



# BREAKING BARRIERS & EMPOWERING CHANGE:

Unveiling the Triumphs, Challenges, and Identity Struggles of Skilled Immigrant Women in Pursuit of Employment – A Pre-arrival Program Perspective.



 CANADA INFONET

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



## THE RESEARCHER:

Julie Singleton has been a front-line employment service provider since 2002, having worked for a range of non-profit agencies in the Greater Toronto Area. Her experience includes working with programs targeting women, youth, social assistance recipients, and newcomers to Canada. She has served as a Job Developer, an Employment Counsellor, and a Program/Workshop Facilitator, with a particular focus on bridge-training programs for newcomer professionals. She has a Master of Arts in Women's Studies from an Interuniversity Program at Dalhousie, Saint Mary's and Mount St. Vincent Universities in Halifax, N.S. For five years, she pursued a Ph.D. in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies at York University, but was drawn back to non-profit employment services by her love of working with people. Her current focus is on providing employment skills training for youth with multiple barriers to employment.

This report represents the culmination of the dedicated work and contributions of numerous individuals. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who made this research possible.

First and foremost, we extend our sincerest appreciation to Julie Singleton, who was contracted to conduct this research and produced this report. Her expertise, tireless efforts, and commitment to the project were invaluable in bringing this study to fruition.

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# CONTEXT



Past research has established that immigrant women face higher barriers to employment success and therefore less desirable outcomes compared to both male immigrants and women in the Canadian-born population. This study utilized an online survey and three focus groups to explore the experiences of women-identifying immigrants to Canada. Participants had previously participated in Canada InfoNet, a pre-arrival employment services program offered by JVS Toronto. A particular goal of the research was to examine whether women's participation in pre-arrival employment services may have helped them to arrive in Canada already in possession of job search skills specific to the local labour market. Additionally, the study explored the persistent barriers to employment that women participants in the pre-arrival program still faced. The motivations and satisfaction of these newcomer career changers were further explored to bring more light to this particular group of women.



# JVS TORONTO



JVS Toronto is a non-profit organization that offers employment-related services in the Greater Toronto Area. It empowers people from diverse backgrounds and communities to achieve their employment potential and partners with employers to develop a strong and inclusive workforce.

With over 75 years of experience in newcomer services, JVS Toronto has become a leader in the field. The organization has a proven track record of training and successfully placing immigrants, while identifying and responding to their unique individual needs. It actively collaborates with employers, settlement organizations, educational institutions, and other key stakeholders to create meaningful partnerships.

Since the early 2000s, JVS Toronto has been delivering pre-arrival services, empowering individuals to integrate into Canadian life and contribute to the country's economy. One of their notable programs is Canada InfoNet, which has been successfully serving over 10,000 people since 2016.

Canada InfoNet specifically assists individuals approved to immigrate as permanent residents by improving their employment outcomes and ensuring they arrive in the country with an understanding of how to engage successfully with the Canadian labour market. The research participants in this report have all been Canada InfoNet participants.

Through their comprehensive services and programs like Canada InfoNet ([www.canadainfonet.org](http://www.canadainfonet.org)), JVS Toronto ([www.jvstoronto.org](http://www.jvstoronto.org)) continues to make a significant impact in helping newcomers succeed in the Canadian workforce.



# METHODOLOGY



In its aim to explore the experiences of past and current women-identifying participants in the Canada InfoNet program, this research focused on the type of barriers they faced to entering their careers in the Canadian labour market. As an area of particular focus, the project examined those who have made changes to their career paths and explored in greater depth the experiences of those career-changers. On a broader level, the project also looked at participants' experiences with settlement, social service and employment programs, as well as personal strategies that have helped them to forge careers for themselves in Canada.

The research was conducted in three phases, using both focus groups and survey data. Potential participants were contacted by counsellors from the Canada InfoNet program if they had arrived in Canada within approximately the past two years, and they had self-identified as women upon their registration with the program. An initial request for focus group participants was sent out; followed by two virtual focus groups, each with two participants, being held in the fall of 2022. Information from these focus groups was partially used to help guide the collection of survey data, with a larger online survey being the second major part of the project. A survey invitation was also sent from their employment counsellors to the same group of former Canada InfoNet clients, with the online survey remaining open for two weeks in February, 2023. In total, 310 survey responses were received and included in data analysis. The survey was made up of close-ended and semi-open-ended questions on demographics and job search experiences. The survey asked respondents to identify themselves if they wished to participate in a follow-up focus group. It is from this group that the final focus group participants were recruited, with the final virtual focus group taking place in March, 2023. The final focus group had six participants; in total, there were ten focus group participants across three separate virtual focus groups. As Canada InfoNet is a program with national scope, participants in the survey and the focus groups were drawn from locations across Canada, with a large majority – over 56% - being located in Ontario. The majority of participants were between the ages of 20-49, with 26% being single, and 67.35% married upon their arrival in Canada. The vast majority were racialized women.<sup>1</sup>

In this report, we draw upon a collection of client anecdotes and select studies to inform our findings and recommendations. It is essential to note that the studies referenced in this report may have been conducted over a decade ago. While more recent data is generally preferred, we believe these older studies remain relevant due to the enduring nature of the issues they address and the absence of more up-to-date research on the subject matter. We acknowledge the potential limitations of relying on older studies and prioritize transparency in presenting the available evidence alongside the anecdotal insights from our clients to provide a comprehensive view of the topic.

Secondly, we recognize the potential issue of self-selection bias associated with online surveys. Participants who have experienced better employment outcomes may have been more likely to participate, which could impact the overall findings. We have taken measures to account for these potential biases in our analysis and interpretation of the data, but it's important to keep these limitations in mind when considering the implications of our findings.

Furthermore, our online survey and interviews with immigrant women were conducted exclusively in English. Given the focus on previous program participants and the program's eligibility criteria of a CLB 5 or higher, it was assumed that interested participants would possess adequate English language skills (as well as digital literacy skills) to complete the online survey and participate in an interview.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendices A-E for more demographic information.



# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Several findings in this research echo that of previous research, while other findings suggest an optimistic shift in the employment outcomes of these pre-arrival participants, suggesting that pre-arrival services may significantly help to provide a boost to their employment outcomes in some areas. Interesting findings related to our participants who are in new careers also point to the need for greater research in this area. Here, we highlight several of the key findings which will be expanded upon in subsequent sections.






# BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Similar to previous studies such as TRIEC, 2022, many participants reported experiencing “lack of Canadian work experience” as the most significant barrier to finding work after arriving in Canada. In fact, **44.9% of survey respondents reported feeling that their “lack of Canadian experience” was a significant factor in delaying their ability to find work.** The ‘lack of Canadian experience’ was by far the most significant factor identified by participants, following by working in a regulated profession (20.4%). Additionally, some participants mentioned needing time to adjust to Canadian culture, as well as being concerned with caring for the mental health needs of themselves and/or their families (both 12.2%).

For the 38.2% of women in our survey who immigrated at the same time as their children, 36.2% of those reported that **the availability or affordability of childcare had an impact on their job search**, with 28.3% responding that they wanted to ensure their children were settled in school before they looked for work.

Yet, **focus group participants also pointed to their children’s well-being as a motivational factor in their drive to succeed in Canada**, with several pointing to their children’s education and future – and in the case of one participant, that of her future children (Maria<sup>2</sup>) – as their main motivation for deciding to immigrate to Canada in the first place. One participant, Toni, stressed the need to learn about her new city before she even arrived:



“I practically knew the whole of Regina before I landed in Regina. I was leaving everywhere behind, coming to an unknown place, and I have three kids, so I need to do that I needed to get up-to-date, whatever I was doing.”

– Toni, finance professional from Nigeria<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The names of all participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

<sup>3</sup> All emphasis in participants’ quotes are added by the author.





Lam, a participant in another focus group, laughed while referring to her attempts at balancing job search while taking an online micro-credential course to improve her chances in the labour market – all while raising three kids in a new country. Responsibilities related to motherhood, therefore, could be viewed as mixed in relation to women's job search in Canada, with children potentially providing a high degree of motivation towards success, while also presenting practical challenges, particularly for mothers navigating entirely new school and/or childcare systems.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** While some supports are available in the form of settlement and employment services, it is recommended that taking a gendered lens to immigrants' experiences could help to provide more targeted services to women in Canada. Recognizing that families with children have particular needs, and that in the vast majority of families, mothers are still the ones working to meet those needs<sup>4</sup>, could make mothers' immigration and therefore employment integration simpler by providing more support. One approach to more targeted support could be the development of programs that integrate all of these needs – settlement, employment, daycare – in one place. Of course, actually fulfilling the long-promised goal of \$10/day childcare spaces across the entire country would also help women to get into the labour market more quickly after arrival.



# PRE-ARRIVAL: STRONG EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES




Participants in the Canada InfoNet pre-arrival program displayed remarkable employment success and confidence in their job search skills. This was especially evident among those who secured fulfilling employment within the initial six months after arriving in Canada. Furthermore, those who continued to work in their previous occupations reported exceptionally high levels of success and contentment with their current employment path, indicating the program's beneficial impact. At the time of the survey, 82% were currently employed, with 40.4% of participants reporting that they were currently employed in the same industry and in a similar level to the role they worked in prior to immigrating. Given that our respondents had been in Canada for no more than three years, this is an impressive result.

When compared to a broader study of women immigrants to Canada<sup>5</sup> – who were not part of a pre-arrival employment program – it is likely that these remarkable numbers can be attributed at least in some part to our participants having benefitted from the program itself. Indeed, a full 51% of our participants began their job search before even arriving in Canada, and 71% stated they were job searching as soon as they arrived in Canada.

TRIEC's 2022 report surveyed women who had been in Canada for up to 10 and found a very similar 82.7% employment rate among their participants, yet also found landing their first job in Canada took much longer for more of their participants, with 48.2% of their respondents requiring more than six months to obtain their first job in Canada. Amongst our participants, we found success in the speed at which respondents found work, with **61.8% of participants reported having begun working in their first job in Canada** within the first three months after arriving in Canada. Of those, 20% began working within less than 1 month. The success and the

confidence of our respondents is all the more remarkable, given that in the case of our study, **virtually all respondents arrived in Canada either during or in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic**. One focus group participant detailed how she had arrived in Toronto only one day prior to Ontario's first Covid-related lockdown in March, 2020, stating:



"I was in back-to-back lockdowns since the day I landed... That was – emotionally, mentally – a very tough transition. Thankfully I'm at a much better place right now, but obviously, moving to another country, uprooting yourself and not getting a chance to assimilate, that was difficult. I [eventually] had to get the idea that this is what Canada is all about, because for one and a half years I had no idea."

– **Shantha, business professional from India**

While the numbers showed remarkable employment rates and signs of resilience, evident through the perseverance of early and continued Canadian job search activities, negative results of the pandemic also emerged. One focus group participant reported having experienced negative mental health effects that were not helped by the social isolation she continued to experience as a result of working a completely remote job.





**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Of course, none of us can alter the impact the pandemic has had on job seekers or the enduring impact it has had on the Canadian labour market. We can, however, recognize that newcomers who arrived here showed particular courage and resilience to succeed under the unique circumstances that were presented. We can also learn from its continued effects; in particular, being mindful in program and policy planning, that isolation does not garner the most positive human connections, nor does it foster the strongest mental health.

The positive employment outcomes found in this study, then, are particularly noteworthy, given that all participants had their immigration and early Canadian job search experiences acutely impacted by the pandemic. Thus, we see a strong indication that **pre-arrival services hold great promise in setting their participants up for greater success – even in the face of incredible adversity**. In addition to this important recognition, we must not require women to shoulder such burdens on their own.

As a lesson learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, we recommend **improving access to free mental health supports**. In addition to ensuring **public funding for culturally appropriate mental health services on a national scale**, improving access could be achieved by **offering these mental health supports integrated with employment and settlement services**. As well, employment service providers would be advised to monitor the mental health and well-being of their newcomer clients who obtained jobs that are entirely remote/work from home positions. While these positions do allow for increased work flexibility that is helpful and even crucial to allow some women to participate in the workforce, such roles can also prove to be isolating, negative experiences for others.

# CAREER CHANGE AND SENSE OF IDENTITY

The largest group of career changers, 29.5% of our respondents in this group, were those whose occupations are in regulated professions requiring long paths of re-training and licensure in Canada. The other significant group was those who came from unregulated professions and had spent longer than six months actively looking for work in their previous occupation. For the purposes of this study, survey participants were defined as career changers when they responded that their current job was either “fairly different,” or “completely different” from the last job they had prior to immigrating. 44.8% of these also reported their current work to be in a different industry/sector than their previous one. Of this group, 56.4% had been working in this new job or sector for at least six months to more than one year. In addition, four of the focus group participants were either considering or had already pursued career changes.

Career changers reported a range of satisfaction with their new professions that ranged from extremely satisfied with their new career path to extremely unsatisfied, with the latter group also showing a significant loss of self-esteem. To a great extent, these outcomes differed depending on whether the respondent was still struggling to make a decision on whether or not she would make a permanent career change, with those who were undecided reporting the lowest levels of happiness and satisfaction with their current state.

In both the settled/satisfied and undecided/less satisfied groups of career changers, respondents made clear that their sense of identity and sense of self was closely tied to their occupational identity. This was reflected in several experiences of the focus group participants, summed up here:

“Back home, you had an entire identity, you had an entire career and you left all that and here you start from scratch, and you’re very humbled because you’re like ‘I need to prove myself again.’”

– Maria







This finding reflects that of earlier studies, such as that of Novak and Chen whose review of relevant literature highlights the important role occupational identity plays in one's view of themselves and their perception of how others see them. They note the resulting loss of self often experienced by newcomers in regulated professions who are not able to work or be recognized as legitimate professionals in their previous occupation.<sup>6</sup> This loss of self should not be understated in its potential impact for those facing decisions around changing careers post-immigration.

We found, for instance, that **those who planned to change their careers after immigrating are more likely to consider this change to be a permanent one.**

Our survey responses finding a close match between the 42.1% of respondents who are in a new job and who 'definitely,' or 'probably' planned to change careers after arriving in Canada, and the 43.5% of those who consider this to be a "new career" rather than either a temporary or a 'survival' job. This suggests that participants who had been planning their career change pre-arrival more strongly identify with their newly chosen career, as opposed to those who feel a career change is forced upon them once they are unable to find work in their original or preferred career.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** This is an area requiring further study, particularly for its impact on those in regulated professions, and for racialized women immigrants. **As the group with the lowest employment success outcomes of all immigrant groups, racialized women immigrants<sup>7</sup> could particularly benefit from being presented with career change in an empowering manner where the focus would be on making their own informed choice.** As our findings only bolster those of other researchers that point to the link between changing careers and sense of identity for immigrants – changing one's career post-arrival would ideally be framed for newcomer women as part of a narrative of growth and self-discovery where the individual has all necessary information to then make the best choice for herself.

Similarly, newcomers whose professions are regulated in Canada should be assisted to fully understand their path to licensure in Canada, with employment professionals being trained to counsel clients from a place of understanding the strong link between career and sense of identity. Given the strong link found in this research, and by Novak and Chen (2013), perhaps pilot programs to assist newcomers to make fully informed decisions around changing their careers could enable stronger and swifter integration into the Canadian labour market. Immigrant women from racialized groups and those in regulated professions would most likely benefit from such an approach.

To rebuild their narratives from a place of empowerment requires understanding the intersection at which they find themselves as skilled immigrant women – most often from racialized groups – who now find themselves building on their past to construct their new selves. That **this is for many of them a reconstruction of sorts** became evident at the close of each focus group, when, after extensively discussing their career and immigration journeys, **the question put to each of them was “What are you most proud of?”** Their answers sometimes reflected back to their work ethic, or to being proud that they had been able to thrive in a new work culture. But **most often, they expressed pride in their own ability to persevere, to overcome challenges, to have the courage to overcome any fear of the unknown and embrace the change, the newness of a completely different culture. They showed a remarkable ability to participate in writing their own narratives.**





# CANADA INFONET PROGRAM: MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

“I remember this one recruiter, when I was one year in Canada, they called me up and they said ‘So you have one year of experience, and I said ‘No I have five years of experience and they said, ‘But you only have one year of experience in Canada, so you have one year of experience.’”

– **Shantha, business professional from India**

“You really want to have someone give you the opportunity because you know you can do the work.”


– **Maria, Project manager turned Business Administrator from Dominican Republic**





# THE “LACK OF CANADIAN EXPERIENCE” PARADOX

The paradox of Canadian employers requiring newcomers to have “Canadian work experience” prior to considering them as serious or employable, has been previously well-documented. Our participants were well-acquainted with what they often referred to as this “requirement” for Canadian experience, with focus group participants making frequent reference to it when asked about their early job search experiences in Canada, and **44.9% of survey respondents identifying “lack of Canadian experience” as the main barrier delaying or preventing them obtaining their first job in Canada.** One participant stated:



“Before I came to Canada, everybody was talking about the famous Canadian experience, and starting with lower level positions. I was ready to start with a lower level position, but I still applied to higher level positions as well.”

– Namita, International NGO professional<sup>8</sup>

We call this a paradox for two reasons. One, because of the position in which it places newcomers – how does one obtain “Canadian experience” when you are being told that the barrier to getting to a job in Canada is not having had a job in Canada? And two, because it contradicts the requirements for work experience in their field that immigrants must meet in order to be approved to immigrate to Canada



under the most common permanent resident requirements. Shantha's experience, cited above, of having a recruiter invalidate all of her non-Canadian work is simply one example of the absurdity and ignorance of such attitudes. She also stated:

"I had always worked in multinational firms so most of the people I'd worked with, it was always a global team, I was talking to people from Europe, from Africa, from North America both Canada and US, so when I came to Canada and people were like 'You know what? You need Canadian experience,' I was like, I don't even understand what that means. I mean obviously that might hold true in certain fields and you might need certifications in certain fields, but for a lot of jobs the skills are completely transferrable."

**– Shantha, business professional from India**



With work experience communicating and working with teams from across the globe, including those in Canada, why would Canadian employers continue to discount her work experience? The longer this practice continues, the more outdated it seems, and the longer it continues to impact the lives of individual newcomers and their families. Participants looked for a variety of methods to obtain their first "Canadian experience," with one stating that she had turned to volunteering (Vashanti, Pharmacist from India), and another completing an internship in her field (Andi, Graphic Designer from South America) as ways to overcome the "Canadian experience" hurdle. Still, others had sought training that led to employment immediately upon immigrating (Veronique, FG#3, teacher turned health care professional from Africa) and others working in "survival jobs," that paid their bills but were much lower-level than their education and level of experience could have seen them qualify for (Nadine, teacher from Jamaica).

The next major barriers to employment that were identified as delaying job search success included coming from a regulated profession – which will be detailed in the section on career changers – followed by



the need to adjust to Canadian culture and concern for the mental health needs of themselves or their family. While prioritizing the needs of children was consistently expressed as a priority by respondents with younger children, it should be highlighted that their children's needs were also a major motivating factor for mothers in the study. Providing for the future of their children's security and education was identified by participants to be a major motivation prompting their decision to immigrate to Canada for those with children, and sometimes future children for those who did not yet have children at their date of arrival. **If hope and planning for their children's future may be what brings many immigrants to Canada in the first place, policies certainly could provide a stronger support system in place for parents to access when they arrive here.** Given that 36.2% of our survey respondents reported that their job search had been impacted by the availability or affordability of childcare, this experience described by one participant likely sums up one faced by others:



"The thing that ... makes it more difficult here [is] because we do not have our families here... So [there's] no one to help us. So it is the challenge here when I have three kids. For example, now my husband goes to work and then after that, I quit my job, I came back to study and then I stay at home and take care of the kids. So only one person can go to work. That is the challenge here. So now I have to find some part-time job so I can work and take care of the kids and do all of the housework and cooking and all of the things and study at the same time."

– Minh, business professional from Vietnam



# BEING PREPARED; FEELING CONFIDENT



It is beneficial for a newly immigrated job seeker to arrive already in the possession of skills and knowledge that will help improve the likelihood of her finding employment in the Canadian job market, which is important for a number of factors. Research has shown a clear wage gap for immigrant women greater than that experienced by immigrant men, and that gap widens for immigrant women who are also racialized.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the success of Canada InfoNet's pre-arrival program in helping women to 'hit the ground running,' with their job search skills is notable, with 71% of survey respondents stating that they began to job search as soon as they arrived in Canada. 49% of survey participants stated they were researching their own industry or sector in the Canadian labour market before arriving in Canada. Such high numbers of engagement in active job search appear to have paid off for many participants, as 61% reported having begun work within 3 months of arriving in Canada. There is potential for pre-arrival services to contribute to making gains for those women who need it most, and to play a role in helping to narrow the employment and wage gaps that have been long evident for racialized immigrant women.

“What we really gained was through Canada InfoNet we were really focused on our career – focused on what you were going to do, so that is what gave us confidence. I got a lot of confidence. You have the knowledge so you can adapt it to any situation that you find yourself. I was mentally prepared. We have to adapt to any situation and try to change the situation to be more positive in our thinking. So we were prepared to adapt... before landing.”

– Veronique, former teacher now health care professional

Of significant importance in this endeavour, we found patterns in respondents between the lengths of time it took to find her first job in Canada, and comments that correlate with varying degrees of confidence in her own skills. **Participants who found work in their first six months in Canada tended to show confidence in both their professional skills as well and their own job search skills.** They were also most likely to be working in the same occupation as they had pre-immigration, which was particularly true for those who had found work earliest of all – often within the first three months. Of our survey respondents who reported that they “found a job quickly and without much difficulty,” 50.9% reported that the first job they had in Canada was in their own profession, with an additional 18.9% stating that their first job in Canada was “somewhat related” to their profession.

One strong indicator of a participant's confidence levels was their likelihood to express that they shared advice on job search and settlement with other newcomers.

“When I came into Canada I got my first job three weeks after I landed, which was a customer care job. I didn’t even start that job and then I got another one which was a finance and accounting role. And then shortly after that I applied again to the CRA and got a job with the agency as well. And right now I’ve left the agency and I’m with a private organization. One thing I like about Canada, is the opportunity and friendliness it gives. Knowing the right people to mingle with, it gives you that platform to just keep accelerating in your career.”

“I’m one of the lucky few. I landed last year April [one and a half years ago]. I understand the people you meet when you land goes a long way to helping you settle. I’m going to give myself kudos as well, because I did my research as well.”

– **Toni, finance professional from Nigeria**





Given that our participants had all arrived in Canada within the past three years, the particularly uncertain times around the Covid-19 pandemic have influenced their experiences in very specific ways. Shantha stated that, after arriving right before Ontario's first Covid-related lockdown, she experienced a difficult, stressful transition; however, she is now doing much better now doing much better (Shantha, FG#3, business professional from India). Another woman described all of the positive, albeit flexible and different ways in which her Canada InfoNet mentor provided guidance, as well as the unique job search situation into which she was immigrating:

"I'm still in touch with him [my mentor]. He was very helpful, ranging from how to book tickets - because I came during Covid, I came July 2020. So he guided me through anything, if I needed an AirBnB, how to communicate. He guided me through anything. Through mentoring, I also got two offer letters...both of the letters got revoked due to Covid. Before coming [to Canada] I had two offer letters, after coming here, nobody was even accepting volunteers."

– **Vashanti, Pharmacist from India**



Vashanti did go on to explain that after a few weeks, she had found a volunteer position in her field, and within a month of starting to volunteer, she then found the job she was continuing to work in. While she reported not being entirely satisfied with her job at this moment due to regulatory requirements that were challenging for her to meet, she also expressed gratitude that she was able to work in a position that was still related to her field: health care. She had also remained in contact with the mentor who she originally met through Canada InfoNet, and continued to benefit from this connection. She expressed pride in doing her best during Covid – a challenging situation beyond her control – and still expressed confidence in her own job search skills. She attributed her job search skills to the Canada InfoNet program directly, stating:

"That workshop helped me very much, how to project your qualities and how to sell yourself in the Canadian workforce, so that was a very nice experience."

She displays confidence in her own abilities as well, later also attributing her successful job search to:

“The qualities and confidence that I have. And the contacts that I make. I’m a people person, I like to speak a lot, engage with people effectively. This job is one I got from a friend’s reference. He referred me to a recruitment agency and I got permanently hired. ”

**– Vashanti, Pharmacist from India**



To go through a highly challenging experience such as immigrating on her own during the Covid-19 pandemic, still not be in the position she had hoped for, yet be able to show a high level of confidence in her professional and job search skills, does show remarkable resilience and strength. It is also helpful that this participant received skills and support that was needed from Canada InfoNet to help her persevere and continue to engage with her own sources of courage.

We did, however, find examples of participants whose struggles to thrive post-pandemic proved greater than they had for Vashanthi or Toni. While resilience and perseverance were found in all participants, there was some exception to those who seemed to be thriving in the face of pandemic impacts. The participants who were less likely to rate themselves as doing well or to report positive experiences were those who had remained in situations of social isolation, including those who had arrived in Canada on their own, who worked from home, or had gone long periods without finding work.

Nadine, a teacher from Jamaica who had taught in two different countries before coming to Canada during the earlier stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, found herself unable to obtain regulatory approval to work as a teacher after arriving in Canada.<sup>10</sup> She had a couple of survival jobs, including first working at a grocery store while she also pursued a course in business administration, thinking she would be able to transition to at least find an administrative job within a school or educational environment. When the latter proved more difficult than she had expected, she had then found a job working from home for a call centre, which she had remained in for over a year. Still working from home in the call centre job at the time of our focus group, she described her job as not challenging, and stated that

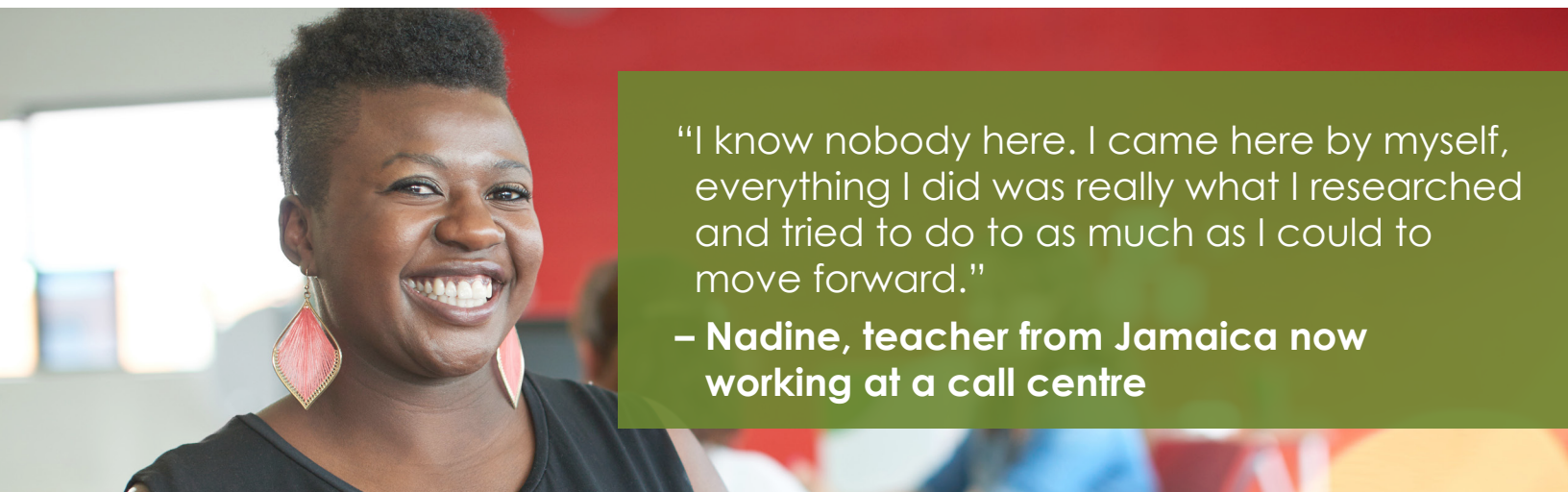
“I still work from home - that has its advantages and disadvantages, so I haven’t really had the chance to go out and meet people and find out about job opportunities other than what I research and I just haven’t been able to go out to interact within the working world outside of home.”

**– Nadine, teacher from Jamaica now working at call centre**

<sup>10</sup> The next section on career changers will further detail the situation faced by teachers and other professionals in regulated fields.



Nadine showed clear signs of struggling with her inability to work as a teacher in Canada, and was deeply bothered by the complete lack of recognition of her educational credentials. While these structural forces were clearly beyond her control, they impacted her on a very personal and everyday level. Being disconnected from her profession was impacting her certainly, yet just working from home and being disconnected from the opportunity to form connection and interpersonal relationships in a work environment had obviously worn down her confidence greatly. She made clear the isolation she felt, stating:



“I know nobody here. I came here by myself, everything I did was really what I researched and tried to do to as much as I could to move forward.”

– **Nadine, teacher from Jamaica now working at a call centre**

No matter the structural nature of these forces impacting her job search – the regulatory system, the pandemic – at one point during the focus group Nadine wondered aloud “*Maybe it's something I'm not doing right*”

That the impacts of such forces beyond an individual's control can result in such an impact on a newcomer's confidence levels is, unsurprising.<sup>11</sup> It need not be accepted as the status quo. Nadine herself continued to praise Canada, in particular stating that she would stay here for the access to a strong health care system within Canada:

“There are a lot of opportunities here that I wouldn't be able to explore [elsewhere]. And, for the health care, that's worth it for me, to stick it out. I hope with time that it will get better.”

Yet, from a policy perspective, Canada is clearly failing Nadine and other women like her on several fronts, including lack of access to culturally appropriate mental health services. If such access was fully funded and made easily accessible for new immigrants – for instance by providing the services in the same location alongside employment and settlement services – we could improve upon actually providing the same promise of strong access to health care that attracts many immigrants here in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it has been well-documented. Rezazadeh and Hoover's 2018 literature review into studies on the experiences of immigrant women in Canada cited increased rates of stress and/or depression among newcomer women whose experiences included social isolation, discrimination in employment and difficulty finding work.

<sup>12</sup> Nadine was not alone in highlighting health care as a primary reason for choosing to immigrate to Canada. A majority of focus group participants mentioned the Canadian health care system as a highlight of what attracted them to this country. Some identified the health care system as a system they admired and wanted to work in, others as a system they wanted themselves and their families to benefit from living in.

# CHANGING CAREERS: CHOICE OR NECESSITY?



“This job gave me the opportunity to open up my vision to new things that I might actually be good at, and not necessarily [think that] there was one absolute path for me.”

– **Maria, project manager now business administrator from Dominican Republic**

Changing careers while also coping with adapting to a new culture, getting by in a second language and adjusting to all of the other changes brought about by immigration is no easy feat. In their 2013 article, Novak and Chen point to a further reason that makes career change difficult, citing research that links identity to occupation, with this link being particularly strong in regulated professions. Finding themselves unable to work in their previous occupations is particularly difficult for immigrants in regulated professions – who are not permitted to work in their professions upon arrival – who may face losing their sense of identity and selfhood.<sup>13</sup> While we found a combination of reasons for why participants had or were likely to change careers post-immigration, by far the largest group of career changers in our study could be attributed to those from regulated professions. Amongst survey participants who self-reported to be working in a different or very different sector than they did pre-immigration, 29.5% of these attributed their change of field to the fact that they were in a regulated profession. This aligns quite closely with data cited by Novak and Chen, which found that professionals from regulated fields were 24% less likely to work in their previous professions.<sup>14</sup>

One example is our previously discussed participant, Nadine. As a foreign-trained teacher with five years' experience teaching in both Jamaica and Japan, neither Nadine's experience nor her education is recognized by her provincial regulatory body. In order to work as a teacher in Canada, Nadine had been told she would need to return to school, to re-do her education degree at a Canadian university. As Nadine continues to struggle with this situation, we can see that she may not be alone, as Augustine<sup>15</sup> uses **Statistics Canada data to show that only 25.3% of**

<sup>13</sup> Novak and Chen, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Novak and Chen, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, 2015.



**internationally educated teachers were working in their field, compared to 66.5% of teachers who were both Canadian-born and educated.** And even for those not directly working as teachers, the Canadian-born and educated were also more likely to be employed in related professional positions such as principals or policy researchers in education. While their immigrant counterparts were occasionally employed as principals, Augustine found, they were much more likely to work as early childhood educators (ECEs), cleaners or nannies – jobs less likely to receive either the status or salary associated with “professional.” As well, given the link between career and identity, it is perhaps unsurprising to see how greatly Nadine has struggled to make a decision since realizing the enormity of the hurdles facing her return to a career as a teacher in Canada. She stated:

“I’m not sure if I want to change career paths, but at this time it is something that I am looking into. Because I really... I haven’t yet accepted the fact that I need to go to school for four more years to do another degree in education that I already have. You know, it’s not something that I’m comfortable doing. I’m thinking of possibly... I would have to change career paths. It is something for me to think about. ”

**– Nadine, teacher from Jamaica now working for a call centre**



We found that for those who were still in the midst of making a decision around whether or not to remain in the same career as pre-immigration, the decision was often spoken of with great anxiety. Similar to Nadine's clear struggle with the decision around whether or not to change careers, Minh also expressed her experience with being in the midst of making challenging decisions about her career goals, having been in Canada for only 6 months.

“When I decided to move to a new country, it means that I accepted to start my career journey again from the beginning. So it's a little bit [of] a struggle to find a career in my field here, so there are a lot of challenges in the next months. ... I thought...it would be easier for me to find a job in my field, but actually when I came here, it's not at all. It seems to me, at the moment, maybe impossible for me to find a career in my own field and maybe I have to switch my career to take whatever opportunity that comes to me, rather than stick to my home career.”

– **Minh, consumer product industry professional from Vietnam**



Changing careers for those from regulated fields was not always a negative experience, with one focus group participant pointing out the similarities shared between her previous and new career – the one she had already pursued in Canada. Also a trained and experienced teacher prior to immigrating, Veronique had decided quickly to try training and working as a Personal Support Worker (PSW) in Canada rather than pursuing the much longer path of re-starting her teacher education. After completing nine months of PSW training, she was hired to work in a hospital within a month following her graduation. When asked to reflect on her feelings about having changed her field of work, she highlighted the common - and in this case highly gendered - links she found between the two fields:

“It's not quite different [from my previous work] because - even though we teach the children - we take care. And working in the hospital is taking care. So for me it boils down to the same thing... everything is taking care. ... So for me it's not that much different. It's just a change of maybe the age group, the condition, maybe the situation where you are.”

– **Veronique, former teacher now health care professional**



This pattern of highlighting connections between an individual's two careers correlated with a likelihood towards more positive reflections on their decisions. It was also found in the experience reported by a participant from the first focus group. As her previous career was not in a regulated profession, but in project management, she thought she would be able to find work in her field in Canada.



"I started applying for my specific field. I was working with a mentor... I was really guided so I thought getting called was going to be easier, but it wasn't. I always came here with the idea I would be open to any role, any position, but you always want to stick to what you know. But it was a bit of process. ... You really want to have someone give you the opportunity because you know you can do the work. "

**– Maria, project manager now business administrator from Dominican Republic**

When asked about the differences between her former career and her current one in business administration, she similarly points out the links between them. She points out several times that it was the decision to change careers itself that was the difficult choice for her to make, which is not unsurprising considering Novak and Chen's link between career and identity. Maria even draws the link to identity herself:

"Honestly, it's not that different. I had the transferrable skills. And honestly, I think it's the best decision I made, going into this role. ... This job gave me the opportunity to open up my vision to new things that I might actually be good at, and not necessarily [that] there was one absolute path for me"

Back home, you had an entire identity, you had an entire career and you left all that, and here you start from scratch, and you're very humbled because you're like 'I need to prove myself again.'"



**When issues of identity are in question or in doubt – such as the current situation for Nadine or for Minh – this is likely to be stressful; once they have been satisfactorily resolved, it allows for the chance to settle into, to find comfort and confidence in one's new identity.** Given the difficulty involved in this process, however, women should be provided with greater degrees of specialized support to 1) have all of the necessary information available to them in order to allow them to make their own choices, and 2) as part of that, provide them with a supportive environment in which to understand how best they might be able to apply their transferrable skills to a new or different career path, should that be their choice. The importance of such supports is evident in their current absence.

In the process of constructing new lives in a newly adopted country, skilled immigrant women show a remarkable resilience not just to survive, but to thrive on their own new path as they reconstruct their own narratives. Questions of identity and the centrality of fully participating in choosing their paths forward cannot be ignored. With appropriate supports in place, women are primed to make fully informed choices that will allow them to feel in control of their immigration journeys and career paths as they write their own narratives of the future in Canada.

As immigrant women, particularly the majority who are racialized, have long represented one of the most underprivileged groups in Canadian society, regardless of how highly educated or professionally qualified they were prior to immigrating. Yet, this study shows that with pre-arrival support the low numbers of success seen for this group can start to be turned. This is the beginning of what could represent a tidal shift, but it is not enough on its own. The historical barriers faced by racialized immigrant women are too great to leave their correction up to pre-arrival services, no matter how promising the outcomes show for the Canada InfoNet program. Rather, this program and others like it should be expanded, alongside additional supports specifically targeted for immigrant women. In particular, access to culturally appropriate, publicly funded mental health services, alongside career programs aimed at assisting immigrant women to navigate through career exploration and informed career decision-making processes in a supportive environment need to be made available either on a pre-arrival basis, or across the country. The benefit of targeting programs toward women allows for a gendered understanding of how such programs will best benefit and empower women, while connecting them back to women's experiences with connecting career with identity. Because identity is itself gendered, the manifestation of career/identity narratives will evolve in gendered ways.

As our findings show that access to pre-arrival services through Canada InfoNet brings promising positive change in employment outcomes for women immigrants, such successes should not be left to rest, but rather should be continually built upon towards greater positive forward momentum for women who courageously immigrate to take part in this ever-evolving nation-building exercise.



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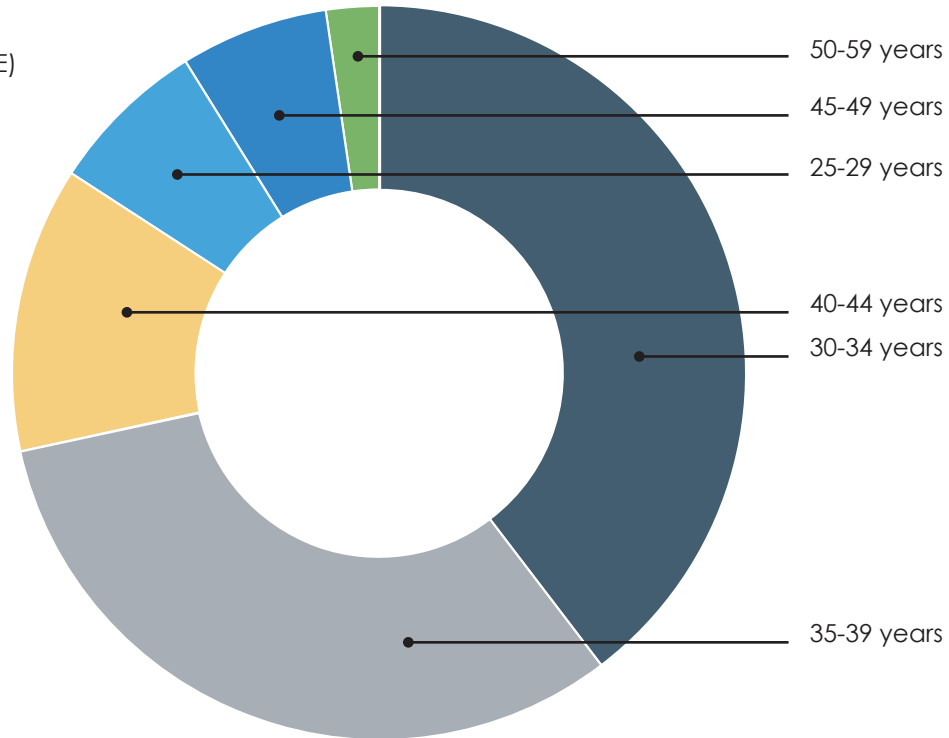
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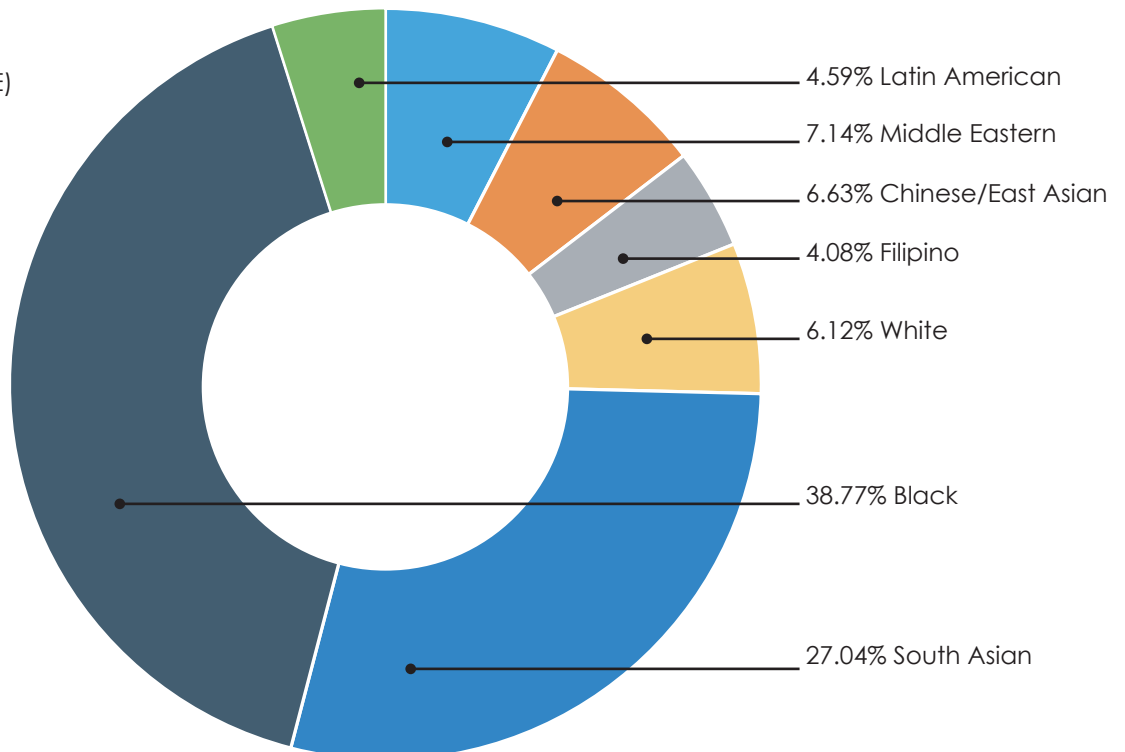
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# APPENDIX A – DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

AGE – CURRENT  
(AT TIME OF SURVEY RESPONSE)

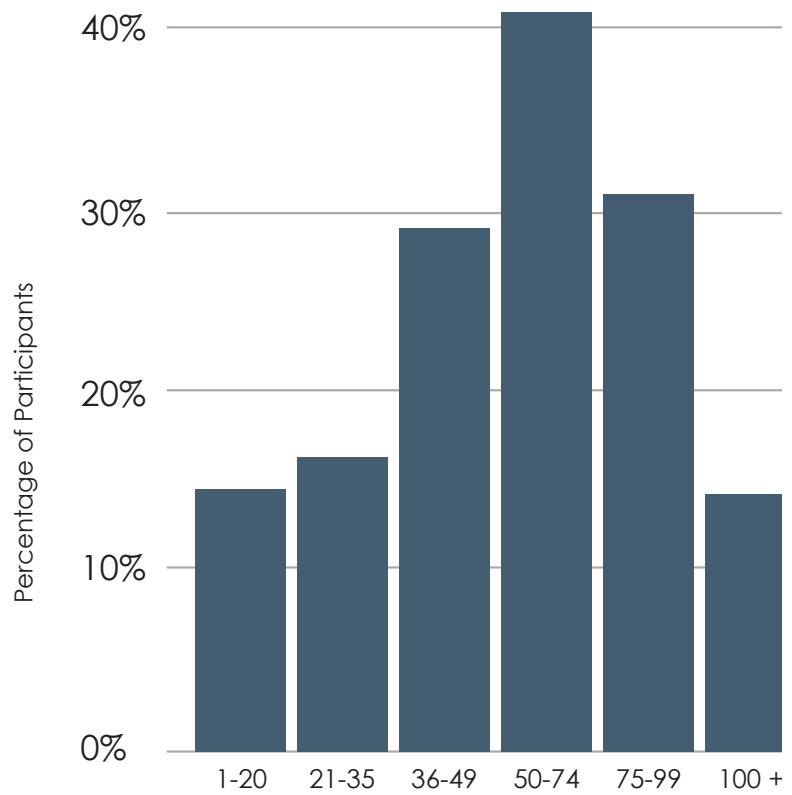


AGE – CURRENT  
(AT TIME OF SURVEY RESPONSE)

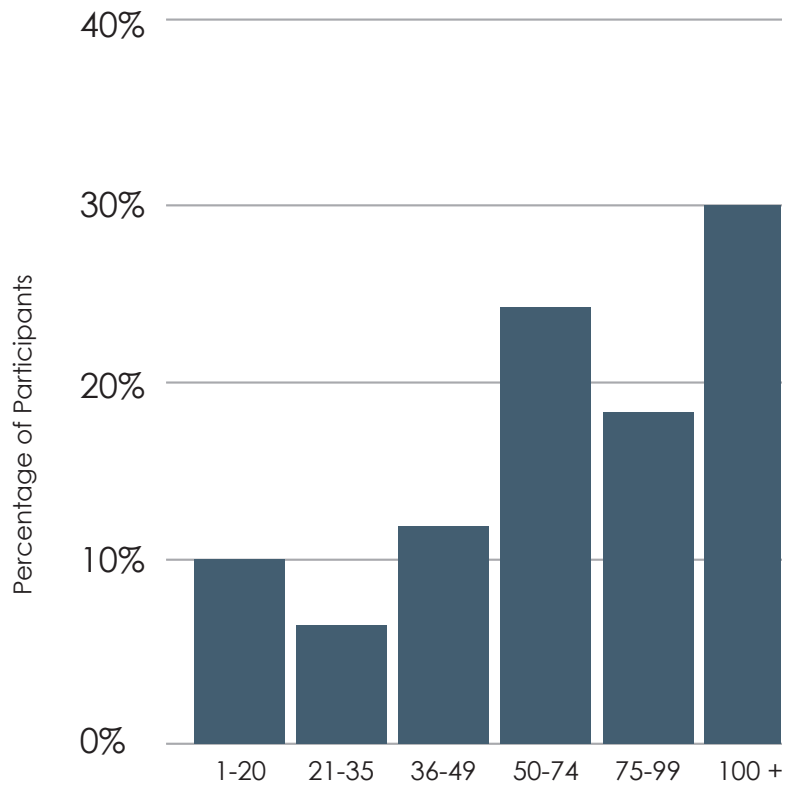




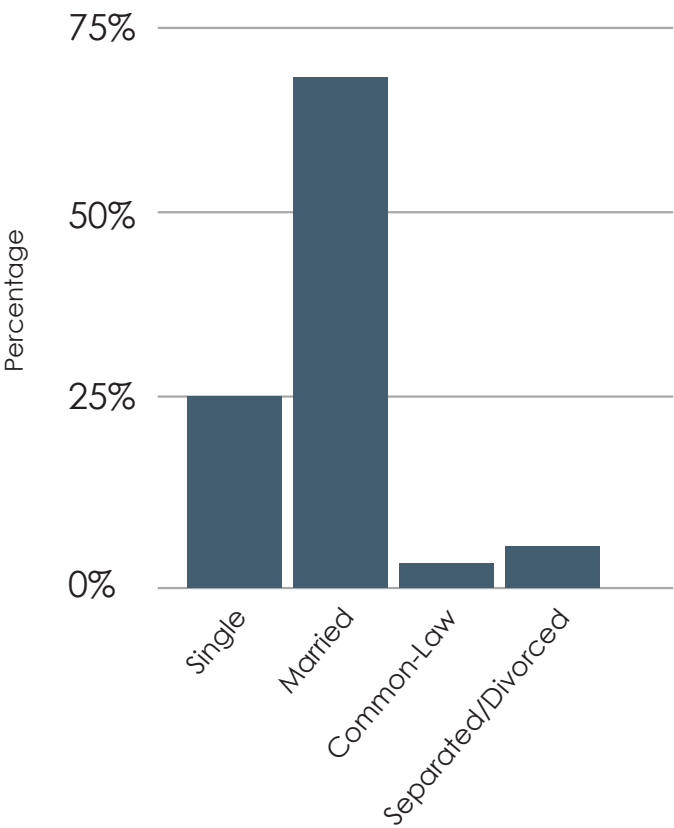
CURRENT ANNUAL SALARY  
IN THOUSANDS  
AT TIME OF SURVEY PARTICIPATION



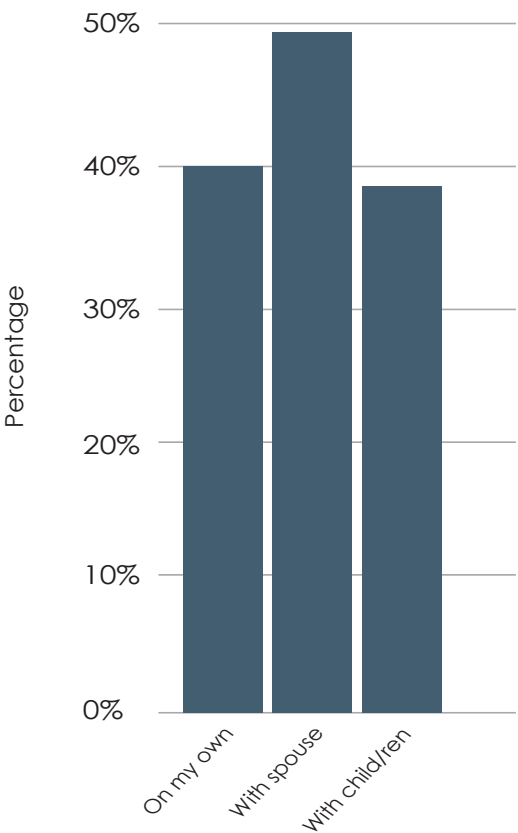
CURRENT HOUSEHOLD  
INCOME  
AT TIME OF SURVEY PARTICIPATION



MARITAL STATUS ON  
ARRIVAL IN CANADA



IMMIGRATED WITH  
(AT THE SAME TIME)  
AT TIME OF SURVEY PARTICIPATION



Survey allowed for multiple responses to this question



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