

Executive Summary

Opening Doors

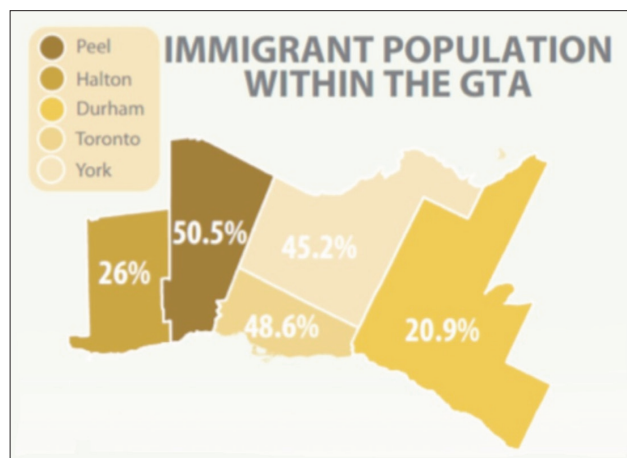
Economic Opportunities
for Immigrant Women

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Peel is home to one of the most diverse populations in Canada. One in every two residents of Peel immigrated to Canada, almost twice the rate of neighbouring Halton. In 2011, this translated into 650,530 immigrants living in Peel; a number that is expected to increase to 1.65 million by 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Of that population, 100,910 were recent immigrants that arrived in Canada between 2006 and 2011. The share of the GTA's immigrant population settling in Peel has grown from 12% to 20% since 2001, while the immigrant population settling directly in Toronto has dropped over the same period from 80% to 60% (Statistics Canada, 2011). More immigrants are settling in the GTA than anywhere else in Canada, and Peel can benefit enormously from the economic, social and cultural wealth that these populations bring with them.

Significant challenges come along with this demographic advantage. Of all adult newcomers, 39.6% are between the ages of 25-44 at the time of immigration. These are generally considered to be prime working years, yet immigrant populations in Peel continue to struggle economically. The unemployment rate for newcomers is 10%, whereas only 3% of Canadian-born graduates are unemployed (Portraits of Peel, 2011). About 20% of visible minorities in Peel live in poverty, roughly double the rate of non-visible minorities. 33% of recent immigrants in Peel are low income, three times the rate of non-immigrant populations.



Source: Statistics Canada, National Household Survey 2011. Image from Peel Data Centre

Immigrant women, despite being largely of prime working age with high levels of educational attainment, continue to bear the brunt of this disparity across Canada. A 2011 study found that racialized women were 48% more likely to be unemployed and earned on average 55.6% the income of non-racialized men (Block & Galabuzi, 2011). While studies have shown that all women in Peel earn on average only two thirds the median income of their male counterparts, immigrant women were found to earn roughly half the median income of immigrant men (Peel Newcomer Strategy Group, 2008). Similarly, while the unemployment rate among women was roughly 2% higher than men in 2005, the rate among immigrant women was nearly double the rate of immigrant men (Peel Newcomer Strategy Group, 2008).

THE PROJECT

Peel enjoys exceptional immigration rates, attracting skilled and experienced workers from around the world. For many of these immigrants, there is stubbornly slow progress in accessing employment appropriate to their skills and experience.

Working with a grant from Status of Women Canada, the Brampton Multicultural Community Centre (BMC) set out to examine the employment challenges faced by immigrant women and identify the extent to which the current employment support systems adequately address those challenges.

The research phase of the project consisted of four components: a literature review, a service inventory, interviews with key informants, and focus groups with immigrant women carried out in their own languages.

The research was overseen by an Advisory Group representing a broad cross-section of stakeholders including businesses, service providers, advocacy groups and public institutions in Peel. The Advisory Group reviewed and amended the work plan and research strategy, reviewed research results, provided guidance and interpretation of the findings and reviewed the draft report, offering feedback on the text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focused on Canadian research but also included information from research in the UK, Australia and the US as guidance on matters where Canadian literature was sparse.

Several themes emerged clearly from the literature. Firstly, the Canadian labour market is skewed along racial and gender lines. Women and immigrants earn less, have jobs that are less stable and are disproportionately represented in low skill jobs despite often significantly higher levels of education. Literature also indicates that women face distinct challenges in the labour market. Household responsibilities, levels of social isolation, cultural expectations and caregiving duties tend to place different constraints on women seeking employment than their male counterparts.

These challenges, however, vary widely by cultural group and other factors. Immigrant women are a heterogeneous group with varying levels of need and access to support. Although certain supports, such as affordable childcare and accessible transportation are more universally mentioned, few interventions are consistently appropriate for all groups of immigrant women.

Similarly, the literature shows employment outcomes vary considerably by race and cultural background, in complex ways that defy simplistic solutions.

While literature shows that immigrant women see improvements in employment prospects as they become more familiar with the English language and Canadian employment contexts, those gains are becoming less and less significant and the ability of immigrant women to catch up to their Canadian-born counterparts is declining. Local enclaves, which attract newcomer women and provide valuable early support in orientation and settlement, also have negative effects that limit the long-term scope of social networks and access to accurate employment information and resources. As a result, immigrant women in established enclaves appear to have worse long-term employment outcomes than those in less culturally comfortable settings.

Literature shows that women have responded to these challenges by lowering both their expectations and their ambitions. Women are increasingly likely to downplay their skills and seek jobs that do not draw on the training and experience they have to offer, depriving both their families and the economy as a whole of the benefits of their skills and capacities.

KEY INFORMANTS

Many key informants expressed concern about the gap between the work women are able to obtain and their skills and experience. They saw a steep challenge for women who continued to seek appropriate work and an overabundance of situations in which women instead pursued work that failed to capitalize on what they had to offer. They described these situations both in terms of lost opportunity and of the impact on immigrant women's families and communities. Key informants noted not only poor prospects of obtaining appropriate work, but even weaker prospects of advancing in the workplace as well as considerable difficulties retaining existing jobs.

Key informants noted that the existing systems of support were inconsistent in their ability to link women to work. Many felt the "hidden" job market, with positions obtained through contacts and networks, were harder for newcomer and immigrant women to navigate and played a very large role in the allocation of many jobs. Existing services focused far more on résumés and interviews, with little emphasis on intensive work of developing networks and linking to appropriate mentors and contacts. The success of the job seeker was also seen as dependent to some extent on "soft skills" related to the social and business practices typical of Canadian workplaces, posing a barrier to recent arrivals and socially isolated individuals, with few services designed to overcome this hidden barrier.

Key informants also noted the difficulty employers have assessing the skills and capacities of applicants with international training and experience. Training for employers to help them better understand and appreciate the opportunities represented by Peel's diverse workforce was seen by many as an inescapable necessity. The need for some solid supports was also emphasized. Access to affordable child care, respite care and care associated with employment services was frequently mentioned, and access to affordable, reliable transit was also a high priority.

Though key informants had no simple answers to these difficult challenges, they encouraged the enhancement of the existing service infrastructure and the need to tailor services to the diverse, real-world needs of immigrant women. They also expressed concern about rapid and sometimes disruptive changes in legislation and regulation affecting immigrants and their employment prospects.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups corroborated the themes drawn from both the literature and key informants, and added the impact of lived experience. Many participants were frustrated about the disconnection between the skills they demonstrated to gain access to immigration and the lack of willingness of employers to draw upon those skills. Despite investing considerable time and effort in their job searches, and applying the guidance of service providers, very few focus group participants had found appropriate employment.

Women who had sought services and programs to help them overcome this gap found many of the services offered provided repetitive opportunities to adjust résumés, improve interview skills and seek out advertised jobs. Their experience often inclines them to believe that much of the job market is driven by networks and contacts and very few programs built significant capacity in those areas.

Women find employers often negatively disposed to employing immigrant women. Many women found employers had few tools for assessing their training and background accurately and seemed inclined to select candidates with more familiar résumés, cultural practices and names. Most women faced the added challenge of family responsibilities. Child care and household duties constrained the time they could spend looking for work and the hours they were available for employment.

SERVICE INVENTORY

The service inventory was conducted using 211 data supplemented by one-on-one interviews with service providers. The inventory reinforced the evidence from focus groups and key informant interviews. Peel's immigrant employment infrastructure needs to grow if it is to meet the needs of the community. Peel has roughly half as many service providers per immigrant as Toronto, despite a faster growing immigrant community. Programs are limited in size and scope, and many are inactive. Few programs are geared specifically toward immigrant women and fewer still reflect the scope of needs the diverse community in Peel requires.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report makes a number of recommendations that reflect the evidence obtained through this study. These recommendations are outlined in detail at the end of the report, but in summary they focus on the following:

1. Grow the service infrastructure: There are too few programs in Peel for the volume of need.
2. Diversify the service offerings: One size does not fit all and the highly diverse population in Peel needs programs tailored to the mix of needs.
3. Focus on the keys to success: Many jobs are obtained through networks and contacts but few programs focus on those needs and those that do not always focus on the most appropriate tools and relationships.
4. Support good jobs: Programs should place a priority on women accessing appropriate work as well as on advancement and retention, not just on getting survival jobs.
5. Successful employment systems depend on good employers. Employers in Peel need training and information to enable them to identify when immigrant applicants meet their needs and to recognize the benefit of Peel's diversity.
6. Address straightforward barriers to work: Affordable child care, respite care, and accessible transit are all key factors in women accessing suitable employment.