

## Submission to Ontario's Task Force on Women and the Economy

July 30, 2021

OCASI - Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants submits the following recommendations to the Committee, on addressing the unique economic challenges facing immigrant, refugee and migrant women and ensuring their equitable participation in economic growth in Ontario.

OCASI is the umbrella organization for immigrant and refugee-serving organizations in Ontario, and now has 240 member agencies across the province. As the collective voice of the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in the province OCASI is an important advocate for access and equity for refugees, refugee claimants, immigrants, migrants and people with precarious immigration status.

OCASI is advised on priorities for women's organizations by the Women's Caucus. The Caucus is formed by 40 women's organizations in the Council, and is co-led by the Women's Director, an elected position on the OCASI Board of Directors. OCASI convenes regular meetings of the Caucus for knowledge-sharing, advocacy, and partnerships. More than 40 Caucus members are funded by Ontario's Investing in Women's Futures Fund, which provides pre-employment supports for women and violence against women prevention programs.

*Context:*

Women in Ontario have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19. The greatest and deepest economic, social and health impacts are felt by Indigenous, racialized and immigrant women, particularly those who are living on low-incomes and experiencing intersecting inequalities based on race, class, disability, education, and migration and immigration status. Immigrant and racialized women are also disproportionately represented in jobs with greater exposure to COVID-19 across multiple sectors. Given gendered norms and pre-existing inequities, women shouldered a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities and unpaid work at home, including caring for children and dependent family members.

- *A recent [report](#) from the Future Skills Centre found that recent immigrants, workers who are racialized, Indigenous workers and young workers are disproportionately holding precarious jobs, and all have experienced adverse income outcomes due to the pandemic. 55% of racialized workers who are also recent immigrants reported either a loss of hours of work or job loss or both.*
- *[Statistics Canada labour force survey data](#) reported in December 2020 showed the unemployment rate for racialized women was 10.5% compared to 6.2% for white women and the former group's unemployment rate was only slightly higher than racialized males (10.0%).*
- *As per labour force survey data, Indigenous women and racialized women are among the last to return to jobs lost during COVID, and the impacts are different for different groups. The unemployment rate for Black women was the highest at 13.4%. East Asian women are the furthest from pre-pandemic employment with a 10.2% unemployment rate. The unemployment rate for Indigenous women was approximately 16.8%.*
- *[IRPP calculations of Statistics Canada data](#) found that employment rates for immigrant women aged 25-54 and arrived more than 10 years ago (workers with more secure jobs) dropped by 12.2 percentage points between May 2019 and May 2020. In comparison, the employment rate dropped by only 7 percentage points for Canadian-born men and women, and 8 points for immigrant men.*
- *An [interdisciplinary research team](#) at Carleton University reported that immigrant women encounter vulnerabilities due to gendered responsibilities that negatively impacted their employment experiences. This included a reversal of career trajectory, layoffs, and decreased availability for short-term employment opportunities. In addition, many were deemed ineligible for emergency government support.*

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- *Statistics Canada [reports](#) that in Ontario's most diverse neighbourhoods (aka racialized/immigrant communities) COVID-19 infections were three times higher, hospitalizations rates were four times higher and deaths were twice as high.*
- *A [study](#) conducted by the Law Commission of Ontario found that recent immigrants were the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest overrepresented category of persons holding precarious employment.*
- *A [RBC study](#) indicates the earnings gaps between immigrants and those born in Canada, despite comparable educational levels, is estimated to cost the national economy approximately \$50 billion. Because Ontario receives the largest share of immigrants to Canada [46.3%](#), this economic loss is deeply felt across the province.*
- *The 2016 Census found the gender pay gap is higher for women who are Indigenous, racialized and are immigrants. Racialized women working full-time, full year earn an average of 33% less than non-racialized men, at 67 cents to the dollar. Immigrant women working full-time, full-year earn an average of 29% less than Canadian-born men, at 71 cents to the dollar despite having higher levels of education.*
- *Researchers at University of Toronto, [report](#) a sharp rise (up from 11% to 35%) amongst those reporting discriminatory experiences in the last two years.*

There is an urgent need to strengthen our economy for recovery. In the process, we must look ahead to ending the persistent underutilization and under-compensation of immigrant and racialized women's talents and skills, and adopting measures that will end systemic inequities in the labour market and the economy.

Ontario's Taskforce On Women And The Economy is mandated to make recommendations to remove entry barriers in skilled trades and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, where women are underrepresented. This presents a tremendous opportunity to dismantle existing systemic barriers in accreditation, licensure and employment access for immigrant women trained internationally in precisely these fields, as well as other regulated professions and trades.

#### OCASI Recommends:

- Commit to inclusive labour market integration
- Address immigration status barriers
- Address persistent barriers to registration and labour market integration in regulated professions and trades

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## 1. **Commit to inclusive labour market integration:**

There is a need to resolve long standing and disproportionate race and gender labour market inequities across all sectors. In particular there is an urgent need to end the inequities in the care economy, which includes formal and informal, and paid and unpaid work in health, education and social services. Racialized women and immigrant and migrant women workers are disproportionately represented in care economy work. Ending this injustice requires a commitment to creating and sustaining decent jobs, raising employment standards protections and occupational health and safety provisions, extending legal protections to all workers including gig workers, ending discrimination against workers with disabilities, investing in childcare, and fully implementing measures to prevent and gender-based violence.

### **Recommendations:**

- Collect disaggregated provincial labour force data, modelled on disaggregated patient healthcare data collected during the pandemic.
- Adequately support the Anti-Racism Directorate to enable the full implementation of the Anti-Racism Act.
- Advance representative workforce legislation<sup>1</sup> that mandates diversity, equity, and inclusion in recruitment, hiring, retention and promotion.
- Ensure women with disabilities can access appropriate attendant care, technological support and transportation so they can fully participate in the labour market.
- Prioritize Community Benefits Agreements within public infrastructure projects that ensure diversity in hiring; include contract compliance in publicly funded projects.
- Invest in a high quality, affordable and accessible licensed child care system for the province.
- Fully implement measures to prevent and end gender-based violence, including appropriate supports in workplaces, schools, and service spaces, adequate financial supports for women who are economically impacted by gender based violence including loss of income, and safety from exploitation and deportation for women made vulnerable by lack of immigration status.
- Expand investments in affordable housing projects, and support the hiring of Indigenous, immigrant and racialized women in publicly funded construction projects. Prioritize

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<sup>1</sup> A representative workforce must reflect the diversity of the available labour force and that under-represented or designated groups (e.g. Black, Indigenous, Persons of Colour aka, BIPOC, women, persons differently able) are represented at all occupational levels in proportion to their numbers in the provincial or select comparative population base.

opportunities for women with international experience in the trades and related professions, and who are seeking certification (i.e. architecture, project management) to be part of these workforces.

- Raise the minimum wage to at least a [living wage](#) – an estimate of at least \$20/hr and require employers to provide a guaranteed minimum number of hours of work each week, legislate 10 permanent paid sick days, end the misclassification of gig workers as independent contractors, and invest in stronger enforcement and compliance measures to the Employment Standards and Occupational Health and Safety Acts.
- Increase and target supports within Employment Ontario (EO) programs that will identify and remedy systemic barriers to enhanced labour force attachment for immigrants. The new EO transformation model must recognize and prioritize women-specific services and women-focused service providers, to ensure that immigrant and racialized women receive appropriate and sufficient employment support.
- Invest sufficiently in community-based services that provide targeted support for racialized and immigrant women - including Francophone immigrant women - for workforce entry, as well as supports needed to dismantle systemic barriers and integrate effectively in the workforce including affordable childcare, housing, education and training, settlement services, supports for women with disabilities, and language interpretation.

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## **2. Address immigration status barriers:**

The current federal Temporary to Permanent Resident Pathway initiative for temporary workers (essential and healthcare workers) and international students, which is meant to accelerate transitions, is not meeting its targets. There is a need to expand and improve this initiative to be more equitable and to ensure long term, accessible and rapid transitional pathways to permanent residence for those holding temporary work permits. While this is a federal responsibility, the province can support more effective and equitable implementation of the current initiative, as well as using provincial policy tools like the Provincial Nominee Program.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **Broaden available provincial pathways:**

- Utilize and expand the provincial PNP program by creating expanded streams targeting applicants from essential occupations and trades, including low wage occupations.
- Revisit lessons learned from the GTA pilot for out-of-status construction workers and expand to other temporary workers and sectors.

#### **Improve the current temporary to permanent pathway:**

- Increase provincial outreach efforts including targeted information sessions and plain language/pictorial and multilingual explanations of the application process that can be disseminated by trusted community stakeholders.
- Review provincial efforts on an ongoing basis to identify gaps and inequities in who is applying and implement inclusive processing steps.
- Support the deferral of federal fees until after approvals, along with guidance for how to access Immigration Loans Programs. Explore supplementing existing immigrant loan programs with provincial resources.

### 3. **Address barriers to registration and labour market integration in regulated professions and trades.**

There are long standing and well documented barriers for immigrants attempting to re-enter their professions and trades, particularly immigrant women. While some advances have been realized, significant barriers remain, including inadequate resources. Systemic changes are required in order to end the underutilization of immigrant talent.

#### **Recommendations:**

#### **Bring stakeholders together for professions and trades to collectively address barriers and facilitate access**

Creating timely and equitable access involves a range of stakeholders for each profession or trade. Barriers to access can only be effectively addressed by key stakeholders working collaboratively.

- Establish provincially based occupation-specific centres that: bring together all key stakeholders, including regulators, relevant ministries, educational bodies, employers, immigrants, and service providers to address barriers in the assessment, bridging and registration process; that provide information and career navigation services to immigrants; and that streamline access to bridging and career laddering opportunities.
- Immigrant and refugee serving sector organizations across Ontario must be involved in the above process as they have expertise and experience in delivering services in settlement, language training and labour market integration, know local labour market needs and employers, and can be a catalyst to fast-track labour market integration of immigrants in regulated professions and trades.
- Prioritize the development and dissemination of educational materials for employers illustrating general equivalency of international qualifications by occupation sector.
- Identify occupational categories in which immigrant women disproportionately find employment (such as: interpretation, translation, personal support worker, childcare) and explore measures to ensure better wage/working conditions, while not creating any additional labour force attachment barriers.
- Prioritize public appointments of immigrant women with lived experience of the registration process to occupational regulatory body councils of professions and trades.

### **Guarantee timely assessments/registration and occupational licensing:**

For immigrant women in regulated professions or trades, regardless of when they arrived or their status, a commitment is needed to ensure regulatory/licensing body assessments are completed within an appropriate timeframe. That means assessment and direction to applicants must be completed before their previous experience expires as stipulated by the regulatory body.

- Establish a process whereby the Ontario Fairness Commissioner works with regulatory bodies to identify the appropriate time (as defined above) for each occupation and the resources required to ensure assessment of and direction to candidates within that time frame.
- Provide regulatory bodies with the necessary resources to guarantee assessment within this timeframe.
- Require reporting to ensure compliance with this timeframe within the Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act; and enact legislation to mandate equity provisions in the recognition and granting of credentials in a timely manner; collect disaggregated data; and reporting by regulated professions.
- Examine legislative requirements adopted in some EU countries (e.g. Denmark, Germany) that establish maximum processing time limits for regulatory bodies to assess international credentials. In Denmark, this is 30 days for uncomplicated cases
- Establish dedicated information tools and platforms including internet portals that provide concise, easily accessible information about recognition processes/occupation.

### **Invest in bridging & gap filling opportunities:**

- Ensure that all immigrant women have access to the necessary bridging or gap filling programs for their intended occupation within the appropriate time frame, and that these programs are provided adequately in English and French and they are adequately supported with childcare and access for women with disabilities.
- Increase investment in proven and innovative bridging models, pathways, and programs that are scalable, replicable to ensure access for all eligible candidates.
- Focus on coordinated career laddering and bridging initiatives where the labour market need is most urgent, such as for internationally trained nurses to advance their careers in the long term and home care sectors. Explore similar initiatives for other sectors, at scale.
- Explore and expand the use of virtual technologies and simulations to speed and scale up the skills learning and competency assessment aspects bridging and assessment processes.

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### **Establish a portable professional/trades integration benefit:**

Ontario's healthcare sector and other sectors will realize significant labour market skills development gains by establishing a portable professional integration benefit for eligible immigrants that can be used to meet their occupation-specific licensure requirements (bridging tuition, exams, fees etc.,)

- Establish equitably accessible funding supports per regulated in-demand occupations for internationally trained newcomers to cover expenses such as competency assessments, registration exams, and bridge training. Other career related expenses such as a living allowance, transportation, and childcare could also be supported through this benefit.

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