

How ‘safe spaces’ can help racialized newcomer women find good jobs

Canadian pilot program sees success with career adaptability, hours of work and earnings

By Stacy Thomas | March 05, 2024



A pilot program that got the go-ahead from the Feds to try an untested approach to employing racialized newcomer women has reported successful outcomes.

The program provided dedicated “safe spaces” for the women – a strategy that worked to increase their confidence.

The pilot resulted in increased career adaptability, measured by career decision-making self-efficacy, job search clarity, and job search self-efficacy. There were also large increases in the likelihood of working, hours of work, and earnings after participation in the pilot.

It’s the increased confidence that made the outcomes of this program notable, said Taylor Shek-wai Hui, research director and chief data scientist at Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), the entity that conducted the research.

“Racialized women are particularly behind in terms of their labour market outcomes, when compared to any other group of

newcomers, or men, or compared to even Canadian-born women – they are very behind. They do substantially worse,” he said.

“Women-only programming provides this safe space for participants to share their experience, share their challenges, and to build that social connection with each other, friendship. Then because of all that, they feel that they belong to a community, and that helps them to improve their confidence and do better.”

Increasing confidence integral for improving outcomes for racialized women

The pilot program is a multi-year initiative funded by Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), “to help racialized newcomer women secure employment,” the report states. IRCC initially invested \$31.9 million for SRDC to design and implement the three-year project, then extended it another year until 2023.

The program, which recruited 2,267 newcomer women who self-identified as racialized, acknowledged the intersectional identities of racialized newcomer women, who often have complex needs and barriers to employment – a main aspect of the program was creating a dedicated “safe space” for the women to interact with each other, where they were supported in setting their job targets higher than just survival.

This safe space proved to be an integral piece of the puzzle – perhaps the most important piece, Shek-wai Hui said. Women-only programming allowed participants to prioritize skill-building, interests and goals. Support activities included mentorship, peer support, employer connections and mock interviews.

“Through that process, they found that they can actually do it, they get the confidence of deriving a career plan, implementing it, trying to look for a better job ... the outcome is exactly what we thought it would be: more of them finding a job that they feel is making use of their skills instead of just any survival job. And so that is the major outcome from this program.”

Finding ‘good jobs’ a challenge for racialized newcomer women

Shek-wai Hui explained that many programs that provide employment services to newcomer women in Canada focus on getting them jobs, any jobs, with the greater emphasis placed on earning income rather than suitability.

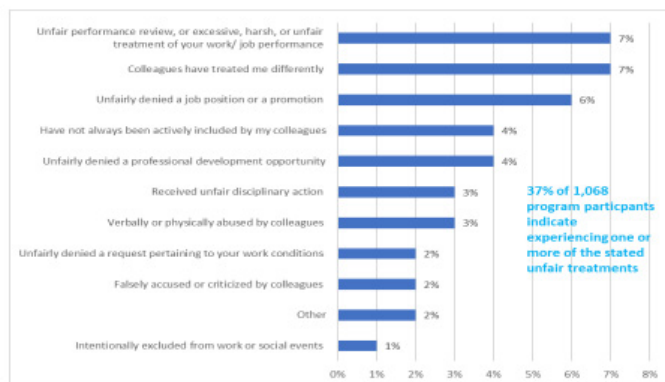
“Women serve a lot of different roles,” he said. “They take care of their families; a lot of times when they immigrate, their priority is to take care of their family first, but at the same time they have to find jobs.”

This results in racialized newcomer women being funnelled into low-paying jobs where they become stuck. Job placement companies can be part of the problem, Shek-wai Hui said, when they focus too much on placing immigrants in survival-type jobs while disregarding education and other credentials.

“It’s that type of mentality that this program is trying to address,” he said.

Employers can also support racialized newcomer women by creating “safe spaces” in the workplace, said Shek-wai Hui, as participants reported experiencing discriminatory or racist behaviours in the Canadian labour market, such as being treated differently by colleagues.

Figure 4 Racial discrimination in the labour market



“Some of the experiences are very subtle. It’s not an overt discrimination, it could be something about how opportunities are made available, or just how other people are talking to each other” he said. “I think that that is the one major indirect lesson learned, is that for the workplace to be inclusive, the approach is everybody learns how to be more inclusive, and creating that space for everyone is important too.”

Soft skills a focus of pilot program for racialized newcomer women

Also a barrier to employment in good jobs is unconscious bias around “soft skills,” another focus of the women-only safe spaces in the pilot program.

“Hard skills are the ones that you can see on the resume, and in education, work experience and training and so forth,” said social work and social psychology PhD Izumi Sakamoto. “Soft skills are the ones you demonstrate in interview settings ... soft skills matter more, it’s been argued, because that’s something that really shows how people can fit into the workplace in Canada.”

Sakamoto has been working on eliminating “Canadian experience” requirements in job postings, she says, as they inherently discriminate against newcomers – there is currently legislation in the works in Ontario – Bill 149 – that, if passed, will ban “Canadian work experience” from job postings and applications. It would be the first such ban in Canada.

“It could seem like a risk-taking, for organizations, when they are hiring newcomers who may have different ways of expressing communication or leadership styles, but it might not,” Sakamoto said. “It may be the opportunity for organizations to grow by embracing more inclusivity, which makes the organization more attractive to not only new employees but also to clients and other people that they work with.”

Pilot program’s success will lead to similar initiatives

The study’s authors admitted that there are systemic barriers that were not addressed and remain problematic for racialized newcomer women, such as non-recognition of education and credentials by employers, lack of professional networks, and lack of childcare.

But the program will lead to more like it, Shek-wai Hui said.

The service-delivery aspect of the pilot project concluded in 2023, but the results have been so positive that the government is continuing funding to the service providers they worked with, he said. Also, targeted programs have become a priority for the next round of funding.

“They do a five-year funding cycle to all the settlement service providers ... they made it a priority that if you have a program that is targeted to racialized newcomer women or some other equity deserving group in particular, it could be youth, it could be just a racialized population of newcomers, the government is willing to fund specifically for that targeted programming, and it is based on the success that we have from this particular program, and they’re expanding it to other equity-seeking groups.”