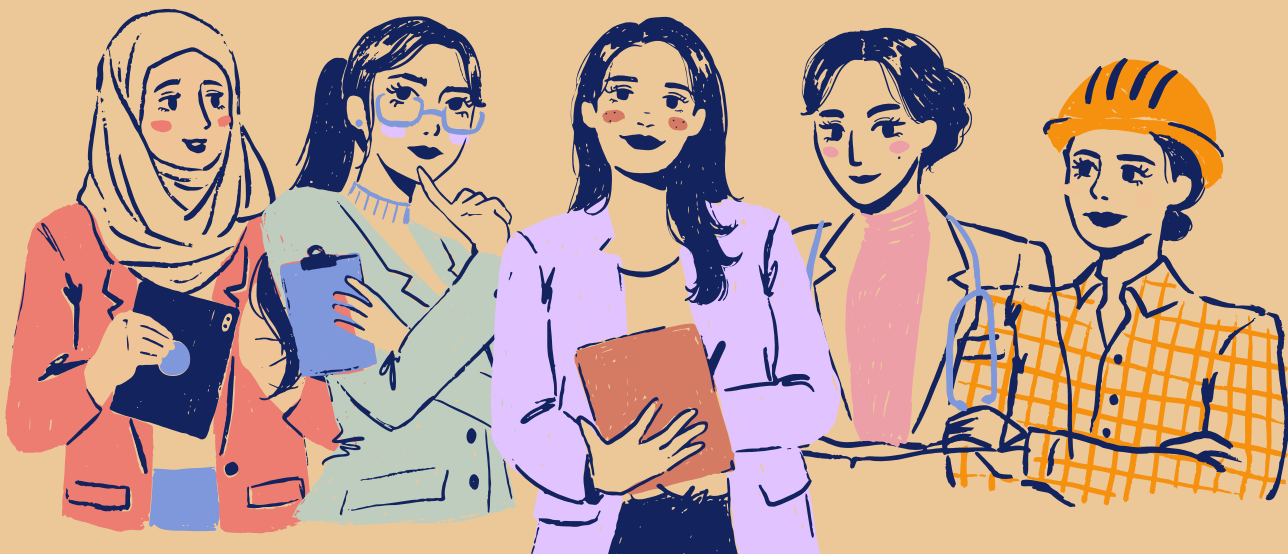




BREAKING BARRIERS: IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S VOICES IN THE CANADIAN WORKPLACE

**Immigrant Women's Advisory Committee
Project Report in Partnership with
Pacific Immigrant Resources Society**

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50-30 Challenge
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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



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INTRODUCTION



Behind every statistic about workplace inequality, there is a personal story. In this report, you will meet Liz, Maria, and Rose (pseudonyms) - three remarkable women whose experiences illuminate the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee women in Canadian workplaces. Their stories are not just testimonies of struggle; they are powerful calls to action that remind us why initiatives like the [50-30 Challenge](#) are crucial for creating genuine change in our workplaces.

As you read their stories, we invite you to consider: How many other voices remain unheard? How many other talented women are facing similar barriers? And most importantly, what role can each of us play in creating more inclusive workplaces?

This report documents employment barriers and challenges faced by immigrant and refugee women in Canada, based on case studies collected by the Immigrant Women's Advisory Committee (IWAC) at Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS). The findings highlight systemic barriers that prevent newcomer women from achieving gender parity and equitable representation in Canadian workplaces.

A NOTE ON PRIVACY

The stories shared in this report represent real experiences of immigrant and refugee women in Canada. Names and certain identifying details have been changed to protect privacy while maintaining the integrity and authenticity of their experiences. Each woman has generously shared her story to help create positive change for others.

WHEN SAFETY TAKES A BACKSEAT - LIZ'S JOURNEY

When Liz decided to immigrate to Canada, little did she anticipate having an injury at work that would cause her life-changing health problems. Originally from Ecuador, Liz and her family arrived in Vancouver in 2019 as permanent residents hoping this opportunity would benefit their whole family.

Having worked in administration, and credits and collections in her home country, Liz was able to continue working online with the company from Canada until June 2021. Then, she had a career transition – thanks to the support of community organizations like South Vancouver Neighborhood House, Liz was able to find work in August 2021. Though not in her original field, she managed to build a new career path in the after-school care program sector.

She was enjoying her job and had an incredible supervisor as well as a nice workmate but, sadly, things changed. The organization asked employees to start lifting tasks that were not included in the original job description. As Liz had never heard about the Employment Standards Act or Occupational Health and Safety or WorkSafe BC, she did not know that she had the right to refuse the additional tasks, not included in her job description.

Since July 2022, in fear of being laid off, she continued doing the lifting tasks that included lifting heavy wooden chairs above the table. This coincided with her recovery from an injury in her right wrist. As a result, she had severe pain in her back and right knee. Her family doctor sent her to start therapy and advised her to ask her employer to inform WorkSafe BC about this work injury.





LIZ'S JOURNEY - CONT.

After asking the employer to inform WorkSafe BC and continuing the therapy, she started recovering from her back and knee pain. She was able to take time off from work (medical leave) for some time. Meanwhile, with the new school year starting, she requested her family doctor if she could be granted a bit more time off work and wait until full recovery before going back to work. The doctor, however, asked her to go back to work and rather request workplace accommodation on the grounds of her limited ability to walk.

Despite Liz informing the new supervisor about her health problem and asking for the advised change in her job duties, the request was denied. The supervisor did not accept or approve any change and told her that if she missed work or needed time off work, the organization would deduct the hours from her payroll. Feeling perplexed and not knowing what to do, Liz asked for assistance from her family doctor, but this time he told her that he was sorry – he wouldn't be able to help.

In short, at the end of October 2022, as Liz could not receive job duty accommodation and had to walk a long distance doing her work, her right knee and back started hurting a lot and she was in terrible pain. She went to the hospital for pain relief and was told by the specialist doctor that she didn't require any surgery for her back, but her knee pain got worse. She and her husband were so worried that they preferred to pay for a private MRI for the knee rather than wait four to six months for the publicly funded MRI, but doctors could not find anything wrong. Additionally, Liz received a phone call from her WorkSafeBC case manager telling her that she would be covered for her back pain only but not for her knee pain.

The family doctor sent her to a musculoskeletal specialist, and then to the pain management specialist and to a different physiotherapist but none of them could help her. Starting from January to September 2023, Liz almost lost her complete mobility, shredded 20 pounds and experienced worsening pain in her right knee. It was really a nightmare for her and her family.

LIZ'S JOURNEY - CONT.

In October 2023, after receiving a visit and advice from a real angel friend who was a doctor experienced in chronic pain, Liz asked her family doctor to increase the neuropathic medicine dose; it started helping a little. Then in November, after receiving a visit from her sister-in-law, also a doctor in the United States, who reviewed the situation, Liz realized that the exercises prescribed by the new physiotherapists were incorrect. She recommended a new neuropathic pain medication urgently and it started to help. After this, Liz and her husband decided to return to her home country and this new treatment started working.

The recovery journey started in 2024 in her home country and Liz started feeling better. Now she does not want any other newcomers to experience what she has been through. Luckily, in May, she joined the Immigrant Women's Advisory Committee (IWAC) at Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS) and got in touch with fellow immigrant women passionate about system change to better support racialized women in Canada. In this group, Liz felt heard, really appreciated and valued again. Liz shared with the group her difficult work experience and the challenges she faced as a newcomer. Her goal is to share information about basic Employment Rights with as many newcomers as possible and create a system to better support them. This is the new project of her life.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM LIZ'S STORY:

- ▶ **Lack of awareness about workplace rights and inadequate workplace accommodation for injuries led to preventable injuries**
- ▶ **Healthcare system navigation challenges compounded the issue**
- ▶ **Community support through IWAC provided a path to advocacy**

FINDING YOUR PLACE - MARIA'S PATH TO SUCCESS

When Maria first arrived in Canada, she was filled with excitement but also a bit of anxiety. She had left behind her home, her friends, and everything familiar, to start a new life. But as the days went by, she realized that finding a job in a new country was harder than she expected.

Maria spent hours each day searching online, but the job postings seemed confusing, and she wasn't sure where to begin. She felt a bit lost and worried about how she would support herself and her family.

One day, while visiting a local community center, Maria stumbled upon a flyer for a free resume workshop. She decided to attend, even though she wasn't sure what to expect. That decision changed everything.

At the workshop, Maria met other newcomers who were in the same boat. The instructor helped her understand how to tailor her resume for the Canadian job market and gave her tips on what employers were looking for. Maria also learned about local job boards that focused on positions suited for newcomers like her.

Encouraged by the support she received, Maria started applying to jobs with her newly polished resume. A couple of weeks later, she got a call for an interview at a local retail store. She was nervous, but she remembered the advice from the workshop and walked in with confidence.

Maria nailed the interview and was offered the job on the spot. It wasn't her dream job, but it was a start, and she was proud of herself for taking that first step. The experience boosted her confidence, and she knew that this was just the beginning of her journey.





MARIA'S JOURNEY - CONT.

Today, Maria is thriving. She's moved on to a better job that aligns more with her skills, and she continues to take advantage of the resources available to her. It was not an easy journey and she feels grateful for all the support she received. When asked about her experience, Maria always says that the key was not being afraid to ask for help and staying determined, even when things seemed tough. Now she wants to give back by supporting other newcomer women to navigate their employment journey in Canada.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM MARIA'S STORY:

- ▶ **Community resources played a crucial role in career development**
- ▶ **Persistence and adaptability led to progressive success**
- ▶ **Support networks made the difference in job search success**

BREAKING THROUGH BARRIERS - ROSE'S STORY OF RESILIENCE

Rose arrived in Canada with mixed feelings of excitement and fear. She faced initial struggles with language barriers, finding housing, and adapting to a new culture. She escaped her conflict-ridden country with lots of hopes and dreams for a better future. She left everything behind and missed her family, friends, and cultural traditions.

You can imagine how she started her journey in Canada; it was not that positive at first. She settled in a small city without any friends or family to help her. The bustling Canadian city was filled with a mix of cultures. She felt alone in this new country and faced culture shock. Oh, you can imagine her feelings. She was lost in herself. She did not have any valuable reason for being alive. Flashbacks to her life before fleeing and family ties left behind showed her the path forward and kept her motivated despite the challenges.

She got help from a nonprofit organization to find a shared accommodation. Then she applied for a refugee claim and it took a long time to find a lawyer to help her submit the application. Getting a work permit was another battle and she faced bureaucratic red tape to obtain it. During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, getting a work permit was even more difficult. She navigated life without a steady income, relying on community resources and making sacrifices. The hard part for her was receiving monetary support from others while developing friendships with other refugees and locals who supported her. She started to volunteer at school, and this gave her hope for a better future.





ROSE'S JOURNEY - CONT.

After two long years of waiting, Rose finally received her refugee status in Canada, along with a work permit. Then she got a job at a local daycare center. She was happy and excited. Now she had an ID card and permission to live and work in Canada, but she still had no idea about the upcoming challenges at her workplace.

Rose encountered prejudice from some parents and colleagues who viewed her with suspicion. She faced challenges in gaining the trust of both the children and their parents, especially in a predominantly white environment. One of her colleagues, a seasoned worker, harbored biases and often questioned Rose's methods, believing that Canadian approaches were superior. She challenged Rose in front of the parents, which undermined her confidence. This added tension as Rose must find ways to assert herself and demonstrate her capabilities. Also, a parent of one of the children expressed concern about Rose's background and her ability to care for his child. This created a ripple effect among other parents, leading to moments where Rose felt isolated. His initial distrust was a catalyst for her to confront prejudices in her workplace and community.

Luckily she was able to develop a relationship with a colleague who was kind and supportive. A fellow daycare worker originally from Syria, she recognized Rose's struggles. They bonded over shared experiences and cultural backgrounds. She became Rose's mentor, teaching her not just the ropes of the job, but also how to navigate social dynamics in the workplace. She encouraged Rose to share her story with the children, helping to build confidence in her identity. Rose gradually won over the children with her warmth and creativity. A pivotal moment occurred when she led a cultural day, sharing her heritage and fostering understanding about her traditions and culture among the kids and their families.

ROSE'S JOURNEY - CONT.

The head of the daycare center was initially skeptical of Rose's abilities. However, as he observed her interactions with the children, he began to appreciate her unique approach and dedication. He became an ally, advocating for Rose during staff meetings and encouraging her professional development. Since then she started feeling better but was still hurt.

Rose learned the lesson that a big community of support is needed to get help with struggles. Rose joined lots of workshops to develop and inform herself. She got connected to WorkBC, a center that helps with training, finding a job, and guiding through the job search process. She also connected with non-profit organizations, including Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre (VIRCS) and Victoria Native Friendship Centre. She got the WorkSafe certificate to learn about human rights and labor rights in Canada.

She also joined the Immigrant Women's Advisory Committee (IWAC) at Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS) to meet women from diverse backgrounds and share lived experiences in Canada. She really loved this group; they had Zoom meetings and project teams where she met Liz and Maria. She opened up about her challenging work experience and the obstacles encountered as a newcomer. She felt heard and supported by her project team members and created strong bonding with fellow participants. She is very happy to be a part of the mission to create awareness about workplace health and safety rights among newcomers.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM ROSE'S STORY:

- ▶ **Work permit delays created significant hardship**
- ▶ **Workplace discrimination affected mental health and career growth**
- ▶ **Mentorship and community connection provided crucial support**

COMMON THREADS

While Liz, Maria, and Rose's experiences are unique, their stories reveal recurring challenges that many immigrant women face in Canadian workplaces. Through careful analysis of these and other cases, several key systemic barriers have emerged:

▶ **Knowledge Gaps**

- Limited awareness of workplace rights and safety regulations
- Unfamiliarity with Canadian employment standards
- Difficulty navigating government systems and processes

▶ **Structural Barriers**

- Bureaucratic delays in work permit processing
- Limited access to timely healthcare
- Inadequate workplace accommodation practices
- Housing insecurity affecting employment stability

▶ **Cultural and Social Challenges**

- Workplace discrimination and prejudice
- Language barriers
- Cultural isolation
- Professional credentials recognition issues
- Fear of job loss affecting ability to advocate for rights

▶ **Support System Gaps**

- Limited access to mentorship
- Need for culturally competent healthcare providers
- Inadequate orientation to Canadian workplace culture
- Limited professional networks

RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating meaningful change requires coordinated action from employers, policymakers, and community organizations. Based on the experiences shared in this report, we propose the following recommendations to address systemic barriers:

▶ **Workplace Rights Education**

- Develop multilingual resources about employment rights
- Create mandatory orientation programs for newcomer employees
- Establish workplace safety training specific to newcomers

▶ **Healthcare Access**

- Improve coordination between workplace injury support and healthcare
- Increase availability of culturally responsive healthcare
- Reduce wait times for essential diagnostic services

▶ **Workplace Accommodation**

- Strengthen enforcement of workplace accommodation requirements
- Develop clear guidelines for employers about accommodation processes
- Create support systems for employees requesting accommodations

▶ **Community Support**

- Expand mentorship programs
- Strengthen connections between employment services and community organizations

▶ **Systemic Change**

- Streamline work permit processing
- Implement anti-discrimination (bullying and harassment) training in workplaces
- Create accountability measures for workplace inclusion

CONCLUSION

The insights identified in this report directly relate to the 50-30 Challenge's objectives by highlighting:

- ▶ Barriers preventing women from achieving desired employment goals
- ▶ Intersectional challenges faced by racialized immigrant women
- ▶ Systemic issues affecting career advancement
- ▶ Need for workplace culture change
- ▶ Importance of representation in decision-making roles

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

The stories of Liz, Maria, and Rose represent just three voices among thousands, but they point to clear paths for action. By addressing the barriers identified in this report and implementing the recommended changes, we can move closer to achieving the goals of the 50-30 Challenge while creating more inclusive and equitable workplaces for all.



NOTE OF GRATITUDE

This report represents a collaborative effort made possible through the generous support of the Women's Economic Council (WEC) and funding from the Government of Canada's 50-30 Challenge initiative. Their commitment to advancing workplace equity has been instrumental in bringing these important stories to light.

Our deepest gratitude goes to the courageous women who shared their personal journeys with us. Their willingness to be vulnerable and open about their experiences will help pave the way for positive change in Canadian workplaces.

Special thanks to the Immigrant Women's Advisory Committee members whose dedication and perspective helped shape this report. Their commitment to amplifying immigrant women's voices continues to inspire our work toward more inclusive workplaces for all.

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