



# ‘OF COURSE PEOPLE WILL HIRE THE WHITE PERSON’

Social and economic  
inclusion of migrant women  
in Vancouver, Canada



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women



# ‘Of Course People Will Hire the White Person’: Social and economic inclusion of migrant women in Vancouver, Canada

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## Introduction

In 2020, the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) initiated a research project to document migrant and trafficked women's experiences with social and economic inclusion. Some of the questions we sought to answer included: what work, education, and training opportunities are available to migrant and trafficked women in countries of destination or upon return to the country of origin? Are these relevant to the local labour market or do they reinforce gender stereotypes and condemn women to a life of low-wage work? What barriers prevent women from enjoying productive, well-paid, and rewarding work? What, if any, government assistance is available to them? How do women articulate their own ambitions and desires with regards to their work and social life?

The conversations with women were initiated by 30 partner NGOs in 18 countries in five regions: **Southeast Asia** (Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand); **South Asia** (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka); **Europe** (Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom); **South America** (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, and Peru); and **North America** (Canada). All the partners are civil society organisations that work closely with and provide services to migrant and/or trafficked women. The GAATW International Secretariat supported the partners with

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financial resources and conceptual discussions on social and economic inclusion as well as the principles of Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), which the partners used as the guiding framework for their conversation with women. Ultimately, the goal is to bring about positive changes at the community, national, and international levels, that will lead to improved opportunities for social and economic inclusion of migrant and trafficked women.

This report presents the findings of the research conducted in Vancouver, Canada, by SWAN – a community organisation for im/migrant sex workers in Vancouver. SWAN had noted the limited focus on im/migrant women’s access to the Canadian labour force, which results in a lack of sufficient research on the topic. While social and labour market barriers have always been an issue of concern to the im/migrant women who access SWAN’s services, Covid-19 had exacerbated their social exclusion and highlighted the urgent need to access labour rights. Therefore, the research was an opportunity for SWAN to ensure that migrant (sex) workers are included in the increasing calls for labour protections for migrant workers in Canada.

## Methodology

The study used feminist participatory research principles, which capture the qualitative understanding of im/migrant women’s perceptions about their challenges to entering the Canadian labour force. In adopting a feminist qualitative research and data analysis approach, the study placed im/migrant women’s lives at the centre of social inquiry by 1) validating and acknowledging their positions as experts, 2) highlighting their unique communal standpoint as racialised and marginalised individuals and groups, 3) enhancing their voices and influence in society, and 4) exploring alternative ways of understanding the world through their experiences.

SWAN conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty women between October 2020 and January 2021. All data was gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic and as such all findings and analyses need to take into consideration this specific historical event.

The interviews were conducted in-person (n= 8) and via phone (n=14) and Zoom (n=8) in Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), English, and Spanish through a translator.

The interviews lasted between 12 and 49 minutes, with the median length 29 minutes. The length of interview depended on the extent to which participants were willing to elaborate on their experiences. It is also important to note the cultural variation in the speed at which women spoke, such that some participants spoke very fast and shared details of their experiences in a short time.

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The interviews were conducted by three peer staff. Dr Menaka Raguparan trained the peer staff with qualitative interviewing skills prior to SWAN staff conducting interviews with study participants.

The research participants were recruited through posters circulated among im/migrant sex workers who access SWAN's services. SWAN also reached out to community partner organisations that support migrant workers. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants signed an informed consent form. Participants also consented to recording the interview and the use of direct quotes in any publication arising from the study. Participants received a CAD 100 honorarium for their time and expertise.

## Demographic Data

### Countries of origin

The vast majority of participants were Asians from China, including Chinese Taipei (the island of Taiwan) (66%). This is representative of SWAN's target population; furthermore, Asians also make up the largest migrant group in Vancouver. Other research participants were from Latin America (Chile, Mexico, and Guatemala – 17%) and other Asian countries, including India (3%) and Iran (7%).

### Immigration Status

The immigration status of study participants varied, with majority holding permanent residency (n=11) or citizenship (n=9). The rest were on temporary visa (n=8) or other type of visa (n=2). It is important to note that individuals with precarious immigration status will not identify as such due to legal ramifications. Immigration raids and deportation sprees under the guise of anti-trafficking initiatives have further pushed im/migrants to the margins and/or underground, enhancing their isolation.

### Age

Sixty-seven percent of participants were between the ages of 35 and 50; 20% were between the ages of 25 and 34, and 13% were over 51 years of age.

### Employment status at the time of interview

Sixty per cent of participants were employed at the time of the interview. This is consistent with Vancouver's unemployment rate during the pandemic, which was not significantly affected. Furthermore, for many participants the precariousness of their jobs meant that they did not work a traditional 9-to-5, Monday through Friday job. Many of the women worked when they had a job. In this regard, the pandemic was not any more disruptive than their usual working schedule.

### Length of current / last employment

Participants' tenure in their current job, or the job they recently lost, varied from a few days to over 10 years. To understand the impact of this finding, further data needs to be collected. **NOTE:**

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there are gaps in this section of the data with the interviewers not consistently asking the question from all participants.

## **Type of jobs**

Participants reported a wide variety of jobs, including but not limited to sex work, house cleaning, retail sales, restaurant servers, operating own business, etc.

## **COVID impact**

Only 20% of the unemployed participants at the time of the interview had lost their jobs due to COVID and all had been employed in restaurants and cafés, which were all shut down. While the unemployment was 40% among study participants, half of the unemployed were such because of their precarious position rather than COVID. The precarity of the jobs had forced some women to start a new job during the pandemic.

## **Employment history**

According to participants, their employment history plays a major role in their ability to find a mainstream job in Vancouver. Forty-four per cent reported work experiences in their country of origin; however, this work experience is not valued for jobs in Vancouver. Only 26% reported having Canadian work experience. Only 20% reported having worked in both their country of origin and in Canada. Ten per cent reported no prior work experiences at all. This is a key finding that shapes im/migrants' integration into the Canadian labour force and by extension, into society.

## **Education**

Participants' education levels had a strong relationship to their perception of integrating into Canada's labour force. Their education levels varied significantly. Majority (50%) obtained their post-secondary education in their country of origin, including a graduate degree. Only 10% had a Canadian post-secondary education, including a graduate education. Thirty per cent had only secondary or lower level of education (10% elementary and 20% secondary).

## **Professional and/or vocational training**

Data under this category points to a significant barrier for study participants' integration into the Canadian labour force. Seventy-one per cent reported not having any professional and/or vocational training suitable for the job market, 13% had obtained such training in the country of origin, 13% in Canada and 3% in both country of origin and Canada.

## **Recognition of credentials obtained abroad**

Only 7% of the study participants had their foreign educational credentials recognised formally (by the Canadian government) and/or informally by individual employers in Canada. Forty-seven per cent did not even have formal certification that can be accredited. Forty-six per cent had some form of certification from their country of origin, and this included diplomas and degrees that were not recognised in Canada. Among this, 46% perceived that their certification would not be recognised in Canada and therefore did not initiate the accreditation process.

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## English language proficiency

Most study participants (n=22) said they had limited or very limited ability to read, write, and communicate in English. Many reported having enrolled in state-sponsored English language classes, which allows them to improve their reading and writing skills to some extent. Despite these classes, most women said that they could not converse in English and that was their main barrier to integrating into the Canadian labour market and society. Only three women, who were schooled in Canada and/or had graduate degrees from their country of origin and Canada, identified as fluent in English.



## Findings

While the objective of the study was to understand im/migrant women's challenges to integrating into the Canadian labour market, study participants pointed out that these challenges were also barriers for integrating into Canadian society.

The following are the main challenges identified. It is important to note that the thematic presentation of data is merely for highlighting the main themes of this research and for the readers' convenience. Analytically, participants' barriers to integrating into the labour force and society are intersectional.

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## Language Barrier

Most of the study participants (n=22) self-identified as limited or very limited in their ability to read, write and communicate in English. All these women associated this fact to their inability to find jobs in the mainstream Canadian labour market. Therefore, they looked for jobs that did not require them to read, write and speak in English. The following quotations exemplify the language barrier.

*My English is not good enough. So I don't have the courage to look for mainstream jobs. [S16, restaurant server, speaking in Mandarin]*

*Language was a big difficulty for me when I first came here. [...] There was this front desk job at a car repairing place. [...] There was also a front desk job at a dental clinic. Anyway, front desk jobs all turned me down. Because my English was bad. Even now my English is not good enough for those jobs. [...] I also applied for an art sales job in Chinatown. And they hired me. Later when I was working there, an old lady walked in. And I could only speak one English sentence, "how can I help you?" And the old lady replied with a lot of things, blah blah blah, asking where does that art come from? Things like that. And I wasn't able to explain one thing to her. [...] I just roughly knew what she was asking, how much was that jade ware, and where was that jade ware made. Language is the biggest obstacle in the early days. [S20, massage parlour worker, speaking in Mandarin].*

*The major difficulty was my poor English skills. I couldn't put a whole sentence together. And I couldn't understand anything. China is no longer under colony for so many years. So everybody there is speaking Chinese...[laughs] But people from like the Philippines or India, people from English colony in the past, their English abilities... even they just graduated primary school, like didn't study that much, their English is better than ours. [S19, bakery worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

*[...] my English is limited. Some friends of mine are working as casino dealers. But if I work there, I can't even understand what the manager says, so I'm not able to have this kind of job. Working at restaurants will be the only option with a better salary for me because of tips. [S25, restaurant worker, speaking in Cantonese]*

Because of the language barrier many women work for businesses owned by people of their own race and ethnicity. In the following quotations three women explain:

*Working part-time at this Chinese restaurant which is owned by Chinese, for one or two days a week, is something that I'm competent to do. So what I do now is back in the kitchen, and doesn't require to communicate with customers verbally. [...] I haven't met any difficulties. My co-workers [...] have helped me a lot. Because one or two work mates can speak English quite well. So they would help me in daily life. They are quite nice. [S16, restaurant worker, speaking in Mandarin].*

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*Because of the language barrier we have, all the jobs that I was looking for were [...] related to Chinese community, jobs that didn't have too much language requirement. In other words, the companies I worked for, the owners all have Chinese origin. Those jobs also required me to speak some English. But just some simple English for communication. Although my background and my own experience is very rich, but if I wanted to look for local jobs here in the related area, it's really hard. [S23, working in the service trade, speaking in Mandarin].*

*[...] the jobs we found after we came here were all in Chinese companies. I think in white people's companies, first there is this language thing, although I got six in my IELTS exam, but when it comes to speaking, or thinking, we're still more in the Chinese way, in terms of concepts or something. [S30, finance sector worker, speaking in Mandarin].*

## Education

Even as 50% of the study participants had some form of post-secondary education from their country of origin, many felt that they did not have sufficient education or the right kind of education to enter the mainstream Canadian labour market. This feeling was exacerbated by the lack of accreditation and recognition of foreign education in Canada. Many participants' experiences were similar to Man's concept of deskilling as it relates to Chinese immigrants in Canada whose previous education and professions are undervalued. Man writes,

Gendered and racialized institutional processes in the form of state policies and practices, professional accreditation systems, employers' requirement for 'Canadian experience' and labor market conditions marginalize Chinese immigrant women. As a result, they are being channeled into menial, part-time, insecure positions or becoming unemployed.<sup>1</sup>

The following participant has a Master's degree from China and she explains her challenges finding jobs that meet her qualifications.

*When I first came to work at the company [in Canada], I started from the lowest level, which is the assistant position. It was actually a big step down compared with the job I had before [in China]. So I don't think my diploma was recognised. [...] Maybe that situation is not so true for people who majored in engineering. But jobs like mine, which require all time communicating with people... [S18, purchasing manager, speaking in Mandarin].*

She further explained the dynamics of education and job market relations in Canada now that she is in a managerial position and involved in hiring people.

**Interviewer:** *You said that when you were looking for this job, there was a luck factor. But you also mentioned that the graduate degree you got in China is not recognised here. So did they mention that during the interview? Or they just didn't acknowledge it? The degree you have is actually a pretty high degree.*

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<sup>1</sup> G Man, 'Gender, work and migration: Deskilling Chinese immigrant women in Canada', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2004, pp. 135-148, p. 135, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2004.06.004>.

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**Participant:** *Well, yes, they didn't mention it. But because of my confidence issues, I didn't mention it either. I was also like, I am new here, so a small assistant job would be fine for me. [...] I think back then when I was interviewed, and even now when I'm interviewing other people myself, people here understand that there are many immigrants here. So your employer will put you in a very low position. Because that way they could "pay you less", right? Nowadays when I interview people, there are even people who have Doctor's degree in other countries. I know that he has already lowered his expectations when he came to interview for this position. Because you applied for this job yourself, right? That is to say, you also think that you should do this kind of job now. Not that we're deliberately putting you down. [S18, purchasing manager, speaking in Mandarin]*

Another woman who had a graduate degree from China and had taken a professional training course in accounting there, shared her experience as follows:

*I graduated from a grad school outside Canada. [...] I was looking for a job as an accountant. So I signed up for a course [in Canada]. But I wasn't able to find a job after that course. [...] Another training I took was the bartender training. That wasn't exactly like a training. But when I first came there, I knew nothing about alcohol. So I learnt how to mix a drink from my co-workers. After I got that job, I received some training. I was responsible for taking care of the cash and keys, also for hiring people. So I was kind of like a manager. [S4, undisclosed job, speaking in Cantonese].*

The following are quotes from other participants who shared their experiences.

*It's not recognised. If I translate my diploma, it isn't useful because, you know, it's not a university diploma; just a diploma for education. It's not something if I translate it, I can get a better job. Because I try once to work for a – it's not Amazon but the other one. They are looking for the diploma. 14 dollars an hour, minimum wage. And I have to bring all of those papers here, and I have to translate them, and the job was so hard. Then I get the job without doing those stuff. Same minimum wage – \$14 an hour. It's like some heavy lifting stuff. But that was the only time that they ask me about my diploma. [S2, works at COSTCO, speaking in English]*

Because education from foreign countries is not recognised in Canada, many study participants had no choice of jobs; instead, they accepted whatever job they were offered. Two women explained:

*I worked in a fishery. I worked in a chicken farm. And I worked in a bakery. As long as it paid, any job was okay for me. I didn't have choices. It was all just jobs that no one else would even look at. They couldn't find anyone else to do the work. [...] In our cases, we were the ones who were chosen. Not that there were many jobs for us to choose. That was a bakery job. If that were a car washing job, I would do that job as well. And if there was a nanny job, I would do that too. [S19, bakery worker, speaking in Mandarin].*

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*Actually, my major is no longer important. That's the situation that I can't change. Because as an immigrant here, I won't be able to find a job that uses my major perfectly. But I know many people that, even if they have professional qualifications, they're not accepted here. Like [to get] doctors' and nurses' qualifications, you have to start all over again. Or professions related to laws, like lawyers or things like that. You have to get a qualification in North America or in areas or countries that are recognised here. To be frank, it's also a kind of local protectionism, right? You come to us, and we only recognise things from North America. Right? Because only that way they can accept that only after you take educations here, or take training here, you can develop a career here. Other places abroad, like Africa or other places like China or Asia, do not match [the standards] here. But people probably are not that different. But they have their own system here. You can only adapt to that. [S21, restaurant server, speaking in Mandarin].*

## Work Experience

Likewise, participants unanimously pointed out that their past work experience from their country of origin is not recognised by Canadian employers. As a result, many have to start fresh, at the bottom of the ranks. Just as in the case when education from countries of origin is not recognised, ignoring work experience from a foreign country also leads to deskilling.

*They needed you to have work experience here. Without work experience, they wouldn't hire me, right? Normally we would go for the kind of more hard labour work. That's fine for us. But that kind of jobs also require job experiences, right? [S15, massage parlour worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

*I tried to find some [jobs]. T&T didn't hire me at that time. And I went to look for a job at restaurants. They didn't hire me either. They all required work experience. And I didn't have any work experience when I came here. [S20, massage parlour worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

*It's mainly your working experience that is under evaluation. [...] If you don't have a certain amount of experience in Canada that's related to the job you're applying, there is a ninety percent chance that you won't be considered. Your work experience abroad won't be considered. [S23, working in the service trade, speaking in Mandarin]*

*In China, I think I was very experienced since I had been working and running a company for so many years. I have many experiences. But I feel those experiences don't really work here. [S27, service industry worker, Mandarin]*



## Intersections of Barriers

The following participants point out how work experience, education, ability to speak in English and gender are all intersecting barriers to enter the labour market.

*People are definitely paid equally [in Canada]. But the difference here is, maybe because of your race, your English ability or maybe your gender, you're not even considered at all for some positions. That's where I think it may not be fair. Equal pay for equal work, that's what I see in my experience. But I think the thing that is not fair is that women like me may not have the opportunity in the very beginning. Like with my latest promotion, I was thinking that I would get a higher promotion. Not really getting a higher position, the positions are on the same level. But in my expectations... the company's structure, like who is above me and who is under me, things are a little different. Our CEO took many meetings with me and communicated with me a lot. But he feels that I'm still not ready to handle all those things. So he arranged a part of the work to some else. The things he was referring to are things like dealing with our headquarters in Europe. I accepted it eventually because I considered the situation comprehensively. But I also imagined that, if I were a man, and if I were a native here, I would get my promotions much faster. [S18, purchasing manager, speaking in Mandarin]*

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*Mainly, they would ask your previous work experience. And if you were not suitable, then you were not for the job. If they thought you were good for the job, they would accept you. And we also have a good sense of self-awareness. I mean, I would apply for the jobs that I thought I was capable of, to put it this way. Because I knew what I could or could not do, right? Then, for example, my English was not good when I first came here. So I wouldn't go for jobs with certain English language requirement. Then like job-required skills because my work background is teaching in China. So if you felt you couldn't do other jobs, you would apply for some physical works. Right? As you know, in Canada, any job that is slightly better requires a license. So, in order to get that license, you need to go to school for it. I think that is also a challenge for me. Because we're not in a very good economic condition. So, for example, if I want to get a degree for preschool education or a teacher qualification, I have to go to college. And you need money, it takes time, you need to pay tuition fee... So it's a bit difficult.* [S3, self-employed teacher, speaking in Cantonese]

*If I came here when I was younger, I could learn the language better and take tests for some certificates, then I could do the same kind of work as I did in China. I think it depends on everyone's age, and family and all sorts of situations. After that we could do the same things we did in China. But most of the people I know here, because of language problems, and because they need to make a living, they need to earn the money to cover their expenses, so they may choose to work at a Chinese supermarket, or in a non-English speaking working environment. And they won't get rich but they won't be starving. However, they will have little time to study. Because if they take the time to study, they wouldn't have income. They may have a family to support. A lot of people I know are like that.* [S26, self-employed in retail clothing, speaking in Mandarin]

## Family Responsibility

While not a very common situation, some participants pointed to family responsibilities that shaped their entry into the paid workforce. That is, for some women, their family responsibility of caring for parents and other family members back in their country of origin, or in Canada, meant that they were not in a position to choose their desired job or the employer. Having a job as soon as they arrive in Canada is a necessity, because families in their country of origin are financially dependent on them. The following quote exemplifies this situation:

*She is saying that she's not married, she doesn't have kids, but she has the responsibility of taking care of her parents because she's in charge of the house. You know, because her father is not young and he's not working anymore, so she has to take care of everything pretty much.* [S12, house cleaning worker, speaking Spanish through a translator]

For study participants who had family in Canada, whether children or parents, the responsibility of caring for them limited their opportunities in finding jobs.

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*I go take care of them when I have time. It's not that they couldn't take care of themselves. Just that my parents are in their old ages, so I help them cook meals and do grocery shopping. [S14, retail sales worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

*If I was going to work full time, I wouldn't be able to take care of my family. Because my husband also wanted to work. So, that was difficult to balance. [...] Our kid was still young. There would be a lot of things that couldn't be done. [S23, working in the service trade, speaking in Mandarin]*

*When I was learning English in the beginning, I was a volunteer in a library. And then they opened some positions for part-time jobs or something. Then they thought that if I wanted that job, I could do it. But I had to take care of my kid. And our parents are here too. So I didn't take that job. [S27, service industry worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

## Intolerance to Diversity

Research participants who worked in stores, restaurants or any other business operated or frequented by white Canadians reported experiencing passive discrimination by their employers and the clients/customers. Participants reported lack of tolerance by employers and clients/customers because of their accents and their inability to “fit” within Canadian culture. The quotations exemplify these experiences:

*I love this job and I start in my country and get some certificate and work and so easy there. And after that, I said, “OK, I want to learn more. [...] I want to go somewhere and learn about, especially about the beauty.” And I came here and choose this major and I study and get the certificate. But I think so easy but not so easy. [...] I think everything about my language and sometimes there are different culture sometimes and sometimes so personality. OK, I doesn't like to speak too much. You know, for example, I remember I had a client said me, “Which colour do you think is beauty?” OK my idea and your is so different. And I couldn't say, I prefer, for example, red but you doesn't like the red. Can I help you? OK, this season, for example, red or yellow. And this season, for example, the darker but I couldn't say especially this one. And my client not happy. I told my co-worker, yes, they say, “No, this is so beauty.” [S1, aesthetician, speaking in English]*

*In my last job, the bartender job, I had [...] issues as well. Because I'm Chinese. Maybe [...] like different manners. Maybe some white guys felt that I wasn't polite enough. Because when it got busy, I would just mix drinks very fast. And I didn't care to say hello, or ask them how they're doing. And I wouldn't give too much time to each customer. Because there were so many people waiting. So some customers thought I was rude. [...] Some customers were like, maybe they have higher standards, so they thought I just delivered the drinks to them and I was rude. Because I wasn't trying to [make conversation]. [...] Occasionally, there were some customers rolling their eyes at me, and saying “Chinese”, this and that. [S4, undisclosed job, speaking in English].*

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*I speak OK English. But I think the fact that I had an accent it was difficult. Because at the beginning I thought I could get a... I don't know, a job similar to the one I had when I was in Chile, in either pharmaceutical or I don't know, something like that. But, yeah, I think my accent it was bringing a lot of questions. Like oh, what are you doing in Canada? What's your status? For how long have you been living here? And when you're a newcomer and you're a woman and you're a single mother like me you don't want to answer those questions. [...] They said that you cannot – you're open to work in any type of industry but you cannot work in the sex industry or you cannot work in the massage parlour or anything related to erotic massage or anything like that. So I think that's discrimination because it's basically indirectly focused on women. Because, let's be real, I mean, what's the percentage of males doing that? [S24, hairdresser and sex worker, speaking in English]*

Participants also noted that employers' lack of tolerance to diversity resulted in barriers to getting jobs in mainstream employments

*But of course, I know it's very difficult. With a white person, a yellow person, and a Black person, of course people will hire the white person. Many people around me had that kind of experience. They just said that they didn't get any jobs. But other people did. They are on the same educational level. But the companies hired other people. [S14, salesperson in a clothing store, speaking in Mandarin]*

*I think... like, in their mindset...like just by glancing at your name, they won't even offer you an interview. [S19, bakery worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

Asian participants discussed the anti-Asian sentiments what are ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic in their everyday interactions at work.

*Now there is this COVID-19, right? There are some people say that, oh, COVID-19 is from Wuhan, from China. And they say things like, you're Chinese blah, blah, blah. [...] Yeah, that did happen in China, in Wuhan. But that kind of thing is a global issue, alright? It's not like we brought that or something. That's pretty extreme. Like when you judge something, you need to be fair, right? [S21, restaurant server, speaking in Mandarin]*

The account below by the Chilean participant further articulates how employers and clients/customers undervalue employees of colour. From this participant's experiences it is clear that she is being subjected to the assumption that women of colour and immigrant women are here to do the thankless task. Such assumptions are forms of passive discrimination.

*She says that in some situations, because we're Hispanics, a different colour, she's been facing some kind of trouble to find a specific job that she might want to get into. She says that sometimes white people, they're looking at her over their shoulder. Like seeing that she's cleaning and because she's cleaning, you know, some white people do a mess by showing her that that's what she's there for, you know, to clean up again. So it's a little*

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*frustrating for her because, you know, you're doing a job and they don't really value the effort. She felt that it was intentional. [S9, construction site cleaner, speaking through a translator]*

Canadian culture is popularly known for its politeness and friendliness. It is also known as the country that is tolerant and accepting of other cultures. Classified as both multicultural and nationalist, Canada is ranked highly as one of desired countries to live in. Vancouver, one of the largest metropolises, represents Canadian values to facilitate a high quality of life for its constituency. On the one hand, the participants' experiences in this study, to some extent, cast a shadow on the Canadian culture.

On the other hand, despite having experienced limited opportunities and differential treatment, many women in this study perceived Canada as a non-prejudiced country. Many believed that the challenges they face are the result of their personal limitations of not speaking English, not having the right education level or the necessary work experience. In the quotes below the woman, who no longer lives in Canada, clearly articulates that the deskilling of immigrants to a great extent is not the result of racial biases:

*If she has the ability to communicate in English well and has expertise, she could land on a good position. I heard that from my friend. She said that situations in Canada are pretty good. Because I have many Chinese friends there. They said that they still feel a little rejected. [...] Other obstacles... Many of my friends are immigrated from China. They are university graduates with professional skills. Many of them are skilled immigrants. But after they immigrated, most of them didn't work in their old professions or old field anymore. They mostly are running a restaurant or a hotel, or a grocery store. [...] There are even some [who] work in car repairing business or moving houses. You know these kind of more lower, physical labour work. People who had a relatively high position in China, after they came to Canada, it seems difficult for them to find a position of the same level. [S5, massage parlour worker, speaking in English].*

Other women concurred:

*I don't feel any racist stuff here. But sometimes it's like if you go for a job interview, you know more English, or you know more language, they prefer to hire some people with more educated and more to know. As I see, it's like that. Sometimes it's – I don't feel that they're racist. They're looking for the company's right people. [S2, works at COSTCO, speaking in English].*

*Based on my experience... I don't think there is such kind of racial discrimination in Canada. I think Canada is a country of fairness and justice. [S3, self-employed teacher, speaking in Cantonese].*



## Exploitation

Research participants predominantly perceived the mainstream labour market owned and operated by white Canadians as non-discriminatory and fair. However, they often perceived business operated by non-white people as exploitative. They reported various forms of exploitations – from unequal distribution of tips to not receiving payment for the work done. The following quotes articulate the diverse exploitative situations.

*The companies I worked for were mainly owned by Chinese bosses. And so there was one where there seemed to be a wage difference. It was a short-term job, just a two- or three-month job at a restaurant. While I was working there, I felt about my tips... how to say it.... There was a difference. But the owner of the restaurant, he has Asian origins, but he was born here. And I felt it was a little unfair in terms of my tips... My tips were less than the others who were from his hometown. Like those people were chatting a lot and not doing as much work as I did, but their tips were more than mine. [S23, working in the service trade, speaking in Mandarin]*

Women reported experiencing exploitative working conditions regardless of whether they had a work permit or not:

*She says that when they found this employer, he offered her a job, but the work permit would be from October until December, but because the employer will have to spend*

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money with the lawyer fees, he refused to continue with the job offer. So, that's why she feels that she was used by the employer just for a little time, but there was not really the intention of offering the permanent job [...] She felt cheated, because this employer didn't really want to take responsibility by offering permanent job. [...] She says that this employer was a Canadian citizen, but he came from El Salvador, so Hispanic. After she left the employer, she found another job but felt they were cheating too. Because once they realised that the work permit was going to end, they offered her to keep the job as long as she'd keep working long hours ... At the end she decided to quit, because she was not getting the pay she was offered. They take advantage of your situation. [...] She says that the majority of people she's been working with, they're Spanish speaking people, so [language barrier is] not really an issue. [...] Before going to work with this second employer she was with no job for like a month. And then when she left the second employer, because she was not getting paid, she was without a job for like three months. [...] She says that her [current job] is OK, but sometimes she doesn't really like it, because of the way people treat her. She says that sometimes she gets bad reactions from her boss, who is a woman. She's Hispanic too. Her boss start yelling at her if things don't get done on time. [S10, construction site cleaner, speaking in Spanish through a translator].

She's saying that because she doesn't know English, she was looking for a job on Facebook and that's where she found her first job which was landscaping. But they were actually looking for a man. So it was a bit difficult because she cannot do what a man is able to do, like carrying heavy loads. She was trying so hard but she couldn't continue doing that. [...] [In the second job] she wasn't getting a pay cheque as it should be. They were keeping two weeks salary, you know, holding it so she can continue working but at the end of the month, she will only get part of it, not the whole. She says that, you know, not having a work permit, open work permit, people take advantage of that and they don't pay you. When she was supposed to get her pay cheque, she talked to the person in charge but she got the answer to wait and wait and wait for days. She says that sometimes she realises that she has to accept whatever is available because there's no choice. [S12, construction site cleaner, speaking in Spanish through a translator].

I had to do many things – clean and take care of the reception, and work with actual people's hair – but I was earning too little money. And I didn't sign any contract when I got there, because the owner said like no, I'll try you for a couple weeks and I'll pay you cash. So I think people take advantage of you when they think and know you're vulnerable. [S24, hairdresser, sex worker, speaking in Mandarin].

In addition to taking advantage of women's vulnerability due to their precarious immigration status, women also reported other forms of exploitation.

It's said that Chinese people tend to take advantage of Chinese people. Because we are from the same origin, it's easier to find [a job]. But the salaries they pay are mostly low. Just like what I told you, I didn't get any tips for the first three days that I worked. Not even a penny. So from the three-day hard work I could only earn a quarter of the tips. But even

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*before the third day, there were already blisters on my feet. [S25, restaurant worker, speaking in Cantonese]*

*I felt very tired. And then, I didn't really have any freedom. Even sometimes taking a bathroom break... I felt that my boss was watching over me. I didn't feel quite free. Well, he just felt that he paid you money to work, right? Then you need to work non-stop. You can't let your work time go wasted, right? I remember at that time my son was delivering dishes there. He had like four or five dishes on one tray. The dishes were piled on one another. God. Sometimes if you didn't pay enough attention, you would break the dishes. And it was very heavy. [S3, self-employed teacher, speaking in Cantonese].*

## Future Aspirations

Towards the end of the interview, we asked research participants what their ideal job would be. Their answers varied. Most of them hoped that they could find work that matched their educational background, or work in the same area that they used to work in their country of origin. However, some wished that they had their own business and could be their own boss.

*She says that she would like to work as a quality control person, making sure everything goes right, you know. Like the time that she was working back home as a quality control person in a packing company or something like that. She likes doing that. She really enjoys organising things, making sure everything is OK. [S10, construction site cleaner, speaking in Spanish through a translator]*

*She says that she is having in mind someday eventually to own a restaurant because she loves cooking and she is looking for ways to help her family by running a restaurant business. [S11, house cleaner, speaking in Spanish through a translator]*

*She is saying that she would love to do babysitting. She loves kids, so she thinks that it will be easier than anything else. Maybe in a childcare centre. [S12, construction site cleaner, speaking in Spanish through a translator]*

*If you ask what I want to do most, I still want to go back to do my old business and make more money. And open my own jewellery shop here in Vancouver. Because other people in my family are all in the jewellery business. And I was growing up watching them do that. So [...] after I make a lot of money, I will open my own jewellery store, and live a normal life with it. That is my ideal. [S13, massage parlour worker speaking in Mandarin]*

*Ideal job... An ideal job would be investing in something if I had money, and just collecting the rent. Not hard labour. Yeah. Not a hard job. I wouldn't need to go out every day to work. The work I like... is jobs in travelling industry. [S14, salesperson in clothing store, speaking in Mandarin]*

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*Three characteristics....so... it could support me and let me take care of my family. It should pay enough. And it wouldn't be sneaky like our jobs now. It could be out in the public. A job that would give me that kind of feeling. And it would be something I like doing. [S15, massage parlour worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

*OK. if we're talking about work, I think it should be an office job. A management type of job. Not just a labour job. [...] I think it would go back to my major. What I learnt in college; I should work in that area. [S19, bakery worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

*I'd like running my own business. Or working as an assistant at a dental clinic [S20, Massage parlour worker, speaking in Mandarin]*

*I really want to work at a coffee shop in a university. Because in Canada, my language ability limits many things. I'm almost fifty now, right? At my age, my English is not possible to get any better. And before, I had been working at coffee shops in middle schools. So my dream is that I could work at a university cafe. So I could get to know how college students are living their life, and how they study and their eating habits. Why? Because my daughter is in college now. [S22, school café worker, speaking in Mandarin].*

Some women discussed their frustrations in attaining their dream jobs. As we can see from the quote below, the obstacles to achieving these dream jobs is believed to be the language barrier, educational qualification, and their age.

*The dream I had first when I first came here was to work in a large foreign travel agency or organisation. To have a stable job. But so far, for so many years, I haven't achieved that. Now, as I get older, I don't really want a full-time job. So my current plan is, for example, to get a license for a touring agency, or to take group tours or for an insurance broker or for real estate agency. But to do that, the first obstacle is the language barrier. Although I think that my ability is enough, I could absolutely do that, but there is still the language thing. If I'm going to get those licenses, that [the language] is a troublesome thing for me. I took the language tests as required. But I was only a little far from passing the exam. So I'm just stuck there, and that makes feel... how to say... very annoyed. I regret now that all these years I've been here, I didn't study. With time, I definitely would have gotten a high school degree or some other kind of a diploma. But after I came here, I had to make a living, so I had to work. I feel that the biggest obstacle for immigrants here is the lack of local experience and the difficulty with language. Of course, for our next generation, for our kids, these things are no longer problems. [S23, working in the service trade, speaking in Mandarin]*

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# From Research to Action

In response to the findings, SWAN delivered several action-oriented workshops and information sessions. These sessions aimed to enhance skills in order to support women on their pathways to greater social, economic, and labour inclusion.

English proficiency arose as a key factor impacting inclusion. SWAN partnered with an immigrant- and refugee-serving community organisation to offer English classes. The low-barrier English classes are free, accessible to women with any immigration status (or lack thereof), do not require legal names, and are offered at various community sites. Moving forward, SWAN plans to incorporate informational and labour market-related topics of English conversation. These include topics such as ‘Negotiating Identity: Strategies to Navigate the Canadian Labour Market’ or ‘Navigating Small Talk and Other Local Norms in the Workplace’.

Many economic and labour market accessibility questions, including those related to work permits and immigration status, arose in the conversations that followed the interviews. To provide information about the various pathways to immigration, and in turn work permits, SWAN hosted a multi-lingual information session. The law student presenters paid particular attention to securing immigration status (and work permits) for migrant women who are victims of trafficking, are discriminated against based on sexual orientation or gender identity, or have experienced violence.

The study also provided valuable insight into the barriers both sex workers and other migrant labourers in Vancouver experience to social and economic inclusion. As a result of the study and the collaborative efforts of migrant worker-serving organisations to address the self-identified needs of participants, SWAN will continue its advocacy efforts in policy fora with other NGOs and governments to bring forward the realities voiced by the participants.

## Conclusion

The migrant women who participated in this research shared a number of challenges to finding productive, well-paid, and rewarding work, and thus integrating into Canadian society. Most of the women described how the limited ability to read, write, and communicate in English prevented them from finding good jobs. Additionally, past work experience from their countries of origin were not recognised by Canadian employers and lack of accreditation and recognition of foreign education limited their opportunities to find work in their area of expertise. Many women also spoke about how family responsibilities in Canada or their countries of origin added an extra burden as it became an absolute necessity to find work immediately. Furthermore, women experienced passive discrimination by employers for their inability to ‘fit’ within Canadian culture. All of this meant that they often could rely only on other migrants from their

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country or region of origin and accept any type of work they were offered, which in some cases involved exploitative working conditions.

Despite these challenges, the women generally perceived Canada as a just and fair country where they could achieve their life goals of earning a living for themselves and their families. When asked about their personal aspirations, many women shared that they would like to start their own business or take on more responsibilities in their current jobs. It is clear that migrant women are ready to contribute to Canadian society if given the opportunity. The Canadian government should support them in these efforts by facilitating their access to regular migration status, language classes, and decent work opportunities. The government should also combat negative stereotypes and discrimination of migrants and promote social inclusion and equal opportunities for all. Lastly, given the invaluable work of civil society organisations like SWAN with migrant women, the Canadian government should consult them in the development and implementation of policies on migration and human trafficking, and support their work.



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