



Workfinding & Immigrant Women’s Prosperity in STEM

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Abstract

Canada stands at the intersection of a duality when it comes to immigrants. On the one hand, it realizes the critical need for sustained (and even increased) immigration in the face of aging demographics, for upholding tax-based funding of universal public services --like healthcare, infrastructure, and education--, global competition for knowledge workers, and labour market and demographic stability. On the other hand, immigrants continue to struggle to various degrees in their attempts to integrate equitably both in the labour market as well as the general social fabric. **Based on in-depth interviews with 74 STEM-trained immigrant women in hub-cities of all 13 Canadian provinces and territories**, our benchmark pan-Canadian study uses qualitative and participatory approaches to examine the workfinding experiences of highly-skilled immigrant women as a way to deconstruct mainstream 'explanations' and rhetorics informing the increasingly narrow economic focus of Canada's immigration policies. Along the way, the impact of austerity-led devolution of publicly-funded supports that facilitate occupational and social integration of "ideal immigrants" are also explored. Our findings suggest that the challenges outlined in this report are directly or indirectly tethered to factors impacting everyday Canadian workers, except that they are experienced much more blisteringly by our participants at the intersection of gender, race, ability, and immigration status. Indeed; unlike their Canadian-born and non-visible-minority peers, many of our participants have neither established professional networks nor the requisite social capital to open doors or provide shortcuts, while also struggling with the lack of access to intergenerational family support to alleviate their day-to-day challenges. The results of the study challenge many persistent stereotypes of how Canadian institutions and the general cultural imaginary perceive immigrant women, and serve to illustrate the necessity of linking Canada's goals to establish a sustainable and competitive innovation economy, the workfinding experiences of STEM-trained women, and the general state of workers' well-being and resilience across the country.

Introduction

Canada stands at a critical demographic juncture: by 2031, more than 80% of Canada's demographic growth is projected to come from immigration. In the face of inexorable population aging, Canada needs immigrants to come, prosper, and stay - and not just to create and fill jobs. Indeed, working-age immigrants are net contributors to Canadian public coffers: without immigration, taxes would have to go up for everyone in order to fund universal social services such as health care, education, and public pensions (The Conference Board of Canada, 2020).

However, many of the largest source-countries of immigrants to Canada are also facing similar trends of population aging, and Canada is soon to encounter fierce competition from other nations with older populations and low birth rates who need young, skilled and mobile workers (Yssaad & Fields, 2018). For countries that are keen on gaining a competitive advantage as knowledge-based innovation economies, STEM-trained immigrant women make up a high-potential subset of those in-demand 'young, skilled and mobile' individuals.

Consider these two facts from the 2011 Canadian census:

- Among those aged 25 to 34 with a STEM university degree, 38% of women were immigrants
- Among university graduates aged 25 to 34, immigrant women were almost twice as likely to have a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) degree as Canadian-born women (23% versus 13%)

While it is clear that Canada has been successful at attracting this highly-skilled talent pool, it is not clear that we have done well at substantially benefitting from their expertise (i.e.

providing them with the opportunity to equitably integrate into the labour market). Indeed, women remain underrepresented in Canada's STEM fields (Frank, 2019), in large part because we have not appropriately invested in integrating these STEM-trained immigrant women into the workforce in a meaningful way. In fact, immigrant women from culturally diverse backgrounds face some of the highest levels of labour market challenges in Canada across indicators such as: unemployment rate, wage gap, part-time employment, and low-income rate (Access Alliance, 2014) - all with specific gendered implications like facing a tougher time getting their credentials recognized (48% versus 56% for immigrant men) and other barriers like prohibitive child care and early education costs (Caidi, Komlodi, Lima Abrao, & Martin-Hammond, 2014; Macdonald & Friendly, 2016). These factors of sub-optimal outcomes (despite high demand) combine to create a confusing and costly duality for both STEM-trained women and for the Canadian economy.

Our benchmark study serves as an inquiry into factors that uphold this contradictory duality. The lived experiences of STEM-trained immigrant women in Canada are critically understudied; especially when examined through an overlapping economic and social lens at the intersections of gender, race, ability, language, health, housing, isolation, access to critical services and market-related information. Using qualitative and participatory research approaches, we spoke to 74 STEM-trained immigrant women in the largest hub-cities in each of the 13 provinces and territories. By doing so, this study aims to present a pan-Canadian snapshot of the workfinding journeys undertaken by STEM-trained women who immigrated to Canada in the past 15 years.

The significance of this benchmark study is three-fold:

- By centering the voices of STEM-trained immigrant women, a different light is shed onto Canada's labour market response and its (mis-)alignment with immigration policies and practices. As can be seen, the dynamic between what employers are incentivized to do and rights-based social responsibility is multi-dimensional, complex, and contested.
- In establishing a pan-Canadian compendium of the professional profiles and achievements of a range of highly-skilled women, we are able to critically reflect on the assumptions underlying the construction and continuous optimization of the

“ideal immigrant”; and how this construction shapes both the programming direction and funding support for settlement services, and ultimately how these factors mediate and impact the real-life workfinding experiences of our participants.

- The results of our study show that the experience of STEM-trained immigrant women and their workfinding journeys can serve as a barometer for assessing the overall state of workers’ health and well-being in Canada. In many ways, the challenges faced by our participants (at the intersection of gender, race, ability, and immigration status) draw direct or indirect parallels to the experiences of all Canadian workers.

If Canada wants to transition successfully and sustainably to an innovative, knowledge-based economy and attract investment, it needs to rethink its short-sighted reliance on “cheap labour” as an economic development incentive. Instead, it needs to commit to a long-term investment strategy of developing robust, publicly-funded infrastructure to nurture a healthy, entrepreneurial, and resilient workforce for its growing sectors. The data arising from the pan-Canadian workfinding experiences of these STEM-trained immigrant women provides an important springboard for reframing Canada’s strategy.

As a British Columbia human rights tribunal observed:

“It cannot be in anyone’s interest to continue to accept into this country some of the best and brightest individuals from around the world, and to then make it virtually impossible for them to use the skills that they bring with them.”

(Bitonti v. British Columbia, 1999)

Lastly, despite the focus on labour market integration (or perhaps because of it), the study participants reminded us that people who immigrate to Canada contribute far more than dollars and cents: they put down roots, they make friends and build communities, fall in love and have children. They make art and share their food, traditions, songs - thus enriching our shared lives. Though it may not be reflected directly in economic data, these human considerations matter just as much, if not more.

We hope that this study fuels the necessary re-imagining of how Canada can better support the prosperity of STEM-trained immigrant women, and by extension, of all its workers.

Methodology

A series of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 74 women in the 13 provinces and territories across Canada. The vast majority of interviews were conducted in-person, with a few conducted via an online platform (i.e. Google Hangouts, Skype) to accommodate participants' availability. The study's methodology was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto.

In order to participate, the individual had to self-identify as a woman and had to be between the ages of 18 to 65. The participants also had to have immigrated to Canada within the past 15 years under one of the following criteria: Federal skilled workers (FSW), Canadian experience class (CEC), Federal skilled trades (FST), Study permit, Start-up business class, Investors, Entrepreneurs and self-employed persons, Self-employed persons class, Quebec Economic Classes, Provincial nominees, Caring for children and caring for people with high medical needs classes, Immigrant Investor Venture Capital class, Live-in caregivers in Canada, Atlantic Immigration Pilot Programs; and needed to be currently residing in one of Canada's 13 provinces or territories. Recruited participants had to have either an educational or occupational background in a STEM field (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and we used Statistics Canada's groupings to determine what fields to include in the STEM designation. Participants were recruited through various channels including posters, social media, community organizations, settlement agencies, and existing professional networks.

An iterative design and pilot testing of the questionnaire was used as a means of garnering an in-depth and descriptive account of the women's stories and to gain insight into their lived experiences at the intersections of gender, race, ability, language, health, housing, isolation, access to critical services, and market-related information.

The interview guide was divided into the following sections: A) Background Information; B) Pre-Arrival; C) Arrival in Canada - first 6 months; D) Intermediate - 6 months to 2 years; and E) Long-Term - 2 years+. Collectively, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data (including open- and close-ended questions) provided insight into not only participants' experiences in the labour market but their experiences navigating other systems such as the Canadian housing market, the education system, and newcomer/settlement services.

All 74 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a member of the research team for analysis. In addition to these 74 interviews, instances where some women who were interested in participating but expressed reluctance towards being formally interviewed as an individual, the research team hosted semi-structured focus groups and one-on-one, "off the record" meetings, which were not audio-recorded. However, with the women's consent, detailed notes were recorded during these interactions in order to capture their contributions and add their experiences and insights to the overall narrative.

The data analysis was undertaken through an iterative process of thematic coding. The thematic analysis involved conducting line-by-line analysis to identify narratives and associated emotions in the participants' accounts. The coding scheme was discussed and revised by the research team until a consensus was reached. The quantitative analysis involved an evaluation of the economic impact of the lost earnings and productivity that the Canadian market incurs as a result of their 'misplaced' and underpaid labour.

Results

Why do STEM-trained immigrant women choose Canada?

Our data shows that most participants' motivation to immigrate to Canada is multilayered, with many intersecting and overlapping factors driving the choice to immigrate from their home countries and choosing Canada vs. other parts of the world.

When we posed this question to our participants, the primary reason for immigrating to Canada was *personal well-being* - accounting for 43% of the responses. Personal well-being

included increased personal safety and security (driven by political instability in home countries), less gendered restrictions on mobility, a more stable immigration status and/or pathway to permanent residency/citizenship (compared to countries that have large foreign worker populations with no pathways to permanent residency), and legal recognition of same-sex relationships and families in Canada. A need to take chances and expand their horizons and “go on an adventure” were also commonly cited as reasons for migration.

The second highest number of responses was for *economic reasons related to work opportunities* - accounting for 35% of responses, with the leading factor being job security in a stable economy, followed by sector-specific opportunities for research and development in STEM, Canada’s reputation for “better quality of life” and being “friendly towards immigrants” - with many women proudly stating that their high ambitions for their careers and success were instrumental factors behind their decision.

Twenty-eight percent of our participants stated a spouse’s influence in choosing Canada over options like USA, Australia, UK or New Zealand. Eighteen percent stated a better future for their children as a vital driver behind the decision to immigrate to Canada - with a cleaner environment (low air and water pollution), better quality of education, and safety being the top reasons.

Emergent Profile: Getting to know STEM-trained immigrant women in Canada

- 67% of our participants were the **primary applicants** on their immigration file, which means that in Canadian Immigration’s points-based system, their labour market fit was deemed highly relevant, with their skills assessed to be in high demand in order to be listed under Economic Class.
- That said, **career-related reasons were not the main factor** for these women in choosing Canada, an assumption that is common amongst the stereotypes of why highly-skilled people choose to come to Canada.

- At the time of landing in Canada, our participants' average **age** was 36 years old (in an age range of 18 - 60 years) - meaning the majority of them had **7+ years of work experience** upon arrival.
- While 48% of our participants **immigrated to Canada on their own**, 52% came with a spouse, and 29% had at least one child at the time of landing.
- 81% of the participants rated their **English proficiency** upon landing at good command / good working knowledge or higher, and 25% also had at least a basic command (or higher) of **French**.
- 99% of our participants had acquired a bachelor's **degree** (BSc, BEng, BA, BBA, BTech, BComm) before they landed, 54% also had a Masters degree (MD, MA, MSc, MBA, MPH, MEng) with 22% having also completed a PhD in their chosen STEM fields.
- As part of their work experience, 50% of participants had **lived and worked in at least one other country besides their home country** prior to landing in Canada, bringing with them robust experiences of international work.

Based on our data, the profile that emerges is that immigrant women educated and experienced in STEM fields tend to be drivers of the decision in choosing Canada, and their decision is in large part based on non-economic factors of personal well-being, safety, security, and mobility. They are highly educated in their chosen STEM fields, often with specializations that make their strong academic profile unique and in-demand across the globe. They arrive in Canada already having gained many years of work experience, already having put their academic training to test. Their work experience has helped them acquire a wide range of leadership skills, handling both people and project management for large multinationals or prominent globally-recognized institutions. They are highly successful in their fields, both in the titles they carry and also in monetary terms. They have a good command or better of the English language and about a quarter of them can also utilize French. They are highly likely to have gained international work experience before they

arrived in Canada, and thus have a nuanced and informed understanding of different cultures and work environments. This makes them experienced in being able to package and present their talents, education, and work experience to various discerning labour markets.

All in all, these immigrant women are confident in their talents, clear in their ambitions, driven in their plans, experienced in navigating many complex systems, and exhibit a highly entrepreneurial risk-threshold in pursuit of their goals. It is hard to imagine a group of people more prepared to participate in Canada's STEM sectors than them; women whose stellar education and work experience credentials required zero contribution from Canada, yet we stand to gain enormous economic and social value from it all if we do our part right in integrating them into our labour market and society.

Mapping the workfinding journey of STEM-trained immigrant women

Based on their experience and Canada's 'marketing' of itself around the world as a destination worth choosing for highly-skilled immigrants - our participants' expectations are tempered but enthusiastic before they arrive.

When asked what they expected about their own workfinding opportunities prior to actually landing in Canada, 66% were "optimistic", with about a quarter expressing "cautious optimism" that they would be able to find a job in their field. Yet when we asked them how they felt at the end of the first six months of having lived in Canada, only 37% of those that chose to respond expressed optimism in terms of "hope" or "excitement" - while 35% expressed feelings of "pessimism" i.e. they felt disappointed, overwhelmed, undervalued, depressed, lost, or afraid that they had made a mistake in choosing Canada.

What changed between the time when they had done extensive research prior to coming to Canada, and the reality of trying to integrate into their respective sectors in the Canadian labour market?

Our research in mapping the ‘workfinding journey’ for immigrant women in STEM shows a far-ranging and interconnected system of challenges, ones that are more pronounced if the women are visible-minority. Based on our research findings, we have divided the journey into three main phases:

1) **“Foot in the door”**

This first phase pertains to what our participants referred to as their search for the “foot in the door” in Canada’s labour market - i.e. **the first job**. The findings in this phase shed light on power dynamics, gatekeeping, and lack of accessible information on potential career pathways in STEM fields.

2) **“Running into walls”**

The second phase covers the journey of our participants’ **experience trying to integrate into Canadian workplaces** - which includes the process of securing their first job, issues of pay equity, recognition and promotion, as well as roles, titles, and responsibilities.

3) **“Standing at crossroads”**

The third phase relays the challenges of our participants realizing the limitations that weigh them down as they try to return to the level of seniority, responsibility, and compensation that they had attained prior to moving to Canada. This part delves into the **complexity of their available options for navigating forward**, professional status, and their self-confidence.

“Foot in the door”

When immigrant women land in their new home cities across Canada, they are singularly focused on gaining entrance into the labour market. When asked “What was your biggest concern when you decided to migrate to Canada?” - 49% stated that prior to landing, *‘securing meaningful employment’* was their top concern, with 27% expressing some caution or apprehension towards cultural adjustment, including workplace culture. From the study sample, 30% of respondents knew

someone in their line of work who was already in Canada, and had attempted to reach out to them for guidance. Twenty-three percent reached out to people they knew in Canada who were not in a related field, but had the potential to provide general guidance. Fifty-three percent of respondents looked for job postings in their field before arriving in Canada. What this data tells us is that these STEM qualified and experienced immigrant women are not only driven, but that they do their homework in terms of research and relevant network outreach even before they came to Canada to increase their chances of success in finding work in their field.

Some of the most recurrent challenges they encountered when applying to jobs were:

- No response or feedback following applications and/or interviews
- Being asked for 'Canadian experience'
- Being asked for a particular immigration status. For example, being told that an employer is only accepting applicants with permanent resident status, when provincial nominees have to show a year of continuous employment in order to apply for permanent residency.
- Lack of pathways to access certain sectors like research and academia. For example, not knowing that many post-graduate programs in Canada are paid.
- Being told they are "overqualified" and should take their higher degrees and several years of experience off their resumes to make their profile "less threatening" to a wider pool of potential employers
- Being shunted towards temporary or casual 'survival jobs' not related to their field of training, especially by some career counselors at immigrant settlement agencies
- Being told that their prior experience or credentials are not recognized in Canada

- Facing the fragmented, unconscionably long, and unreliable accreditation landscape across Canada for regulated fields
- Lack of affordable childcare impacts job search efforts, location access for both interviews and work
- The potential career derailment experienced through bridging programs that our participants noted often “re-skill” them in a line of work that does not reflect the specialization of their particular STEM fields, while also repositioning them into junior or entry level roles

“Running into walls”

Although the focus of this study was to map the journey of immigrant women in STEM and the road to their first job in their field of training, our results show that journey is complicated and looks more like a game of Pac-Man (being sent towards many dead-ends) than Chutes-and-Ladders (navigating a matrix of relatively clear up/down/backwards/forwards choices), i.e. they are often sent down time-consuming pathways only to run into a wall and find out that was not the direction they should have invested so much time and effort in.

According to our participants, the most common hurdles to career progress they encountered are:

- Lower starting pay - research has shown that the gender wage gap compounds over time, and can result in a deficit of millions of dollars over the span of a career. This includes being asked to negotiate their salary or rate of pay in the dark - in a new culture, market, currency, and system with no way of knowing if they are being underpaid and by how much
- Little to no employer guidance around professional development. Implications include fewer projects and leadership opportunities to practice

their talents and make their expertise evident

- Being expected to stay late regularly, to “prove their commitment” and to take on ‘office housework’ like coordinating logistics for social events, arranging for catering, and always being expected to do notetaking work like meeting minutes to gain the particularly gendered status of “likeability”
- Having to endure mistreatment, microaggressions, and bias based on gender, race and/or immigration status. For example, when reporting harassment by a senior figure in the organization, being told they should really be “grateful” for their job and not “complain” - effectively weaponizing the precarity of their immigration status
- Having limited access to inter-organizational networks, especially due to lack of gender sensitivity when it comes to planning informal networking opportunities. For example, events may only be held at pubs, structured around alcohol, and scheduled in the evenings - which means some women are unable to attend due to childcare responsibilities, or because they feel uncomfortable as someone who does not drink for religious, cultural, or personal reasons.
- Struggling with gradual de-skilling resulting from forced downgrading of their intellectual potential - i.e. highly-skilled immigrant women becoming less proficient over time because they are deprived of opportunities to continue their practice and build on their STEM expertise. According to data from Statistics Canada, the impact of this deskilling of immigrants in Canada is increasingly common and long-lasting (Galarneau & Morissette, 2008; Germain, Armand, & McAndrew, 2010)
- Lack of information about critical career pathways; both within sectors, and within organizations. This lack of access coupled with their limited professional networks in Canada hinders their quest to get back to the level of seniority and compensation that they had already attained prior to coming to Canada.

“Standing at crossroads”

Securing their first job, gaining experience working in a Canadian organization, and navigating various degrees of often dissatisfactory results - all of this brought our STEM-trained immigrant women to a critical juncture, where they were faced with the following questions:

- What should their career progression strategy be to move forward?
- What are their options or choices?
- How does one evaluate and then decide on a pathway that offers some semblance of clarity towards career goals they know they are capable of attaining?
- What are the risks associated with various options that they can consider?

Many of our participants shared that they struggled with stark economic realities that are attached to most of the “options” they considered, all the while struggling with their sense of self-confidence and the downgrading of their professional status. For example, should they change jobs in hopes of landing in a new organization where their talents and work experience may be better recognized and more fairly compensated? For a new immigrant, this path presents specific risks if they came to Canada as provincial nominees. In order to be able to apply for permanent residency, they need to show one year of work experience and the application process itself can take anywhere from 12-36 months. During the wait time, the validity of their application paperwork is contingent on the job they submitted it through, and any changes can cause a ripple effect - with potential ramifications ranging anywhere from rejection of application by the government to being bumped to the back of the queue. These potential risks often make them feel like they are being held hostage to an employer until their permanent residency is granted.

Another option many consider is if they should go back to school so that Canadian

employers stop penalizing them for foreign-earned credentials. The risks with this 'choice' are many - school demands that they forgo earning potential if they have to quit their jobs or work part-time. Additionally, it takes time away from looking after their families. All this risk, effort, and sacrifice is often to re-learn skills that they already have training and work experience for. On top of it all, the cost of tuition is often prohibitive, and for many that would mean that they would also be taking on serious long-term debt.

Even though these women exhibit higher-than-average risk thresholds for committing to a rewarding and meaningful life and career - the fragmentation of available information, lack of formal or semi-formal pathways, the precarity of their personal or family immigration status, prohibitive financial costs, lack of intergenerational family support, racial and gender discrimination and harassment compounds their career set-backs manifold compared to their Canadian-born counterparts.

Most Rewarding Experience

As part of our interviews from coast to coast to coast - we asked all participants what they found **most rewarding** about immigrating to Canada, particularly in the first year. Their answers offer a kaleidoscope of things like healthcare, access, mobility, safety, security, and independence - aspects that have a specific and undeniable gendered bent. It is also telling that a staggering majority did not choose their professional or workfinding experience as their most rewarding one in Canada.

PERSONAL	PERSONAL	ECONOMIC	PERSONAL	PERSONAL	PERSONAL	ECONOMIC
immigration status, security, mobility, independence, confidence	legal rights, support organizations, people, culture	work, education	environment, weather	family	healthcare	prospects of good pay
27%	17%	14%	13%	10%	5%	< 1%

Calgary

*"I think it would be the **healthcare** - because the first two weeks after we landed here my kid fell really sick, and we were so worried that he had brought in malaria or something from Nigeria, but then it turned out not to be that, and then going to the hospital... we didn't have a car at that time and we got to the hospital we were talking about getting a cab, and then one of the nurses just walked up to us and she was like, "you didn't come with the car?" and we said no and then she gave us a taxi pass to take us back home and to bring us back to the hospital the next day, because we had to be going everyday for like 3 days for my son to get his IV injection stuff. So we would go every morning and leave in the afternoon so like I think that was like the biggest thing for me because I'm like in Nigeria, I don't know any hospital that you would be sick and go to the hospital and they'll be like hey I'll call a cab for you free of charge - like no one would do that for you. You pay with your money, or you drive yourself to the clinic. So I was like, yeah, I think that's like I made the right decision to move here." (P. 39)*

Charlottetown

*"Just being able to walk down the street and feel safe. **Just being safe**. Yeah that was really rewarding." (P. 53)*

Halifax

*"You know the most rewarding--I always remind myself why I moved in the first place, and my husband and I... we often say we are settled and the kids are happy and all but [also] it's very peaceful. When you come from a place where there wasn't as much peace and you didn't feel always as **safe and secure**? But I like the space that we [were given], in terms of people don't stick their nose into your business, you have physical space and even today it's pretty **laid-back, peaceful**, and people are a little slow... slow moving? And if you are fast they get impressed quickly (laughs)" (P. 31)*

Iqaluit

*"In the first 6 months the most rewarding was actually getting a **permanent residency and being able to plan and start our lives as documented persons** in Canada. So that*

was the most rewarding, that okay, NOW we can actually start planning our life on what we could do, and for me as well, it was looking forward to starting school because that was how many years now, five years since I left Zimbabwe and working as an accountant in the actual profession, and in those five years it was transitioning between countries, working in whatever I could get and not pursuing my schooling which was my original goal when I left Zimbabwe. So yeah it was really rewarding that now finally we could get those things done.” (P. 70)

Moncton

*“I got my driver’s license. And then my husband got a car, and **I also got a car right after I got my license.**” (P. 46)*

Montreal

*“Not worrying about **walking alone on the street.** That was like a freeing experience, is that a word?” (P. 6)*

*“The people, I would say. Well, we ... **we were feeling, kind of, really welcome here.**” (P. 13)*

Saskatoon

*“I guess, [just] realizing that I could do that! Like, move without family, without friends... **I didn’t panic. I could learn, I think, the basic things to survive...** and I also found good friends here - people that immediately heard that I had arrived here on my own, no family, and they would lend [a] hand you know? Like do you need help? So those two things.” (P. 23)*

St. John's

*“My most rewarding--I think learning to be **independent.** Because prior to that... that was the first time that I wasn't living in my mother's house, and [for] the first time, I had full reign of everything. When I went to bed, when I got up, when I went grocery shopping,*

what I bought, what I didn't buy, whether or not I paid my phone bill, you know? Whether or not I went out versus studied, where I went, when I came home.” (P. 35)

Toronto

*“I would say not the professional side, and not the personal side, but **the family** side. So I think as a family we discovered many things, like, many opportunities that we didn't have before. We were traveling a lot, we moved to this house, before that we were in an apartment, we had a lot of social interactions because of this community, which was really nice and rewarding. I think **to see the kids that they have settled in, they have friends, they speak [English] fluently, and that it wasn't hard for them... that was the most rewarding.**” (P. 4)*

Vancouver

*“**I met a lot of different people from everywhere.** Like, I had never met people from so many different countries! Especially, like, so Pakistan is close to India, we share a border! But I have never met anybody from Pakistan! Like, we have cricket matches, there is so much culture around our cricket matches, right? But I land here, and I'm like half the people on my floor are from Pakistan, this is great! We can watch matches together! And we did! And I'm like oh, that was fun, you know, because this is so much part of our culture. And this rivalry? But then watching matches with them was also fun.” (P. 19)*

Whitehorse

*“**Good salary.** It was the reason why I came here.” (P. 59)*

*“Oh, I think the **environment** here in Yukon, because it was ... it is very quiet, laid back. Compared to the city which I came from, Manila, it's so different. I love this place. **When it comes to practicing my profession, of course I'm still hoping.**” (P. 63)*

Winnipeg

*“Just the difference in how work [in my field] is conducted in Canada versus how work is conducted in Brazil. As far as [the practices being] **ethically responsible.**” (P. 67)*

Yellowknife

*“You know just gaining my **independence**, you know? It was very rewarding for me. First time, like, now my uncle couldn’t say a word in my life. It’s not like I could do whatever, there were constraints, mostly economical, but free of those social constraints. As a woman, coming from a patriarchal society, that was a big thing for me.” (P. 64)*

Most Frustrating Experience

When we asked our participants what they found to be **most frustrating** about immigrating to Canada, particularly in the first year, their answers skewed heavily towards struggles based on finding work, or once they had found a job, the treatment, expectations, and work culture they were faced with.

ECONOMIC	PERSONAL	PERSONAL	ECONOMIC	ECONOMIC	PERSONAL	PERSONAL	PERSONAL
Finding work for themselves and/or spouse	Work culture, bosses, workplace culture, language expectations	Immigration status, security, self-confidence, mobility	Access to important information	Costs for housing, access to and cost of food, insurance costs	Environment, weather	Lack of professional networks, difficulty making friends, missing family	Overall quality of life
21%	18.6%	15%	12%	8%	7.6%	6%	3%

Calgary

*“Oh **not finding a job** and getting a ‘no’ even in the like, stupid places. Like, yeah, you go to the store, and you just hear ‘no’ and you are like, what? I cannot even get a job to work at a store? Why?” (P. 38)*

Charlottetown

*“I think ... like the **overall settlement gets frustrating**, like even not getting an apartment of your choice or husband’s work not working out. All of that, it gets – but I would not mention it as a very bad experience. You have to come across some hurdles,*

right? And these things are just okay I think, but sometimes it got frustrating. It took very long [for] my husband getting a job, for example.” (P. 52)

Halifax

“I felt like the workplace culture was overly ‘politically correct’. And, it was hard and it was also ... very, you know, very simplistic in terms of culture and history and I don’t know, it was some ... I had a huge culture shock. So, but the culture shock was a bit different because I was used to living in [different] places that were probably.... clear monolithic culture, is that right word? Yeah, very clear dominant culture, and I was used to being the cultural person you know, learning “oh this is the way we do things [here]” and so coming into Canada where it was like, oh we just keep things simple and plain, so everybody can get along, do you know what I mean? To me, that didn’t seem right. So, I felt pretty lost and **I would say I felt lost the last three years**, I’m only just finally on my feet now in my present environment.” (P. 56)

Iqaluit

“I think I was happy, but it was frustrating when we realized that you know we can’t do anything about [being employed under the] licensed practical nurse (LPN) program [per my training] and we feel like we were basically **trapped in this closed work permit**, you know? I think after six months we were all excited that the company is going to sign us off, and we were going to be able to apply for permanent residency but that took three years.” (P. 55)

Moncton

“Low income [was frustrating]. Also the period of time that we have to wait to get the child benefits, like it's months. For healthcare, like, we are eligible to use the health system since we arrived but **find a [family] doctor?** That's a completely different story... it takes years for some people.” (P. 49)

Montreal

“A lot [was frustrating]. It's more work related because I think, as I said before I came to Canada, I was talking to my previous principal investigator (PI) on Skype [and over]

emails, so I was expecting more supportive environment from them [once I arrived here]. From the very first day he didn't even like look [at] me, **he didn't even, like, shook my hand and say 'hi!' so you know it was like, what I'm doing here? Why I'm here?** I found it there was [another] Turkish postdoc two labs behind us, but [my PI] didn't even let me know about this postdoc because he didn't want me to make my Turkish community growing in the lab area, as much he said after a year, he doesn't want me to talk Turkish in the lab although he hired a research visiting professor from Turkey and she's Turkish and of course we talk in Turkish if this is, if...(stutters in frustration) yeah so, but he told me he doesn't want me to talk Turkish in the lab." (P. 8)

Saskatoon

"The first six months, **transit** bus... sometimes you're waiting at -37°C and the bus didn't show up. It was very frustrating and we don't want to spend money in the cab and that, I'm not need to have that like... luxury! And so that was very frustrating otherwise everything was good." (P. 21)

St. John's

"I think what I've heard a constant narrative of the graduate student especially immigrant international student is that the **power imbalance** between the university professor and you, and that dynamic, and how it's almost like a threat hanging over your head because should you not listen to them, should you not follow what they're saying or doing, or should you even be in abusive emotional/physical situations... there is nowhere to go to because the minute you do that, there's always the risk of losing your study or work permit and you would have worked so hard to get there, that yeah... so I'll leave it at that. [That was] the most frustrating for me and I can't talk more about it." (P. 34)

Toronto

"**I didn't have any friends. I didn't know people, it was very frustrating.** For me it's very frustrating, I'm a people person, I like people being around me or have friends and I came from a very, from a [very social] society when we were in Saudi Arabia, it's sort of

like, it's like when you're living in a bubble you have lots of friends because they are all on the same level." (P. 5)

Vancouver

"I had a very difficult six months when I came. My boss was a woman; a French woman, that now if I look back and with my colleagues, and we talk back now, I think I should have filed for **psychological harassment** [against her]. I didn't because... I just didn't even know about that? I didn't, I had no knowledge that that existed, and had no idea that even you could just talk to somebody about it, so yeah. I was almost--**I'm a strong personality and always a positive personality but for these six months, I was coming home almost crying everyday.** Like the worst ever, so it was very, very hard." (P. 74)

Whitehorse

"Trying to convince everybody that I worked with that I was competent, and that I could do this job, and you know, that I was here not to oust them from a job, and that we are really going in the same direction. That was the hardest thing. I was running a project and I figured, something, they told me something didn't work and I looked at the error message and I could fix that. My technical background and my ideas, which would upset them. **One guy who was the manager of application at that time, he had me at his office and asked "when are you going to give up?", I said "when it works"** and I went back to my office and slammed the door shut. It was trying to figure out the culture of where I worked and convince people that I can do this." (P. 58)

Winnipeg

"For my family it's not happy. We experience very high pressure. Yeah you know, I need to get the money to pay the down payment and because it's not in our plan to buy a house, **I have no money to buy a car, to buy a vehicle, it's hard for me, for us, in the winter, we are cold to go outside and to to buy a groceries,** yeah it's very hard. [After a year] in December, we got the money to buy the vehicle. Yeah and my husband is not there, and no one support me." (P. 29)

Yellowknife

*"Well employment is the [worst] one. You have to find a place to stay, you don't know how to find that, right? Then when you depend on people, especially in your first few months, that's a very tricky thing. **The family I was staying with, even though I stayed with them for a week, the guy would go into my emails like, people can take advantage of you. You are very vulnerable.** That was very frustrating for me because you are vulnerable, you are very young, you don't have many resources, so you just rely on whomever." (P. 64)*

Select Vignettes

Rosina (Moncton)

Rosina, 44, is a medical doctor specializing in gynecology, originally from the Congo. She applied through New Brunswick's provincial nomination program, along with her husband (also a doctor) and their three children. They landed in Moncton in 2013. At that point, she had 15 years of experience working in hospitals, eight of those years spent managing a maternity unit in a large hospital. She also worked for two years in Zambia with an international aid program designed to help alleviate a severe shortage of medical professionals in the country.

Because Canadian immigration accepted their application, they rightfully expected to continue contributing to their new home country in their capacity as doctors. To her surprise, she found the accreditation process for medical professionals to be a convoluted nightmare. She experienced being told that nothing she could do would make it possible for her to work as a doctor in New Brunswick, because that profession was not for "outsiders" like her.

"When I went to work in Zambia, we arrived and were told that the medical system in Zambia was a bit different from the Congo. So we were enrolled in a three-month training program to bridge that gap, and then we went straight to work helping people.

Why does Canada not have that for doctors? They won't even let me work as a nurse! I used to run a whole ward, with teams of doctors and nurses. I know what I am doing."

"Did you know that there are many closures of hospital departments in New Brunswick due to understaffing? They closed the entire labour and delivery unit in Moncton Hospital in 2016. And I am right here - ready to do the work needed by so many people in Moncton, and in nearby communities who depend on this hospital."

After a year of living on their savings, Rosina enrolled in a 6-month training program to become a personal support worker (PSW) - a job staffed by mostly casual positions that pay \$10 - \$13 per hour. The anti-Black racism she has experienced as a care-worker has broken her spirit, this in addition to years of being undervalued and underpaid. Through tears of rage and frustration, she ended the interview with:

"What does Canada want? For me to forget the work I did? For me to forget I was good at it? I don't understand what Canada wants."

Tayyaba (Saskatoon)

Tayyaba, 32, has a PhD in geophysics from one of the top universities in Iran. Before immigrating to Canada in 2014, she spent four years working in Tabriz, one year working in Turkey, and three years on a project in Argentina. When we asked why she chose to study geophysics, her eyes lit up:

"I love geophysics because, it's like the geoscience field where you can know whatever it is in whatever - like water, oil, gas - actually, like, marry all the things that you are looking for in say paleontology and ecology! Actually you can see, for example, where you were going to put the garbage and how you fill that. It's beautiful, it's beautiful! I don't have words to describe that it's beautiful. The thing that I can do the rest of my life, I feel so happy when I do geophysics, very happy!"

When she tried to find work in her field in Saskatoon, she was constantly asked for "Canadian experience". She found it frustrating because from her resume, it was clear that

she was a new immigrant, so being called in for an interview and then told that she lacked Canadian experience felt like a deliberate insult. After seven months of not being able to secure a job, she enrolled in a one-year business administration course at the local college as a way to counter the constant refrain for “Canadian experience.” While there, she experienced sexual and verbal harassment from a member of the faculty, who also repeatedly asserted that she deserved to be sent back to her ‘terrorist country’.

When she reported this to the authorities, she was told to ‘try to keep her distance’ from her harasser and to give him ‘another chance.’ After word got out about her complaint, five more women confided in her about similar experiences with that same faculty member, but they were international students and could not risk having their study visas revoked, so they kept quiet. Getting through that one year course turned into a nightmare.

“All this, and I'm still fighting to find a job in my field.”

Aneni (Whitehorse)

Aneni, 39, studied to be an environmental technician in Zimbabwe. She is passionate about her field:

“[It's all about] aquatic biology, the study of trees and nature and rocks and fish - getting information on a ground-level, so being hands on and also doing lab work. We test water flow, pollution, abatement and land recommendations. It's a lot but it is so necessary and impactful!”

She arrived in Canada with three years of work experience from Zimbabwe and decided to do a one-year environmental technician certification from an Ontario college to make sure that she could work in her own field. After graduating, she moved to Ottawa thinking there would be more opportunities there than the small Ontario town she had been living in for college, and began what would become 14 long months of looking for work and not being offered any positions. During this time she applied for more than a hundred jobs, and got called in for one interview, in Barrie. She ended up enrolling for a course as a Personal Support Worker (PSW) to be able to support herself:

"I ... I couldn't get a job ... I was living in Ottawa after post-graduation and it was very difficult to find work...any work, so I decided in the meantime, I was going to take something that would allow me to work and fend for myself, whilst still searching for a job in my field of interest. Do you see how many Black women end up doing personal support work?"

After spending almost three years in Ottawa, her frustration with not knowing why she was not getting invited for interviews; even with a Canadian re-certification as an environmental technician, grew exponentially. In the meantime, she had to work three separate, casual, on-call contracts as a PSW to make ends meet. She decided to take a chance and move up north because she had heard that pay rates were better, even if she had to continue working as a PSW. She packed her bags and bought a one-way ticket to the Yukon. She found a job as a PSW and continued sending her resume out for environment-related jobs in the territory.

Six years after her Canadian graduation, she was finally offered a job with the territorial government. The trauma of being invalidated for so many years by employers meant that she did not quit her PSW contracts for a year after accepting the full-time job in her own field.

"I juggled three jobs that whole year - because I couldn't rely on the fact that they would not go back to not recognizing me or my experience again."

Xheng (Halifax)

Xheng, 33, has a doctorate in data science from one of China's top universities. In 2016, she immigrated to Halifax through Nova Scotia's provincial nominee program. Early in her career, she worked as head of sales for a software company. Later, she was promoted to territory director for Europe and Africa, which lasted for six years before she came to Canada.

"When I arrived and got my first job offer, it was for an account manager for a start-up and ... it was a bit odd it wasn't really what I do typically, and I felt very uncomfortable, but felt very lucky someone was even offering me a job, so ... but it was actually ... so, in my role in China, I was an enterprise salesperson and when I say enterprise sales, I say that I sold to organizations that

need at least 500 employees as a whole. I sold very complex technology solutions. I accepted a job selling an app – a cleaning company ... and I was told that the company is very successful.

The company was just not the right fit for me and it was quite obvious from the get go because ... I was spoken to like a child and I was told to, you know, and it was just pure cold calling and it was hard for me to build a rapport in an area that I wasn't familiar with, which was a [market of] super, super small businesses, right? It's not even ... it's not even like major business. This is not technology. I previously sold to a technology crowd and now I was just selling [a non-tech service] to just small regular businesses."

A huge part of this transition was the fact that Xheng went from making \$107,000 a year to \$56,000 in Halifax, and within months of arriving in Canada, found herself pregnant and deeply uncomfortable about sharing this information with her new employer, because the workplace culture did not feel safe.

Amidst severe morning sickness and daily microaggressions at work, she felt cornered, and ended up quitting her job without a backup employment plan.

Efeoghene (Calgary)

Efeoghene, 37, is a computer science major, with a Masters in Management of Information Technology. She immigrated from Nigeria with her spouse and two young children in 2015, and chose to land in Calgary, Alberta. She was the primary applicant for her family's immigration to Canada, based on her seven years of experience working as a technical analyst and managing multinational IT projects for large companies. She was also the family's primary breadwinner.

Since English is one of Nigeria's official languages, Efeoghene is fluent. She also speaks French. Her research prior to coming to Canada showed that "No matter the province or the city I was going to end up in I was certain that I would find something to do. I felt optimistic."

The first few months looking for work took her to "a very bad place" as she struggled with depression. It took her six months to find her first job, for which she took a \$20,000 pay cut compared to her last job in Nigeria. Her many years of experience managing complex portfolios for large multinational projects was not recognized in Canada, and she had to

settle for a junior, non-management role where her skills and experience were severely underutilized. Her husband could not find a job as an engineer, and after looking for over a year had to return to Nigeria so they could afford to pay their bills in Calgary. Efeoghene had to manage in Calgary as a solo-parent, with no family to support her. The childcare costs alone were \$1,680 per month. She has had to change her job twice since, and she was faced with a difficult choice when we spoke:

"I find that there is... I don't know how to put it... like just a feeling that you're being treated differently because you are different from everyone else on the team. Things that everybody else does and doesn't count or they don't get in trouble for, if I try to do it I get in major trouble or I'm always being picked on or victimized. Basically that's what is making me think about moving again because I loved my old team, we were basically 80% immigrants there was no--but here? It's tiring. And like I didn't have to deal with this in all the jobs I worked in Nigeria so why do I have to put up with that now? I don't want to use the word [racism] but..." (sighs in resignation)

Pan-Canadian data patterns:

The data from our research helps us draw significant insights that are pan-Canadian in nature. We can see that the profiles of highly-skilled immigrant women like our participants are understudied and therefore critically misunderstood. It is also clear that many factors impacting their settlement and workfinding experiences that are generally thought to be correlated to the degree of cultural openness towards immigration in different regions are in fact, strikingly similar all across Canada. And finally, the data establishes that being an expert in highly sought-after technical and scientific skills does not insulate our participants from gender-based (d)evaluation of their objective skills, experience, and expertise.

These insights are based on the following emergent patterns from our research:

- The emergent profile of STEM-trained immigrant women as confident in their talents, clear in their ambitions, driven in their plans, experienced in navigating many complex systems with a highly entrepreneurial risk threshold challenges many

of Canada's most **persistent stereotypes pertaining to immigrant women**, especially when it comes to visible-minority women.

- The research data collected across Canada establishes that our study participants' labour market challenges (including but not limited to underemployment and native-immigrant wage gap, pay inequity and wage suppression, workplace harassment and weaponizing of precarious immigration status, and systemic anti-Blackness) share **a high degree of overlap with the labour market hurdles faced by "lower skilled" immigrant women** in the sectors of personal care, retail, food-service, and agriculture
- Our data shows that 37% of the women who had expressed optimism (defined as feeling hopeful and confident) about their workfinding expectations prior to landing in Canada actually reported a complete 180° change in those feelings within the first year of landing - **a sharp turn to "pessimism"** - saying that they felt disappointed, overwhelmed, undervalued, depressed, lost, or afraid that they had made a mistake in choosing Canada.
- Further, they reported feeling that their **hard-earned expertise was slipping away** when they were forced to work in sectors and at skill levels that didn't match their original STEM training (referencing the **deskilling** of highly-skilled immigrants that costs the Canadian economy \$50 billion in losses every year (Reynolds, 2019))
- Our research results from the hub cities of all 13 Canadian provinces and territories also show that while local economic and social landscapes vary significantly (say, between large cities like Toronto and smaller cities like Charlottetown), the **workfinding hurdles faced by our highly-skilled participants in all of these regions are curiously similar**
- Consequently, **our study upsets the widely-believed profile of 'ideal immigrants,'** one based on qualities that are believed to make it easier for them to integrate into their new country'. Our findings illustrate clearly that 'officially' favoured factors like high levels of education, language fluency, and in-demand STEM training are not enough to afford our participants a welcoming and equitable workfinding experience, especially if they were visible-minority.

Discussion and Implications

Our analysis of the pan-Canadian workfinding journeys of STEM-trained immigrant women illustrates that they encounter a significant experience of 'bait and switch' when it comes to their labour market integration.

During the immigration application process, the profiles, CVs and achievements of these highly-skilled women contribute to defining them: in many ways, the documents stand for the individual, a proxy of sorts. For those selected and granted permission to come to Canada, the process serves as a clear validation of the value of their skills, training, and work experiences. Since STEM-trained individuals are in high demand in Canada's growing economy, these women feel optimistic about their labour market prospects and feel *needed* and *wanted*; and once invited to apply for immigration, even *chosen* or *selected* based on a points-based 'meritocratic' system. They rightfully believe that **Canada views them as a valuable asset** and therefore post-immigration career success is within their reach.

However, once they go from being a valued asset 'on-paper' to a landed immigrant, **a critical shift occurs**. The very same qualifications that made them a sought-after and intentionally selected asset for Canada, seemingly become deficient (almost) overnight. Data from our research indicates that many employers, regulatory bodies, and even some settlement agency staff seem unable to reconcile the person-as-document with the individuals standing in front of them, with all the characteristics that make them who they are (e.g., country of origin, skin colour, gender, accent, the presence of a hijab, etc.). The women's search for appropriate and equitable work opportunities often begins with a variety of shocking attempts to re-package their profile (at times even being asked to 'dumb down' their CVs by excluding higher degrees). They quickly hit the insurmountable wall of 'lack of Canadian experience', and being generally made to feel that their academic and work qualifications are not worth much or that they fall short in Canada. This retro-active disqualification makes our participants feel wildly confused, and ultimately leads them to

feel that they were misled about the decision-making process, and makes them question how much Canada really values their STEM talent and skills.

This shift does not impact all STEM-trained immigrant women equally - a difference made apparent through data from our white study participants who immigrated from countries like the UK, USA, France, Sweden, and Australia, whose workfinding experiences and outcomes with employers and credential recognition bodies in Canada differed substantially from those of visible-minority women from Nigeria, Congo, Algeria, India, Sri Lanka, Colombia, UAE, and Iran. This difference in data shows a certain hierarchy in corresponding workfinding outcomes, with racialized women often being held to a higher standard when it comes to satisfying the Canadian experience requirements. Moreover, the fact that (local economic and social differences notwithstanding) workfinding hurdles faced by our visible-minority participants across Canada share striking similarities also leads us to believe that there is a larger meta-narrative that seems to inform the relationship between immigrants and Canada as a whole. This meta-narrative is a cultural force strong enough to override significant regional and national economic priorities that favour occupational demand for STEM-trained immigrant women, influencing both private and public sector labour market outcomes.

Participants in our study reported their most explicit encounter with this meta-narrative when being asked for 'Canadian experience' - a discourse that frames skilled immigrants as possessing 'technical' or 'hard' skills but often sorely lacking appropriate 'tacit' knowledge or 'soft skills'. By insisting on equivocating both explicit 'technical' knowledge (like degrees, licences, and certificates) and 'tacit' knowledge (which often includes values, behaviours, identities, and forms of communication) as 'essential' requirements for performing well in the Canadian marketplace (Sakamoto, Chin, & Young, 2010) 'Canadian experience' constructs immigrants as 'deficient without a need to directly refer to their racial or social characteristics' (Bhuyan, Jeyapal, Ku, Sakamoto, & Chou, 2017). In so doing, 'Canadian experience' operates at a level analogous to Quebec's 'Canadian values' system in that it frames STEM-trained immigrant women's labour market integration problems as a result of their own 'lack of skills' rather than as a result of a broader systemic issue, which may include potential discrimination.

Our data shows that 'Canadian experience' is a shape-shifting proposition, and at times akin to a black box. In the case of STEM-trained immigrant women, this lack of clarity presented challenges during each phase of their workfinding journeys. We structured their workfinding journeys along three phases: 1) the "foot in the door"; 2) the "running into walls" and, 3) the "standing at crossroads". We examine these below.

Early on in their workfinding experiences, our participants vied for the proverbial "foot in the door", and it became clear to them how overt the demand for 'Canadian experience' was from employers. Participants reported going through several levels of interviews with potential employers, only to be told that while their STEM qualifications fit the job posting, they were being rejected due to lack of 'Canadian experience'

*"I was surprised when I came here. Yeah, before that I thought that **Canada needs a lot of skilled workers** and things like that, but when I came here, I looked at the job board and I always see 'Canadian experience' and I had talked to some of my friends, a lot of relatives, they told me about that [as well]. I don't know, **because [Immigration Canada] asked for many skilled workers but then they ask for Canadian experience, that very confuse us.**" (P. 51)*

*"I got my first interview and I passed, but two weeks after the panel interview with the director, president and vice-president, they told me that my skill and appearance are good enough, but my English speaking skills are not good for the job. **But, after that email, I saw the posting on the internet again, and with the post they had [now] asked for 'Canadian experience'.** Because when I applied for the job, I would not have applied if they asked for Canadian experience." (P. 51)*

Our data also highlights the inadvertent role played by immigrant settlement agencies in reinforcing some of this invisibilized discrimination against highly-skilled immigrants, including STEM-trained immigrant women. From encouraging highly-skilled immigrants to settle for 'survival jobs', running unpaid job-placement programs to satisfy the 'Canadian experience' requirement, to actively guiding them to cross their PhD or Masters degrees off their resumes so as to not appear 'threatening' to potential employers, many well-intentioned settlement agency staff end up normalizing problematic employment

criteria in the pursuit of pragmatism. The Canadian government's recent launch of immigration programs like 'Canadian Experience Class' further legitimizes this discourse (Bhuyan et al., 2017), cementing an impossible-to-attain standard in the labour market for STEM-trained immigrant women.

During the next phase that covers our participants' experience of trying to integrate into Canadian workplaces, our research indicates that these women's workfinding journey looks more like a game of Pac-Man (being sent towards many dead-ends) than Chutes-and-Ladders (navigating a matrix of relatively clear up/down/backwards/forwards choices). Our data shows that the implications of 'Canadian experience' in this phase of "running into walls" does not go away, but instead transforms to present through mutually conflicting or dependent conditions. As an example, our participants reported being penalized for "not being assertive enough" if they came from a culture of non-confrontational communication styles, but also for being "too assertive" and reprimanded for showcasing their expertise, performing well in majority white and/or male-dominated teams, or for asking "too many questions". These responses can be viewed as a particular manifestation of the opaque nature of the 'Canadian experience' and the associated expectations at the intersection of gender, race and immigration status. Indeed, highly-skilled immigrant women reported being ensnared in the conundrum of 'not acting confident enough for a highly-skilled woman' yet penalized for acting 'too bold for an immigrant woman'. This catch-22 serves as a broader reflection of what many in Canadian society believe should be the place of immigrants in their communities, and the underlying power dynamics that reinforce the existing systemic hierarchies.

*"I have to say, **their HR said "we want women, we want women to run the organization"** - and I had to watch a woman who had 25 years of experience be [sidelined and] treated like she was an admin, when she was technical, more technical than a lot of [men] at the table. I was the only woman of colour [in addition to being a Black woman]. Eventually, my time came when they got tired of hearing my voice and literally everything dropped in one meeting where I sat with about seven of the men and **I'm told by the CTO who hired me "you need to shut up and nobody cares what you think" and "you are no longer managing this project because you are pissing me off" and from then on, I lost all administrative access to systems I had built. I was***

bullied. I was sidelined and I had, yeah, I had a horrible experience that really showed me that Canada isn't all that everyone says it is, and I understand from my experience that I am not the only one that this happens to. (P. 56)

By the time they enter the third phase where they are “standing at crossroads”; trying to negotiate the complexity of their available options with the goal of regaining the level of seniority, responsibility, and compensation that they had attained prior to moving to Canada, the residual effects of being held back due to lack of ‘Canadian experience’ in its many forms; despite having been selected for their “ideal immigrant” profile, become undeniable. Our data shows that as they weigh the options for moving their career trajectory forward, their underemployment in the Canadian labour market in the first two phases of their workfinding journey seriously inhibits their ability to establish themselves appropriately in their STEM fields in Canada. They notice that their hard-earned skills start to slip away with the passing of each year that they are not able to practice. That yawning gap also widens on their resumes, simultaneously rendering an irreversible blow to both their expertise and self-esteem. Most women we spoke to recalled going through bouts of severe depression and anxiety, often isolated from their support network of family and friends, while battling feelings of shame in having been forced to downgrade their previously thriving careers, and dealing with Canada’s institutionalized mistrust that stands between them and the jobs they are trained experts in.

*“By then my self-esteem was so low. I wasn't in a place of really, you know, going out into the world, also my husband didn't have a job, so of course I cannot leave my job and start looking around, because we need the money [to support our three young children]. **Yeah it was tough, because I felt trapped in a job that I hated, but we needed the money, and we needed that to stay here in Canada. And we really wanted to stay. [But here I was], no one here knows me, I have a boss who thinks that I'm nothing, but everybody else was nothing to him as well so it's not something...I knew it wasn't about me, but it still, it makes you feel bad. He wasn't helping anyone to get other jobs, so he wanted everybody to stay, there was this person in a post-doc there for 13 years, and he is still there by the way! So [this boss] was really trapping people in the lab making them feel like they can't go anywhere else, paying them nothing. So I really wanted my husband to find something [so I could leave].**” (P. 4)*

Our data establishes the far-reaching economic and social implications of burdening these highly-skilled immigrant women with obstacles at every turn (including obscure references to the elusive 'soft skills' - a knowledge that is context-specific, often one-sided, and always difficult to formalize) especially when we know that their STEM-training had been assessed as viable and even desirable to the needs of Canada's growing innovation economy. Based on this pan-Canadian benchmark study, there are many questions that the government of Canada needs to grapple with. Among them is the following: if this system is not working in favour of Canada's economy and it is not working in favour of STEM-trained immigrant women, **then whom exactly is this system working for?**

It should give us pause that the workfinding stories brought forward by our participants from coast to coast trouble the story that Canada cultivates about being a diverse, feminist, and immigrant-friendly country.

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While traveling across Canada for this research, our team was intentional to meet with Indigenous women in each of the cities and learn about the FNIM history of the regions. From witnessing elders leading ceremonies for the Women’s Memorial March in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, learning about challenges of over-policing in Saskatoon, to sharing muktuk in Iqaluit, we are humbled by and grateful for these opportunities to learn.

As members of an equity-seeking organization, we are on a journey to decolonize both our work and how we move through this world, and commit to the responsibility of cultivating what Black Cherokee activist Zainab Amadahy describes as “a Relationship Framework” where we nurture co-existence through co-resistance in support of Indigenous self-determination, in Canada and around the globe.

Thank you, Canada’s Public Libraries

We chose to meet and interview our participants at local public libraries in each of the 13 provinces and territories we visited for this research. Staff dealt with our room booking requests and other inquiries across different time zones, opened early and stayed late for us, gave us tours, and showed us how proud they felt to work in a public institution that serves everyone.

Across Canada, we also witnessed how the libraries in the “good” part of town looked, felt, and operated differently than libraries in the “other” parts of town. We witnessed small libraries staffed with several heavily armed security guards in Saskatoon, and happened to be there in the first week of Winnipeg Public Library rolling out border-security grade bag scanners, complete with personal pat-downs by security guards.

This slow militarization of one of Canada’s last truly democratic public spaces is heartbreaking and alarming. Hubs like libraries are supposed to be spaces to nurture learning, healing, counseling, and community-building. Libraries are places to welcome young and old, immigrant and Indigenous, rich and poor, speakers of many languages,

keepers of many stories - a critical equal right in this increasingly unequal world. Corporate-driven surveillance and securitization disproportionately criminalizes the poor, racialized, disabled, immigrants, and others on the margins (like substance users) - and deters people from seeking help and getting better.

In many ways, the findings of this report reflect today's Canada back to us, and given what we witnessed, we feel compelled to advocate for keeping our libraries open and safe for all, especially for those on the margins. A long-term, social-equity based view would have us divert funds allocated to this increasing securitization and have them support critical social services, so people can seek help and heal without judgement or discrimination.

Canada's public libraries need vigorous defense so that our legacy maintains them as welcoming spaces for all.

A note to our participants

This report would not be possible without the ferocity, resilience, and vulnerability of the women who entrusted us with their life's stories. It is far easier to allow unjust hardship and its resulting disappointment and pain to put our guard up and harden us against the world. Yet each of the women we spoke to chose to open up in hope that their stories would change outcomes for others in the future. In doing so, they gave us a glimpse into the kind of tenacity, generosity, and leadership that is so needed in these trying times.

So to our participants, we hope you accept our heartfelt gratitude: for your trust, your hope for justice, and for expressing valid rage on being let-down. Thank-you for sharing with us the love for your families and your communities. Thank-you for not giving up on your passion for your work and your dreams of a better collective future. Thank you for expressing solidarity - with each other, with Indigenous women, and with precarious migrant workers across the world.

Let the official record of this time show that we were here; whole and outraged, fighting to keep our joy alive.

Thank-you for continuing to expect better from Canada.

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