

Skilled immigrant women's career trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite immigrant-receiving countries' need for skilled professionals to meet labour demands, research suggests that many skilled migrants undergo deskilling, downward career mobility, underemployment, unemployment and talent waste, finding themselves in low-skilled occupations that are not commensurate to their education and experience. Skilled immigrant women face additional gendered disadvantages, including a disproportionate domestic burden, interrupted careers and gender segmentation in occupations and organizations. This study explores how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic impacted skilled newcomer women's labour market outcomes and work experiences.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw on 50 in-depth questionnaires with skilled women to elaborate on their work experiences during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings – The pandemic pushed skilled immigrant women towards unemployment, lower-skilled or less stable employment. Most study participants had their career trajectory delayed, interrupted or reversed due to layoffs, decreased job opportunities and increased domestic burden. The pandemic's gendered nature and the reliance on work-from-home arrangements and online job search heightened immigrant women's challenges due to limited social support and increased family responsibilities.

Originality/value – This paper adds to the conversation of increased integration challenges under pandemic conditions by contextualizing the pre-pandemic literature on immigrant work integration to the pandemic environment. Also, this paper contributes a better understanding of the gender dynamics informing the COVID-19 socio-economic climate.

Keywords COVID-19, Immigrants, Women, Work, Gender, Canada

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation that challenges existing work structures and makes social inequality issues more visible. Governmental measures to curb the spread of the virus, including business closures or reduced operations, restricted travels and the suspension of border crossings, resulted in massive job losses (Emmanuel, 2020). The pandemic aggravated the precariousness inherent to the contemporary structure of work – shifting towards more flexible and non-standard work arrangements (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2003; Mckeown, 2005), and as a result, has marginalized some groups more than others.

Despite countries' need for skilled professionals to meet labour demands, previous research in a pre-pandemic environment suggests that many skilled immigrants end up in



low-skilled positions, leading to downward career mobility and talent waste (Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2012; Richardson, 2009). Also, gender and migration scholars have long documented how skilled immigrant women encounter particular vulnerabilities due to their gender, racialized and non-citizen status, influencing their employment experiences (Bauder, 2005; Brekke and Mastekaasa, 2008; Cooke, 2007; Liversage, 2009; Meares, 2010; Man, 2004; Purkayastha, 2005).

A growing number of studies investigate skilled immigrant women's experiences transitioning to formal employment in receiving countries. These studies identified various barriers to women's labour market participation, including the non-transfer of foreign credentials and accreditation barriers (Purkayastha, 2005; Salaff and Greve, 2003), the privileging of male-dominated fields in immigration and the corresponding devaluation of feminized ones (Kofman and Raghuram, 2006; McCoy and Masuch, 2007), discrimination based on the lack of local work experience and discounting of experience gained abroad (George and Chaze, 2009; Meares, 2010; Van Ngo and Este, 2006), poor access to diverse social networks (Salaff and Greve, 2003, 2004), women's dependent visa status (Cooke, 2007; Man, 2004; Yeoh and Khoo, 1998) and corresponding domestic responsibilities (Cooke, 2007; Hari, 2018; Meares, 2010; Purkayastha, 2005), and discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity and immigrant status (Bauder, 2005; Brekke and Mastekaasa, 2008; Liversage, 2009; Meares, 2010).

The downturn and subsequent recovery from the widespread lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have substantial implications for gender work equality, including high unemployment in female-dominated service sectors and increased child- and eldercare burdens (Alon *et al.*, 2020; Collins *et al.*, 2021). There are now urgent calls to adopt a gender lens to study the pandemic and its effects with a focus on disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable populations (Gausman and Langer, 2020). We answer these calls by examining the pandemic's effects on work integration of 50 skilled newcomer women – immigrant women who arrived as permanent residents in Canada in the last five years with tertiary education. Before introducing our study, we provide a brief discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, followed by a review of the relevant literature on immigrant work integration.

COVID-19 in Canada

Since the first reported COVID-19 case in January 2020 (The Canadian Press, 2020), the real impacts were felt nationwide with the closures of borders, airports, public institutions, schools and all non-essential businesses in March 2020. Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey released in May 2020 confirmed more than three million job losses due to the pandemic and a historic rise in unemployment to 13% in April (CBC News, 2020).

There is developing research on the unique and escalating gender burdens posed by the pandemic in different national contexts (McLaren *et al.*, 2020: Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia). COVID-19 appears to have increased gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work in the short-term (Farré *et al.*, 2020), and that women will endure these burdens until well after the pandemic is under control. Overall, the pandemic has exacerbated economic barriers for women, including incomes and career advancements (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2020; Howard, 2020). School closures and the lack of non-parental childcare options have exacerbated the disproportionate gendered division of housework and childcare in the home.

There is also some recognition of the increased pressures on immigrants. The April 2020 Labour Force Survey Data revealed that employment rates fell more sharply for recent and established immigrants than Canadian-born. The pandemic has impacted the processing and timelines of immigration, visa and permit applications (Boutilier, 2020) with potential job and financial security implications. In this study, we investigated the specific vulnerabilities and marginalization experiences of skilled newcomer women who are predicted to be doubly disadvantaged due to their gendered and immigrant identities.

Immigrant work experiences in a pre-pandemic work environment

The literature on immigrant work integration suggests that many skilled immigrants end up in low-skilled precarious employment (Shirmohammadi *et al.*, 2019; Syed, 2015) or employment that is stable and categorized as skilled while still underutilizing their talent (Malik *et al.*, 2017; Ressia *et al.*, 2017). In Canada, employment outcomes of skilled immigrants coming from specific countries and regions such as China (Man, 2004), the Philippines (Aten *et al.*, 2016) and Africa (Creese and Wiebe, 2012) confirm such experiences of deskilling and downward occupational mobility.

Immigrants are often at high risk of precariousness (Campbell and Burgess, 2018; Rodriguez and Mearns, 2012; Wright and Clibborn, 2019) employment characterized by poor working conditions, long working hours, limited payments, little to no benefits, low job security and weak attachment to the employing organization (Burgess and Campbell, 1998). Even though many immigrants can secure stable employment, they are often underemployed and occupationally marginalized. Studies (e.g. Bell *et al.*, 2010; Cheng, 2013) focusing on immigrants in low-skilled sectors tend to highlight their experience of discrimination and exploitation.

Immigrants who secure commensurate employment often face other types of inequality, such as discrimination (Pendakur, 1998; Hamrin, 2019; Rajendran *et al.*, 2017) or limited career advancement (Holck, 2016; Subeliani and Tsogas, 2005). Studies investigating the workplace marginalization of immigrants suggest that they are disadvantaged by biases embedded in recruitment practices (Almeida *et al.*, 2015; D'Netto *et al.*, 2014) and training (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017), as well as overt or subtle discrimination at work (Hamrin, 2019; Rajendran *et al.*, 2017; Syed and Pio, 2010). Immigrant employees are often placed in lower positions with limited opportunities to move up in the organization's hierarchy (Subeliani and Tsogas, 2005). In times of economic crisis, research shows that immigrants are more likely to be severely affected (Botric, 2018; Maroukis, 2013).

Gender differences are recognized as an important factor influencing integration in receiving countries (Guo and Al Ariss, 2015; Phan *et al.*, 2015; Donato *et al.*, 2018). Boucher (2007) compares data from Australia and Canada to suggest that systematic gender inequalities in skilled migration selection and immigration policy operation also disadvantage female applicants. We contribute to this diverse body of the literature on immigrants' work integration by exploring the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic – a complex and evolving socio-economic crisis – has influenced the career trajectories of skilled newcomer women in Canada.

Theoretical perspective: feminization of migration and social capital

In accordance with a grounded approach, we did not begin this study with specific hypotheses in mind. We sought a “practical middle ground” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 635), drawing iteratively from our initial knowledge of immigrant women integration, perspectives of feminization of migration, the dataset we created and subsequent literature reviews. The feminization of migration perspective has informed our study design and questionnaire development. As we engaged with the data, we were drawn to the literature on social capital and social networks related to transitions to foreign environments to further explain our findings. Both perspectives are discussed below.

Feminization of migration

Migration can change women's status in complex and contradictory ways – for better and for worse (Foner, 1998). The feminization of migration perspective was conceived to encompass the identities, relations and interactions at the intersection of gender and migration (Donato *et al.*, 2006; Mahler and Pessar, 2018). This perspective brought to the forefront women's roles as key players in the overall migration equation, including global capitalist production and markets, significant growth in service industries (McDowell *et al.*, 2009; Sassen, 2000) and global chains of care (Cheng, 2003; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003).

Most importantly, for this paper, the perspective highlighted the dominance of gender as a social relation in shaping labour market integration (paid work) and the division of household labour and care responsibilities (unpaid work) in a post-migratory context (Pessar, 1984; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Min, 1992; Kibria, 1993; Lim, 1997; Foner, 1998). Women's increased incorporation into the workforce enhances their sense of economic independence with their regular access to wages (Pessar, 1984, 1995), improving their position in the household and broadening their social horizons (Collins, 1994). Childcare constraints, however, often limit women to low-paid jobs with flexible schedules, preserving and in some ways intensifying, gendered divisions of childcare and housework (Foner, 1998; Greenlees and Saenz, 1999; Grahame, 2003; Min, 1992; Moon, 2003).

As the feminization of migration perspective evolved to include the lives and experiences of (im)migrant women entering occupations requiring a range of skill levels, there continues to be growing empirical support over the last four decades for immigrant women's struggle against barriers pertaining to their gender identities and roles (Da, 2010; Gauthier, 2016), as well as implicit, internalized and socialized gender expectations among various cultures (Akua-Sakyiwah, 2016; Ali *et al.*, 2017).

Gender and social capital

Social capital theory has been a useful framework to understand immigrant integration. It argues that the intensity and the quality of relations individuals form with other people – their social capital – contribute to their employment success (e.g. Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Grosser, 2014). *Social capital* includes the actual and potential resources (Bourdieu, 1986) required to develop *social networks*, the underlying structure of relations “that hold the capacity for providing social capital” (Clear *et al.*, 2005, p. 80). Research has established the critical role of local social networks in adjustment to foreign environments (Farh *et al.*, 2010; Glanz *et al.*, 2001; Johnson *et al.*, 2003; Manev and Stevenson, 2001; Sobre-Denton and Hart, 2008). Social networks are a crucial source of social support, which in the context of adjustment refers to communication that helps individuals manage uncertainty and ambiguity and increases their perceptions of control regarding life (Albrecht and Adelman, 1987). Social support plays a significant role in immigrant settlement and adjustment (Gao and Gudykunst, 1990; Sobre-Denton and Hart, 2008) and positively impacts immigrant health, despite systemic issues and challenges (Simich *et al.*, 2005).

There is limited research on the gendered barriers to accessing social support and social networks towards immigrants' psychosocial adjustment and integration (Furnham and Sheikh, 1993; O'Mahony and Donnelly, 2013; Simich *et al.*, 2005). These studies find that immigrant women have significantly more psychosocial challenges (Furnham and Sheikh, 1993) due to complex gender-related problems, including poverty, immigration status, discrimination and poor spousal relationships (O'Mahony and Donnelly, 2013).

Growing research investigates the use of technology to develop social networks and access social support (Mikal *et al.*, 2013; Rains and Young, 2009; Nardon *et al.*, 2015). While this research suggests that technology provides newcomers with many affordances and benefits, the pandemic environment and its almost exclusive reliance on technology for social interactions provide a unique context to further explore newcomer women's integration challenges.

We build on the interaction of the feminization of migration perspective and social capital theory to contextualize skilled newcomer women's employment experiences amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Responses to the pandemic have increased the housework and childcare burden while decreasing work opportunities within a context of social distancing and technology dependence for social interactions. This theoretical toolkit helps us understand the complex nature of the challenges faced by skilled newcomer women during the COVID-19 pandemic and the supports they sought as they negotiated the competing demands of their work and family lives.

Research approach

We conducted an inductive, qualitative and elaborative study to explore the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on skilled newcomer women's work experiences in Canada. Elaborative studies refine, extend or contextualize pre-existing concepts (Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Fisher and Aguinis, 2017; Pratt, 2009). In this study, we contextualize social capital theorizations of immigrant integration and the feminization of migration perspectives to understand the gendered nature of the COVID-19 work environment.

Data collection and analytical approach

We collected our data via an online questionnaire to accommodate social isolation measures in effect during the pandemic. The questionnaire contained closed and open-ended questions about skilled newcomer women's work situation in February 2020 (before the onset of COVID-19 in Canada) and August 2020 when the data were collected. We designed our questionnaire with the knowledge that skilled newcomer women face a wide range of work integration barriers, including balancing personal, professional and familial desires and demands and need a variety of supports. We expected that the COVID-19 pandemic would heighten some of the challenges and pose new ones. However, typical of an inductive qualitative approach, we did not impose assumptions on participants and kept the questions open (e.g. what are the main challenges you are currently facing?).

The open-ended questions contained no limit on length, allowing participants to write as much as they desired and inquired about participants' challenges and support needs. Some open-ended questions were factual (e.g. type of work), while others prompted self-reflection (e.g. explain your experience of the pandemic through a metaphor). We estimated that the questionnaire took about one hour to complete. We solicited volunteers through social media and immigrant support organizations and recruited 69 volunteers. Given our interest in immigrants' narratives of their experiences, we selected the 50 questionnaires that were complete and provided rich, open-ended responses. All participants in our final sample had a good command of English and provided comprehensive responses. The average response length per participant was 823 words.

Participants in our study came from 26 different countries and had been in Canada for less than five years; 4 had a post-secondary diploma, 12 had a bachelor's degree, 25 had a master's degree and 9 had a Ph.D. They specialized in a variety of fields, including business, health, engineering and language. All participants had work experience in their fields; the average years of work experience was 8.1 years. Thirty-six of our participants were married, and 24 had school-aged children at the time they filled out the questionnaire. Thirty participants reported having used some type of employment service from settlement or community organizations at some point in time, and 23 were using employment services in August 2020. Forty-one participants used online job search tools at some point, and 33 participants were using online job search tools in August 2020.

The first stage of analysis involved preparing a memo describing how the COVID-19 pandemic affected participants' careers in Canada, including descriptions of key events and experiences. Second, two members of the research team read all transcripts and regularly discussed the coding scheme to agree on codes by consensus. They categorized participants based on similarities through successive iterations of coding and theorizing. The rest of the team assumed the role of "outsiders" (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), critiquing and challenging their interpretations. Table 1 categorizes participants' experiences based on changes to their employment situation from February to August 2020.

Further, we compared these categories based on their challenges, support used and support needed, as summarized in Table 2.

As illustrated in [Table 2](#), 38 (76%) of the women in our dataset complained of a lack of career opportunities, which was true even for some who did not experience career change or progressed professionally. The remote work environment was also a challenge for many immigrant women (29), both due to work from home pressures and exclusively relying on online tools for employment support and job application. As a result, almost half of the women in our dataset were experiencing some type of psychological distress, and 18 identified mental health support as an area of need.

Given the open-ended nature of the questions, the absence of a particular challenge or need does not mean the need does not exist or is not important. Thus, the number of times a challenge was mentioned is a rough indication of its importance and magnitude and not a representation of the number of women experiencing the challenge or need. In the next section, we explain the career changes highlighted in [Table 1](#) and use participants' responses to discuss how the pandemic has influenced newcomer women's career experiences.

Findings: newcomer women's experiences of the pandemic

We found that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced newcomer women's experiences by blocking or reversing the direction of their career trajectory. Generally, participants experienced layoffs, challenges finding employment and performing at their current occupations. More specifically, they described changes in their work environment, including decreased availability of work contracts, reduced work productivity due to family responsibilities and limited resources, limited government support to find and/or retain work due to delays in immigration and citizenship processing, ineligibility for emergency benefits and measures due to non-citizen status, as well as reduced social support to help navigate the increasingly challenging and changing job market.

As displayed in [Table 1](#), 41 out of 50 respondents were negatively impacted by the pandemic. We identified three main categories of negative impact: delayed start of a career, reversed career trajectory due to layoffs or decreased availability of short-term opportunities and interrupted career trajectory due to reduced opportunities to perform and advance in a work-from-home environment. Only five were able to secure a job during the pandemic, and four women experienced no change in employment. We discuss each of these experiences below.

	Work Situation in August 2020			
Work Situation in February 2020	Working - Satisfied with current employment	Working - Unsatisfied with current employment	Not working	Total
Working - Satisfied with current employment	4 No career change	2 Reversed career trajectory	8 Reversed career trajectory	14
Working - Unsatisfied with current employment	2 Career progression	8 Trajectory interrupted	5 Reversed career trajectory	15
Not working	2 Career progression	1 Career progression	18 Delayed start of career	21
Total	8	11	31	50

Table 1.
Immigrants work
situation changes

Table 2.
Newcomer women's
experience

Career trajectory	#	Key challenges mentioned	Support used (August 2020)	Support needed
Delayed start of career	18	Lack of career opportunities (17)	Online job search (16)	Economic opportunity (11)
		Lack of professional network (13)	Employment support (13)	Developing networks (11)
Reversed career trajectory	15	Remote work (13)	Informal support (7)	Education and accreditation (8)
		Psychological distress (9)		Psychological support (7)
		Family demands (7)		Coping with family demands (6)
		Social isolation (2)		Immigration/legal advice (4)
		Lack of career opportunities (12)	Online job search (13)	Economic opportunity (12)
		Psychological distress (8)	Employment support (7)	Developing networks (6)
Trajectory interrupted	8	Remote work (7)	Informal support (5)	Education and accreditation (5)
		Family demands (5)		Immigration/legal advice (4)
		Lack of professional networks (4)		Coping with family demands (3)
		Social isolation (1)		Psychological support (3)
		Lack of career opportunities (5)	Online job search (3)	Economic opportunity (6)
		Social isolation (5)	Informal support (3)	Education and accreditation (5)
Career progression	5	Psychological distress (5)	Employment support (2)	Coping with family demands (4)
		Remote work (4)		Developing networks (4)
		Family demands (3)		Psychological support (4)
		Lack of professional networks (2)		Immigration/legal advice (3)
		Remote work (3)	Informal support (2)	Economic opportunity (4)
		Psychological distress (2)	Employment support (1)	Coping with family demands (2)
No career change	4	Lack of career opportunities (2)	Online job search (1)	Developing networks (2)
		Social isolation (1)		Psychological support (2)
		Lack of professional networks (1)		Immigration/legal advice (1)
		Family demands (3)	Informal support (2)	Economic opportunity (3)
		Lack of career opportunities (2)		Coping with family demands (3)
		Remote work (2)		Psychological support (2)
All participants	50	Social isolation (1)		Education and accreditation (1)
		Lack of career opportunities (38)	Online job search (33)	Immigration/legal advice (1)
		Remote work (29)	Employment support (23)	Economic opportunity (36)
		Psychological distress (24)	Informal support (19)	Developing networks (23)
		Lack of professional networks (20)		Education and accreditation (19)
		Family demands (19)		Psychological support (18)
Social isolation (10)		Coping with family demands (18)		
				Immigration/legal advice (13)

Delayed start of a career^[1]

COVID-19 measures have delayed the start of recently arrived immigrant women's careers, stalling their labour market entry and hindering their ability to adjust to Canada. Ana is a good example. Ana arrived in Canada from Brazil in February 2020 (as a dependent spouse) with a nutrition degree and three years of work experience. In her search for an entry-level job, Ana realized she requires accreditation to work in nutrition, but "the costs of the process were too high." Since the onset of the pandemic, she has applied to several jobs online without success. She says, "applying online and never getting an interview can [be] frustrating. Sometimes I feel like I don't fit anywhere here. I never know if I am looking at the right platforms and if I am using the right employment supports". She equates looking for a job in Canada during COVID-19 with "being in a maze with lots of ways out but wearing a blindfold. . . I am walking around unsure if I am going in the right direction. I feel lost." This feeling of being lost was shared by other women immigrants in our dataset. Like Ana, Olga reported feeling isolated and finding it difficult to build social networks online. With a Ph.D. in business, she equated looking for a job in Canada during COVID-19 with "sailing without a compass under a storm."

For recently arrived immigrants or those that had not yet established a professional network in Canada before the COVID-19 pandemic, the move to virtual interactions presented unique challenges. Despite their technological know-how and access to job applications and information, they feel lost and stalled because they are unaware of or uncertain about which resources are available and applicable and how to connect to people. They are deprived of opportunities to develop relationships and build the necessary social capital and networks to support their integration.

This uncertainty and a prolonged precarious employment situation have a serious impact on their psychosocial adjustment. Some women expressed frustration with the overall integration process and reported feeling a sense of impossibility. For instance, Bao felt that her experience was equivalent "to trying to reach the sky." A few women (7) mentioned the need for mental health and psychological support to cope with their situations. For instance, Ana said, "it is hard to handle moving to another country, leaving a career behind and not being able to find a job here. It is not just a new culture and being apart from family and friends, but it feels like I left everything behind, but I am not building anything here."

Reversed career trajectory

Some immigrants who had secured initial jobs in February were hopeful about progressing and building a career in Canada. The pandemic, however, reversed this trajectory by decreasing work opportunities. With a Ph.D. in translation from Algeria and nine years of work experience, Meriem was disheartened in recalling her reversal experience. She arrived in Canada about a year ago with two young children. It took Meriem five months to find her first job in Canada as a contract instructor at a university; her "dream job," and she was "really satisfied by the whole work environment." The job only lasted four months, and she has since been struggling to find new contracts. In addition to the challenges of finding stable work, she describes the difficulties of remote work arrangements with young children at home. These pressures, coupled with extended unemployment, are taking a toll on her mental health and sense of self: "[t]he more time passes, the more I lose confidence in my abilities."

Meriem feels isolated and explains how building a professional and social support network is much more challenging during the pandemic as "many hiring processes have been canceled or postponed." She equates the pandemic experience with a "thirsty person lost in the desert," feeling "tired, miserable, and guilty." She says, "I am struggling to find my way here. . . I am depressed and stressed most of the time. I immigrated to Canada for a better life, career, future for me and my family."

In addition to struggles to find employment, these individuals are often ineligible for emergency government supports. For instance, Karin was working on a temporary contract

in diplomatic relations that ended in February. She says, "I was very happy with my employment in February 2020 and would have loved to stay with the [employer] for longer. However, there were no openings at the time. In February, I wasn't too worried about my future prospects as I had several interviews lined up and had obtained good references from the [employer]." She feels things have changed dramatically since the onset of the pandemic as "interviews and projects were cancelled. . .As my previous contract ended at the end of February but not because of COVID, I was also not eligible for any CERB [Canada Emergency Response Benefit] support." Now, she is working, but as she said, "I am very precariously employed, only working part-time at the moment. . .My dream would be to get a job in my field so that I could aspire to my long term career goals." She feels that working in Canada during COVID-19 feels like being "surrounded by big gray clouds. . . feeling the distant but also very present threat of the clouds, which makes me worry about what to come".

A few of the participants were further in their career trajectory with a stable employment contract; the pandemic, however, has affected many organizations, and many immigrants have lost their jobs. Nour is an example. She arrived from Egypt a little over a year ago with a pharmacy degree, an MBA and 16 years of work experience. In February 2020, she worked in the pharmaceutical field as a business development manager but was laid off in March due to COVID-19. She is now working as a customer service representative and looking for other opportunities. She finds opportunities limited and feels the need for more employment guidance and access to professional networks.

Like the immigrants who had the start of their Canadian career delayed, these women struggled to find the right networks and describe the growing need for mental health support as much as they needed employment counseling. Juliana, from Brazil, lost her job at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and has since been searching for paid positions. She describes her psychological strain. "It is draining to do this over and over again, for so many months in a roll. I am afraid it is too out of reach, and I might never get it." She questions, "Are all my efforts being for nothing? Isn't the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results? That is what I am doing, and something needs to change in order for me to achieve my results." Like many others, she needs career guidance "I need guidance from someone who can tell me what I am doing wrong. I have tons of experience in management and cannot secure a job."

Trajectory interrupted

Those participants who retained their jobs struggled to balance work and family responsibilities and grappled with decreasing opportunities to advance professionally. These women had hoped to move up their organizational ladders and secure better jobs, whose aspirations were interrupted by the onset and continuation of the pandemic. For instance, Ling is a single mother from China, working in retail. She is struggling with loneliness and lack of support. "With no family around, and because of Covid-19, we also need to keep a social distancing from friends. Kind of isolated here." The availability of childcare is a significant challenge for her "[My] kid has to stay at home, I [do not] feel safe to go out." She is also facing discrimination and complains, "Some people still think the virus comes from China! This is really painful!"

Some, like Aafina, feel trapped and hopeless. She was a physician in Yemen. In Canada, she was and still is working as a personal support worker in a retirement home. She says, "Although it is a good job and I have health benefits, it is not where I want to be. This was supposed to be a temporary job till I finished my exams and got my residency in a hospital (That is where I want to work)." She is working long hours, the job is stressful, and she is underpaid. Together, it becomes challenging to feel satisfied in her current situation and work towards a different career trajectory. She explains, "Most residents in the retirement home couldn't see their families, which was affecting them mentally. It was challenging to be there

for them when you are affected by the pandemic too. You have to put on a pleasant face and try to help them as much as you can. The demand at work has increased but not the manpower. I have been taking more hours to help cover shifts, and the responsibilities have increased. But my study time has decreased because of it and my time for self-care is practically nonexistent. . . I work minimum wage, so it does affect. I need to work double just to have a normal month and be able to pay the bills. . . If I need to take a course or workshop, I have to make sure that it is not out of my budget. . . I feel exhausted and on a never-ending cycle. I wish I could just get off of it and leave, but I need to keep moving for the sake of my dreams, which lately have seemed far-fetched. . .”

These women are in a difficult situation, struggling to keep their jobs for survival, a situation made worse by the limited time and resources to invest in a better career. Lack of social support and guidance makes it particularly challenging for them to find a way out. These challenges are exacerbated in a work-from-home environment as it restricts the ease of communication and creates added pressure to showcase increased individual work performance. Amala, from Bangladesh, is a short-term contract worker in the Canadian public sector. She describes her struggle, “As I have a short-term contract, I cannot get any days off or have any sick days. Due to having a short-term contract and not getting any days off/sick days, work-life balance is harder, and finding the time to get away from ‘work from home space’ is impossible.”

Career progression

Five women in our dataset were able to secure jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These jobs were typically in front line occupations, positions they were overqualified for and often precarious. Aisha, with a Ph.D. in Medical Biochemistry, laments “the work I found is a survival job” and complained that the online work environment “limits [my ability] to develop a network and [become] familiar with the Canadian workplace.” Nora agrees, “since COVID started, everything turned virtual, which is not the same thing. Face to face interviews give the chance to build an impression and transfer the positive energy and ambition to the recruiter; I don’t believe that the virtual interview does the same.”

Fabiana, from Brazil, reported being “glad to be working even though not in my field” but recognized the difficulties of long hours and strenuous work shifts. Similarly, Dia, from India, is happy to be working, but being exposed in a front-line retail work environment makes her feel that she needs more support to protect herself from the virus.

No change

A few women were able to find and retain suitable employment (four women in our dataset); however, they still struggle with family demands in the work-from-home environment and limited career opportunities. For instance, Dilara, from Iran, works in the technology sector, which was less affected than many others. Still, she was worried that she may lose her job and feels lonely and isolated. She confesses, “Sometimes I feel down and not in the mood to work . . . now that we’re home almost all the time, I miss my family back in my country more. I am constantly worried about their health, and I think about them all the time. If something happens to them, I may not even be able to get a ticket immediately and travel to visit.”

Iyawa, from Nigeria, also highlights the practical challenges of working from home. She complains of lack of “access to supporting equipment like printer, telephone, comfortable seating arrangements, and increased cost of utilities” as well as “challenges taking care and homeschooling the children.” She is also struggling with delays in immigration processing. She explains, “I have been a refugee claimant for a year and a half now without a court hearing and been fully employed for a year now. Being a refugee claimant means I do not get any monthly support for my kids from the Federal Government. . . especially as a single

parent, it's twice as hard. I am currently in the process of preparing my children for school, and I have a lot of cost implication and now including masks, sanitizers, etc.”

Discussion

The experience of the newcomer women in our study highlights how the pandemic heightened existing challenges to immigrant women. Generally, the pandemic has exacerbated the void left by limited social and professional support and heightened challenges to balancing gender roles and responsibilities in work-from-home environments, increasing barriers to integration into the Canadian labour market. Skilled newcomer women face growing employment precarity due to unemployment, underemployment and limited career advancement opportunities, challenging psychosocial adjustment.

Our findings are consistent with the feminization of migration perspective (Donato *et al.*, 2006; Mahler and Pessar, 2018; Ressler *et al.*, 2017) and gendered barriers to accessing social support and networks (Furnham and Sheikh, 1993; O'Mahony and Donnelly, 2013; Simich *et al.*, 2005). Gender continues to be a dominant system that shapes both the paid and unpaid work in which immigrant women engage. In a pandemic environment, these women face decreased work opportunities, little to no access to social support and social networks and increased domestic burden due to gendered responsibilities (i.e. childcare, eldercare and household work typically seen as women's work).

While research on social support suggests that technology can contribute to creating social networks and accessing social support (Mikal *et al.*, 2013; Rains and Young, 2009; Nardon *et al.*, 2015), these technologies are typically used as a complement to face-to-face interactions. However, in the COVID-19 environment, all support interactions became virtual, decreasing access to informal sources of social support and decreasing the richness of support programs delivered virtually. The reliance on technology for communication limited participants' access to social capital resources to build social networks in support of their overall integration. We contribute to this literature by highlighting that while technology can contribute to the creation of social networks, it does not replace face-to-face interactions critical for accessing local interpretation schemas (Glanz *et al.*, 2001; Nardon *et al.*, 2015), including information about work opportunities, as well as interpretation and evaluation of one's skills and fit to the labour market.

The pandemic placed an increased strain on high skilled immigrant women who need to care for their families and seek commensurate employment in a predominantly online work environment, limiting their access to social capital and support. As a result, these women encountered delayed, interrupted or reverse career trajectories which were made worse by limited employment opportunities, financial instability, growing family responsibilities and mental health challenges. There is potential that the growing gap in career progression to balance work and family will have long-term and unpredictable occupational outcomes as these women continue to build their personal and professional lives.

Similar to the developing studies on escalating gender burdens posed by the pandemic in different national contexts, we predict that delayed, interrupted and reversed career trajectories could potentially prolong skilled newcomer women's labour market precarity. It also decreases access to necessary work experience in their fields to advance their career trajectories and find job satisfaction. Furthermore, the ongoing reliance on virtual work environments and increasing family and care demands will likely exacerbate these career challenges. As a result, skilled immigrant women may continue to have their skills and experiences further devalued, and their confidence and psychosocial adjustment to Canada eroded.

Our study is a starting point in efforts to better understand and support newcomer women and respond to calls for further action to support their professional and mental well-being. Urgent measures are necessary from various government levels to develop support

programs, providing financial and other emergency support regardless of immigration status. These supports include reliable childcare, career coaching and mentoring, and mental health support to those individuals to minimize the adverse long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrant women's work experiences.

Limitations and areas for future research

Our study is a snapshot of newcomer women's experiences from February to August 2020 in Canada. It highlights the emerging and resultant gendered challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic during what is now thought as the first wave of the virus. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly evolving, and its gendered effects on employment and immigrant long-term integration are not yet clear. Follow-up and longitudinal studies are necessary to fully understand the pandemic's long-term impacts in creating and furthering inequalities of immigrant women and other vulnerable groups. In addition, future research needs to explore and compare various groups exposed to vulnerabilities, including immigrant men and racialized individuals. Large scale comparative studies of multiple groups and across multiple countries will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, our study's exploratory and qualitative nature allowed for challenges and experiences to emerge but limited our ability to measure the relevance of each challenge and need. Follow-up quantitative studies may provide more reliable evidence in support of corrective action.

Conclusion

Our study highlights the exacerbated challenges of work, social inequality and disproportionate gender dynamics during the evolving pandemic. Newcomer women's employment is increasingly precarious, and their career trajectories are negatively affected, thereby challenging their psychosocial adjustment while dealing with increased domestic burden and remote work environments. Our research is intended to motivate further dialogue around the emergent gender dynamics and initiate action to improve newcomer women's lives amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Note

1. We made small grammatical and orthographical corrections to participants' texts to increase readability.

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