

Immigrant Women as Volunteers: Benefits for Charitable and Nonprofit Organizations

Fay Fletcher, Blythe Campbell, Jeneane Fast
Changing Together... A Centre for Immigrant Women

Every year, over 100,000 women immigrate to Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006). Many have post-secondary educations and a wealth of professional work experience (Statistics Canada, 2000). Despite these credentials, immigrant women often enter Canada as dependents with limited access to resources (Cote et al., 2001) and are more likely than Canadian-born women to be under- or unemployed (Miedema & Tastsoglou, 2000). In the absence of formal transitional programs, some immigrant women see volunteering as a way to build the skills and confidence to participate fully in Canadian society (Fletcher, 2004), understand Canadian culture, and develop essential social and professional networks.

Immigrant women have much to offer Canada's charitable and nonprofit organizations and the communities they serve. This fact sheet discusses the benefits of involving immigrant women in your organization and how you can recruit and retain immigrant women as volunteers. It is based on interviews and focus groups with 24 immigrant women volunteers and 26 representatives from charitable and nonprofit organizations. The research was conducted in Edmonton, Alberta, between June and December 2006.

Reasons for recruiting immigrant women

Our interviews revealed several benefits for charitable and nonprofit organizations that recruit immigrant women as volunteers. They include:

- Greater cultural awareness resulting in improved understanding of and service to multicultural communities.
- Access to a broad range of knowledge, skills, and education.¹
- Access to new dimensions or perspectives beyond those of Canadian-born volunteers.
- Access to an underutilized resource.²

"Some of the kids that come to our shelter are immigrants themselves, so to have that aspect shared with them by someone who is also an immigrant...is definitely...an asset in terms of youth support volunteers." (Focus Group Participant)

Challenges faced by immigrant women

Immigrant women told us that they face several challenges relating to volunteering, including:

- Difficulty juggling the multiple roles of work and family.
- Difficulty mastering the English or French language and/or Canadian customs.
- A mismatch between their skills and the tasks they are asked to perform.
- Organizations that underestimate their potential to contribute.
- Not feeling heard or appreciated.

"They [organizations] need to be ready to take a volunteer. They need to learn about different cultures and think of others as professionals, as people with skills to share, even if they don't have great English." (Interviewee)

1. Statistics Canada (2000) reports that 39% of recent immigrant women ages 25-44 had at least some university education; 17% had a bachelor's degree or first professional degree, and 9% had a master's or doctorate degree. Of the immigrant women we interviewed, 56% had a bachelor's degree, 32% had either a master's or a PhD, 28% had a diploma, and 52% had multiple degrees. Many were professionals such as teachers, lawyers, government workers, scientists, and managers in their countries of origin.

2. In 2004, immigrants in general were less likely to volunteer than Canadian-born individuals (41% vs. 48%, see Hall et al., 2006). Representatives of charitable and nonprofit organizations who participated in focus groups, interviews, and workshops where our preliminary results were presented said they had not previously considered recruiting or did not know how to connect with immigrant women.

Strategies for improving recruitment efforts

The following are some steps that will help your organization when recruiting immigrant women as volunteers.

- Offer a positive, welcoming experience. Remember, for some immigrant women this may be their first experience in a Canadian social environment.
- Let the women know that they are able to make mistakes without feeling ashamed. Encourage them to ask questions and address their concerns if they have any.
- Be prepared to challenge stereotypes and open to enhancing your knowledge about other cultures. Make it clear that the women are able to share their experiences, traditions, and holidays with staff and volunteers in your organization.
- Be aware that behaviours vary from culture to culture. For example, in some cultures direct eye contact is a sign of aggression.
- Show an interest in developing the necessary skills to work with and learn from people of diverse cultures. For example, consider providing cross-cultural training for staff and volunteers.
- Adapt volunteer responsibilities to match individual strengths. Some women want to use their existing skills and education; others want to do something totally different.
- Create volunteer experiences that accommodate both the needs of immigrant women and your organization. Remember, immigrant women have to manage many new roles and responsibilities.
- Be prepared to accommodate different language skills and accents (particularly with phone responsibilities).
- Encourage immigrant women to participate in setting and achieving goals by inviting them to participate on boards and attend meetings.

- Think about how you can provide immigrant women with more support and training if necessary. Offer mentoring or partnering opportunities for new volunteers.
- Provide easily understood, informative materials about your organization.
- Offer solutions to transportation issues. Some women, especially if they are relatively new to Canada, are not familiar with the public transit system. If you are able, provide bus tickets to those who need them.
- Be aware that security checks and clearances are not always available for newcomers.

References

- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2006). Facts and Figures 2005: Immigration Overview. Retrieved February 13, 2007 from: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pub/facts2005/permanent/01.html#female>
- Cote, A., Keresit, M., & Cote, M. L. (2001). *Sponsorship – for better or for worse: The impact of sponsorship on the equality rights of immigrant women*. Ottawa: Status of Women Canada.
- Fletcher, F. (2004). *Settlement experiences of immigrant women at an Edmonton settlement agency*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Alberta.
- Hall, M., Lasby, D., Gumulka, G., & Tryon, C. (2006). *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2004 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. (Catalogue No. 71-542-XIE). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Miedema, B., & Tastsoglou, E. (2000). "But where are you from, originally?" Immigrant women and integration in the Maritimes. *Atlantis*, 24(2): 82-91.
- Statistics Canada. (2000). *Women in Canada, 2000: A gender-based statistical report*. Ottawa: Author.