

Submission to Ministry of the Status of Women On Women's Economic Empowerment

By
OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change
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Introduction

OCASI - Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants is a council of autonomous immigrant and refugee-serving organizations in Ontario and the collective voice of the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in the province. Formed in 1978, OCASI has 220 member organizations across the province of Ontario. OCASI's mission is to achieve equality, access and full participation for immigrants and refugees in every aspect of Canadian life.

Colour of Poverty Campaign/Colour of Change Network (COP-COC) is a community initiative based in the province of Ontario, Canada, which is made up of individuals and organizations working to build community-based capacity to address the growing racialization of poverty and the resulting increased levels of social exclusion and marginalization of racialized communities (both Indigenous peoples and peoples of colour) across Ontario.

Background

Indigenous women and women of colour in Ontario – particularly women of African descent – as well as refugee and immigrant women are over-represented among low-wage earners, those in precarious employment and those who are low-income. The intersectional identities of race and ethnicity, and immigration status combined, as well as gender identity, sexual orientation, age, (dis)ability and family status together to further exclude women and contribute to their income insecurity and economic instability.

Statistics on visible minority (VM)¹ women show¹: those living in poverty outnumber men by a ratio of 52% to 48%; they have lower participation in the labour force and a higher unemployment rate; they are paid significantly less than non-VM men and women.¹ The 2011 National Household Survey reported VM women had a median income of \$39,330 compared to \$42,848 for non-VM women, despite the fact that over 30% of VM women had a university degree compared to 19.5% for non-VM women. Immigrant VM women earned the lowest overall. Statistics Canada has said in a submission to the Parliamentary Status of Women Committee that immigrant women and visible minority (VM) women are among those who are at higher risk of falling into low income¹. Refugee women are that much more over-represented among those who are low-income, and therefore have additional limited economic security.

¹ [Statistics Canada uses 'visible minority' as a demographic category for people of colour.](#)

Women migrant workers are particularly disadvantaged in Canada's labour market as a result of legal and policy barriers that exclude them from many of the protections and benefits that all other workers enjoy, despite paying into the same programs. Further, their precarious immigration status is a major impediment to accessing even the most basic of protections that they are legally allowed. Migrant workers in the agriculture, service and caregiving sectors are typically low-waged – and not coincidentally are disproportionately if not predominantly women of colour, with the vast majority being from countries across the Global South.

Migrant workers are over-represented in low-wage work in Canada. Their precarious immigration status has made them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by employers and recruiters. Workers who are trying to transition to permanent resident status – such as live-in caregivers – face long processing delays which lead to deeper precarity in their work and residence status as well as impacts their access to healthcare coverage and other services.

Women with minority religious observance or faith identity, especially Muslim women are often subject to profiling and further exclusion in the labour market (as well as in society generally), which has a negative impact on earnings, income security, access to services and more.

Women with precarious immigration status, such as refugee claimants and those who are undocumented or otherwise without immigration status are at the greatest economic (and other) disadvantage. In addition to not having access to any economic, social and income security programs and measures (other than limited access to healthcare and temporary work permits for refugee claimants), women with precarious immigration status are at a greater risk of exploitation, abuse, and assault. Typical remedies such as making a complaint, or going to the police are often not available to them – whether real or perceived - due to their vulnerability.

In light of these realities, we would like to propose the following policy remedies:

Recommendations

1. Employment Equity

Recommendation: Ontario must introduce mandatory employment equity legislation, such that the named groups (women, First Peoples, peoples of colour, persons with (dis)abilities, LGBTQ community members) benefit equitably from hiring and compensation, as well as retention and promotion; and have these mechanisms integrated into all public physical capital and social infrastructure investments (including public transit, roads and highways, housing, water and waste-water, hospitals, renewable energy, green economy, arts and culture, and more) through the creative use of conditional transfers, contract compliance, Community Benefits Agreements (CBA's) and other appropriate legislative tools and program delivery mechanisms.

Federal employment equity legislation has increased employment opportunities for women in the federally regulated sectors. However, given the disparities evident in earnings and labour market data, women – and particularly racialized immigrant women – are yet to

reach wage or labour market parity or equitable promotion and retention in federally regulated sectors. This in large part is due to the less than earnest approach to implementation and enforcement of the federal regime, though the potential for achieving these goals through the employment equity framework remains.

That being said, the federal legislation covers only federally regulated employers—which includes about 500 private-sector employers, 30 Crown corporations and 5 other federal organizations with a combined workforce of over 760 000 employees. Therefore the majority of the Canadian labour force is not subject to mandatory employment equity legislation.

2. Disaggregated Data Collection

Recommendation: Implement disaggregated socio-demographic data collection across all government organizations and public institutions across the province so that we are better able to identify and plan for targeted labour market participation, ensure equitable participation in employment and income security programs, and identify policy gaps or inequities where women are excluded from such programs by factors such as immigration status.

The information thus collected will help develop the Ontario government's capacity to better quantify the impact of gender-equity initiatives on racialized refugee and/or immigrant women, as well as women from other appropriate equity seeking groups or historically disadvantaged communities.

3. Migrant Workers

Recommendation: Ontario should call on the federal government to introduce permanent resident status upon arrival for all migrant workers. In the interim, Ontario should call for the restoration of Employment Insurance (EI) benefits to all otherwise eligible migrant workers to allow them access to pensions, parental benefits, EI and supports after workplace injuries even after they leave Canada. Additionally, in the interim all migrant workers should be allowed to convert to open work permits that allow them to maintain status even if they leave their employer of record.

Recommendation: The Ontario Provincial Nominee Program should be opened up to low-wage migrant workers in all sectors, and without the onerous requirements that would bar access for most low-wage workers.

4. Universal/Affordable Childcare

Recommendation: Provide universal and affordable childcare. It will benefit all women, but especially those from low-income and working poor families – who are disproportionately of racialized and/or refugee or immigrant backgrounds.

Ontario – the province with the highest childcare feesⁱⁱ also has a gender wage gap that is higher than the Canadian median, and employment rates for women at lower than the national averageⁱⁱⁱ. The disparities are greater for racialized and/or immigrant and refugee women. Having to take care of children and having burdensome if not unaffordable childcare

costs is the key reason women take involuntary part-time work. Statistics show that racialized and/or immigrant women are more likely to be in part-time work.

5. Homelessness and Poverty Reduction/Eradication

Recommendation: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy and Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy must adopt "targeted universalism" approach by incorporating effective measures to address disproportionate rates of poverty and homelessness among First Peoples, peoples of colour, single mothers, persons with (dis)abilities and immigrants and refugees.

Research shows that poverty and "minority race" are key factors that can lead to homelessness. Racialized people experience disproportionately higher levels of homelessness and poor housing. Immigrants and refugees in Ontario are at risk for homelessness due to poverty, discrimination, cuts to social programs, lack of housing services, and lack of information about their rights. Further, being homeless can pose a variety of barriers to pursuing employment.

Existing housing options and programs are typically not accessible for women with precarious immigration status. Women who live in extended and non-traditional family households, such as recently arrived government and privately sponsored refugee families that include a larger than average number of individuals and multiple generations, face barriers in finding appropriate and affordable housing.

Recommendation: Ontario must revamp current housing policies to accommodate extended and non-traditional family households in need of social housing, and review access to existing and new interventions to ensure that residents with precarious immigration status can access shelters and affordable housing programs and services, as well as related supports that will enable them to secure and retain housing such as information and legal representation to access tenant rights and emergency housing funds.

6. Equitable Program Access

Recommendation: Increase availability of English and French language classes and employment-oriented training programs, and increase access by providing onsite child-minding, and other supports such as bursaries for internationally-trained low-income immigrant and refugee women to pursue licensing and accreditation.

Federally-funded language training and employment programs for immigrants and refugees are not available for certain migrants, such as refugee claimants, citizens, migrant workers, international students and those with precarious immigration status. Provincially-funded programs are typically the only option for such persons. Internationally-trained low-income refugee and immigrant women face multiple barriers to becoming employed in their profession such as the high financial cost of accreditation.

ⁱ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14694-eng.htm>

ⁱⁱ Henessy, Trish. Better Child Care for Ontario. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. January 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14694-eng.htm>