

Project Insights Report

Resilience of Newcomer Women in Northwestern Ontario: Overcoming Economic Shock Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic



PARTNERS

Lakehead University



LOCATIONS

Ontario



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Executive Summary

The project “Resilience of newcomer women in northwestern Ontario: Overcoming economic shock due to the COVID-19 pandemic,” led by Lakehead University, explored the employment challenges and recovery prospects of newcomer women in northwestern Ontario post-COVID-19. Conducted in both rural and urban areas, the study involved 66 interviews and surveys with over 5,000 residents of northwestern Ontario. The study was designed to assess how the pandemic affected these women’s job opportunities.

The findings reveal that many of the surveyed women focus on securing financial stability to support themselves and their families, which comes at the cost of their long-term career growth. They often experience difficulty entering the Canadian workforce due to a mismatch between the soft skills they possess and those sought by Canadian employers, as well as limited knowledge of Canadian workplace safety regulations. Many newcomer women juggle multiple jobs along with unpaid care duties and have expressed a strong desire for further education and training.

The research highlights the need for tailored support systems that facilitate successful integration into the Canadian labour market. Recommendations include creating inclusive work environments with comprehensive onboarding, offering training on Canadian labour laws, and focusing on the development of soft skills. The study emphasizes the importance of collaborating with local organizations, particularly in remote areas, to ensure effective outreach and support.

Furthermore, there is an urgent call for systemic changes to tackle discrimination, underemployment and safety concerns disproportionately affecting newcomer women. The findings advocate for organizations and policy-makers to focus on inclusivity and support, which are critical for enhancing workplace integration and fostering a sense of belonging and productivity among newcomer women.

This study not only calls attention to the barriers these women face but also provides actionable recommendations for employers, policy-makers and community organizations. The overarching goal is to enhance economic integration and labour market success for newcomer women in northwestern Ontario, promoting inclusive economic growth and societal well-being in the region.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Eighty-five per cent of newcomer women who participated in the project expressed intentions to retrain or return to school.
- 2 Of the newcomer women who participated in the second-year survey, 7.8% reported feeling unsafe at work. This indicates a critical gap in occupational health and safety training and emphasizes the need to address these concerns to retain and empower newcomer women in the workforce.
- 3 Tailored interventions and support mechanisms are crucial for empowering newcomer women to overcome employment barriers and achieve sustainable economic independence.

The Issue

Newcomer women face multiple barriers to employment, such as having their experience and credentials undervalued, which leads to their overrepresentation in precarious work. The gap in earnings between immigrant women and women born in Canada has actually grown over time.

COVID-19 and its accompanying restrictions exacerbated this situation. Newcomer women were overrepresented in occupations that were deemed essential, exposing them to forced overtime and increased health risks. At the height of the pandemic, newcomer women experienced higher unemployment rates relative to Canadian-born peers.



What We Investigated

This project investigated the challenges newcomer women face in northwestern Ontario, focusing particularly on their employment prospects and recovery post-COVID-19. The study aimed to identify necessary skills, explore the pandemic's effects and develop strategies for resilience and recovery. A comparative, longitudinal study was conducted in rural and urban settings to assess the impact on newcomer women's participation in the workforce.

The research methodology involved 66 interviews over two years to track changes in employment status, and a series of surveys with over 5,000 residents of northwestern Ontario. This approach helped deepen understanding of the barriers to accessing meaningful employment and contributed toward developing tailored strategies to improve outcomes for newcomer women.

The project relied on partnerships with local organizations and communities to effectively reach newcomer women.

The project aimed to provide insights and recommendations to support the integration of newcomer women into the labour market. It focused on both addressing immediate financial needs and enhancing long-term career prospects.

What We're Learning

Efforts must focus on making Canadian workplace culture more inclusive

The newcomer women who participated in the research were unfamiliar with Canadian labour laws and workplace norms, emphasizing the need for targeted training and support to help them navigate and succeed in the workforce. The research underscored the importance of creating more inclusive workplaces by enhancing onboarding processes and providing educational opportunities, which not only support newcomer women but also boost overall workplace productivity and diversity. These findings echo those of other Future Skills Centre-supported projects on the usefulness of training on Canadian workplace culture to accelerate integration into the labour market.

Organizational partnerships aid in reaching and supporting newcomers

Collaboration with a variety of organizations, especially in remote and rural areas, was vital for effectively reaching the newcomer women who participated in the research, and in providing them with ongoing support. The need for flexible and adaptive organizational structures to maintain effective partnerships between organizations to facilitate coordinated support was also highlighted.

Newcomer women are pursuing training despite limited time

More than 3,000 records were collected in the first year's survey. About one-third of those records represent women who worked more than 40 hours per week at their primary job alongside unpaid care duties and sometimes a secondary job. Almost all were investing 10–30+ hours weekly in further education or skills development. Additionally, 85% of the participants expressed intentions to retrain or return to school. The second year's survey, with over 2,000 records, showed a shift in employment status. While 76.9% of immigrant women were employed full time, a significant number were temporarily laid off or actively seeking work.

More newcomer women have safety concerns in the workplace than Canadian-born women

A concerning finding was that 7.8% of newcomer women did not feel safe at work, compared to 6.2% of Canadian-born women, highlighting a gap in occupational health and safety practices. The recommendations call for systemic changes to address discrimination, underemployment and safety concerns in the workplace. The recommendations advocate for targeted interventions that create fairer opportunities for newcomer women.

Why It Matters

The research on newcomer women in northwestern Ontario underscores the critical need for tailored support and interventions to help them overcome unique challenges in the workforce, particularly during times of crisis like those that emerged during COVID-19. The findings highlight the importance of equipping these women with the necessary skills and support systems to succeed in the Canadian labour market. This involves creating inclusive workplaces, offering educational opportunities and improving onboarding processes to ensure their successful integration.



**State of Skills:
What Works for Newcomer
Integration**

By emphasizing the development of soft skills, training on Canadian workplace norms and fostering supportive environments, organizations can empower newcomer women to thrive professionally. This not only contributes to a diverse and skilled workforce but also fosters a sense of security and belonging, enhancing their potential to contribute meaningfully to the workforce.

The implications of this study extend beyond the immediate research, providing valuable insights for policy-makers, employers and organizations working with newcomer women, especially in rural and remote regions.

By addressing the identified challenges and implementing targeted policies, organizations can support newcomer women and reap the benefits of a diverse and productive workforce. Policy-makers are encouraged to invest in programs that meet the specific needs of these women, promoting equity and inclusion across society and the labour market.

Industry-specific, employer-driven initiatives have been successful in accelerating and enhancing the employment prospects of newcomers.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

► What's Next

Researchers from Lakehead University continue to mobilize knowledge about [this project](#) through academic conferences and by publishing in peer-reviewed journals.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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