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Express Entry and Economic Migration Pathways to Canada: Opportunities and Barriers for South Asian Women

Vathsala Illesinghe, Nishi Mitra vom Berg & Khalid Iftekhar

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**Express Entry and Economic Migration Pathways to Canada:
Opportunities and Barriers for South Asian Women**

Vathsala Illesinghe
Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada

Nishi Mitra vom Berg
TATA Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India

Khalid Iftekhar
Open University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Series Editors: Anna Triandafyllidou and Usha George

Guest Editor: Marshia Akbar



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Abstract

Canadian immigration policies, premised on liberal, multicultural ideals, are challenged with the task of balancing economic priorities with family reunification and commitments to human rights and gender equality. The pathways for economic migration to Canada have changed over the years to balance these aims with labor market needs and outcomes. Using published data and information gathered through a series of community consultations in four cities across Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka, this paper examines South Asian women's economic migration to Canada in the context of recent changes to selection and ranking of applicants. Working from a feminist lens, the changing trends, new opportunities, and persistent barriers to women's full participation are discussed in the context of varying states of gender (in)equalities in their countries of origin. Challenges to upholding Canada's stated commitments to family reunification and gender equality while applying immigration policy across a wide range of settings are also included.

Keywords: Women, Immigration Policy, South Asian, Canada, Migration

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Background	2
2.1. Express Entry and the Changes to Economic Migration Pathways.....	3
3. The Study Settings.....	4
4. Methodology.....	4
5. Results	5
5.1. Participants	5
5.2. Economic Migration to Canada: Recent Trends	6
5.3. Women’s Migration through Express Entry	6
6. Themes	7
6.1. Opportunities: Economic Pathways in a Gender Equitable Context.....	7
6.2. Barriers: Economic Pathways in the Context of Gender Inequality	8
6.3. Express Entry and the Structural Barriers to Women’s Participation	9
7. Discussion	10
8. Limitations	11
9. Conclusions.....	12
References	13

1. Introduction

Canada has a long history of immigration and settlement and one of the most comprehensive immigrant selection systems among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (OECD, 2019). Premised on liberal, multicultural ideals, contemporary immigration management is complex and challenging for Canada; it is a constant balancing of economic priorities of skilled migration with family reunification and international commitments to people facing humanitarian crises across the world (Simmons, 2010).

In 1962, Canada abandoned its Eurocentric, country-of-origin based immigrant selection policies opening pathways for skilled migrants from all over the world to work and live in Canada. Immigrant selection policies¹ over the next three decades reflected its desire to improve global competitiveness as a destination for skilled migrants. In 1967, Canada pioneered a points system for selecting migrants based on skill (economic class) while at the same time admitting their dependents and making provisions for sponsoring family members (family class) (Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, n.d). Since 1996, economic migrants and their accompanying dependents have been the largest category of immigrants admitted to Canada each year (Simmons, 2010).

Over the years, the points system has been the subject of substantive revisions in response to changing policy goals, labor market requirements, and demographic trends (Ahmad, 2020). One of the most recent and significant changes was in 2015 with the introduction of Express Entry-a new application management system. For the first time, applicants eligible to migrate under the economic classes would be placed in a candidate pool and ranked against each other. While the system of ranking was introduced to allow for efficient processing of applications, the benchmarks used for ranking was designed to pick candidates with the highest potential for labor market integration in Canada (Vineberg, 2019). By limiting application processing to a selected, pre-determined number of Candidates Express Entry was expected to create an efficient system to meet Federal and Provincial governments' needs for skilled labor (Government of Canada, 2019).

Historically, women's migration to Canada has been managed separately and differently from that of men. For example, in the early eighteenth century, women of European descent would arrive in Canada (New France at the time) to live, bear children, and work in the new settlements (McIvor, 1996). With the industrialization of Canada in the twentieth century, as settler-colonial women took up paid-work outside the home, women of non-European descent were allowed entry to fill gaps in the domestic and caregiving labor (McIvor, 1996). In contemporary Canada, immigrant women have had access to the same economic migration pathways as men since the 1960s. But most women who migrated to Canada in the last four decades have arrived as sponsored spouses or dependent family members (Dobrowolsky, Arat-Koc, & Gabriel, n.d.).

Immigrant women's labor market outcomes across different pathways in terms of employment rates and incomes have been relatively poor when compared to men (Hou, Frank, & Schimmele, 2010; Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2017; Wong, 2020; Yssaad & Fields, 2018). Women from Asian countries of origin have had some of the highest unemployment rates, higher than that of immigrant men and non-immigrant men and women in Canada (Challinor, 2011; Yssaad & Fields, 2018). With almost a quarter of the

¹ In this paper, 'policy' is used in its broadest sense to refer to the government regulations, laws, bills, statutes, initiatives, and programs, that govern policy-making and practicing venues (Weible, 2013, pg.4).

female population in Canada now being foreign-born, efforts to improve immigrant labor market integration must include an understanding of the opportunities and barriers for women in the context of recent changes to economic migration pathways. In the expansive field of migration studies, gender-based analyses still constitute an area where there are large gaps, especially research from specific countries or regions of origin that constitute major migrant flows to Canada.

Using information gathered from literature and through community consultations in four cities in Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka this paper aims to understand South Asian women's participation in economic pathways for permanent migration to Canada. Focusing on migration trends since the introduction of Express Entry in 2015, the opportunities, constraints, and barriers to women's participation are examined.

2. Background

In 1967, Canada pioneered a points-based selection system for economic migrants replacing a system that was discriminatory on nationality, citizenship, and ethnic origin (Simmons, *Immigration and Canada: Global and Transnational Perspectives*, 2010). The Immigration Act legislated in 1976 regulated migrant selection based certain criteria – the level of education, training and experience in occupations-in-demand, and knowledge of the Canadian official languages English and French (Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, n.d). The strong human capital focus of the points system was critiqued in the past for being exclusionary to women. The policy of selecting people based on certain criteria, seemingly to remove the gender and racial bias in immigration policy, feminists argued, resulted in gender-based discrimination of women (Arat-Koc 1999; Dobrowolski 2010). Because points for work experience was tied to specific occupations., gendered norms about men's and women's work in the countries of origin, it was argued created a structural barrier to women's participation (Arat-Koc 1999; Dobrowolski 2010; Kofman & Raghuram, 2006).

Over time, the points-based system has changed. The most recent and significant change in 2015 introduced a system of applicant ranking (while still maintaining the points system) based on human capital benchmarks. A policy aimed at shifting immigrant selection priorities from human capital gains to better labor market integration in Canada (OECD, 2019; Vineberg, 2019). Express Entry sought to improve the efficiency of application processing in the Federal Skilled Worker (FSW), Federal Skilled Trades, Canadian Experience Class (CEC), and part of the Provincial Nominee Programs (PNP). In addition to removing the highly critiqued occupation-specific eligibility criteria and occupation-based quota, there were other changes, including raised benchmarks for official language test scores and reduced points for age over 40 years (Government of Canada, 2019; Vineberg, 2019; Weiner, 2008).

Although there has been a large body of work focusing on economic migration in the past, there is not much focus on recent experiences and outcomes with the changes to the application processing, candidate selection and ranking under Express Entry. Apart from official government reports and a few publications (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018; Vineberg, 2019; Wong, 2020; Yssaad & Fields, 2018) gender-based analyses of economic pathways as they relate to specific countries or regions of origin is an area of research with major gaps.

2.1. Express Entry and the Changes to Economic Migration Pathways

Express Entry introduced several stages to the application processing - an Expression of Interest stage (EOI), a candidate pool, and a system of ranking. In addition to the assessment of eligibility at the EOI stage (based on the points system),² applicants are given a Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) score and ranked against others in the Express Entry pool (Government of Canada, 2019).

The CRS score is based on several benchmarks and has two equal components - core points and additional points. Core points up to a maximum of 600 are awarded for applicant's human capital (age, education, official language proficiency, and Canadian work experience), and accompanying spouse's factors (education, official language proficiency, and Canadian work experience). Additional points, also up to a maximum of 600, are given for arranged employment in Canada, post-secondary education in Canada, second official language proficiency, and siblings in Canada.³ An applicant's CRS score determines their rank in the pool and the likelihood of being invited to apply for permanent migration to Canada. The CRS score and ranking are dynamic and subject to change as applicants enter or leave the pool, or when the criteria used for ranking are adjusted by IRCC (Government of Canada, 2019).

When it was first introduced in 2015, CRS benchmarks awarded 600 additional points to candidates with a job offer in Canada moving them to the top of the Express Entry pool (Vineberg, *Improving Canada's Selection of Economic Migrants*, 2019). Although this prioritised people with the highest chance of labour market success in Canada, most highly skilled migrants without job offers were excluded in this process. The Government of Canada reduced the number of additional points awarded for job offers to 200 in 2016 to make the system fairer and equitable. This policy change, some argue, has re-shifted the aims of Express Entry from labor market integration to human capital gains (Vineberg, 2019).

CRS score-based ranking also introduced a process of determination for accompanying spouses based on human capital points. Unlike in the past when spousal points were optional, a spouse who wishes to accompany an applicant under Express Entry must contribute 40 out of the 600 core CRS points for their education, official language proficiency, and Canadian work experience. Applicants not claiming spousal points, as notified on the IRCC website, will apply "as if [...they] don't have a spouse or partner" (Government of Canada, 2019). Spouses not-accompanying applicants can be later sponsored by them, using a process similar to those applied under the family class. Once a principal applicant assumes residency in Canada they can submit an application for sponsorship providing that they can demonstrate financial capacity to support their partner in Canada (Government of Canada, 2020a).

This paper focussed on two aspects of Express Entry as it applied to candidates in the three countries of origin in South Asia; that is the system and the human capital benchmarks used for ranking and inclusion/exclusion of a spouse based on them.

² Only the FSW program eligibility is based on the points' system. The CEC and Federal Trades program have different eligibility criteria. For the CEC, there is no minimum educational qualification requirement and language test benchmarks are lower than for the FSW program (OECD, 2019).

³ Provincial nominees also receive additional points (Government of Canada, 2019).

3. The Study Settings

The South Asian region has been increasingly more open to international labor migration since the 1970s (Bhat & Rather, 2016; Nazneen, Hossain, & Chopra, 2019). Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka are considered emerging markets and developing economies that have undergone structural reforms since the 1980s and 1990s with an aim to boost growth. These countries are faced with unbalanced growth, widespread poverty and unemployment and problems of skewed education and skilling with growing middle-class aspirations accompanying economic liberalization. Even though the three countries have different growth trajectories, together they are one of the world's fastest growing regions and contribute young and large work force to global growth (Goretti, Kiara, Salgado, & Guide, 2019). The three countries are also shaped by shared histories of colonization, persistent economic and political instability, and ongoing conflicts among its different ethno-racial groups (Barbora, Thieme, Siegmann, Menon, & Gurung, 2008).

In all of South Asia, patriarchal values and practices impact women's lives, health, and livelihoods. Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage at 52 percent with India following closely at 47 percent (UNICEF, n.d.) Combined with unequal access to education and poor control over resources and decision making, women in these three countries have been systematically disadvantaged compared to men. Some indicators of gender parity at the country levels, for example, labor force participation rates for women, are similar for the three countries at around 25% to 35% (Solotaroff, George, Kuriakose, & Sethi, 2020; The Global Economy, n.d.). There are wide variations in other indicators such as access to education; Sri Lanka performs better than India and Bangladesh in adult literacy and school enrollment for girls (Solotaroff, et al., 2020). Across these countries, although there are regional variations, women are still severely underrepresented in community leadership and political decision making. In India and Sri Lanka, women's place in politics has been largely dynastic and symbolic with representation in parliament not more than 10 percent (Nazneen, et al., 2019).

The status of women in these three South Asian countries is both regressive and progressive at the same time. While underlying patriarchal norms are slow to change, there are many examples of contemporary feminist organizing against traditional value systems and examples of women contesting and (re) negotiating gender norms (Feldman, 2001; De Alwis, 2002; Nazneen, et al., 2019; Samath, 2009; Shukla, 2015). With relatively better access to education, work, and opportunities for travel and networking, some of the younger women from urban cities have a better chance at exercising agency and advocating for their rights to decision making at the household level (Bhasin, K., 2000; Chopra, Osella, & Osella, 2004; De Mel, Peiris, & Gomez, 2013; Nazneen, Hossain, & Chopra, 2019).

At the same time, family plays an important role in socializing women into gender roles, marriage and divorce are tied to women's sense of self, and masculine norms and attitudes continue to determine the distribution and access to power (Abeysekara & Amarasuriya, 2010; De Mel et al., 2013). As a region yet not comfortable with the idea of 'an empowered woman' there is widespread pushback against public displays of women's activism, organizing, and demonstrations (Abeysekara & Amarasuriya, 2010; Arora, 2019; Weib, 2014).

4. Methodology

Two sources of information are included in this paper: published data and outcomes of a series of consultations with key informants in Colombo, Dhaka, Mumbai, and New Delhi. Published data were gathered from the Government of Canada (2020g) 'Open Government'

data portal, IRCC annual program reviews and reports to the parliament as well as other published papers. Most of the consultations were completed between May 2019 and February 2020-before the global lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the consultations were held in the countries' respective capital cities Dhaka and Colombo. In India, key informants from Mumbai as well as the capital city New Delhi were consulted.

The selection of these four sites is both conceptual and practical as the authors had long-standing community connections and networks in these cities. All four cities were also likely to provide access to immigration lawyers, consultants, and language trainers as they normally tend to organize themselves around the respective locations of the Canadian High Commissions and Canada visa application centers (VFS Global) in each country. These sites also provided access to the Universities, Research Centers, and some of the not-for-profit agencies involved in this field of work.

The three authors of this paper led the research work in each of their respective countries of origin. While they had lived and worked in these countries, for the most part, they had also lived outside them as economic migrants, students, or dependents. Existing connections to academia and networks with community organizations were leveraged to identify and invite key informants for this study. Most consultations were in-person individual or group meetings held before the travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic; a few of the meetings were held over the phone afterwards. The authors and/or locally based research assistants facilitated the meetings in either a native language or in English based on participants' preferences.

The data analysis is gender-based and rooted in feminist perspectives recognizing that diverse groups of women, men, and non-binary people have different experiences based on their social locations. It challenges western assumptions of homogeneity and universality of "third-world" women's experiences (Mohanty, 1984). While recognizing women's agency and individuality as uniquely situated complex subjects, this work also aims to contextualize their experiences within the varying and dynamic states of gender in each of these settings.

The following results section includes a description of the participants, gender-disaggregated data showing recent trends in economic migration pathways more generally and specifically in relation to the South Asian settings, and thematic descriptions drawn from the consultations. Summative findings from the consultations and some of the representative (de-identified) quotes are presented under three broad themes-Opportunities: economic pathways in a gender-equitable context; Barriers: economic pathways in gender-inequitable contexts; and Express Entry and the structural barriers to women's participation.

5. Results

5.1. Participants

Across the three sites, 24 participants representing immigration-related service providers including immigration lawyers and consultants, language trainers, and organizations supporting labor rights and women's rights as well as academics affiliated with local Universities in Colombo, Dhaka, Mumbai, and Delhi participated in the consultations. All the participating immigration lawyers and consultants were men. Except for a few of academics and one agency representative who identified as male, all the other participants were women. Some of the immigration lawyers lived and worked in multiple locations in Canada, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and a few other countries. Those who identified as immigration consultants worked in their respective countries of origin. The academics were

experts in diverse fields of study ranging from Social Sciences and Humanities to Gender Studies and Anthropology. Representatives of labor and women's rights organizations had different backgrounds ranging from Gender Studies to Health and Social Sciences; most of them had worked in the not-for-profit sector long term.

5.2. Economic Migration to Canada: Recent Trends

In 2019, Canada admitted 109,595 principal applicants and their accompanying family members processed through Express Entry. The majority of them were admitted under the FSW program followed by the Canadian Experience Class and the Provincial Nominee Program (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2020). When both principal applicants and their dependents are included, almost equal proportions of women and men have been admitted through these programs. However, when the principal applicants admitted under the economic classes are considered, the proportion of women continues to be lower than the number of men as it has been in the past (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2020; 2019; 2018; 2017).

In terms of the countries of origin, 25% of all immigrants admitted to Canada in 2019 was of Indian origin (Government of Canada, 2020d). They also accounted for almost 50% of the people who entered Canada through economic classes in 2019 - a statistic that has shown a steady increase since 2015 when it was only 19% (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2017).

In 2019, 815 economic migrants arrived from Sri Lanka,⁴ almost doubling the number the arrived in 2015 (Government of Canada, 2020e). They will add to the 200,000 or so Sri Lankans living in Canada (Government of Canada, 2020b). Although about a quarter of them arrived as refugees prior to 2010 during the civil war in Sri Lanka (Statistics Canada, 2018), Canada is one of the leading destination countries for Sri Lankan labour migrants outside of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (Doan, n.d.). It is likely to continue to be an important country of destination for Sri Lankans who have ties to the largest Tamil diaspora outside of India.

From 2015 to 2019, about 2000 Bangladeshi's have been admitted under the economic classes⁵ every year (Government of Canada, 2020e). Bangladeshi migration to Canada shows an increasing trend becoming one of the more recently-added destination countries following the Gulf Cooperation Countries, the UK, and the USA (Etzold & Mallick, 2015). It is estimated that there are 100,000 Bangladeshi people in Canada (High Commission for Bangladesh, Ottawa, n.d.).

5.3. Women's Migration through Express Entry

The proportion of women submitting applications as economic migrants has shown an upward trend reaching 41% by the end of 2019 from 30% in 2015 (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2020; 2018). This pattern is also consistent with the increasing proportions of successful applications - women admitted to Canada under economic classes across several countries of origin have increased proportionality (table 1). By 2019, almost 40% of the Indian citizens admitted under Express Entry were women.

⁴ Includes FSW, CEC, Caregiver, Atlantic Immigration Pilot Programs, and the PNP

⁵ Includes FSW, CEC, Caregiver, Atlantic Immigration Pilot Programs, PNP, and Business (Investor) groups

From Pakistan and Egypt, other developing countries among the top 10 countries of origin for economic migrants, the proportions of women have varied around 30%. Among Bangladeshi citizens admitted in 2017 and 2018, around 30% were women. Data for Sri Lanka is not available from the sources cited here as it would be aggregated under the 'other' group with several countries of origin. For comparison, admissions from France, the UK, and the USA and are also included in table 1.

Table 1. The Proportions of Women and Men admitted through EE 2017 – 2019⁶ by the Applicant's Country of Citizenship

Country of citizenship	2017		2018		2019 [#]	
	Women%	Men%	Women%	Men%	Women%	Men%
France	42.7	57.3	43.8	56.2	48.2	51.8
United Kingdom	38.0	62.0	27.1	72.9	38.8	61.2
United States	39.6	60.4	27.9	72.1	42.7	57.3
India	32.8	67.2	23.3	76.7	38.2	61.8
Bangladesh	27.0	73.0	31.4	68.6	*	*
Pakistan	26.8	73.2	19.2	80.8	33.6	66.4
Other	42.9	57.1	43.8	56.2	44.5	55.5

#Preliminary data subject to change *Data not reported/not among top 10 countries in 2019

Source (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2020)

6. Themes

6.1. Opportunities: Economic Pathways in a Gender Equitable Context

From a country of origin perspective, with Express Entry application processing being almost entirely online, immigration lawyers and consultants in these four cities take on a substantive role as frontline contacts and sources of information available and accessible to applicants. According to the representatives from this group that were consulted, anyone able to meet the program requirements, regardless of their gender, can potentially migrate through economic pathways. From this perspective, an immigration consultant based in Colombo argued, barriers to economic migration are not gendered. As gender is not an eligibility criterion for the economic classes and/or subsequent scoring and ranking in the Express Entry pool, they considered Express Entry to be gender-equitable in principal.

Express Entry is not based on gender. It is based on their abilities, assessment, skills, points. Whether it is a man or a woman, if you can go through the point system you can go, there is no gender bias. [it is based] merely on whether they pass the tests and reach the points. – Consultant, Sri Lanka (ref#4SL)

According to the immigration lawyers, consultants, and language trainers, at an individual level, women's participation in the economic migration pathways to Canada showed positive change. Although it was not common for married or single women to apply

⁶ Gender disaggregated data by the country of citizenship is not published in 2015 and 2016.

as principal applicants in the past, they said more of them were now inquiring about and applying through Express Entry. During the consultations with the academics, some of them agreed with this observation, because anecdotally, there were more South Asian women taking the lead in applying for “skilled” migration to Canada. Lawyers and consultants also recognized a difference between women’s motivation, engagement, and willingness to not only participate but also support their husbands’ applications, but not vice versa. They said women were more likely to work on improving language test scores to meet the benchmarks and improve CRS scores for their own applications or to support their partners’ ones. In fact, some consultants said that they encouraged women to apply or re-apply as principal applicants because of these qualities.

I believe the trend has changed. What once was a male’s decision, has changed [for] it was the wives who decided to make the move. Incidentally, the women end up doing better in the application or the IELTS. In my experience, women are taking the lead. – Academic, India (ref#3In)

Unlike in the past when application processing times were lengthy, Express Entry can be a quick and efficient pathway for both men and women if they were qualified and well-prepared. Although it was a small number of women coming forward, a few immigration lawyers have helped those leaving abusive relationships to apply through Express Entry. People who feared public stigma and persecution because of their sexual orientations and/or non-conformist gender identities, according to an immigration lawyer in Colombo, have had their applications rapidly processed through Express Entry. But not all of them have been successful; women who have recently left abusive relationships may not meet the one year’s continuous work experience requirement for the FSW program or they would not have saved enough funds to cover application fees, provide evidence of funds, and/or to pay lawyers/consultant’s fees.

If you are a single working woman and you are responsible for the family [children], you may or may not have the luxury of having spare cash to fund the immigration process because the immigration process is costly. – Academic, India (ref#3In)

6.2. Barriers: Economic Pathways in the Context of Gender Inequality

Women’s ability to participate in economic migration, the academics and labor rights advocates agreed, was shaped by several intersecting factors -her socio-economic class position, access to resources, and the ability to exercise agency in decision making. They agreed that the ability to engage in economic migration was dependent on access to funds: “If you think about it, do you know anyone from India who immigrated, that is poor?” questioned a scholar based in India (ref#1In).

Marriage was cited as a pre-requisite for society to sanction migration for women in these cities. Unlike for men, it is not common for single women to think about applying for migration or for their families to allow it. For married women, the husband and family play a large role in decision making. As mentioned by an immigration consultant in Dhaka, they will not even consider accepting a client without clarifying whether she has family support.

If a woman comes, I first ask where is her partner is? If she says her partner will not apply. I ask her whether her parents are with her [supportive] in case her husband is not. You know a woman needs support from the family, without the support, it’s really difficult. – Consultant, Dhaka (ref#8Ban)

Immigration lawyers and consultants considered the system of ranking and the benchmarks for ranking as creating a fundamental shift in aspects of human capital that is valued in the selection of migrants. In the allocation of points for the FSW program eligibility, work experience accounted for a higher proportion of the total points than in the CRS. This meant that highly skilled professional women, such as doctors and nurses who would have qualified for the FSW program would lose points for age and have no advantage for work experience in the CRS rankings.⁷ For them, migration to Canada through Express Entry is no longer an option. In all four cities, participants talked about Canadian experience as a barrier to nurse's migration under this scheme, because unlike in the IT fields, nursing requires accreditation, which is not offered to applicants outside Canada. At the same time, immigration lawyers and consultants have noted that younger, better educated women in other fields of work have had chances of being successful through Express Entry-if they score well enough in the official language competency assessments.

One of the occupations that provide[d] opportunities for women was nursing. With the new system, [...] they don't get the opportunity to get the visas like they used to [before the Express Entry]. But some of the new applicants are younger, their English level is higher, and they become successful faster. – Consultant, Sri Lanka (ref#4,SL)

6.3. Express Entry and the Structural Barriers to Women's Participation

With the introduction of spousal factors for CRS points and the option of determining accompanying status based on their points contribution, immigration lawyers have advised couples to decide on the principal applicant based on the most favorable accumulation of points. Although they did not consider gender bias to be in effect, the fact that more men are still successful as principal applicants is, they agreed, indicative of their relative advantage over women in terms of the ability to claim higher points for better CRS rankings.

We will check [points calculator] with and without the partner points, if her points are low and his ranking goes down, we advise them to declare non-accompanying spouse. – Lawyer, Sri Lanka (ref#4SL)

Consultants and lawyers recognized that women may not be able to contribute enough human capital points because of their reproductive roles.

When women are included as the spouse, and in cases where due to childbirth or health reason, they have taken a backseat in terms of career [education] points, [that] affects the main applicant's score. – Consultant, India (ref#4In)

Because of gender inequitable access to education, work, and opportunities to develop skills, a spouse excluded from accompanying an applicant in South Asian contexts, according to the academics, is most likely to be a woman. Using human capital to decide whether they would be allowed to enter Canada with their partner, the academics argued, is likely to deepen gendered perceptions about women's worth not only in Canada but in their countries of origin. A system that allows for the exclusion of a spouse based on her labor market value, they argued, creates a structural barrier for women; it can systematically

⁷ Vineberg (2019, pg 5) provides a comprehensive comparison of points under FSW and express entry

exclude more women than men from participating and benefitting from economic migration. As frontline advisors and counsel to applicants, immigration lawyers and consultants did not have an awareness of the manifold implications for the women left behind both in terms of the additional reproductive and caregiving roles or the possibility of a long and complicated sponsorship process.

7. Discussion

From an immigrant-receiving country perspective, Express Entry has created an efficient application management system that has been able to remove delays and backlogs in processing times. (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2020). The online application submission process has removed country-specific quotas that were limited by country office's and processing center's capacities in the past (Satzewich, 2015). This means that any number of eligible applicants, in so far as they meet eligibility criteria, can potentially enter the Express Entry pool from any country in the world.

In terms of the eligibility screening, scoring, and ranking to access economic pathways, Express Entry provides an efficient application process. As a policy, it can open possibilities for those with the desired human and economic capital, regardless of their gender, to be able to benefit from rapid assessment, selection, and approval of their applications to permanently migrate to Canada. From an immigration program delivery perspective, those who regularly engaged with the application process in the four cities of origin, mostly immigration lawyers, consultants, and language trainers considered it to be gender-equitable in principal.

In addition to the overall increase in the proportion of women applying and admitted as principal applicants in the years since the introduction of Express Entry, there is some country-level evidence of positive change in women's participation rates (IRCC, 2019; 2020). While it may be too early to see trends in women's access across South Asian settings, there are indications of individual-level changes in their participation. Representatives of labor rights organizations and advocates for women's rights recognized this as being compatible with women's relatively better access to education, work, and opportunities for travel and networking in urban settings. There is some evidence of positive changes for younger women who have begun to demand equal rights and access to spaces, resources, and opportunities (Feldman, 2001; Gunjan, 2015; Nazneen, Hossain, & Chopra, 2019; Shukla, 2015). While it may be also presumptive to draw links between women's empowerment and migration in these settings, it is not so to recognize their agency in navigating far more barriers than the women from relatively more gender-equal ones (Abeysekara & Amarasuriya, 2010). As the locus of gender socialization, the family appeared to play a significant role in women's decision making around migration. In fact, women's struggles become invisibilized in societies that try to separate their public commitments to gender equality from their demands for greater control over women's freedoms in their private lives (Chopra, et al., 2004; De Mel et al., 2013).

For a small, but growing number of women facing gender-based discrimination and abuse in these settings, economic pathways can create an opportunity to escape persecution, violence, and stigma. In societies that are overtly transphobic and stigmatizing, as is the case in some of these cities (Chandimal, 2014; Knight, 2019), because of realistic fears about safety and public defamation, Express Entry can offer quick pathway even for people who would otherwise qualify through humanitarian routes. When gender-based discrimination becomes a reason for migration, it also becomes a barrier to access and participation because requirements to do so are often predicated on having access to resources, money, and opportunities.

Migration from gender unequal countries to more equitable ones can have positive economic and development outcomes for the sending and recipient countries (Kenny & O'Donnell, 2016). Furthermore, if there were no structural barriers to migration and labor force participation, women from the gender unequal countries would outperform their male counterparts in the destination countries (Kenny & O'Donnell, 2016). Structural barriers are obstacles that disproportionately affect one group more than others to create or maintain disparities in outcomes whether it is incomes, access to resources, and in this case, migration opportunities. The points system and the CRS ranking would be gender-equitable if everyone had the same access to education, types of work in demand, resources to develop language skills, and the ability to access jobs or educational opportunities in Canada. When the characteristics used to determine and rank human capital are not equally distributed across gender, social class, or race and ethnicity, application ranking can reinforce existing structural barriers for those who are disadvantaged. This is not quite dissimilar to the criticisms against the points system in the past (Dobrowolsky, Arat-Koc, & Gabriel, n.d.; Vineberg, 2019). In this sense, Express Entry has not only retained the biases in the points system but amplified it through a system of ranking in ways that are disadvantageous to women.

In gender unequal settings, the determination of accompanying spouses based on human capital points can create a structural barrier for women. While there could be some benefits to an applicant first moving to Canada to find work, get settled, and then bringing family over to join them, there is no forewarning about the length of separation or the complexities of a sponsorship application process. From a labor market integration perspective, such a policy can encourage accompanying spouses to obtain additional qualifications or to improve their official language competencies before migrating to Canada. But if the same structural barriers to women's participation as principal applicants exclude them from claiming spousal points, it reinforces ideas about women's (lack of) worth and dependency. When the option of leaving a spouse is presented as a workable solution to improving chances of migration to Canada, it can obscure the short- and long-term implications for the women left behind.

Obtaining permanent residency through sponsorship pathways can become a lengthy process; it is contingent on the applicant maintaining his immigration status, ability to demonstrate income and financial capacity to sponsor, and in some cases providing evidence of the legitimacy of their relationship (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). Sponsored spouses have some of the lowest labor market participation rates in Canada, they have no recourse to social welfare, and unlike dependents remain in a 3-year sponsorship agreement with the sponsor. There is evidence of sponsored women's higher risks of domestic violence and control by abusive partners post-migration in Canada (Alaggia, Regehr, & Rishchynski, 2009; Oxman-Martinez, Hanley, Lach, Khanlou, Weerasinghe, & Agnew, 2005).

A scoring system that determined women's eligibility based on their human capital relative to that of men's, it could be argued, has created a mechanism to effectively exclude dependent women from the economic pathways managed through Express Entry. A policy that constrains the number of dependents admitted under the economic classes while gathering human capital for market gains, would be also considered as undermining Canada's stated commitments to family unification and gender equality.

8. Limitations

Using quantitative and qualitative data, this paper explored opportunities and barriers to women's participation in the pathways for economic migration to Canada in four South

Asian cities of origin. Centering on the experiences of women and their countries of origin, this work is reliant on published data and a series of consultations involving key informants in the four cities. As such, it is limited by the scope of the available data and the participants' perspectives. As reporting gender-disaggregated data is a recent Government of Canada initiative, there are some limits to the trends, comparisons, and analysis included here.

This study is exploratory in nature and limited in scope. Although Dhaka and Colombo can be representative of a larger proportion of the immigration-related services in those two countries, this is not likely to be the case for a large country like India. Perspectives of a few representatives from Mumbai and New Delhi can only provide limited insights in this context. It is also noteworthy that almost all the migrant related service providers interviewed across the three settings were men. While it is to be expected given that this field of work is highly male dominated, this also means that the perspectives shared may not be reflective of the views of the women who also work in this field.

9. Conclusions

With the GBA+ commitments to policy design and implementation across Government departments, IRCC is faced with the challenge of balancing gender equity with its broad aim of maximizing gains from human capital for economic growth (Government of Canada, 2020f; Taylor, 2018). In addition to versatility and responsiveness to changing Canadian labor market needs, the system of ranking and the benchmarks used for it were aimed at improving immigrant integration into the labor market and life in Canada (Weiner, 2008).

In gender-equitable contexts, Express Entry and the new system of ranking allows both men and women with the desired human capital to benefit from rapid assessment, selection, and invitation to migrate to Canada. Emerging trends show positive change at the macro-level in South Asian women's access to economic pathways for migration. Those who engage with applicants and counsel them on the frontlines have begun to see micro-level changes, a reflection of women's agency in engaging with pathways for migration, at times, from extremely gender disadvantaged positions.

Designed from a Western, liberal, gender-equitable perspective, the system of scoring and ranking can create and reinforce existing structural barriers to women's participation in gender unequal contexts. Gender-neutral policies not grounded in women's specific experiences and needs, as demonstrated here, can reproduce harmful masculine norms and attitudes. The potential to favor men into economic classes while excluding at least some of their women from accompanying them, it could be argued, is effectively reducing the welfare burden on the immigration system while still acquiring human capital for economic gains. For a country opening its borders to an international community of migrant labor and reliant on them for economic and population growth, creating an equitable immigration policy that applies fairly across different contexts is a challenging task. Comprehensive GBA+ analyses of immigration policy and practices must reflect the complexities and nuances of different countries of origin and states of gender (in)equality.

Canada's investments in developing country programs aimed at empowering women and girls (Government of Canada, 2020f) is envisioning women's rights and equal participation in all facets of life, including migration, in the long-term. But balancing its economic goals with family reunification, in ways that uphold the stated commitments to gender equality across a wide range of settings, is the more urgent and immediate challenge.

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