



ALLIANCE DES FEMMES DE LA
FRANCOPHONIE CANADIENNE

Considering the needs of
immigrant women for
successful integration into
francophone minority
communities

BRIEF PRESENTED BY

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PREPARED BY

Soukaina Boutiyeb, Executive Director, AFFC
Nour Enayeh, President, AFFC

This document presents the findings of a study that highlighted the challenges and specific needs of francophone immigrant women who settle in francophone minority communities (FMCs). It also offers potential solutions for overcoming these challenges and capitalizing on the skills of francophone immigrant women.

Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne (AFFC)

Founded in 1918, Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne (AFFC) is a feminist non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness and promoting the role and contribution of francophone and Acadian women in their communities. It defends the right of women in Canada's Francophonie to live and flourish in French. As an inclusive organization, AFFC recognizes the full diversity of women who are part of Canada's Francophonie and who live in a minority community. It represents and works with 15 women's organizations across the country.

Study on the needs of francophone immigrant women who settle in minority communities

In 2021, AFFC commissioned a study on the specific needs of francophone immigrant women in francophone minority communities (FMCs) in four provinces and one territory: British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Yukon.

This study was conducted as part of a project entitled *Intégration des nouveaux arrivants dans les communautés francophones au pays*, which was jointly led by the Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne (AFFC), the Commission nationale des parents francophones (CNPF) and the Fédération des aînées et aînés francophones du Canada (FAAFC) and funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).¹

The qualitative study involved 59 immigrant women and 20 individuals who either offer settlement services or services to the entire host community. The study aimed to identify the needs of francophone immigrant women in five areas of their lives: ability to work, community involvement, family life, health and knowledge of their rights. The goal was to bridge gaps between the needs of immigrant women and the ability of settlement services to address these needs.

The study participants were women from Africa, South America, the West Indies and Europe. They arrived in Canada between 2017 and 2021 under various IRCC and provincial programs: economic immigration, Canadian experience, student visa, refugee settlement.

¹ The report on this study is available at <https://affc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/rapport-immigration-1.pdf>.

Study findings

“The gap between pre-arrival perceptions and the situation on arrival calls for a major reorientation that falls on the shoulders of women. It is important to be clear about the mental load [of immigration], which differs for men and women.”

Participant from Manitoba

Family responsibilities and immigration process

The main finding of this study concerns the impact of women’s family responsibilities on their immigration experience. For 47 of the 59 participants, it was the weight of their family responsibilities that differentiated their experience with the immigration process from a man’s experience. In most cases, it is the women who must ensure that their household runs smoothly while also ensuring access to healthcare and other basic family services, supporting their children’s educational activities and taking on all the administrative processes related to the various formalities to be completed. In such a context, it is not surprising that more women than men make use of settlement services (Jacquet and André, 2020).

The reasons why women bear this additional mental burden are rooted in the unequal distribution of responsibilities related to the well-being of family members. In many homes, these responsibilities almost always fall on women’s shoulders, not to mention the weight of responsibilities borne by single mothers, who are solely responsible for supporting their family and ensuring that their household runs smoothly.

Some mentioned tensions that arise within the family when their spouse is dealing with employment-related challenges. Sometimes these tensions are even exacerbated when the woman is having greater professional success than her husband: *“Many divorces are initiated by immigrant women themselves,”* said one stakeholder, who attributes this situation to the fact that many women refuse to live with persistent tensions in a family environment where they bear most of the responsibilities and where power and decision-making are not shared equally.

The increased weight of women’s family responsibilities is reflected, in part, by user rates for settlement services, which are higher for women than for men, as women receive these services on behalf of their family members.

Mental load refers to
“work related to managing, organizing and planning, which is intangible, unavoidable and constant, for the purpose of satisfying everyone’s needs and ensuring that the household runs smoothly.”
(Flèche et al, 2018)

The success of their efforts to effectively settle their family in the region of their choice is therefore a particularly important factor in determining successful integration and long-term retention of immigrants in the francophone community of their choice.

Gaps in services: negative impacts on the immigration experience

This study shows that the policies that govern programs and services for immigrants fail to consider the specific situation of women because they fail to pay sufficient attention to gender-related factors and the multiple pathways for integration that participants shared through this study. This neutrality translates into various gaps in the service offering.

Access to information on French-language services

Few participants reported having access to pre-arrival services or to comprehensive information on available services in French when they arrived in Canada. The lack of communication and coordination not only among francophone service providers, but also with Anglophone service providers, is a major challenge that prevents many immigrants from accessing French-language services in a timely manner.

Childcare services

The women highlighted significant barriers to finding affordable childcare services, irrespective of whether they are offered in French or in English. This seriously compromises their availability to look for a job or participate in English courses.

Healthcare in French

Limited access to healthcare in French, especially in the area of reproductive health, is a major source of stress for immigrant women. When they arrive, many lack sufficient proficiency in English to be able to interact with Anglophone healthcare providers.

Employability services should be adapted to areas of experience

In our study, we found that many women need more specialized support to find work in their field, especially in regulated professions. Several participants said that they persistently experienced situations in which their professional qualifications were downgraded.

Service delivery methods are poorly adapted

Service delivery methods are poorly adapted to the specific needs of immigrant women, especially those with family responsibilities. More specifically, limited business hours, long commutes, limited access to childcare services and the challenges that some women face in trying to maintain participation in English courses all hinder access to services and, ultimately, impede the successful integration of immigrants and their families into the host communities.

Persistent overqualification

Despite high levels of education and irrespective of the country in which a diploma or degree was obtained, a higher percentage of women than men continue to experience persistent overqualification, and this situation affects many more women from visible minorities. (Cornelissen and Turcotte, 2020; Creese and Weibe, 2012)

Skilled immigrant women: a hidden reality

When francophone immigrants express need for support, the solutions they are offered are primarily based on the relationship between the service provider and the service recipient and the view that providers must address recipients' shortcomings. Service offerings focus on addressing immigrants' inadequacies (limited knowledge of English, ignorance of social etiquette, lack of Canadian training or experience). As a result, the host community's role and immigrants' skills are lost sight of. How is a successful immigration experience defined? Can success only be claimed after housing and a job are secured and the children are going to school? Or can success instead be claimed when one feels welcome, when one feels like a full-fledged member of the community and is able to use personal skills and knowledge to contribute to that community?

For study participants, the lack of contact with the host community, for example with Canadian citizens or immigrants who have lived in Canada for longer periods of time, hinders development of their social capital, contributes to their isolation and remains a major obstacle to learning the labour market rules. Lastly, and most importantly, these gaps prevent them from developing a real sense of belonging to the host community.

It is therefore essential for Canadian society and its immigrant host communities to change their perception of immigrant women and view them as skilled women who can contribute to Canadian society. In a context where economic immigration is becoming increasingly important and where women account for half these individuals, this new perspective is imperative for Canada's investments in immigration to bear fruit. Unless this shift is made, we will continue to lose human capital.

The growing importance of women in the context of economic immigration in francophone minority communities (FMCs)

- In 2019, approximately 5,500 French-speaking permanent residents outside Quebec were selected in the economic class, i.e., approximately 65% of all admissions for French-speaking immigrants outside Quebec. Women accounted for half of these individuals (Government of Canada, 2020).
- The proportion of female principal applicants under the economic immigration class appears to have been rising for several years (Hudon, T., 2015).
- For 2021-2023, Canada aims to welcome 60% of the targeted 400,000 immigrants under economic class programs, which includes all immigration mechanisms based on professional qualifications or studies (Government of Canada, 2021).

The point of view of study participants – What do immigrant women want?

AFFC wanted to give a voice to the women who participated in this study by asking them to provide suggestions to address gaps.

Suggestions from participants and stakeholders

AREA	SUGGESTIONS
All areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer childcare services based on different arrangements (day, week, etc.)
Ability to work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve access to English courses by diversifying arrangements for delivery• Offer job search services that are better adapted to the professional qualifications of women• Facilitate contacts between employers and immigrants
Community life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enable immigrants to meet with members of their host community• Offer immigrants ways to meet each other in informal contexts or through projects (e.g., community kitchen, sewing, community garden or information sessions followed by discussions)
Family life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adapt services to enable mothers to access them and overcome their access-related constraints due to the weight of their family responsibilities• Offer opportunities for men to meet with each other in order to encourage them to participate more actively in family life
Health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build advocacy networks for access to healthcare services in French• Adapt shelter services for women who are victims of violence so that they can welcome immigrants• Pay more attention to the specific needs of young immigrant girls
Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold workshops or presentations on themes such as labour law, housing rights, legal equality between men and women, the banking system and financial literacy

Racism, sexism and discrimination: rarely mentioned barriers

The study data include only a few references to issues concerning discrimination on the basis of race, religion or gender. Since many studies have reported persistent racial discrimination, especially against women, it is impossible to conclude otherwise for francophone immigrant women in minority communities. This masking of various forms of discrimination by study participants could be attributable to the use of virtual meetings to collect data, which may have hindered their ability to share such realities; they may also have been reluctant to criticize service providers and the host communities.

The importance of consulting women's organizations

Some study participants said that they were unable to benefit from some settlement services because of their immigration status (WHP, students, asylum seekers, etc.). IRCC requires the settlement services it funds to be reserved for immigrants who are permanent residents or refugees. This requirement excludes many immigrant women with a precarious immigration status and who require support settling in Canada. The only option available to these women is for them to turn to women's organizations for assistance. It is important to note that women's organizations are often not mandated or funded by IRCC and lack the resources to support recent immigrant women in Canada. Yet the reality is that these organizations are the only source of support for some immigrant women with a precarious status.

Cooperation, and even active collaboration with the francophone immigration ecosystem and IRCC, with these women's organizations would considerably improve the support provided to immigrant women.

Our call to action – Recommendations

Recommendations to IRCC

- #1** – Align IRCC policies with the Government of Canada’s policy on gender equality by adopting a national policy on gender equality and diversity in immigration. Such a policy is likely to require settlement services to pay closer attention to gender and diversity issues when designing their programs.
- #2** – Work with other federal departments and agencies to produce more detailed information on the demographic profile of francophone immigrants, in consultation with immigrant women and the organizations that represent them. The use of such evidence-based data is indispensable for designing policies that will achieve the desired results.

Recommendations to the francophone immigration ecosystem

- #3** – Include issues related to gender, diversity and inclusion in advocacy work targeting IRCC and other entities involved in welcoming francophone immigrants in FMCs. This information on host communities must be shared with IRCC.
- #4** – Support the development of policies, strategies and programs that are sensitive to gender, diversity and inclusion by the francophone immigration networks that play a key role in capacity-building of francophone immigration ecosystems at the provincial and territorial levels.
- #5** – Build the capacity of francophone immigration networks and their member organizations to develop, distribute and use tools such as policies, analytical grids and resources focused on GBA+ in the area of francophone immigration in FMCs.
- #6** – Work with women’s groups in their province and territory to implement services and programs that are adapted to women’s needs and that will be able to make use of the human capital of immigrant women. These organizations work on the ground for immigrant women, regardless of their immigration status. However, they do not always benefit from the financial support of IRCC.
- #7** – Promote the use of knowledge based on research and practice in order to design gender-sensitive policies, programs and services.

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