

Supporting Women Newcomers in Canada: Key Considerations for Inclusive Programming

Introduction

Newcomer women occupy a unique social position stemming from the intersecting structural inequalities of gender, race, class, and status. In order to provide support for newcomer women, it is essential to understand how compounding vulnerabilities and responsibilities shape the experiences newcomer women have throughout the settlement and integration process. Therefore, the focus of this discussion will be on identifying key considerations for designing inclusive and effective programs to support the diverse experiences of newcomer women in Canada.

1. Structural Barriers in Accessing Services

The burden of integrating newcomer families into Canada often falls on the women of these families. Being able to access necessary services plays a key role in the integration process. Research on the experiences of women newcomers points to several structural barriers in accessing services. These challenges can include:

- Precarious employment
- Language barriers
- Unaffordable childcare
- Social exclusion and isolation
- Citizenship status and dependency

2. Employment

While the number of newcomer women in Canada has increased steadily over the last two decades, employment rates continue to lag. Even when women newcomers successfully find employment, they are more likely to be underemployed, part-time, and underpaid.¹

2021 Census Spotlight on the Intersection of Gender, Race, and Immigration Status

Median Annual Income

- Visible Minority Immigrant Women: \$27,000
- Non-Visible Minority Immigrant Women: \$36,000
- Visible Minority Immigrant Men: \$37,000
- Non-Visible Minority Immigrant Men: \$53,000

Unemployment Rate Among Newcomers

- Visible Minority Immigrant Women: 9.0%
- Non-Visible Minority Immigrant Women: 6.3%
- Visible Minority Immigrant Men: 7.7%
- Non-Visible Minority Immigrant Men: 6.0%

Research shows that for newcomer women who have been in Canada for longer than 10 years, employment rates start to converge with those of non-immigrant women, but wages do not. Wage gaps are even greater for racialized newcomer women, who experience a “triple disadvantage” at the intersection of their gender, race, and immigration status.² Women in temporary work program also face poor work conditions, as well as sexual and racial harassment.

Precarious employment and financial instability impact the health and safety of newcomer women and their families in various ways, including:³

- Unpredictable work schedules
- Lack of benefits and sick coverage
- Lack of family time
- High levels of stress and fatigue
- Heightened risk of food and housing insecurity
- Vulnerability to violence

3. Language Barriers

Language barriers present a significant challenge for many newcomers in accessing services and resources. Given women's overrepresentation in completing unpaid care work, research shows that language classes are less likely to be accessible for newcomer women.⁴ Isolation and low wage work also limits the opportunities for newcomer women to develop their language skills.⁵ The ability to communicate with service providers is especially crucial for women to advocate for themselves and their children and seek help when necessary.

4. Employment

While accessing affordable childcare is an issue for many women, newcomer women are especially impacted, given that immigration eliminates most, if not all, of the family support previously held for childcare.⁶ Often, other settlement goals are postponed because childcare needs to be prioritized and women are the sole providers of this responsibility.

5. Social Exclusion and Isolation

Newcomer women can face social exclusion and isolation due to several barriers, including cultural differences and limited social networks. Research shows that newcomer women have fewer social networks than newcomer men. This marginalization not only hinders newcomer women's integration, but also impacts their mental health and well-being.

6. Status and Dependency

Newcomer women often come to Canada as dependents of men or as accompanying family members. When women enter Canada under the "family status" stream, they depend on their spouses to maintain their immigration status. This dependency places women at heightened risk of violence and exploitation. The fear of losing status can deter newcomer women from reporting abuse, perpetuating a cycle of silence.⁷

Key Recommendations

- Provide structural support for women and their families, such as affordable and accessible childcare, transportation, and housing.
- Understand how status and dependency impact women newcomers' settlement and integration experience.
- Facilitate culturally sensitive outreach programs and social support groups for women and mothers.
- Apply a gender lens to policies, services, and programming.

Works Cited

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