



Underemployed Professional Immigrant Women Project

Executive Summary & Project Report

March 2017

Acknowledgements

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ISANS also gratefully acknowledges the financial support for this project from Status of Women Canada.

About ISANS

ISANS is the leading deliverer of settlement services in Atlantic Canada and provides the full range of programs and services along the settlement and integration continuum to 4,000+ clients annually in 100 communities across Nova Scotia. ISANS is also the primary contact in Nova Scotia on refugee, settlement and immigration issues for 2,000+ organizations, employers, government departments and individuals annually.

Mission & Vision

The vision of ISANS is a community where all can belong and grow.

ISANS is a leading community organization that welcomes immigrants to Nova Scotia. Working in partnership, we offer services & create opportunities to help immigrants to participate fully in Canadian life.

Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS)

6960 Mumford Road • Suite 2120

Halifax • Nova Scotia • Canada • B3L 4P1

Phone: 902.423.3607 • Fax: 902.423.3154

www.isans.ca

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Introduction

In 2015, ISANS undertook a two-year **Status of Women Canada** funded project to identify and address barriers limiting the advancement of professional immigrant women in their careers. The objectives were to instigate change by increasing awareness of the barriers that immigrant women face, and to work in partnership with employers to address those barriers through policy change.

The purpose of this report is to present the results of this ambitious project, to share what we learned, and to help employers improve their hiring and advancement practices to make their workplace more welcoming to immigrants. It is also to recognize the joint efforts of our partners, stakeholders and participants who supported this project and collaborated with ISANS to bring about change. We congratulate the efforts of all participants in building awareness and improving human resources policies and practices.

Background

Currently all labour market growth in Nova Scotia comes from immigrants. Based on the point system, Canada's current immigration policies focus on the economic class and labour force needs. Despite credentials, successful integration into employment situations that match immigrants' qualifications have multiple *unseen* barriers. While we have many programs to address these, there are indications that professional immigrant women are still having difficulty advancing in their careers and are *underemployed*.

What is Underemployment?

Underemployment is employment that:

- underutilizes a woman's education and skills
- is outside a woman's field of formal education and training
- is underpaid or has lower job status compared to workers with similar skills and education
- does not offer adequate hours of work or is not full time employment
- is perceived as generally lacking or unfulfilling

Quick Facts¹

- Immigrant women have poorer labour market outcomes than either immigrant men or non-immigrant women.
- 51.5 percent of immigrant women are employed compared to 65 percent of immigrant men.
- 7.8 percent of active immigrant women are unemployed, compared to 6.1 percent of immigrant men and 6.2 percent of non-immigrant women.
- Immigrant women also have lower average employment income than either immigrant men or non-immigrant women.
- The average employment income for immigrant women is \$27,817, compared to \$43,213 for immigrant men.

¹ Statistics Canada. (2011). Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11528-eng.htm#a1>. Accessed February 6, 2017.

Underemployed Professional Immigrant Women Project

Purpose

The project addresses the issue of *underemployment* and lack of opportunities for immigrant women to move into leadership and management roles.

Planned Outcomes

The planned results of the project are:

1. Professional immigrant women have identified challenges and barriers to advancing into higher-level positions.
2. Professional immigrant women and employers have an increased awareness of opportunities for advancement in their workplace.
3. Partners have identified best practices for the advancement of immigrant professional women in the workplace.
4. Partners and stakeholders are working together to develop new human resources and fair practices to advance immigrant professional women in their workplace.
5. Stakeholders are champions and take a leadership role in advancing underemployed immigrant professional women.

Phases

The project has three phases: *Planning and Research*, *Employer Partnerships*, and the *Tool Development-Project Forum* phase.

Phase I: Planning and Research

Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee provided ISANS with the guidance and support required to initiate, plan, implement and reach the desired outcomes of the project. The Committee included subject matter experts from immigrant women's associations, educational institutions, regulatory bodies, government agencies, private employers and ISANS staff members.

The members are involved in, and knowledgeable about, immigrant women's issues, barriers to employment and licensure and labour market integration. Members are interested in ensuring qualified immigrant professional women reach their full potential at the workplace in Canada. They are well connected and involved with groups that serve immigrant women in Nova Scotia. They contributed their thoughts and expertise to ISANS as it endeavored to facilitate the successful advancement of professional immigrant women in the workplace and provided advice on ways to make systematic changes in human resource practices with employers.

Consultation

This phase of this project began with the selection of consultants to carry out the research to base the project on. The consultants, Lori Root and Maria Jose Yax Fraser, carried out the literature review, the GBA+ analysis (needs assessment) and collected data from the focus groups. They delivered a report that highlighted the barriers professional immigrant women face in advancing in their careers and provided recommendations for employers on how to remove those barriers.²

Literature

The foundation of research examines evidence from previous research - what do we already know and how do we know it. The literature shows that a lack of awareness on the part of employers often leads to unintentional but systemic barriers in employers' practices and policies that limit highly skilled immigrant women from advancing into positions that match their education, experience and other qualifications. In other words, despite credentials, skills and experience, multiple *unseen* barriers often limit successful advancement resulting in underemployment.

Gender-Based Analysis +

To uncover the circumstances that contributed to the *underemployment* of professional immigrant women it was necessary to undertake a Gender-Based Analysis + (GBA+). Through the idea that "no-one is shaped by gender alone, GBA+ takes into account how gender interacts with identity factors, such as ethnicity, age, ability, geography and other aspects of identity among individuals and within broader social structures. GBA+ thus challenges notions of sameness among groups of women and of men" (Status of Women Canada, 2015).³

Regarding immigration, women usually immigrate through the economic class as a dependent or spouse or through the family class. In 2009, 29% of women who immigrated to Canada came through Family Class, 39% came as dependent spouses in the Economic Class while 19% of women came as principle applicants through the Economic Class (Statistics Canada, 2011). Immigrant women face the double challenge of being an immigrant and a woman, and the impact is significantly larger when they move to a country where they are suddenly a visible minority. As the primary applicant, their partner may have a job offer, but the skills may not match the job market in Nova Scotia. They may come from a culture where women are not encouraged to be assertive and are unaware that self-promotion is important to advancement in Western culture. Although highly qualified with many transferrable skills, they may abandon the search for a position matching their previous employment and often settle for jobs where they are *underemployed*. This often comes from a need to have some source of income in order to survive or *survival employment*. Women are usually responsible for the bulk of domestic responsibilities, family care and childcare and may experience pressure to meet their cultural expectations while balancing a career. Losing the social network and family support they relied on in their country of origin, they find it difficult to take part in activities—such as upgrading skills, gaining Canadian education or attending formal networking events—that would help them advance in their career.

² Root, L. & Fraser, M. (2016). *Gender Based Analysis Plus Needs Assessment: Moving Up Underemployment of Professional Immigrant Women*. ISANS, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

³ GBA+ Research Guide. <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/gba-acsguide-en.html>.

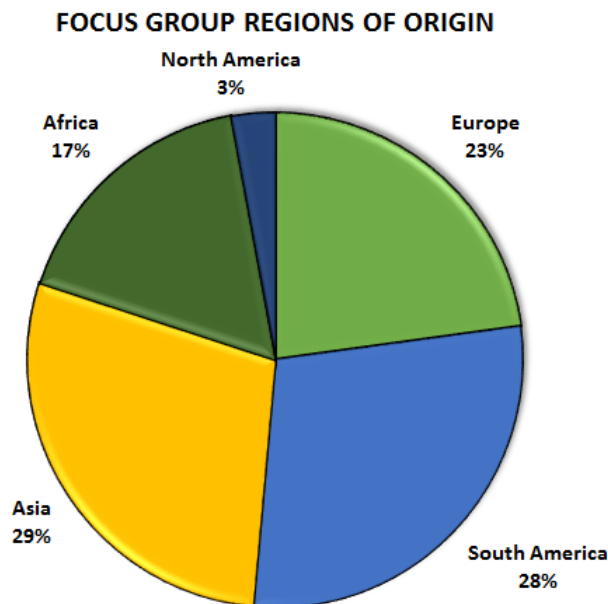
Focus Groups

Three focus groups took place: underemployed professional immigrant women, professional immigrant women who considered their careers successful, and organizations that employ immigrants.

1. Underemployed Professional Immigrant Women

Twenty-seven underemployed professional immigrant women from different backgrounds, cultures and twenty-seven countries participated in focus groups.⁴ To participate, immigrant women had to have been underemployed in the same job in a non-regulated profession for two to five years.⁵ They first answered survey questions about background, education, and employment. During the focus groups, participants answered a series of questions more specific to their employment experiences after immigrating to:

- a) hear stories describing individual current employment experiences
- b) identify the challenges associated with advancing to higher positions
- c) explore existing hiring practices with their current employer
- d) understand cultural and gender differences in the workplace
- e) determine possible opportunities and strategies to assist women in advancing within their organizations
- f) build awareness around developing fair and equitable human resources policies and guidelines (Root & Fraser, 2016 p. 5)



⁴ Professional immigrant women in the focus groups came from Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, Columbia, UK, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, Japan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Russia, Egypt, Sudan, USA, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Syria, Botswana, Jordan, Israel, Germany, Kosovo, Poland, Bosnia, and Ireland.

⁵ Regulated professions require licensed professionals—engineer, physician, accountant, nurse, etc.

2. Comparison group

Professional immigrant women who were working in positions that matched their credentials, skills and experience participated in an additional focus group and spoke about their experiences and what helped them *move up* to successful careers. The purpose was to:

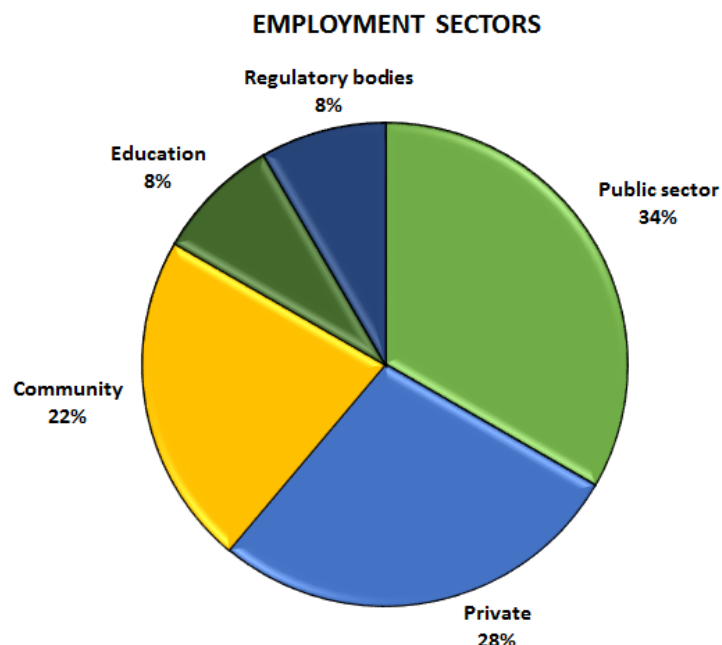
- a) hear stories describing individual current employment experiences
- b) explore existing hiring practices with their current employer
- c) identify existing supports and key promotion practices for the advancement of women in their workplaces
- d) understand cultural and gender differences in the workplace
- e) determine possible opportunities and strategies to assist women in advancing within their organizations (ibid.)

3. Employers

Thirty-three employers from a cross-section of private sector, government, community organizations, educational institutions and five professional bodies participated in sector-specific focus groups to determine what they saw as the key challenges and barriers to immigrant women advancing in their careers. Participants included lawyers, engineers, IT professionals, public servants, executive and administrative professionals, self-employed and medical professionals.

The priorities were to:

- a) explore existing hiring practices and employers' understanding of hiring and promoting immigrants within their workplaces
- b) explore policy practices and strategies to make the workplace more welcoming, inclusive and equitable for immigrant employees
- c) understand how employers access support services, including those provided by settlement serving organizations, to facilitate the development of policies and strategies for the hiring and promotion of professional immigrant women
- d) determine possible services and programs that could support employers to hire and promote immigrant women



Results: Barriers and Recommendations

The consultants analyzed the data, identified key *unseen* barriers to professional immigrant women advancing in their workplace, made recommendations on how to overcome the barriers (Appendix A) and shared the results in a report.⁶ This information formed the basis of outreach phase of the project and the toolkit developed to help employers improve their practices.

Phase II: Employer Partnerships

The success of the project has been in large part due to partnerships between ISANS, employers and stakeholders. Project staff met individually with human resources professionals and hiring managers from private, government, post-secondary and non-profit sectors in the region, to talk about their workplace hiring and advancement policies. A brief outline of the project, barriers and recommendations, and best practices to *remove* them were discussed. Working in partnership with ISANS staff, employers were able to identify the unseen barriers in their workplace practices and use recommendations from the research to remove these barriers. By making what were often small changes to their policies and practices, employers advanced the economic prosperity of immigrant women in the region and:

- developed better practices around hiring, retention, and promotion
- improved their diversity and inclusion policies
- made their workplace more welcoming to immigrants
- increased their access to a greater pool of talent
- addressed the issue of underemployment
- worked towards becoming an employer of choice
- optimized and enhanced international talent in the workplace

During this phase, over 50 employers participated. Many of these resulted in additional meetings with upper level staff, offering cultural competence workshops through ISANS, or extended consultations with project staff to improve policies. All employers that participated planned to modify their hiring and advancement policies. Some larger employers made plans for significant, organization-wide changes. Others had already identified a need for a more diversity in their organization but were unaware of how to prepare their workplace to be more welcoming. Others had a significant number of immigrant employees on staff and wanted to improve their policies and practices in order to retain them. Employers who participated were unaware of how unseen barriers unintentionally limited professional immigrant women from advancing in their workplace. During the outreach phase of the project, a number of employers asked if there were tools or guides to help them apply the recommendations. The third and final phase of the project was the development of those tools and sharing the project's results at the Forum.

⁶ Strategies adapted from Root, L. & Fraser, M. (2016). Gender Based Analysis Plus Needs Assessment: Moving Up Underemployment of Professional Immigrant Women. ISANS, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Phase III: Tools For Implementation

The meetings and partnerships with employers highlighted the need for *tools* that employers could use to help them:

- review their policies and practices
- determine areas where improvement was needed
- update human resources policies and practices to remove unseen barriers that prevent professional immigrant women from advancing

Using the barriers and recommendations from the research as well as in-house expertise, project staff created tools to help employers apply recommendations:

1. **10 Strategies to Create a Welcoming Workplace for Immigrant Women** (Appendix B).
2. **Best Practices for a Culturally Diverse Workplace** (Appendix C).
3. A guide linking the barriers and recommendations to strategies and resources (separate document).

Employers can connect with ISANS to access a range of support services and programs free of charge to help make the workplace more welcoming to immigrants. ISANS also has programs for immigrant employees to improve their integration into the Canadian workplace.

Forum

At the Forum in March 2017, discussions will take place around outcomes and goals, findings and success stories. Information will be shared about barriers, recommendations and the tools developed for employers to overcome those barriers.

Conclusion

The project examined the experiences of professional immigrant women, identified barriers, made recommendations, developed resources and supported partners from a range of employment sectors in implementing change. The project's success is due in large part to the collaborations with employers that wanted to improve their workplace practices and increase opportunities for professional immigrant women. The hope is that the impact of the project will not end with the Forum but will extend its reach beyond the project close.

APPENDIX A

Barrier	Recommendations
<p>1. Credential Recognition and Canadian Experience</p> <p>A lack of familiarity with, or experience assessing, international experience and credentials earned at international educational institutions can lead employers to screen-out qualified immigrant women candidates for promotion prematurely.</p> <p>Many employers cite the time spent on validating international credentials as a deterrent for considering skilled immigrant candidates for employment opportunities.</p>	<p>Use services that can assess and authenticate international credentials and compare them to Canadian credentials (e.g. World Education Service Canada).</p> <p>Ask applicants to verify their international credentials before applying and link your organization’s careers webpage to credential assessment services. This removes the barrier and provides access to a wider pool of qualified talent.</p> <p>Require human resources and hiring managers to take bias-free recruitment training.</p>
<p>2. Lack of Resources; Unaware of Professional Development Opportunities</p> <p>The selection criteria for advancement are often not well defined – both in terms of what to look for in the employee and whether she is the right ‘fit’ for the role (i.e. her skills and/or experience).</p> <p>Not having enough information about training and other avenues available for professional development was another barrier women found difficult to overcome.</p>	<p>Develop orientation packages that provide clear information on application and interview processes, professional development opportunities and organizational supports.</p> <p>Develop a transparent, fair and equitable process for offering professional development and mentoring opportunities for women.</p> <p>Promote development courses and training. Career pathway and succession planning – informal and formal.</p> <p>Develop and implement a mentorship program.</p> <p>Provide leadership opportunities to demonstrate leadership capabilities.</p>
<p>3. Unpreparedness for Navigating the Application Process for Promotion</p> <p>Many organizations that require fairly user savvy online application processes can place immigrant women at a disadvantage.</p> <p>Often, they are not familiar with certain technicalities of this approach (i.e. use of key words/phrases in order for application to get flagged for consideration) or may not understand competencies or how to demonstrate them.</p> <p>Then, those who make the first cut may yet face the challenge of providing resumes the ‘Canadian’ way, supporting documents (in prescribed form) as well as sitting for one or more interviews. This process can be very daunting and can limit their ability to convey their true potential.</p>	<p>Immigrant women should receive information from the organization’s HR department on Canadian application and interview processes and as needed, be introduced to training programs or workshop.</p> <p>The employer can provide feedback to immigrant women on cultural nuances that are likely to be encountered and the particular requirements of Canadian workplaces.</p> <p>Implement policies and practices that recognize and value international experience.</p> <p>Require human resources and hiring manager to take bias-free recruitment training.</p>

<p>4. Accents, Language and Occupational Jargon</p> <p>Immigrant women felt that their accent, and in some cases the lack of knowledge of workplace jargon, is a barrier to promotion.</p> <p>They may not know if help developing their language skills is available.</p> <p>Taking English classes is not always supported or they are difficult to access on their own.</p> <p>Those with suitable English may believe their accent is a barrier to promotion.</p> <p>Lack of confidence in language skills may become internalized and result in a loss of self-esteem and lead to giving up seeking a promotion.</p>	<p>Hiring managers should provide a clear description of role requirements.</p> <p>Engaging and consistent performance appraisals, or evaluations, that include clear performance markers to enhance the promotion process.</p> <p>Organizations should implement language and accent awareness in the cultural competency/proficiency safety training programs.</p> <p>Employers and staff who participate in volunteer opportunities can increase their cultural awareness and learn how language, proficiency and accents can be a barrier that immigrant women face seeking advancement.</p> <p>Professional mentorship or becoming a practice interviewer can be highly rewarding for management, your staff and can enhance leadership and coaching skills.</p>
<p>5. Feeling Unwelcomed and Undervalued</p> <p>Most women felt that their employers and coworkers were well meaning, but in practice did not do enough to make them feel welcome, safe, accepted and valued for their contribution to the organization.</p> <p>They recounted experiences of not fitting in with their coworkers during after hour activities and networking arrangements.</p> <p>Most importantly, they were aware that this had considerable weight in the promotion process and felt that the process was not fair. They felt the employer should be responsible for helping them integrate and to make the promotion pathway more transparent.</p>	<p>Diversity and inclusion practices and training modules should be a part of HR departments and hiring models.</p> <p>Provide workshops and develop competency requirements and models for senior management, staff and others that have a role to play in making decisions about promotions.</p> <p>Develop assessment tools to track progress for training human resources staff on how to screen, test and recognize transferable skills for international candidates.</p> <p>Employers can get information about employer support programs and services and access programs that help meet the needs of immigrant women.</p>
<p>6. One size fits all approach</p> <p>The common approach to promotion is for employers to implement standard procedures for posting and processing new openings. Employers in the focus group perceived the notion of 'one size fits all' as being detrimental to immigrant women and recognized that not everyone will take the same path to a promotion.</p> <p>There should be an enhanced awareness that the needs of immigrant women are different in terms of a) the transferability of skills and experience b) income expectations c) family circumstances d) navigating day-to-day life as women of a different ethnicity, color and culture.</p>	<p>There is a need to increase awareness of the barriers and challenges that individual immigrant women face on a day-to-day basis and to fashion solutions to particular circumstances.</p> <p>Adopt a family-centered approach in the workplace. Immigrant women should be informed about childcare options; work schedule flexibility; family, maternity, personal leave choices.</p> <p>Organizations can develop orientation packages with a range of information on career advancement and include practical tips for successful integration into the workplace</p>

APPENDIX B

10 Strategies to Create a Welcoming Workplace for Immigrant Women

Inform & Support

1. Create an orientation process that includes resources on integration and advancement
2. Promote and provide opportunities for professional development such as courses and training
3. Develop and implement a mentorship program or connect with ISANS mentorship program
4. Provide opportunities to demonstrate leadership capabilities

Improve Workplace Culture

5. Get a Cross-Cultural Workplace Assessment from ISANS and implement ongoing on-site cultural competence training

Improve Human Resource Practices

6. Require bias-free recruitment training for human resources, recruiters & hiring managers
7. Conduct bias-free job performance, planning, and review consultations with employees
8. Update application process with a focus on diversity and inclusion and provide information and training on Canadian application and interview practices
9. Recognize and value international experience
10. Require diverse hiring panels

APPENDIX C

Best Practices for a Culturally Diverse Workplace

Assess & Set Goals

1. Complete a Cross-Cultural Workplace Assessment from ISANS
2. Implement ongoing cultural competence training to build cultural awareness
3. Appoint a diversity committee
4. Design or update diversity and inclusion policies and best practices
5. Create a plan with *smart* goals and strategic actions and communicate them internally and externally

Be Accountable

6. Assign responsibility; provide training, resources and executive support
7. Increase transparency and make managers accountable for applying diversity and inclusion practices

Improve Human Resource Practices

8. Monitor, communicate and market progress
9. Evaluate effectiveness of the policies and procedures and recycle feedback to make improvements
10. Volunteer with ISANS as a mentor or practice interviewer to develop an intercultural awareness of your immigrant employees

ISANS provides a range of services and training fully funded with no charge to the employer

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