



## **PCERII Funded Research**

### **FINAL Report**

## **Coming to Canada: Success Stories of Immigrant Women**

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## **Executive Summary: Coming to Canada: Success Stories of Immigrant Women**

Statistics show that immigrant women represent a growing proportion of the women in Canadian society. In 2000 and 2001, women accounted for 51% of the total immigrant population (250,346 in 2001) (Chard, Badets, and Howatson-Leo, 2000).

A review of past and current immigration policy shows that immigration policies and settlement programs do not provide adequate support to immigrant women. Nor does current policy reflect the valuable roles they play in Canadian society. In 1998, nearly four in 10 female immigrants who entered Canada did so as spouses or dependents of economic immigrants and 35% came as family class immigrants (Chard, Badets, and Howatson-Leo, 2000). Immigration status is particularly relevant to the opportunities women can access that may assist with transition and integration. Classes in English as a second language, health care benefits, and access to transition programs are all highly dependent upon immigration status and conditions of sponsorship (Cote, Kerisit, & Cote, 2001). Despite these challenges, many women become leaders and role models to immigrant and Canadian-born women.

The stories of success shared by immigrant women in our community are meant to (1) demonstrate to policy makers and society as a whole the wealth of skills and knowledge too often overlooked as a result of inadequate policies and the need for program reform in order to maximize the capacity of immigrant women, and (2) inspire newcomers.

Six immigrant women (Lebanese, Chinese from the Philippines, African, Kurdish from Iraq, and Indian) took part in individual interviews. The women were asked to share the experiences since immigrating to Canada; what were the first organizations they made contact with?, who were the first individuals they met?, what qualities did they feel were important to their success?, and how do they define success? Preliminary analysis of themes and categories was taken back to the participants for verification. Five of the six women were available to take part in a follow-up focus group where they were asked to provide feedback on the analysis as well as any further comments. The final results were then presented to a gathering of immigrant women. Their feedback confirmed that the interpretation of the women's stories reflects their personal experiences.

Opportunity and personal agency led to successful integration and the prosperity of the community. Opportunities came in several forms, some formal or structured and other very informal or unstructured. Formal opportunities came

through support organizations, volunteer experience, Canadian culture or policy, employment and education

. The more informal opportunities came through individuals, mentors and family. The women consistently shared stories of personal agency, reflecting perseverance, positive attitudes, belief in the journey, and the importance of their family in shaping their character.

The documented personal and professional success of these women emphasizes the unrecognized economic worth and self-sufficiency of women who immigrate to Canada. In doing so, it brings into question the trend to devalue women's work and worth. As long as the contributions of women go unnoticed, they will continue to be unfairly challenged when immigrating and settling in Canada. Current policies and programs reflect Canadian policy makers' ill-conceived ideas of women's roles in society and underestimate their potential and dedication to becoming contributing members to Canadian society.

## **Statement of the Problem**

### *Statistics*

In 1999, there was a total of 189,922 immigrants to Canada. Of that, 96,873 (or 52%) were women. In 2000 and 2001, women accounted for 51% of the total immigrant population (115,009 out of 227,313 and 126,830 out of 250,346 respectively). Like the total number of immigrants to Canada, the total number of female immigrants to Canada has steadily increased since the mid 1980's, rising from 50,100 in 1986 to 127,800 in 1992, to 250,346 in 2001 (Chard, Badets, and Howatson-Leo, 2000).

Canadian trends reflect a growing representation of immigrant women across all provinces. In 1991, 15% of Alberta's female population was immigrants, 18% of Edmonton's female population. Based on current immigration figures, one can only assume that the representation of immigrant women in Edmonton and Alberta is on the rise.

### *Immigration Status of Immigrant Women*

In 1998, nearly four in 10 female immigrants who entered Canada did so as spouses or dependents of economic immigrants and 35% came as family class immigrants (Chard, Badets, and Howatson-Leo, 2000). In general, female immigrants to Canada are more likely than their male counterparts to have immigrated under the provision of the family class. In 1998, 35% of female immigrants versus 23% of male immigrants entered Canada as family class immigrants. In contrast, 12% of females immigrated to Canada as skilled workers or business women compared to 34% of males.

Immigration status is particularly relevant to the opportunities women can access that may assist with the transition and integration in a new society. Classes in English as a second language, health care benefits, and access to transition programs are all highly dependent upon immigration status and conditions of sponsorship (Cote, Kerisit, & Cote, 2001).

### *Impact of Immigration Policy on Women*

Women have been, and continue to be, disadvantaged in terms of their ability to gain entry into Canada and their ability to adapt to Canadian life due to restrictions imposed on them by Canada's immigration policy. As long as immigration policy and transition programs (affected by policy and funding) are so strictly tied to the economic climate and neo-liberal policies of economic reform versus humanitarian needs, women will suffer. As long as the skills women bring to Canadian society go unrecognized and under-valued, women will suffer.

Women have historically faced personal and societal challenges in immigration. (Status of Women Canada, 1998). Based on current proposals for amendments to immigration policy that would emphasize economic worth and self-sufficiency and the concurrent trend to devalue women's work (and worth), women will continue to be unfairly challenged when immigrating to and adapting in Canada. Current policies and programs reflect Canadian policy makers' ill-conceived ideas of women's roles in society and underestimate and undervalue education levels. According to a recent Statistics Canada publication, immigrant women tend to be highly educated. In fact, recent immigrant women tend to have higher levels of education than Canadian born women. Of immigrant women aged 25-44, 39% of recent immigrants had at least some university education, 17% had a bachelor's degree or first professional degree, and 9% had a master's or doctorate. Despite these credentials, recent immigrant women are less likely than Canadian born women to be employed. The problem is, in part, the absence of transition programs that allow women to develop skills and confidence within educational environments comparable to their education levels. Immigrants, women in particular, are seldom given the opportunity to contribute by virtue of unrecognized credentials, discrimination, or the absence of critical transition programs (AbuLaban, 1998; Bannerji, 2000; Carty and Brand, 1993; Lee and Harrison, 1999; Wright, 2000).

*Documenting the Impact of Multiculturalism and Immigration Policies on Immigrant Women*

The literature review, to this point, has shown that immigration policies have disadvantaged immigrant women in Canada. Furthermore, despite the discourse of multiculturalism (reflected in government documents and public opinion polls) implies equal representation and opportunities for all Canadians regardless of gender or race. In the following section, the reputation of immigration and multicultural policies is challenged.

A review of research on immigrant women's programs and experiences shows that many of the recommendations from the 1981 Toronto conference "The Immigrant Woman in Canada: A Right To Recognition", are consistent with those in the 1985 report titled "Beyond Dialogue" and a 1996 report commissioned by the British Columbia government titled "Immigrant Settlement and Multiculturalism Programs for Immigrant, Refugee and Visible Minority Women: A Study of Outcomes, Best Practices and Issues".

These recommendations are summarized as follows and reflect inconsistencies between policy objectives, attitudes and experiences. The following shortcomings of multiculturalism with regard to immigrant women and women's recommendations are cited, repeatedly, over a fifteen year period.

- The positive role that women have played in the building and maintaining of this country has not received due recognition.
- Immigrant women face extraordinary challenges and experience difficulty and discrimination in all areas of their lives.
- *Spoken and Written Language Skills*: There is a need for government to support the provision of language training for all adult immigrants and universal access should be guaranteed as well as the financial assistance to make (English as a Second Language (ESL) training possible.
- *Government Support*: Quality day-care to facilitate employment, language training, and integration as well as financial support to community groups: A lack of secure funding places severe limits on the activities of immigrant women's service organizations<sup>1</sup>.
- *Effective Delivery of Health and Social Services*: Recognize the need to maximize participation of immigrant women through education and the dissemination of information, especially with regard to health care services and delivery.
- Stop the exploitation of immigrant women by recommending minimum employment standards. This arose in 1981, but continues to be an issue for immigrant women in childcare positions.
- Provide financial support to programs offering services to immigrant women.
- Provide for the initiatives of multiculturalism rather than relying on the volunteer sector (predominantly women) to fulfill the mandate of multicultural policies.
- *Issues of Economic Self Reliance*: On-going research into the unemployment status and un-employability of immigrant women, including the lack of recognition of professional skills and education from countries of origin.
- Issues of public education, including communication with schools and expectations of students and parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Sooknanan (2000) has taken a critical look at the ways in which the states constructs and orchestrates partnerships in the delivery of immigrant women's programs. In fact, "gaps in service provision of mainstream institutions make community based organizations necessary" (p. 74) Roxanna Ng and Tania Das Gupta have also critiqued the role of state in constructing difference and division.

- In 1985, women called for aggressive strategies to overcome discrimination, in particular, systemic discrimination. This was again reflected in reports in 1996.
- Unique to reports of 1996 are issues of racialisation and feminisation and the intersections of race, class and gender. In addition, there is an emphasis placed on the importance of collaborative and participatory research in future projects focused on the experiences of immigrant women.

Despite these challenges, many women become leaders and role models to immigrant and Canadian-born women. The stories of success shared by immigrant women in our community are meant to (1) demonstrate to policy makers and society as a whole the wealth of skills and knowledge too often overlooked as a result of inadequate policies and the need for program reform in order to maximize the capacity of immigrant women, and (2) inspire newcomers.

### **Methodology**

In order to document experiences and find relationships between experiences and policies, a qualitative research methodology was chosen. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) propose that any qualitative approach will have the following elements.

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (p. 2)

In order to meet these criteria, a combination of interviews (individual and focus group) and participant observation provided a rich source of information about the integration experiences of the women who took part in this exploratory study.

### ***Interviews***

When the research objective is to gain insight into personal or cultural life experiences, it is important that the method facilitates open communication and respect for the interviewees' experiences. The purpose of a qualitative interview approach is to describe and understand the subjects' experiences (Kvale, 1996; Bernard, 1995). "The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and understand the meaning of central themes in the life world of the subjects, and to interpret the feeling and nuances of the experiences being expressed by the participant" (Kvale, p. 32). Two people talk together about a shared idea or

theme (Kvale, 1996), while keeping in mind the plan or objective of the interview conversation. The format of the unstructured interview facilitates the kind of open and flexible communication required for gathering the women's personal, reflective stories.

During the initial stages of the research, one focus group of 5 participants was used to test the unstructured interview guide. Revisions were made to the interview guide used for the individual interviews.

Six immigrant women (none of the original focus group) took part in individual semi-structured interviews. The women were chosen by community members based on their perceived success in integrating with the community, their role as community leaders, and their emotional and social well-being. They were asked to share the experiences since immigrating to Canada, for example; what were the first organizations they made contact with?, who were the first individuals that made settlement easier?, what qualities did they feel were important to their success?, and how do they define success?

Five of the six women who completed individual interviews took part in a follow-up focus group. This focus groups also served as data for the final analysis as potential issues emerge from group interactions that are unique, possibly even contradictory to, data from individual interviews. The focus groups served as a means to explore possible inconsistencies in the data, allow participants to verify their comments and respond to preliminary analysis.

### *Participant Observation*

Bernard (1995) writes that

Participant observation involves establishing rapport in a new community; learning to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up; and removing yourself every day from cultural immersion so you can intellectualize what you have learned, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly. (p. 136)

This "intimacy" with the group is advantageous to the researcher and society in that "[it] could supply empirical findings about little known or stereotyped populations, particularly those outside the mainstream" (Gans, 1999, p. 540). Furthermore, participant observation is also scientific due to that fact that the researcher gets close enough to the people to observe what they do, while other empirical methods are limited to what people say that they do (Agar, 2001; Gans, 1999).



Recognizing the importance of understanding the community of immigrant women, the programs available and the policies that impact settlement experiences, the researcher spent two years on site at a local settlement agency. Insight into the experiences of immigrant women was gained through on-going presence at and participation in programs at Changing Together...A Centre for Immigrant Women. I was welcomed by the director at Changing Together and introduced to the many clients and staff and have been given the opportunity to briefly explain that I will be interviewing women to hear and document their stories.

Through regular participation in Centre programs, staff meetings, lunches, and conferences I have been able to reduce reactivity to my presence and formulate relevant and sensible research questions with regard to the community's needs. Over the two years, we have heard not only the stories of the women formally documented through this project, but many women who have used the services of the Centre. The willingness of the participants to share their stories and the accuracy of the findings is directly related to the investment in time and energy to become an active and present participant in the community. On-going participation on-site throughout the interview and analysis phases of the research enables us to speak with confidence about the research and outcomes.

### *Ethics*

An ethics application was completed and approved for the proposed research. In the application the ethics requirements of the University of Alberta were met. The participants were provided information regarding the purpose of the research and the fact that this research would be used for publication purposes. Participants were told that their participation in the research was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were also informed that, while the information would be kept confidential (accessed only by the researcher) and anonymous, individuals within the immigrant community and Changing Together may be aware of their participation in the research. Aside from the institutional requirements of ethical research, a lot of thought was given to the personal ethics of this research. Beyond meeting the requirements of the degree, we kept in mind that 1) the community of immigrant women should benefit from this research and 2) that, as welcomed participants in the community, we have a personal responsibility to ensure that no harm comes to the community or any of the individuals within the community.

### *Analysis*

The interviews (focus group and individual) were transcribed for analysis purposes. The audio recordings were also listened to repeatedly in order to attend to nuances of language that may reflect hesitation, enthusiasm, and avoid isolating words from emotion.

Creswell (1998) writes that the analysis process conforms to a general contour, a spiral process of analytical circles. At an early stage in the research process, the data were organized into files according to units (key words, phrases, paragraphs) for analysis. The ongoing spiral of analysis requires repeated readings of transcripts, writing memos in the margins of transcripts and rethinking the units of analysis and the content of those units.

The following general data analysis strategies suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994, cited in Creswell, 1998) were employed.

- ☐ Write margin notes in transcripts and field notes
- ☐ Write reflective passages in notes
- ☐ Draft a summary sheet based on transcripts
- ☐ Make metaphors
- ☐ Make comparisons and contrasts: Once, identified, the researcher returns to the data to find supporting and/or contradictory evidence, as well as multiple perspectives within each category.
- ☐ Make codes, memos
- ☐ Note patterns and themes
- ☐ Count frequency codes
- ☐ Note relations among variables, build logical chain of evidence: Having categorized and provided support for categories (or themes), interpretation of findings begins

Following the initial analysis of the individual interviews, a follow-up focus group of willing and available participants was held. Five of the six women were available to take part in this focus group. At this focus group, the preliminary findings were presented to the participants and they were asked to provide feedback on the analysis as well as any further comments.

Based on this feedback, changes were made to the preliminary analysis. The final results were then presented to a gathering of immigrant women. Their feedback indicated that the interpretation of the women's stories reflects their personal experiences in settlement in the local community.

## **Findings**

The women who participated in the project identified key aspects of their successful integration in Edmonton. These two key aspects, with their many dimensions, led to successful integration and the prosperity of the community. These two key aspects were opportunity and agency. When opportunities blend with agency, the women are able to continue a journey in life that is, at least in some respects, a continuation of their lives before immigration. As a result of this process, the women become leaders, mentors and role models in the community

and ultimately experience personal and professional success (Graphic Appendix 1).

Anthony Appiah (cited in Jones, 2000) wrote that “We make up (our)selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society. We do not determine the options among which we choose”. This tool kit of options from which the women chose, came from opportunities, formal and informal, that were provided through individuals they met and organizations they contacted. Regardless of form, these opportunities are critical to settlement and integration. Women’s organizations, settlement agencies, sites of formal education, political organizations and first jobs are examples of the formal opportunities the women accessed.

In Sonia’s case, she actively sought some organization to join in order to learn about Canadian culture. “I volunteered ... to learn the language and to learn the customs, Canadian culture.... For sure there were times when I smile so much because I don’t understand, but people did not know what I don’t know.” In S.S.’s case, a group of immigrants created a volunteer association based on an identified need. She says, “There was a group of three or four of us who were all community oriented.... I was helping out setting up the Edmonton Chinese Community Centre. And all of us would be volunteering. Mainly because we know our English is better so we were setting it up so we could help people in the Chinese community”.

Educational opportunities were also an important part of the settlement process. Whether it was access to English language training or post secondary education, women spoke of the importance of opportunities through formal education and spoke about the beginnings of new friendships and networks.

I said, either I go back home to Lebanon or I will go back to school. So he said, "How can you go to school and you have young kids. I said, when you come back from work, I can go to night classes. So I sacrificed to go to night classes. It was really good to sacrifice those two evenings in a week, because I made friends, new friends, the teachers, they were teaching us...and we became really...I had started my network, different than ethnic. The only common thing between us was the English language.” (Sonia)

So how I got into community was, ...the university community was, of course, always important to me. (S.S.)

The skills that women brought with them from their countries of origin were often not recognized in Canada. Many of the women took advantage of employment

opportunities despite the fact that they were over-qualified for the positions they were offered. The women spoke of taking the opportunity to learn about Canadian culture and establish contacts for future employment. Susan says, “When I got my first job, even though it was a clerical position, I knew that I could find other jobs. I thought I’m going to survive here”. The possibility of first employment came about in various forms.

Some were temporary placements funded by the Federal or Provincial Government; others were the result of employer and employee attitude. Some were the result of pure perseverance.

My English was really bad, my typing was lousy, and Gerry, the regional manager for municipal affairs hired me. And now I know that he hired dummy who did not know anything, he wants to see what will happen if he will hire positive person. (Sonia)

I went into teaching computers. There is an agency downtown, so I started to teach there, and next door, they needed a teacher part time. And then, the person here at the concession quit. They need someone to work the concession. I said, ok I have two part time jobs; I will go work the third one. .... it was a nightmare with childcare but I survived it. (Mary)

Canadian policy was also cited as a sort of formal opportunity. Mary and Tara talk about the possibilities of life in Canada due, in part, to the policies and systems that are in place to help women in society. Mary states that

I’m always very, very grateful, and it’s part of success, that I am in Canada, because I am able to do these things. I am always very conscious that if I was in Africa or even in Germany, in Germany there were a lot of barriers. I wouldn’t have been allowed to do all these things, and to shine and to rise to the top and to overcome struggles. So I do give credit to the society, to the laws, the support systems that work here that allow me to do that.

Similarly, Tara comments the policy system in Canada. Tara was an outspoken Kurdish woman in Iraq who fought to end violence against women. As she reflects on those experiences and as she continues to speak out and to challenge violence against women in Canada, she credits the policies of Canada as an asset to those efforts.

And the legal system and the policy system of Canada. We could develop that. I don’t think everything is absolutely perfect in

Canada, but the way you are and the society doing, you know, very well, ...So, why we don't get, we are part of the society, why we don't get benefit from it as a female, as a woman. This is what I am trying to do.

Finally, one woman acknowledged Canadian culture as an integral part of her professional success. "In my culture, back home, is more restricted for women. I can't just dress however I want to dress, at a certain socioeconomic status I would always have to behave the way the society was expecting me, I couldn't grow. And I found that here gave me a chance to grow." Informal opportunities came through individuals the women met. In every case, there was at least one person, often many people, who provided opportunities or support in ways that were instrumental to subsequent employment, skill development, and confidence. A few women said that "someone saw something in me". Two women spoke about the impact of one particular woman on their success.

She always saw that I could. She was so surprised that I wouldn't see that. She has pushed me, gently pushed me. And I have discovered things in myself that I never thought possible. And it would have been so easy for me not to see it. (Mary)

(She said) if you are in this place, (it is) because it was in order that you can overcome the situation. That's what kind of feeling she gave me. She never told me in a direct way. ...you are in the right place and you can do your bit". (Tara)

Interestingly, the woman referred to in the quotes above had a single individual that stands out in her memory. While volunteering in her son's classroom, the teacher became the first person to acknowledge and encourage Sonia, her skills and ability. Sonia recalls that

She did not say it, but now, when I remember her, I always believe she's trying to put that kind of belief that I have talent that I can contribute. Whenever she has parents she introduced me to them and mentioned that I was a French teacher. And, oh, if you see the ... she was teaching or whatever, she will ask me about curriculum. I know she didn't care about my input, but she let me feel I'm important.

Susan's comment sums up the impact of these individuals' actions. "I came here as no one and people really cared, for them to take that time to tell me, to phone me." In some cases these individuals became mentors. They were instrumental in each other's continued aspirations and accomplishments. This may be one of

the most valuable lessons anyone can take from these experiences. The women who became mentors during the women's first experiences in Canada not only added to the life of the immigrant women, the immigrant woman added to the life of the mentor. Susan speaks about the quality of friendships shared during the early years of settlement and emphasizes that these friendships exist to this day. Susan wanted to learn about Canadian experience and her Canadian friend wanted to learn about the immigrant experience. Tara's statement sums up the spirit of mentorship. "... it was her desire and my desire to be part of this friendship.... So her friendship helped me a lot to meet new people, to have courage to look for a job". In the best situations, these friendships become more than mere social and emotional support. These friendships become the networks of success. Sonia remarks that, "I think what we are missing for women sometimes, we are limiting our network. Network is really important, meeting with people who can make a difference in our lives is really important".

Finally, family played an important role in successful integration. For some, it is the role of the family and support found in family in Canada.

If I did not have a supportive husband and kids, I don't think I can do it. It's not like I'm superwoman, but I have support in the family too. My husband never said no to drive me back and forth to university. (Sonia)

For others, it is recognition of the personal characteristics, beliefs and values that were instilled through their family of origin.

And my father, he belonged to one of the political parties. So I think, politically, I got that from my dad because he used to talk about the government and what was happening in the political system. At a very young age, I got that from my Dad. (Susan)

These values and beliefs, established in families of origin, are the characteristics of agency, the other critical aspect of successful integration and settlement. Marion Iris Jones (2000) writes that "To be an agent means that you can take the constraints and possibilities that condition your life and make something of them in your own way". The women taking part in this project show agency in their ability to adapt, their motivation, their belief in a journey and their personal attitudes of perseverance and positive thinking.

*On Adaptation*

- I learn to be flexible (Susan)
- Something that occurs to me, women, we are willing to do that because we always know we have to compete with the men. ... from the beginning, I was willing to do any job (S.S.)
- I am teaching, but teaching in a different setting. (Ravi)
- I just know that I had to do what I needed to survive. (Ravi)

*On Motivation*

- Is there more work for me to do? ... I was learning. (Susan)
- It was about empowering me in different ways. To have courage to talk to new people, to meet new people, to have faith to talk to other people. (Tara)
- I know if I don't do it, it's not going to get done and there will be people who suffer.... When you are in that position to help, help somebody else. (Ravi)
- I went here I did not know anybody, guess what I had to do. Because I don't want to stay in my room the whole time I just started talking. (S.S.)
- I have to give back because I have received so much and by giving I receive even more. (Susan)
- What we do today, it would be part of the future, the most important part towards the future. (Tara)

*On Belief in the Journey*

- You will be born and have your journey...I think that was my mission, always to help people. When you are walking, it always, it continuation, I never stopped. (Sonia)
- I've finally found my path in life and, not that there won't be amendments along the way. (Mary)

*On Personal Characteristics*

- Yeah, we were the famous group who talked out for violence on women. (Tara)
- I never accepted no for an answer. (Sonia)
- I believe in women helping women. (Sonia)
- I think being young, naïve, and taking risks is very important. (Sonia).
- I remember that period as everything being very positive, very challenging but very positive. (S.S.)
- I think part of me, a blessing, is that I didn't see racism exist, so whatever I want, I go for it. (S.S.)
- And that's what I like to do, I like to dream.
- (S.S.)

- I think it's because I wanted to be a teacher there and you have goodness of other people at heart.
- (Ravi)
- All my friends have been very strong, opinionated women. Probably because I have some of that in me. (Mary)
- I was always a leader. (Mary)

Through the blending of opportunity and agency, the women became leaders in the communities, mentors to newcomers, builders of bridges and innovators. Some speak of finding the self they were ten years ago. While they may have lost sight of personal goals or a clear sense of their skills for a short period of time, each woman is now acutely aware of the assets they bring, not only to the community, but also to Canadian society. If they were active in volunteer work, they are volunteering in Canada; the skills they developed in their youth, they are using in their professional and community work today. S.S., through her professional and volunteer work, opens lines of communication among community members through the innovative development and provision of user-friendly web based information sites particularly for women. Susan has become a leader, employed in the area of human rights and often volunteers her time and expertise. Mary, Tara and Ravi are all service providers in the immigrant community helping families with issues of immigration, family violence, health, and settlement. Sonia is a leader in the community and has worked endlessly on the bridging of immigrant and non-immigrant communities and increasing the profile of immigrant women in the community, her motto being 'women working for women'. As participants at many levels, each woman experiences success in Canada.

The ways these women define success and the contributions they make now to the community are only a sample of the potential return on investment. Given opportunities through agencies, organizations, employers and educators, immigrant women flourish. When asked about the meaning of success, the women shared these reflections.

- It's how you cope and deal with what you are presented in life. (Mary)
- To live and adapt to your life as it has been...to adapt to our situation in a health way. (Tara)
- It's having some sort of goals, but also the ability to change those goals. (Ravi)
- When I know where I was going...I've finally found my true purpose and I am able to make it a reality. (Mary)
- What mark you leave in this world...there is a larger population out there and hopefully everything I do contributes to the greater good, not just my own. (Mary)



- Being able to help other people see what they can do, realize their potential. (Ravi)

Because of the opportunity to continue the journey and the recognition of their skills, the women began to feel a part of Canadian society. Tara and Sonia feel fortunate to have two homes, two nations. Tara says, "Maybe you have one home, but for me, I have two, I love both of them" and Sonia says, "I consider myself real Canadian. I consider myself real Lebanese. I am very close Canadian and very close Lebanese". A few women remark that their children have known no home other than Canada. For them, that is reason enough to adopt Canada as home. "I feel that this is my home because it is my children's home." (Ravi).

### **Policy Implications**

These stories demonstrate what has contributed to women's success in terms of their ability to settle in Canada and become vibrant and contributing members of many communities. In some cases, policies were in place that assisted them in the settlement process. However, there are many instances where there were gaps between needs and available services. These gaps were met through personal contacts and community organizations.

Five of the six women came to Canada more than 20 years ago. Of those five, two found employment through short term contracts with the federal or provincial government. These jobs served to open the door for future employment opportunities. One of those five was able to get work in her field of education, having completed a degree in the United States prior to her move here. One woman entered post secondary education based on her French language skills and the other woman worked at minimum wage at a daycare. The sixth participant only immigrated to Canada in 2000. Through her contact with local settlement agencies, she has found employment in social service work. None of the women found gainful employment as a result of policies that are in place to help immigrant women in their settlement in Canada. Each found employment or educational opportunities despite the lack of policies or programs to assist in employment strategies or placements.

The women also spoke often of the importance of English skills. Many took on jobs or volunteer work as a way to increase their understanding and fluency in English. Although there were basic literacy courses available, the women felt they were insufficient in terms of the standard of English required for employment. Until their language skills improve, they are at the whim of potential employers who are willing to "give them a chance" or "see what a positive attitude can do".

In order to maximize the potential of the women who immigrate to Canada, we cannot depend on luck and goodwill to ensure the presence of opportunities in language and skill development. In each case, the women's success depended, in part, on the ability not only to learn the English language, but to speak it fluently. Basic English is inadequate to meet the demand of workplace communication. Furthermore, as the education level of immigrant women continues to increase, English language development becomes even more critical to their employability in professional positions. Otherwise, why continue to expect, through immigration policy, more educated professional credentials?

One of the six women who took part had her educational credentials recognized. She was an exception because her university education was completed in the United States. None of the women's work or education experience were recognized in Canada. Journalists and educators alike took work well below their qualification levels in order to fill the gaps. In taking these jobs, women found a way to learn the culture, the language, create networks, and build a future. These women have remarkable perseverance and determination when there is very little formal support for their efforts. Fortunately, these women have personal and familial support that inspired them, had faith in them, and encouraged them to believe in a future in Canada.

Future research must focus on the gaps identified in this and previous research and the needs of women immigrating more recently to Canada. Are current policies meeting their needs or are current policies still leaving gaps between needs and services that would ensure their personal and professional success in Canada? The following gaps in formal programs, secured and made stable through policy and program initiatives, have been identified; English language skill development, support for raising young families in a new culture, recognition of education and skills, and opportunities for creating networks. Although settlement agencies have attempted to meet these needs, and have done so with some success, the agencies continue to be restricted by inadequate funding and a heavy reliance on volunteer staff. A critical analysis of the funding and attention given to such agencies and programs only raises questions of the intent and purpose of the agencies in the eyes of the state. Are these agencies and programs meant to facilitate greater participation and success in Canada, or are these agencies meant to suffice and appease particular audiences? In order to realize the full potential of individuals and agencies, policy makers (that drive the policy that determines programs and funding) must be committed to relevant programs and stable sources of funding.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this project was to document and present the success stories of women who have immigrated to Canada. In doing so, those who participated

expressed appreciation for the opportunity to take part in a process that allowed them to reflect in a positive way on their life experiences and, in doing to, to provide inspiration to others. Their stories stand as concrete evidence of the resilience and commitment of women, and their passion and dedication to the future of their families, communities and country. In sharing their challenges, these women have identified shortcomings in policy and programs that require further examination in future research.

### **Dissemination Activities**

#### *Presentations to date*

March, 2003

"Coming to Canada: Success Stories of Immigrant Women". Changing Together...A Centre for Immigrant Women Annual Conference. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Sept. 2002

"Experiences and Outcomes of Collaborative Research". A conference hosted by The Canadian Multicultural Education Foundation. Canada: Global Model for Multicultural State

.

Sept. 2002

"Coming to Canada: Success Stories of Immigrant Women". Educational Policy Studies Graduate Student Conference.

April 2002

"Success Stories of Immigrant Women". The Eighth Annual International Qualitative Health Research Conference.

### **Publications/Video Production**

Fletcher, F. (2003). Coming to Canada: Success Stories of Immigrant Women. A video and DVD project supported by Changing Together...a Centre for Immigrant Women and Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association.

Fletcher, F., Gibson, N. (2003) Coming to Canada: Success Stories of Immigrant Women. Presentation made at the Changing Together Conference on Immigration and Integration.

We believe that there will be ongoing demand for presentations on the Success Stories Project based on the fact that we have received requests to facilitate workshops on women's integration strategies based on the video and presentations. All possible avenues will be explored for future use of the stories and video production.

Following the presentation of findings to conferences, there were multiple requests from ethnic communities and groups in the Edmonton area to be included in this project. We explained that, this project having been completed, that would depend on future research. Based on the desire of the many community members to have their stories recorded and presented in ways that highlight success and contribution to community, there is potential for further research in this area.

### **National and International Linkages**

At this point there are no national or international linkages with the project. The possibility of similar work at a national or international level may be explored as dissemination of findings and policy implications continues.

### **Graduate Student Participation**

Fay Fletcher is a doctoral student in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Although the project was intended to be used for her doctoral dissertation, a subsequent project on program and policy implications on informal educational opportunities is serving as the research for her doctoral degree. The Success Stories project was completed prior to the beginning of her current doctoral research at Changing Together.

### **Abstract for PCERII website**

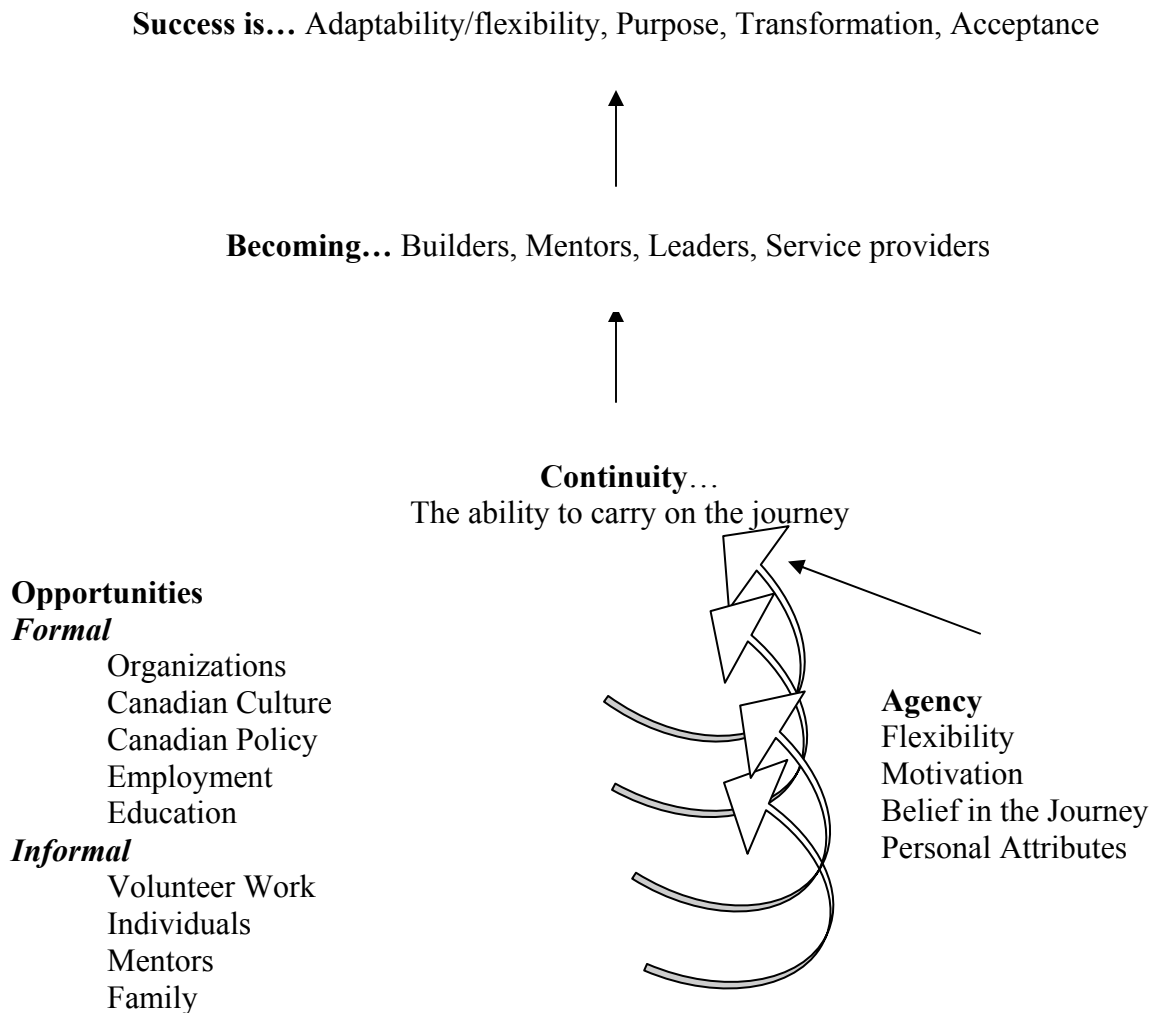
Statistics show that immigrant women represent a growing proportion of the women in Canadian society. A review of past and current immigration policy shows that immigration policies and settlement programs do not provide adequate support to the immigrant women in our communities; nor does current policy reflect the valuable roles they play in Canadian society. Six immigrant women (Lebanese, Chinese from the Philippines, African, Kurdish from Iraq, and Indian) were interviewed. Two women came as young singles, two married with young children, and two recently married.

The objectives were to document their settlement experiences in Canada and explore the factors that led to their successful settlement in Canada. Information was collected through individual interviews. A follow-up focus group served to verify the information and findings of the research. The women who participated in the project identified key aspects of their successful integration. Opportunity and personal agency, with their many dimensions, leads to successful integration and the prosperity of the community.

Through these stories, one sees the important role of settlement agencies, government programs, and non-profit associations, mentors and friends, as well as individual qualities of perseverance and positive attitudes. These stories

document their successful integration as well the need for improvements to current policy and programs.

## Appendix 1



Graphic Summary of Opportunities and Agency, Continuity, Becoming and Success

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