

BMO NEWCOMER WORKFORCE INTEGRATION LAB

MARCH 2025

Addressing Gender Disparities in Employment and Wages: Key Trends Among Immigrant Women in Canada

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[International Women's Day](#), observed annually on March 8, serves as a global platform to celebrate the achievements of women while also drawing attention to the inequalities they continue to face. In Canada, gender equity has been a key priority, reinforced by [human rights legislation and policies](#) aimed at ensuring equal opportunities. However, significant workforce disparities persist.

In 2018, Canada ranked the [8th highest among 43 countries in gender pay disparity](#), according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Despite higher levels of education, women continue to earn less than men across all industries and occupations. While gender wage gaps affect all women, they are particularly [severe for those from marginalized communities](#). A 2015 [United Nations Human Rights report](#) raised concerns about “the persisting inequalities between women and men” in Canada, specifically highlighting the high pay gap and its disproportionate impact on low-income women, racialized women, and Indigenous women.

This report examines the labour market outcomes of immigrant women - [one of the most disadvantaged groups](#) in the workforce. Analyses of the [2001](#) and [2016](#) censuses reveal that labour market disparities for immigrant women remain both gendered and racialized. Immigrant women are [less likely to participate in the paid labour force than Canadian-born women and face higher unemployment rates](#) than both their Canadian-born counterparts and men, whether immigrant or Canadian-born. Immigrant women earn less than their male counterparts and immigrant women who are visible minorities earn less than those who are not.

Although initiatives like the [Racialized Newcomer Women Pilot Program](#), launched in 2018, aim to address these challenges, gender disparities in employment and earnings persist. Using recent data, this report provides updated information on the labour force status and earnings of immigrant women, along with new insights into the labour market inequalities they face across different admission categories. It highlights gender- and race-based disparities and identifies key trends for future research and policy interventions to enhance their economic inclusion.

Immigrant Women in Canada’s Labour Market

Immigrant women accounted for [over half \(52%\) of total immigrants](#) admitted between 1980 and 2021, representing [half \(50%\) of all economic class immigrants and 40% of economic principal applicants](#). With this significant presence, they play a critical role in shaping Canada’s demographic composition and economic growth. However, their economic potentials are often overshadowed by systemic barriers that have historically marginalized them in the labour market.

Research consistently shows that immigrant women face significant disadvantages in the labour market. [According to the 2001 Census](#), 75% of immigrant women aged 25–44 participated in the labour force, compared to 82.4% of Canadian-born women. Even among full-time workers, immigrant women earned less than both immigrant men and Canadian-born workers. Those who were visible minorities had a median wage of \$20,024, nearly 20% less than the \$24,990 earned by non-visible minority immigrant women.

More than a decade later, [the 2016 Census showed that these disparities persisted](#). Among immigrant women aged 25–54, the labour force participation rate was 77%, compared to 86% for Canadian-born women and 92% for immigrant men. Immigrant women continued to earn less than both their male counterparts and Canadian-born workers of any gender. Wage gaps were even wider for racialized immigrant women, whose median annual employment income was \$27,000—well below the \$37,000 earned by visible minority immigrant men, \$36,000 by non-visible minority immigrant women, and \$33,000 by non-visible minority Canadian-born women. These trends highlight the “[triple disadvantage](#)” racialized immigrant women face due to their race, immigrant status, and gender.

Building on existing research, this report examines recent labour market trends affecting immigrant women in Canada using publicly available data from the 2021 Census, the 2025 Labour Force Survey, and the 2023 Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB). It explores how race, gender, and their intersections shape economic participation and earnings of immigrant women. By analyzing gender gaps across admission categories—economic-class immigrants, family-sponsored immigrants, and refugees—it provides new information on employment outcomes, income disparities, and barriers to workforce integration, while highlighting persistent inequalities that require urgent attention.

The Recent Trends

1. Gender Gaps Persist in Labour Force Participation, Employment, and Unemployment and the Gaps are Widest Among Recent Immigrants.

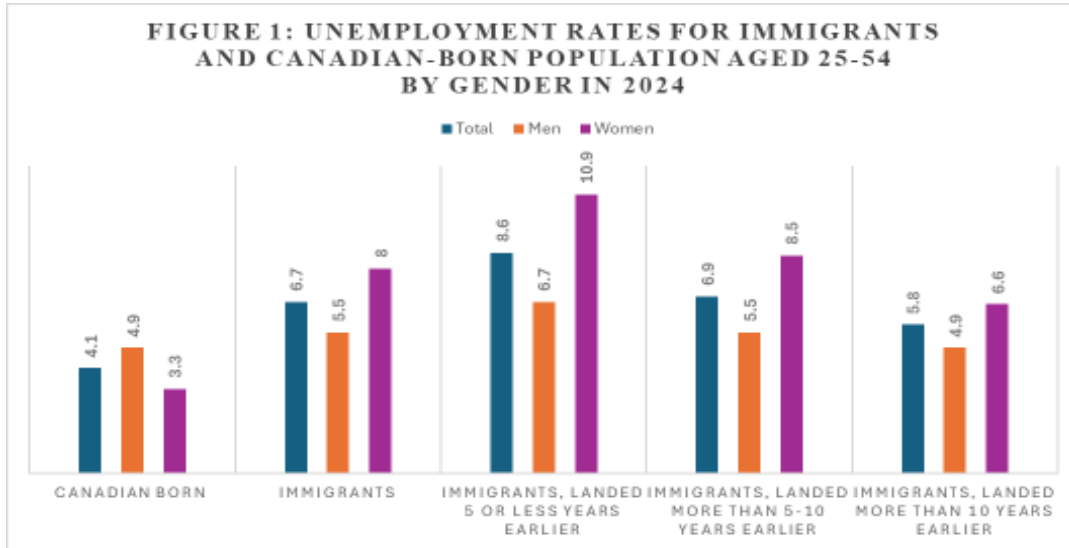
In [2024](#), men consistently have higher labour force participation and employment rates than women among both immigrants and the Canadian-born population aged 25–54. Recent immigrants (landed 5 or fewer years earlier) have the lowest participation rates (86.1%), with the largest gender gap of 14 points (93.1% for men vs. 79.1% for women).

Table 1: Participation, Employment and Unemployment Rates for Immigrants and Canadian-born Population Aged 25-54 by Gender in 2024

	Participation Rate			Employment Rate			Unemployment Rate		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Canadian Born	89.3	91.3	87.2	85.6	86.8	84.3	4.1	4.9	3.3
Immigrant	87.5	93.2	82.1	81.6	88.1	75.5	6.7	5.5	8
Immigrants, landed 5 or less years earlier	86.1	93.1	79.1	78.7	86.9	70.5	8.6	6.7	10.9
Immigrants, landed more than 5-10 years earlier	86.7	93.4	80.2	80.7	88.2	73.4	6.9	5.5	8.5
Immigrants, landed more than 10 years earlier	88.4	93.1	84	83.3	88.5	78.5	5.8	4.9	6.6

Source: [Labour Force Survey 2025](#)

This gender disparity extends to employment rates, where men also have consistently higher rates than women. Recent immigrants have the lowest employment rate at 78.7%, with an even larger gender gap of 16.4 points (86.9% for men vs. 70.5% for women). While employment rates improve with time in Canada, reaching 83.3% for those who arrived over 10 years ago, immigrant women (78.5%) still trail behind both immigrant men (88.5%) and Canadian-born women (84.3%) (Table 1).



Recent immigrants face the highest unemployment rates at 8.6%, with the widest gender disparity of 4.2 percentage points (6.7% for men vs. 10.9% for women). Over time, unemployment rates decline, reaching 5.8% for those who arrived more than 10 years ago. However, even after a decade, immigrant women (6.6%) continue to have higher unemployment rates than both immigrant men (4.9%) and Canadian-born women (3.3%) (Figure 1).

2. Gender Gaps Exist in Labour Force Participation, Employment, and Unemployment Across All Admission Categories with Wider Disparities Among Refugees.

In 2021, among immigrants aged 15 and over who arrived in Canada between 2016 and 2021, men had higher labour force participation rates and employment rates and lower unemployment rates across all three admission categories—economic, family-sponsored, and refugee (Table 2).

Table 2: Participation, Employment and Unemployment Rates Among Recent Immigrants (Admitted in 2016-2021) Aged 15+ by Admission Category and Gender

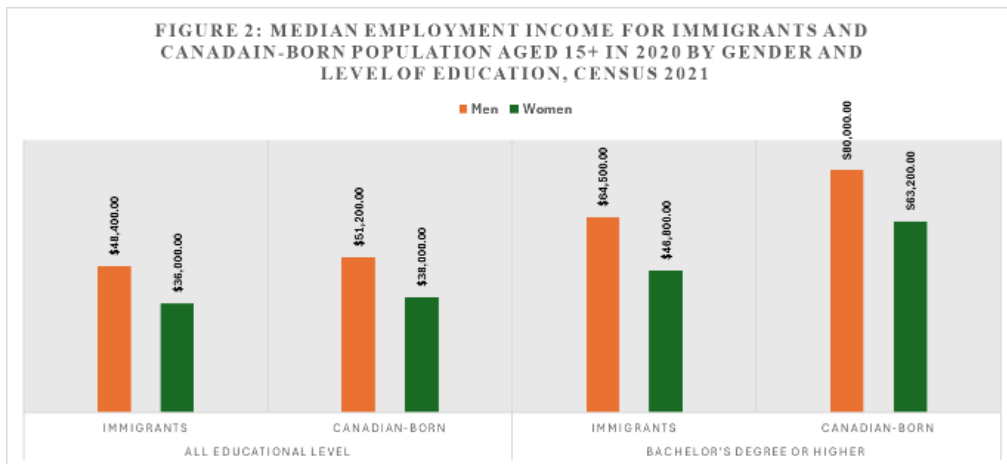
Men	Economic immigrant	Principal applicant	Secondary applicant	Immigrants sponsored by family	Refugees
Participant Rate	88.6	94.0	77.8	73.2	64.9
Employment Rate	82.4	88.6	69.9	64.6	53.8
Unemployment Rate	7.0	5.7	10.2	11.8	17.1
Women	Economic immigrant	Principal applicant	Secondary applicant	Immigrants sponsored by family	Refugees
Participant Rate	78.4	87.5	67.6	55.1	42.0
Employment Rate	69.7	80.2	57.1	44.5	30.6
Unemployment Rate	11.1	8.3	15.6	19.2	27.1

Source: [Census 2021](#)

The gender gaps were most pronounced among refugees. The participation rate gap between refugee men and women was 23 percentage points, while the employment rate gap was even more striking at 23.2 percentage points, with 53.8 percent of men employed compared to just 30.6 percent of women. Additionally, refugee women faced an unemployment rate of 27 percent, 10 percentage points higher than their male counterparts (17 percent), highlighting the severe barriers they encounter in securing stable employment.

3. Immigrant Women Earn Less Their Male Counterparts, and the Wage Gap is Larger for University-educated Women.

Gender disparities in income are stark among immigrants, with women earning significantly less than their male counterparts. In 2020, the median income for immigrant men aged 15 and over was \$48,400, while immigrant women earned \$36,000, reflecting a 25.62% gap. Among Canadian-born individuals, the gender wage gap was slightly higher at 25.78%.



The income disparity widened further among university-educated immigrants (Figure 2). Immigrant men with a university degree had a median income of \$64,500, while their female counterparts earned \$46,800, resulting in a 27.44% gap. Among Canadian-born individuals, men earned \$80,000, compared to \$63,200 for women, reflecting a slightly smaller disparity of 21%. For immigrant women, a university education does not translate into the same employment opportunities and earnings as it does for immigrant men.

4. The Gender Wage Gap Is the Largest Among Economic Principal Applicants.

Across all admission categories, men had higher median employment incomes than women, reinforcing a persistent gender wage gap in 2022. This pattern was evident in both [the 2012 and 2017 admission cohorts](#), with the largest disparity occurring among economic principal applicants.



In 2022, female economic principal applicants from the 2017 and 2012 cohorts had median earnings significantly less than their male counterparts. The gender wage gap was notably wider among more recent immigrants, with female economic principal applicants in the 2017 cohort earning 34% less than their male counterparts, compared to a 24.65% gap in the 2012 cohort (Figure 3).

This trend confirms that despite being selected based on their credentials, language proficiency in English and/or French, and skills, female economic principal applicants were less successful than their male counterparts in securing well-paying employment both five and ten years after their arrival.

5. Racialized Immigrant Women Face a Triple Disadvantage

Gender, race, and immigration status intersected to create [compounded barriers](#) for racialized immigrant women. Among all groups, visible minority immigrant women aged 25 to 54 had the lowest labour force participation and employment rates and the highest unemployment rates in 2021 (Table 3).

Table 3: Labour Force Status by Immigration Status and Visible Minority Status for Core Aged (25-54) population in 2021

	Participant Rate	Employment Rate	Unemployment Rate
	Men		
Non-immigrants			
Visible minority population	87.3	78.1	10.5
Not a visible minority	89.1	82.4	7.5
Immigrants			
Visible minority population	89.7	82	8.6
Not a visible minority	91.9	85.5	7
	Women		
Non-immigrants			
Visible minority population	85.4	77.2	9.5
Not a visible minority	84.2	78	7.4
Immigrants			
Visible minority population	77.3	67.8	12.2
Not a visible minority	81.6	74	9.3

Source: [Census 2021](#)

Visible minority immigrant women's labour force participation rate was 77.3 percent, the lowest among all immigrant groups. Their employment rate stood at 67.8 percent, significantly lower than that of visible minority immigrant men (82 percent) and non-racialized immigrant women (74 percent). Additionally, their unemployment rate reached 12.2 percent, which was 7.2 percentage points higher than visible minority immigrant men and 2.9 percentage points higher than non-racialized immigrant women. These disparities highlight that racialized immigrant women continue to face multiple barriers, making it harder for them to secure employment. In contrast, Canadian-born women face fewer disparities between racialized and non-racialized groups, suggesting that labour market barriers are particularly harsh for immigrant women of colour.



6. Wage Gaps Reflected the Intersectional Impact of Gender, Immigration, and Race

The gender wage gap varied significantly based on immigration and racial status, with racialized immigrant women facing the greatest disadvantages. In [2020](#), visible minority immigrant women aged 15 and over remained the most disadvantaged group in terms of median employment income, even with a university degree.



University educated visible minority immigrant women earned \$41,200, compared to \$57,200 for their male counterparts—a gender wage gap of 27.97% within this group. Additionally, they earned 18.90% less than non-racialized immigrant women (\$50,800) and 31.79% less than Canadian-born women (\$60,400) (Figure 4). This placed visible minority immigrant women with a university degree at the bottom of the earnings hierarchy, further confirming the compounded effects of gender, race, and immigration status on wages.

The Road Ahead

While Canada has made strides in advancing gender equity, recent data reveal that immigrant and racialized women continue to face significant labour market barriers. Recent immigrant women, particularly those in Canada for five years or less, encounter the greatest employment challenges and gender gaps. Visible minority immigrant women remain the most economically marginalized, with the lowest earnings and highest unemployment rates, while refugee women face the most severe barriers to employment, leading to the largest gender gaps across all labour market indicators. A particularly striking revelation is that even university-educated immigrant women, including economic principal applicants selected for their credentials and skills, struggle with employment and earnings disparities.

Previous research identifies several structural factors that contribute to these disparities, including [gender biases](#), [institutional racism](#), [disproportionate caregiving responsibilities](#), [non-recognition of foreign education and experience](#), gender gaps in [skill development and job transitions](#), and [occupational segregation](#)—all of which limit access to meaningful economic opportunities. Considering the persistent disparities, future research should adopt a problem-solving approach to address the root causes. Simultaneously, a comprehensive policy response is urgently needed to tackle the structural challenges immigrant women face in the labour market.

As we observe International Women's Day on March 8, 2025, it is crucial to recognise that ensuring equitable access to meaningful employment for immigrant and racialized women is not only vital for advancing gender equity but also essential for unlocking Canada's full economic potential.



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