

# Social Sector Pathways to Progress Research

September 2023 - June 2024

The Social Sector Pathways to Progress Research was designed to deepen our understanding of the post-pandemic social service sector landscape in East Scarborough and to inform how we can enhance the East Scarborough Storefront's Working With People in the Social Sector (WPS) program. We engaged both employers and job seekers in our research to learn more about their experiences and challenges and align their needs, as we think about what it means to build pathways to progress.

## Social Sector Landscape: Workers & Jobseekers in the Social Sector

According to ONN's 2020 Report, Decent Work for Women, women constitute 80% of Ontario and Canada's nonprofit sector workforce, totalling approximately 1.6 million people. Many of these women are racialized and/or immigrants. The Storefront's WPS program data shows the majority identify as racialized women and/or trans/gender non-conforming, and over one-third are newcomers.



## Social Sector Landscape: Key Challenges

A survey completed by social sector job seekers revealed these key challenges:

- 46.7% struggle with work-life balance
- 33.3% lack the necessary work experience to secure employment
- 33.3% feel their education is insufficient to secure employment, and 33.3% have limited networking opportunities

Focus group data showed that job descriptions often demand too much experience for entry level jobs, specific certifications are required which pose barriers to employment, only "survival jobs" or low paying jobs seem available, Canadian experience is preferred by employers, and that participants saw and experienced racism in the workplace. These issues highlight the need for more and specialized support for racialized and newcomer women seeking jobs in the social sector as well that there are changes that employers need to make to ensure equitable hiring and retention strategies.

## Survey results showed that local social sector employers face:

- Reduced staff capacity due to revenue decline and stagnant funding resulting in increasing pressure on paid staff to do more with less resources
- Staff burnout resulting in resignations and turnover at the staff, leadership and/or board level
- Lack of wage parity for the same job across sectors (private and public) resulting in employers struggling to recruit and retain workers



Additionally, in a focus group, employers highlighted the need for addressing systemic racism, promoting diversity in leadership, fair pay, need for more professional development opportunities, and creating a culture of equity and inclusion in order to support newcomer and racialized women entering the sector.

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## Capacity Building Sessions

Based on our learnings, it became clear that organizations were seeking additional support to enhance their equity and inclusion and decent work strategies to better hire and retain newcomer racialized women:

- Employers expressed wanting to create better strategies and go one step further to embody decent work and anti-racist practices in their workplace culture.
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- 70% of Employers expressed that they do not have or are not sure that they have a strategic approach to supporting newcomer racialized women in the workplace.



In response to this need, we hosted a full day capacity building session at The Storefront featuring interactive keynote speakers led by subject matter experts in these key areas:

- **Creating & Living a Workplace Culture of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion**

Led by: Sahar Vermezyari, Director, East Scarborough Storefront

- **Decent Work & Compensation in the Social Sector**, How these support recruitment, retention, and wellbeing in the sector

Led by: Pamela Uppal-Sandhu (she/her), Interim Co-Executive Director & Director of Policy, Ontario Nonprofit Network

- **Supporting Newcomer Employees in the Workplace:** Creating and implementing effective Newcomer Support Strategies in the workplace

Led by: Shine Jiyoun Chung

Our post-event survey indicated that 100% of attendees Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they better understood how to create a workplace culture of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, implementing decent workplace practices, & attracting and retaining underrepresented groups.

## WPS Pathway Redesign

In order to enhance the East Scarborough Storefront's Working With People in the Social Sector (WPS) program, we hosted a Pathway Redesign Session, bringing together employers and jobseekers to collaboratively design the next iteration of the WPS program.

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## WPS Pathway Redesign Continued

Here's what we learned on how the program can align employers' and jobseekers' experiences and enhance support for newcomer racialized women. This data will help our internal teams structure the next iteration of the WPS program:

- More post-graduation guidance would be helpful for WPS graduates to secure work, or aligned volunteering opportunities
- More time spent learning through hands-on experience or internships would give employers more confidence in making hiring decisions
- Curriculum enhancements, including CPI and harm reduction training
- Specialized WPS cohorts for specific entry-level jobs (e.g. Social Service Worker, Mental Health Worker, Addictions Worker, etc)

## Working with People in the Social Sector Program: What now?

The Social Sector Pathways to Progress Research project has led to a better understanding of the barriers faced by racialized and newcomer women in East Scarborough aiming to access social sector employment and increased employers' recognition of, and commitment to, anti-racist and decent work practices which will help them to hire and retain newcomer racialized women as employees. From a WPS program perspective, Storefront's Employment & Training Strategy team continues to explore how we can apply these research insights to enhance the program for both job-seekers and employers. Some improvements can be implemented immediately, while more substantial changes will most likely require additional resources.



## Conclusion and Acknowledgments

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Peter Gilgan Foundation for supporting this important work, and to everyone who contributed to the research along the way. Your participation has been instrumental in shaping our understanding and developing actionable recommendations to enhance the WPS program and support employers in the social sector. Your voices and experiences form the foundation of this report, and your ongoing commitment to fostering an inclusive and equitable sector will mean decent jobs for equity-deserving groups.

## Does this data resonate with your experience as a social sector leader?

We're always excited to share knowledge and learning journeys. If you have questions, stories, or comments please reach out to:

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