



## **Women International Students**

### **The Invisible Workforce**

Project Report

May 2023

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## Introduction

International students contribute over **\$22 billion** to the Canadian economy annually and support over 200,000 jobs. Locally in Ontario, international students contribute \$11 billion to the province's GDP and support 120,000 jobs.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, from 2000 to 2022, the number of study permit holders has increased from 122,665 to **807,750** with 319,000 of those students being from India.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the highest number of study permit holders (291,175) in Canada were studying in Ontario.<sup>3</sup>

Due to its diversity and accessibility, Peel Region has become a popular destination to settle in for many South Asian international students. Not only is Peel Region home to large academic institutions such as Sheridan College and Algoma University, it is also home to many smaller institutions. Despite Peel Region having a high South Asian population (**54.3%**)<sup>4</sup> South Asian international students are struggling to find culturally responsive community support and services which is resulting in high rates of abuse and mistreatment, often undocumented and unreported. In particular, young women international students are

facing heightened vulnerability and risk due to their gender, misinformation, immigration status and cultural norms and expectations.

When the pandemic first began, Laadliyan started receiving an influx of calls from female-identifying South Asian international students who were finding themselves in precarious situations with very little support and information about their rights and responsibilities. Additionally, Laadliyan was made aware of several other problems these young women were facing such as , food insecurity, health challenges, isolation, depression, anxiety, unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, and harassment.

As a result, we launched **The Udaari Project** in June 2020. The Udaari Project bridges the service gap faced by South Asian female international students living, working and/or studying in the Greater Toronto Area. The program offers educational workshops in community and academic settings on topics such as financial literacy, sexual and mental health, professional development, legal rights, housing, and food security.

Once we started working with students, we began hearing horrific stories about their experiences with employers, landlords, partners, and community members. We learned that some of the most horrific experiences students are encountering are in the workplace. This led us to start raising awareness about the issue and educating students on how to protect themselves in the

<sup>1</sup> Global Affairs Canada, "Economic Impact of International Education in Canada 2017-2018," GAC, December 21, 2020, <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impa-ct-2018/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

<sup>2</sup> Erudera, "Canada International Student Statistics 2023," Erudera, April 4, 2023, [https://erudera.com/statistics/canada/canada-international-student-statistics/#:~:text=British%20Columbia%20is%20the%20province,studying%20in%20Ontario%20\(291%2C175\)](https://erudera.com/statistics/canada/canada-international-student-statistics/#:~:text=British%20Columbia%20is%20the%20province,studying%20in%20Ontario%20(291%2C175)).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Ethnic Diversity and Religion: Peel's Diverse Community in 2021," Census Information Hub, 2021, <https://census-regionofpeel.hub.arcgis.com/pages/ethnic-diversity-and-religion-2021>.

workplace and successfully getting funded for our project Building Equitable Workplaces for Women International Students in Peel.

To respond to the growing needs of these young women, we also launched our International Student Emergency Fund to provide community members an opportunity to donate funds to support the immediate needs of students such as clothing, accommodation, food or health. Through the Udaari Project, we also offer a curated monthly resource newsletter with job postings, volunteer opportunities, rental units, and community events. We currently have 280+ students subscribed to the newsletter. For any requests we are unable to support, we ensure students are connected and referred to other appropriate resources.

Through this report, we will highlight the key themes that came out of our consultations with students related to their employment experiences in Peel. We will shed light on the issue and also share recommendations with stakeholders, government officials, community organizations, institutions and community members on how to collectively better support these young women.



Laadliyan's staff with international students at Algoma University after a Safety 101 workshop



**19 Workshops**

**435 Students Supported**

**280+ Newsletter Subscribers**

**\$55,000 Provided in Aid**

## About the Project

In 2022, Laadliyan received funding from the WES Mariam Assefa Fund in partnership with the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement for our project titled Building Equitable Workplaces for Women International Students in Peel. The project aimed to explore the distinct employment experiences of women international students working in the Peel Region. Our primary objective was to gain insights into the specific barriers faced by women international students as they navigate employment and create training modules for small to midsize employers on how to better support this population.

By engaging in consultations and collaborations with both the students and local employers, we wanted to identify the areas where employers in our community can enhance their support for women international students in the workplace. Moreover, we aspired to understand the active role our organization can play in bridging the gap between the exceptional talent possessed by women international students and the small to midsize employers who hire them. By examining these dynamics and fostering dialogue between the students and employers, we sought to create an environment which promotes equitable and mutually beneficial employment opportunities.

Another important component of the project included offering educational workshops and seminars on topics of interest to

students as identified by them in community consultations. We successfully hosted 8 workshops for a total of 30 students on the following topics:

- Legal Support
- Rights in the Workplace
- Financial Literacy
- Self Defense
- Health Eating and Nutrition
- Health and Wellness
- Professional Development
- Confidence Building



Our team with international students at a Healthy Eating workshop at Seva Food Bank

Using the data collected, we are now in the process of creating training modules for small to medium size employers on how to support this workforce holistically. These training modules will be ready for June 2023 and will be used to provide training to employers across the Region of Peel.

## Methodology & Demographics

To engage students for this project, we facilitated 5 community consultations. 4 of these consultations were in person and 1 was virtual. The purpose of these consultations was to provide the students with an opportunity to openly and anonymously share their employment experiences. We were successfully able to engage **33 women international students** between the ages of 18–30. 31 of the 33 students self-identified as South Asian and 70% of the women spoke Punjabi as their native language. The students we engaged had been in Canada from anywhere between 2015 to 2022, with the majority of them (42.1%) arriving in 2021, during the pandemic. 76.5% of them had experience working full time and 23.5% of them experience working part time.

Before the consultations, we ensured to have one on one meetings with students to walk them through the project and what they can expect. Each student had to complete a screening call which helped us build a rapport with them prior to the consultations. During the consultations, we wanted to ensure the students felt comfortable sharing their challenging experiences. As our team is also made up of South Asian women who can speak Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu and can understand the cultural nuances, we were able to make the students feel comfortable in our presence which provided them opportunities to be open and vulnerable with us. We also ensured counselling

support was available to students during the consultations in the event they had to step away. We encouraged new and young moms to bring their children along with them if they did not have access to child care and ensured our staff were there to support with child minding. Each participant was provided with a \$100 honorarium for their time. Transportation and refreshments were also provided for in person consultations.



## Key Findings

The consultations which were conducted yielded several important findings and themes. Although there was a lot of overlap between the themes, we identified 6 key areas which illuminate the challenges that women international students encounter in the workplace as they strive to acclimate to life in Canada:

1. Exploitation by employers
2. Lack of support
3. Isolation
4. Harassment
5. Discrimination
6. Fraud

### 1. Exploitation by Employers

The most common theme which was identified throughout the community consultations was exploitation by employers. Women international students shared real-life examples and stories about the prevalence and impact of exploitation they have faced at their workplaces. The students expressed that they found themselves in extremely vulnerable situations and had very little knowledge about how to protect themselves and therefore endured the exploitation.

In particular, they expressed facing several forms of exploitation such as:

- Not receiving wages they had earned
- Travelling long hours on public transportation to get to work only to be sent home once they arrived due to lack of shift work available on that particular day
- Being overworked and significantly underpaid
- Not being allowed to take breaks or time off for being sick

Below are two quotes which speak to the exploitation by employers from two students who took part in the community consultations:

“At that time, \$11.40 used to be the minimum, but restaurants only paid us \$8. There was a lot of exploitation. Apart from that, they did not pay us on time. We would ask them constantly for 2-3 weeks to give us our payment because we had to pay for rent and fees, but they still would not pay us on time.”

"They tell us to come for morning shift, so we wake up super early, do all our work, make food, and go by bus. Then, they tell us the shift is cancelled, and tell us to go back. Even during the cold and snowy days, we have to go to work at 6 am and go back at 10 am for just 2 hour shifts. And no one pays for 2 hour shifts."

## 2. Lack of Support

Lack of support was the second common theme we discovered through our consultations with these students. For most people, it is important to have a strong support network around them as it helps them navigate challenges and empowers them to advocate for their rights to foster personal and professional growth. However, for these young women, they experience a significant lack of support from employers, community members, professors, and others around them. Women international students shared stories which highlighted the lack of access they have to support and services in their workplaces, academic institutions and community.

The consultations highlighted:

- Insufficient support from many academic institutions with finding suitable and safe

employment opportunities for students

- Lack of professional development support from academic institutions
- Students are being looked down upon by professors and other students for working long hours
- Lack of support from employers and academic institutions in finding medical support
- Lack of empathy or compassion from healthcare providers, specifically for those who are pregnant
- General lack of awareness and resources
- Lack of education on safety and training from employers
- Lack of security and safety on public transportation by city

One of the students shared:

"I think, employers should provide more support to their employees. Remember, these employees are people who are studying, so they kind of like, need some more support to be able to balance both employment and learning at school"



### 3. Isolation

Although exciting, moving to a new country can be difficult and isolating, specifically for young women who are leaving their homes for the first time. Majority of the students in the community consultations identified experiencing high rates of isolation. They shared that they feel extremely lonely and have a hard time adapting to life in Canada, away from their families, most of whom are currently in India. Students also shared that due to isolation and lack of community, they did not know where to turn in times of need.

They further feel isolated due to:

- The culture shock of being in a country which is very different from their home country
- Having to navigate an entirely different educational system
- Not being proficient in English or having an accent
- Not having someone to share their struggles with without any fear of repercussions or consequences

One student shared how how difficult and isolating her employment experience has been:

**"I feel like committing suicide because of the kind of work that I got myself into. My family members have a completely different perspective on the job that I do here, but the reality is so different"**

All these issues are contributing towards the declining mental health and wellbeing of these young women, resulting in some of them experiencing depression and suicidal thoughts.

### 4. Harassment

Another key theme which emerged through the community consultations was harassment. These young women are extremely vulnerable as they are often living on their own without their immediate families, do not necessarily understand Canadian systems, are afraid to report abuse and exploitation, and may find themselves living in fear of their abuser. Many of the young women in the consultations shared their experiences with having to experience unsolicited physical touching and sexual advances, and demands of sexual favours by employers, co-workers, landlords and strangers in public. From the students who shared they had experienced sexual harassment, not a single one of them had ever reported it to authorities or sought any support. In addition, many of

the students shared that they have faced verbal harassment by employers and co-workers.

Below is a quote from one of the students on her experience with sexual harassment from her employer:

"I think he was 67 years old. He had already had 2-3 divorces. One day, he called me to his cabin and asked me about the nature of my relationship with my husband. It was very awkward for me. He asked me if my husband was good. I knew what he meant, but I tried to give a normal response that my husband is very nice. Then, he was like you're not understanding – I mean in bed."

We know such abuse and harassment have profound and long-lasting effects on a person's well-being, both emotionally and psychologically. It is important to remember that these young women are brought up in a culture where topics such as sexual abuse or misconduct are considered taboo and they are not encouraged to openly address it or report it. As a result, many of these young women found themselves sharing their experiences for the first time ever in our community consultations but still did not feel comfortable reporting it to the police or the

Human Resources departments as their workplaces.

## 5. Discrimination

As we already know, discrimination against racialized people in the workplace is very common. However, for these young women, it is exacerbated due to their unique position and identity in the community. As very young racialized women, new to the country with limited English in many cases, these women have become an ideal target for many to take advantage of. Through the community consultations, women international students openly shared about the blatant discrimination they face in the workplace and the community and its profound impacts on them. They shared stories of:

- Being denied employment opportunities
- Being refused work due to being pregnant
- Being made to feel "different" than other employees
- Experiencing gender bias with their male counterparts
- Being treated poorly by other South Asian community members who have been in Canada longer than them
- Being talked over by employers and coworkers
- Witnessing other employees being favoured more

One student shared her experience with discrimination because of her skin colour:

"Uh, and also getting the job was a problem, a really big problem because, uh, sometimes I could go for an interview and they just say that they don't want, uh, anyone of my colour. They want, uh, I know, uh, someone born in Canada, you know? Uh, and so, I dunno, I felt so left out."

## 6. Fraud

Many young women international students are navigating finances on their own for the first time upon moving to Canada. As a result, many of them are easy targets for financial fraud. During the consultations, the students shared various stories of being victims of fraud by those they knew as well as strangers. Many of these young women were laid off or lost their jobs during the pandemic and became ideal targets for CERB related scams. Some women shared that they had been scammed out of thousands of dollars by immigration lawyers and consultants after being promised to receive paperwork related to work permits.

Another common narrative among the students was that many of

them were forced into getting paid by cash by their employers, resulting in unsafe and underpaid work and no record of employment. Many students also shared experiences being scammed into rental accommodation only to live in overcrowded and precarious housing.

"I studied and paid money to a lawyer for a work permit. He took \$9000 from me, and disappeared. I know nothing about where he went."

Throughout the community consultations we heard gruesome and heartbreaking details of the experiences of these young women in the workplace, housing and in the community. The study's findings and themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by women international students and offer valuable insights that can be used to inform further research, policy and practice, and can be used to address the issues in a meaningful way.



Laadliyan's staff with International students at a Professional Development workshop

## Key Learnings

As a support for many women and girls in the community, we strongly believe that it is our responsibility to shed light on the realities faced by this vulnerable group. Our key learning from this project have been:

- In order to understand the unique experiences of women international students in the workplace, it is important to understand their intersecting identities
- Employers need to understand and acknowledge the unique challenges and barriers faced by women international students in the workplace
- Exploitation of women international students in the workplace intertwines with their academics, housing, wellness, and health and they all must be addressed holistically
- We must apply a proactive approach to the situation rather than a reactive approach
- We must enhance the capacity of academic institutions to recognize indications of exhaustion and exploitation among their students
- We must urge and empower students to come forward and report instances of harassment and mistreatment to law enforcement
- On-campus awareness efforts and the availability of resources for students needs to be strengthened
- It is imperative to empower students with knowledge to recognize and assert their rights in the workplace



Women international students at Sheridan College for a community event by Laadliyan

## Recommendations

In order to create a safer and more inclusive community for women international students, a collaborative effort must be made with a collective responsibility placed on all stakeholders. Based on our findings, we have identified the following recommendations to ensure these young women do not continue to be exploited by those who they are trusting to protect and support them in their journey as newcomers to Canada.

### Cultural Values and Gender Roles

It is crucial to examine cultural values and gender roles within South Asian communities when discussing the implications of these values on the experiences of women international students. Fostering open dialogue and promoting understanding among employees from diverse cultural backgrounds is of paramount importance in enhancing their employment experiences.

### Holding Employers Accountable

It is crucial to highlight the responsibility of employers in creating an inclusive and equitable workplace for women international students. Employers must encourage transparency and better reporting mechanisms for addressing workplace issues and ensure there are policies and procedures in place to protect their employees. Employers must offer clear and comprehensive employment contracts to their

employees, not only to inform them about their legal rights and responsibilities but also about what is expected of them in their positions. Employers who fail to do so, must face consequences for their inactions.

### Mandatory Job-Related Training

Employers have a crucial responsibility to provide essential job-related training for all employees. It is their duty to develop comprehensive training programs that equip their workforce with the necessary knowledge and skills to perform their roles effectively. There must be serious consequences for employers who fail to provide training for new employees.

### Training on Racism, Discrimination, and Harassment

Training will help create awareness about the negative impact of racism, discrimination, and harassment on individuals and the workplace as a whole. It fosters a culture of respect, tolerance, and inclusion by emphasizing the importance of treating all employees fairly and with respect, regardless of their race, ethnicity, background, or legal status. Also, employers must establish support systems, such as employee assistance programs and grievance procedures to ensure the well-being of all employees.



## Access to Community Supports and Services

One important aspect of our project is to raise awareness among international students about the availability of food banks and other support services in the community. Many international students are unaware of these free-of-cost services, which can provide them with vital assistance during times of need. Workplaces, academic and religious institutions and community organizations need to work together to make accessing supports and services easy to navigate for students who are unfamiliar with the existing system



Laadliyan's team with a few international students at Sheridan College for a community event

“Yeah, I just have a suggestion. So I know about cash jobs that there could not be a contract. But if somebody is getting a T4 from some employer, then there should be a contract of employment, which is not the case right now, like we have leases, right? So I want that there should be a contract of employment which tells about all the jobs and roles and responsibilities.”



## Conclusion

Over the last several years, international students have become an integral part of Canada's economy and they continue to fill in many jobs and contribute to the growth of our communities. However, many of the young women students face extreme forms of abuse and exploitation due to their gender and vulnerability. Women students new to the country are finding themselves in highly unsafe and exploitative states in the workplace, at home, in the community and are finding very little support through their academic institutions.

their rights and responsibilities and have become easy targets for employers, landlords and community members to pry on. We must take collective action as a community to draw attention to these issues, build the capacity of these young women and empower them to report abuse and exploitation they face and ensure they have a fair and equitable chance at employment and building a life in Canada.



International students at a Mental Health and Wellness workshop

Many of these young women are leaving their homes for the first time with hopes and dreams to build better lives for themselves and their families in Canada but do not receive the support they deserve upon arriving and settling in Canada. They are constantly being exploited due to their lack of awareness and knowledge about

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