

CRIAW FACT SHEET

CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN NO.5-2003

Immigrant and refugee women

Only 4% of Canadians are not immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Only Aboriginal peoples are native to this land, and have lived and died here for 10,000 years. Thirty percent of Canadian women have themselves immigrated here from somewhere else¹ and this population is growing four times faster than the population of Canadian-born women.²

Approximately 3,000 more females immigrated to Canada in 2001 than males.³ However:

- Almost 15,000 more women emigrate under the family class, which has an impact on their social and economic position in Canada.⁴
- Men are more likely to emigrate as principal refugee applicants with women cited as their family members (dependents),⁵ even though the majority of the world's refugees are women and children.
- Five times more men emigrate as principal applicants under the business class than women.⁶
- Men are more likely to be the principal applicants under the skilled worker immigration class.⁷

Regulations placed on family class (sponsored) immigrants can make it difficult for them to receive social assistance and old age security, as well as limit their access to social housing and job training programs. Not only does this deny immigrant women the services they need, it also means they are forced to rely on men whether they want to or not. This can result in women and children living in abusive situations.⁸

How does immigration policy affect women differently?

- By awarding points for official language ability, education, and professional experience, which women around the world may have less opportunity to develop.⁹
- By focusing on economic criteria and ignoring other characteristics including volunteer work in the community and unpaid caring work in the family.¹⁰
- By granting immigration officers discretionary powers, which allows their biases and prejudices to come into play when making immigration decisions.¹¹
- By shaping immigration categories so that primarily women are defined as “family members” – formerly “dependents” – on husbands or fathers.¹²
- By charging high immigration fees, which women are less likely to be able to afford. Canada has a large wage gap between women and men – women earn 74% of what men do for full-year, full-time work. In many other countries, the wage gap is even larger, and women find it harder than men to save



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the funds to emigrate. A sponsorship application is \$75, plus up to \$550 per person being sponsored. A principal applicant under the investor, entrepreneur or self-employed class must pay \$1050 for him or herself, and up to \$550 for other family members. In addition to application fees, the principal applicant in most immigration classes must pay a Right of Permanent Residence Fee of \$975 for him or herself and an additional \$975 for a spouse.¹³ People from countries in which proper documentation cannot be obtained because of civil war, anarchy or persecution must pay almost \$1000 per person for DNA testing to prove that they are related by blood to family members they are sponsoring. This not only causes financial hardship, but does not recognize adopted family members and other types of kinship systems, unless the Canadian immigration officer is convinced that a family relationship exists.

- By introducing a new rule that bars people on social assistance from sponsoring their families to Canada in order to reunite with them, other than under exceptional circumstances. The majority of those on social assistance are women with children, and they may also be in most need of family support and networks. According to the federal government's own gender analysis, "Research has shown that female sponsors with children are somewhat more likely to default than male sponsors and that most sponsorship breakdowns occur because of economic factors (such as unemployment) beyond the sponsor's control. These conditions are linked to women's labour market experience and their responsibility as primary caregivers."¹⁴
- By forcing domestic workers (almost all of whom are women) to live in the homes of their employers, which subjects some to financial, physical and sexual abuse. The majority of other types of temporary workers to Canada are men, and they are not restricted in this way.

What immigrant and refugee women have contributed to Canada

One of the most well-known immigrant women in Canada is Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, who spent many years as a CBC journalist and promoter of Canadian culture and the arts. To list all the immigrant and refugee women who have contributed in a noticeable way to communities, the economy, human rights, and political life would take longer than this fact sheet. Beyond the visible achievements, immigrant and refugee women contribute greatly to the Canadian economy and society every day. They work hard, pay taxes, do volunteer work, and raise families. Yet, some people continue to judge them unfairly and think of immigrants and refugees in terms of stereotypes. Just because barriers are not impossible for some to overcome does not mean that we should continue to allow those barriers to exist.

Stereotypes of immigrant and refugee women

- **Myth:** Immigrant women are in Canada to do the 'dirty work' Canadian-born citizens will not do.¹⁵
Fact: Immigrant women are often forced to take jobs in manual labour, even though they may have the training and education for other kinds of jobs. This is because Canada has inadequate systems to recognize foreign credentials and experience.
- **Myth:** Immigrant and refugee women are all women of colour, or don't speak English or French. **Fact:** Immigrant and refugee women come from all parts of

Myth: Immigrant and refugee women are all women of colour, or don't speak English or French. Fact: Immigrant and refugee women come from all parts of the world – Asia, Africa, South America, the Caribbean, the United States, Europe and Oceania. Many are racialized women, some are not. The majority speak English or French, 9% do not.

the world – Asia, Africa, South America, the Caribbean, the United States, Europe and Oceania. Many are racialized women, some are not. The majority speak English or French, 9% do not.¹⁶ Some immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, the United States and Europe speak English or French as a first language. Some refugee women have come from Eastern Europe, Rwanda, Somalia and other places ravaged by war. Immigrant and refugee women represent a very large number of cultures and personal and political circumstances.

- **Myth:** Immigrant and refugee women all have large families. **Fact:** Some do, some do not. Some are living apart from extended families overseas. Some refugee women have lost all or most of their family members to war or execution.
- **Myth:** Immigrant women are “uneducated”. **Fact:** On average, immigrant women have higher levels of formal education than Canadian-born women. Those who do not nevertheless have skills and knowledge.

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- **Myth:** Immigrant women are not feminist. **Fact:** Some of Canada’s most high-profile feminists are immigrant women, such as former National Action Committee on the Status of Women President Sunera Thobani.
- **Myth:** Immigrant women take jobs away from Canadian-born women. **Fact:** Canada has a labour shortage in many occupations. If Canada did not benefit from immigrants and refugees, the Canadian population

and economy would decline. Many immigrant women and men set up small businesses in Canada, which create jobs.

- **Myth:** Immigrant and refugee women get into Canada by manipulating the system. **Fact:** The system is actually stacked against immigrant and refugee women. Thousands are rejected every year. The media do not report the whole story when it comes to immigrants and refugees.

Refugee Women

It is a myth that Canada accepts a large number of refugees. For every 443 Canadians born, 1 refugee is admitted. This ratio lags behind countries such as Jordan that admits 1 refugee for every 3 native born Jordanians, and Lebanon that admits one refugee for every 11 native born Lebanese citizens.¹⁹ An immigration analyst states

that Canada particularly discriminates against female refugees by preferring to provide them with aid in camps near their home country while admitting more male refugees into this country.²⁰ This can be very dangerous for women. Women and girls are vulnerable to sexual exploitation in camps, including by humani-

tarian workers. Some men offer their wives, daughters, and sisters to the aid workers in order to receive any type of assistance for their families. Some single mothers will offer themselves to the workers in order to receive enough food to feed their children. These young girls are primarily between the ages of 13 and 18 and often face pregnancies, abortions, exposure to STDs and AIDS as a consequence.²¹ Women can be attacked while collecting water or firewood around refugee camps. These women are trying to mobilize themselves in an effort to battle violence against women in camps.²²

The legacy women refugees live with

Women refugees can come to Canada for similar reasons as men: fleeing political persecution or war in their own countries. In addition, some women may have been the victims of sexual torture and must now face that trauma and fear as well as the confusion and uncertainty associated with settling into a new country and culture.²³ In the past, Canada did not recognize that women could be targets of gender-specific forms of persecution, such as rape, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced marriage or mutilation. For example, in a case that was overturned by the Federal Court of Appeals, a Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) judge ruled against a woman from China because the judge said China's one child policy which requires women to abort any further pregnancies is not a matter of persecution of women or an infringement of rights, but a matter of "economic logic".²⁴

The Government of Canada established the Women at Risk program in 1988,²⁵ and the IRB issued guidelines in 1993 recognizing gender as a ground of persecution for the purpose of a refugee claim.²⁶ However, an analysis of how the guidelines have worked show that they leave room for improvement, both in terms of overseas women refugees' knowledge of their existence, to the success of the claims.²⁷ Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) adjudicators have a great deal of individual discretion, and the gender persecution guidelines are simply guidelines, not laws or regulations.

Have perceptions of refugees and visa applicants changed since September 11th 2001?

Heightened security and racist assumptions have been directed at refugees.

- Heightened security and racist assumptions have been directed at refugees. They are increasingly viewed as threats to national and international security,²⁸ when most just want to build a good, safe life in a country in which bombs will not drop on their heads, and without fear of torture and death for their political or religious beliefs. Women who wear the hijab (head covering), and women with Muslim or Arab-sounding names, whether or not they are immigrants or refugees, are particularly visible targets.
- The Safe Third Country Legislation taking effect in Spring 2003 links Canada's refugee hearing processes to those of the United States. It discriminates against female refugees because the United States does not recognize gender as a form of persecution to the same degree as Canada.²⁹ The Safe Third Country Agreement comes up for review one year after the law takes effect, and will include a review of gender issues. It is important to become involved in ensuring that refugee policies do not discriminate against women.
- Both the Canadian Breast Cancer Network and the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) report that women delegates to conferences in Canada from places such as Kenya were denied entry into Canada in 1999, 2002 and 2003. In one of the incidents, only the male delegates received visas.³⁰ This has always been a problem: Women and men, usually people of colour, wishing to travel to Canada to visit family or participate in conferences may be denied entry because Canadian officers overseas are afraid they may try to stay in Canada. As well, since September 11, 2001, increased security concerns may be resulting in a higher number of people being denied visas.

Same sex immigration policies

While the government of Canada claims to recognize same sex partners in the immigration application and refugee determination processes, the reality can be different. Since no marriage certificate can be presented upon application from most countries (except the Netherlands and Belgium), couples may not apply as

spouses. They can each apply independently, or one may claim the other under the family class or as a common law partner.³¹ This then leaves the interpretation of the relationship up to an immigration officer, thus leaving the process open to biases.³²

Violence

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Sponsored immigrant and refugee women, mail-order brides, and domestic live-in caregivers are especially vulnerable to abusive relationships. Dependent upon their partners and employers for immigration status and economic support, these women face threats of withdrawn work contracts, difficult access to legal help due to economic and language barriers, communication and cultural roadblocks, and distrust or fear of the Canadian legal system.³³ Many women immigrant, refugee and domestic worker organizations have taken action on this issue.

Housing

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Often the first barrier immigrant women face in immigrating to Canada is finding a place to live. Landlords frequently discriminate against immigrant women on the basis of their gender, national origin, race, the presence of children, and their employment and income status. This can result in the racial segregation of immigrant groups into specific neighbourhoods within large cities.³⁴

Jobs/Income

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Immigrant women are less likely to have paid employment than immigrant men and non-immigrant women. This is even true for immigrant women with university degrees.³⁵ In order to understand the reasons for this pattern it is helpful to look at some of the hurdles that face immigrant and refugee women when they try to enter the Canadian paid-labour force.

- Racism among employers against racialized women and men and people who have certain accents in English or French mean that some immigrant and refugee women have little choice but to take on manual labour, regardless of their level of education.³⁶
- They are often forced to start from scratch, taking jobs they are overqualified for, often because their credentials and work experience are not recognized.³⁷
- As dependent immigrants it can be difficult for them to find work.³⁸
- Language training in English or French, for immigrants who do not already have fluency in Canada's official languages, is not always readily available or accessible to women as dependent immigrants.³⁹
- Immigrant women tend to work in 'traditional' women's sectors, taking clerical, sales, and service jobs. Yet, they perform more manual labour than Canadian born women do.⁴⁰
- Immigrant women also, regardless of education, earn less than Canadian-born women.⁴¹

Language training

More immigrant women (9%) than immigrant men (5%) do not speak English or French.⁴² This can be very

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isolating, and even dangerous. This means that one in ten immigrant women (and one in twenty immigrant men) cannot read Canadian medication labels, food labels (which can lead to allergy risks for themselves and their children), or understand their or their children's doctors, teachers, or seek help from police, lawyers or social workers. It also limits immigrant women's participation in politics and societal decision-making. Sometimes people yell at an immigrant woman, thinking that if they talk louder, she will understand. She is not deaf. Sometimes people assume she is stupid, and insult her, or act impatiently. She may be brilliant, and frustrated that she has difficulty communicating with many other Canadians. Immigrant women who do not speak English or French must often use their children as interpreters, which is unsatisfactory, especially if the children are young, and cannot understand things such as tax forms, or where personal issues are being discussed, such as at the gynecologist's office, or abuse counseling. Language training and the availability of trained and confidential female interpreters are essential for those immigrant women who have difficulty in Canada's official languages.

However, only immigrants who are not yet Canadian citizens can access the federal Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC). LINC is free, child care is provided, and transportation costs are covered. For many reasons, not all immigrant and refugee women are able to access this program:

- There are many immigrant women in Canada who are Canadian citizens, but for whatever reason were not able to access language training, or enough language training, in the past. They could use language training to become full participants in a democratic society, but face barriers in terms of fees.
- Even among newcomers, within families, priority for language training is often given to men. Women may be trying to support the family through low-wage work

while the men upgrade their language and job skills. Even if the man is earning a wage, to forego the woman's wage so she can attend language training classes may be a difficult decision for families to make. There used to be training allowances associated with federal language training programs, but these no longer exist, so families are forced into difficult choices with women usually losing.

- In highly patriarchal families, women furthering their learning of English or French may not be deemed to be of value, therefore incentives are needed to ensure women get all the language training they need.

Domestic workers

Women may apply to work in Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program. This program provides well-off Canadian families with nannies mainly from the Philippines and the Caribbean. Many of these caregivers also do other domestic work in the house. The women come to Canada usually because there are few jobs in their home country, and they need to support their families. Most are hoping to eventually become Canadian citizens.

Why does this program discriminate against women?

- By requiring a certain level of education and training the program does not make room for women who, by nature of the society from which they came, have not had much access to formal education.
- By making this the only program/class that fully recognizes the skills associated with domestic and caring work, immigration policy makes it difficult for women with these skills to immigrate under the Skilled Worker Class.

- By forcing women to live with their employers, and by making it difficult for them to change employers women are often caught in abusive situations.
- As live-in domestic workers women are classified as temporary workers. They are not Canadian citizens, and even though they are covered under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, they lack the money, knowledge of the system, and access to public services in order to defend what rights they have.
- This program specifically deals with an overwhelmingly female-dominated area, and no similar restrictive and patronizing program exists for areas dominated by male migrant workers.
- Employment standards are negotiated by the woman and her employer, often resulting in exploitative situations. Because of isolation in the home and fear of losing their employment, some domestic workers' wages are short-changed, charged additional "fees", and their long hours of overtime can go unpaid. Theoretically, domestic workers can leave abusive employers without penalty, but sexual harassment, pay and working conditions under provincial standards can be hard to prove. Some employers lie to domestic workers about their rights, and often the employers are the only people domestic workers know in Canada. Domestic workers can take the chance of complaining about the situation and leaving, but they must find another employer and work for at least 24 months out of 36, otherwise they are not eligible to become Canadian citizens. Many do not take this chance. Finding other employment also involves bureaucracy as a domestic workers' association points out: "...you must first apply for a new Employment Authorization allowing you to work for the new employer. You cannot work for the new employer until you have received a new authorization from Immigration."⁴³ A person working under the Live-in Caregiver Program is barred from taking on any work other than the approved full-time employment – she cannot work part-time, even babysitting, for someone else.

Some feminist immigration analysts recommend that the LCP be abolished and "the immigration criteria for the independent class be amended. We propose that [immigration laws] include "live-in caregiver" among those occupations in demand in Canada, and give greater consideration to the experience of these workers."⁴⁴

What are the major health risks for immigrant women?

Emotional and mental health risks are more of a concern for immigrant women than are traditional risks such as tobacco, drugs and alcohol.⁴⁵ New immigrant women are likely to experience stress in relation to economic circumstances, the negative attitudes of some

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Canadians towards them, and personal isolation.⁴⁶ For refugees these circumstances can increase the post-traumatic stress they may already be experiencing upon arrival.⁴⁷

Risks: Exposure to violence, lack of or reduced autonomy, lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience, cultural and systematic barriers to care, poverty, underemployment, language, the burden of multiple roles within the family, social isolation, loss of pre-existing social support systems and discrimination.⁴⁸

The accessibility of health care services: Some immigrant and refugee women experience language and cultural barriers which prevent them from fully using health services. Misunderstandings in the area of health (for example, when and how often to take prescription drugs, what course of therapy to follow) can result in serious harm to women and their children. In addition, modern medicine does not take into account alternative forms of medication and healing.⁴⁹ A study found that Canadian mental health providers were consistently unable to diagnose Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in immigrant and refugee women who had experienced war, rape, torture, persecution, natural disasters and other traumas, and that often no programs existed to help the children of these women, many of whom also suffer from PTSD.⁵⁰ Studies about home care in Canada show that immigrant women are often burdened with greater unpaid responsibilities for care of ill, disabled or elderly relatives than non-immigrant women because of language and cultural barriers in health and home care services.⁵¹

Pressures on young immigrant women: The experiences of young immigrant women vary but can include culture shock, peer pressure, a lack of information focusing on their needs, heavy family responsibilities including translation and interpretation for parents, inter-generational conflicts with parents who have different cultural expectations of them, a loss of status after immigration, discrimination, underemployment, and racism.⁵²

Culture shock

It can be very intimidating to be completely surrounded by people who dress differently, speak a different language, practice a different religion, and have different ideas, beliefs and ways of doing things. Immigrant and refugee women are not tourists here. They can't just "go home" to something more familiar. Refugee women are in

Canada usually because they fear persecution and death in their country of origin. Immigrant women have paid dearly for the opportunity to come to Canada and start a new life. Immigrant and refugee women may feel torn about where to draw the line between fitting into Canadian society at large and into their own ethnic community in Canada, and preserving their original way

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of life. It is stressful to leave everything you know behind, and most of your family and friends, to go to a strange place where you are often treated badly and are bombarded with new expectations.

Settlement services

"The current patchwork of services is a nightmare for immigrants and refugees who attempt to access them..."⁵³ Dr. Jo-Anne Lee conducted intensive research on immigration settlement services and concluded that it is a "separate, parallel, and marginalized sector of publicly-funded social services". Women form 80% of the labour force in these agencies, 75% are immigrants and 70% are racial minorities. Most of these workers work in low-paid insecure jobs, and are expected to volunteer their time during periods in which funding has not yet been received. Management tends to be almost all white.⁵⁴ ■

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

What you can do:

- Confront racist stereotypes in the people around you, the workplace, the media, your faith or social groups, and anywhere you find them.
- Contact a local immigrant/refugee women's organization and invite them to speak about their experiences of immigrating to Canada. Work with them on the priorities they have set out. Ask how you can support them.
- Support organizations like INTERCEDE and the West Coast Domestic Workers Association which advocate for fair treatment for foreign domestic workers.
- Write/phone/e-mail the federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to demand fairness to women in immigration and refugee policy. To find out who the current minister is and get her or his contact information, try www.parl.gc.ca, or the House of Commons Information Line: (613) 992-4793
- Contact your provincial/territorial representatives to ask for training for all government and frontline workers in health (doctors, nurses, paramedics, etc.), education (teachers, principals, etc.), social services on the realities and gender differences for immigrant and refugee women and girls, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Check with your local immigrant settlement agencies about the availability of interpreters in your community who can help women who have difficulty in English or French. Advocate for trained, confidential, female interpreters for your local health, educational and social services.
- Your faith group or workplace can sponsor refugee women and their children to come to Canada.
- Treat immigrant and refugee women with friendliness and respect.

RESOURCES

The **National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women** of Canada bridges gaps between different women's groups, lobbies the government on issues related to immigrant and visible minority women, and looks to heighten awareness of the issues that differentially affect immigrant women. 219 Argyle Avenue, Suite 225, Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 2H4. Tel: (613) 232-0689 Fax: (613) 232-0988 Web: www.diversewomen.com

The **West Coast Domestic Workers Association** works to provide information to domestic workers regarding work days, income, immigration and workplace rights. 119 West Pender Street, Suite 304, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6B 1S5. Phone: (604) 669-4482 Fax: (604) 669-6456 E-mail: wcdwa@vcn.bc.ca Web: www.vcn.bc.ca/wcdwa

INTERCEDE (Toronto Organization for Domestic Workers' Rights) Phone: (416) 483-4554 Fax: (416) 483-9781 info@intercedetoronto.org

The **Canadian Council for Refugees** works on the issues of protection and immigration and settlement while maintaining a gender and anti-racist focus. 6839 Drolet, #302, Montréal, Québec, H2S 2T1. Phone: (514) 277-7223 Fax: (514) 277-1447 E-mail: Erreur! Signet non défini. Web: www.web.net/~ccr/fronteng.htm

RESOURCES

Education Wife Assault has a number of publications dealing with the abuse of immigrant and refugee women, including training manuals for service providers, and a great resource called *Challenging the Myths and Claiming Power Together: A handbook to set up and assess support groups for and with immigrant and refugee women*.

427 Bloor Street West, Box 7, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1X7. Phone: (416) 968-3422 Fax: (416) 968-2026 E-mail: publications@womanabuseprevention.com Web: www.womanabuseprevention.com

Metropolis is “an international forum for...research and public policy... about ...cultural diversity and the challenges of immigrant integration in cities in Canada and around the world.” You can access many research reports about immigration on its web site (http://canada.metropolis.net/index_e.html) and a Gender and Identity research network (http://canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/GI/index_e.htm).

Citizenship and Immigration Canada is the federal government department responsible for immigration policy. Web: www.cic.gc.ca/english/index.html

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How and why? How can it be improved?**

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