap that disproportionately discriminate against immigrant and racialized women.

In addition to offering recommendations based on our project findings, we also draw attention to the recommendations put forward in recent CBR reports on precarious work and racialized refugee and immigrant women, respectively: [“Working so hard and still so poor!” The Health Impacts of Precarious Work on Racialized Refugee and Immigrant Women A Public Health Crisis in the Making](#) (Ng et al. 2016) and [Precarious Work Experiences of Racialized Immigrant Women in Toronto: A Community-Based Study](#) (Premji et al. 2014). We also support the [12 Steps to Closing the Gap](#) developed by the Ontario Equal Pay Coalition which is designed to eliminate the gender pay gap in 10 years if all steps are implemented together. The Coalition's preliminary submissions to the Ontario Wage Gap Review, [Securing Human Right: Securing Human Rights Justice for Women's Work](#) offers a comprehensive intersectional framing of the issues across population groups and a guide to immediate next steps and the 10 year plan to resolving the gender wage gap (Cornish et al. 2016).

The recommendations developed by this project, are informed by the insights and experiences of the 33 women who participated in the focus groups as well as the perspectives offered through the key informant interviews, and complement the publications identified above. They include specific recommendations for settlement and labour policy and funding; hiring and employment practices and social services and supports. Some of the actions are intended for immediate-term implementation to help alleviate the issues faced by immigrant women under the current labour market, such as changes to immigration policy and practice. However, critical to addressing the barriers that foster the gender wage gap and other employment inequities is the implementation of long-term resolutions that get at the systemic causes of discrimination and exclusion.

The project's key recommendations are as follows:

### **Ensure immigration policy and practices accurately reflect the reality of the labour market:**

- Provide prospective immigrants with realistic pictures of the employment situation in Canada.
- Take steps to make sure that prospective immigrants are aware of the sectors that currently have employment opportunities available, particularly in regards to skilled professional fields.
- Inform immigrants of the barriers to continuing their careers (e.g. requirement of Canadian credentials, experience and references) that they would face within the current labour market.

### **End the devaluing of foreign credentials and deskilling of immigrant women through qualifications equivalency certifications and career advancement opportunities:**

- Develop and implement a process to standardize recognition of foreign credentials, including education and work experience, so that equivalencies can be readily identified at a systems level.
- Understand that credential documentation may vary from country to country and be flexible in requirements.
- Establish cross-sector practicum, bridging and mentorship opportunities that will allow foreign trained professionals to work in their fields while upgrading credentials and building Canadian experience and professional connections.

**Ensure that hiring processes are fair and transparent across sectors:**

- Share job selection criteria with applicants.
- Respond to all applicants to advise them if they have been shortlisted or not.
- Develop and implement mechanisms to provide feedback for unsuccessful applicants.
- Provide a clear, specific range of compensation for the position during the job interview.
- Mandate anti-oppression training for those responsible for hiring processes.
- Institute 'name-blind' hiring processes.

**Make the minimum wage a livable wage:**

- Immediately increase the minimum wage to \$15.
- Guarantee minimum wage earners regular cost of living increases.

**Mandate pay transparency policies and practices:**

- Implement rules that require employers to provide mandatory disclosures around wage structures for all organizational positions.
- Make information available to employees that describes the criteria for determining pay level, how pay increases are distributed, and eligibility for extended benefits.

**Take action so that women in precarious work positions are protected by labour regulations:**

- Establish and uphold protections for workers in casual, contract and other types of employment so they are not exposed to exploitation and lack of labour regulation oversights.
- Provide precariously employed workers the same access to employment rights, regulations and benefits as full time employees.
- End the labour market trends of using casual, short-term contract and on-call positions in order to increase the availability of stable, permanent jobs.

**Eliminate workplace discrimination and exclusion**

- Require that employers implement mandatory anti-oppression training across staff levels.
- Work with staff and management within organizations to develop inclusive human resources policies.

### **Enforcement of Employment Equity Regulations**

- Frame the gender wage gap and employment equity as a human rights issue.
- Give appropriate government agencies the mandate and funding to promote, investigate and enforce employment equity across sectors.

### **Increase immigrant women's access to child care supports:**

- Increase availability of subsidized, licensed child care spaces.
- Provide for adaptable child care scheduling to accommodate shift work, work on weekends and non-standard hours.

### **Increase access to settlement, employment, health and social resources and supports**

- Ensure that community agencies serving immigrant women have the sufficient funding to deliver the services and programs needed to support women and their families to settle in Canada and to facilitate their full social and economic inclusion. Funding should reflect the specific needs identified in each community.
- Offer women immigrants access to clear, culturally relevant and multilingual resources that detail pay equity and employment rights, and how they can get help when facing workplace discrimination.
- Partner with community agencies that serve immigrant populations to support the development and dissemination of these resources in order to increase visibility and access.

## Conclusions

**“I just have this hope that there is light at the end, that we can get there...”**

The lived experiences and perspectives shared by the women who participated in this project offer important insights into the barriers to inclusion that women face upon immigrating to Ontario. More specifically, through their personal stories we are able to better understand the reality of the systemic issues and discriminations that perpetuate the gender wage gap and employment inequities in Ontario’s labour market.

The strength of the project’s findings demonstrates the importance of including diverse women in conversations to help identify the issues and solutions to the gender wage gap and more broadly, employment equity. Policy and program development must consider the intersection of determinants that impact women’s experiences. Continued opportunities, such as this project funding, to engage with community members is critical.

Responding to the depth of these barriers require long-term federal and provincial government action at the levels of policy, funding and enforcement that will address these issues in a systemic way. There are also immediate actions that can be taken by policy makers and employers to implement practical solutions that will support women in achieving meaningful employment that reflects their training and skills. Together these recommendations are critical in ensuring that the labour market does not continue to profit off of the exploitation of women immigrants.

The negative impacts of the barriers to immigrant women’s equitable inclusion in the labour market are significant for women and their families. As women identified in the focus groups, there are a number of supports needed, in addition to the settlement and employment policy and practice actions described above, that would help them through the processes of settling and working in Ontario. In her interview, Borooh Pyatt described the strength that women need to make it through the immigration process, the sacrifices that women make for the well-being of their families and the need for them to be supported and valued: “If she can be supported, and her potential can be recognized, tremendous things can happen.”

In conversation, Armstrong pointed to the importance of acknowledging gains that have been made in regards to the wage gap and gender equity generally in order to support continued advancements for women:

There has been some decline in some areas in the overall gender wage gap and in the wage gap among immigrant women compared to other women. I think we have made some progress and I think obviously not nearly enough, but we have to make sure we at least keep those gains and build on them to move ahead.

Despite the barriers they have faced, many women spoke of the optimism they feel that they will be able to achieve their dreams in Canada. Women across the focus groups were very clear that they have much to offer and that they just need a chance to prove it. The implementation of this project’s

recommendations will support the realization of immigrant women's full inclusion and contribution to Ontario's social and economic systems and this will result in benefits for all Ontarians.

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