Invisible and At Risk: Confronting Barriers Faced by Women International Students

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Prabhjot Kaur is the Operations Manager at Laadliyan, bringing over eight years of experience in community service with a focus on youth empowerment, leadership development, and strengthening South Asian communities. She holds a Diploma in Social Service Work and also serves as Director of Administration at the World Sikh Organization. Prabhjot has contributed to the BMJ scoping review on the health of international students in Canada and has presented at the 8th Metropolis Identities Conference. Prabhjot's journey with Laadliyan began in 2018 as a Social Service Work placement student. Inspired by the organization's mission and the welcoming space it created for girls like her, she continued volunteering before joining the team. She credits Laadliyan with helping her grow from a quiet introvert into a confident leader and is passionate about creating that same sense of belonging and opportunity for others. Outside of work, Prabhjot enjoys reading, watching lighthearted Turkish shows, and exploring hands-on crafting projects.

Canada’s post secondary education system relies heavily on international students, yet their lived realities, particularly those of women, remain underexamined in policy and practice. Drawing on Laadliyan’s community-based programming, funded research initiatives, and focus group findings in the Peel Region, this article examines the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by women international students, including workplace exploitation, housing precarity, sexual harassment, and legal illiteracy. It highlights how temporary immigration status, gendered power dynamics, and limited access to trusted information compound risk. The article further outlines culturally responsive practices, such as multilingual legal education and peer-informed digital resources, that can strengthen institutional accountability and student protection in Canada’s evolving immigration landscape.

INTRODUCTION

International Students in Canada's Evolving Immigration Landscape

Canada's reputation as a culturally diverse and safe country coupled with a well established and globally recognized education system has made it a destination of choice for many prospective international students (Esses et al., 2018; Netierman et al., 2022). In recent years, international students have also become increasingly central to Canada's labour market and immigration strategy. However, as tuition costs rise, work-hour restrictions tighten, and housing affordability declines, many international students face mounting financial and social pressures.

For women international students in particular, these pressures are compounded by gendered vulnerabilities that remain largely invisible within institutional responses. Balancing academic demands with employment and settlement responsibilities, many women encounter exploitative working conditions, unsafe housing, and heightened risks of harassment, all while navigating precarious immigration status. This article draws on Laadliyan's community-based research and programming to examine these challenges and identify best practices for more equitable engagement with women international students.

Organizational Context: Laadliyan and the Udaari Program

Laadliyan, Celebrating & Empowering Daughters is a Canadian non-profit organization with a mission to inspire South Asian daughters of all ages to become empowered individuals through education, engagement and awareness. Laadliyan delivers culturally responsive programming for daughters of all ages such as the Laadli to Laadli Mentorship Program, Laadli Care Packages, and the Udaari program, each designed to meet diverse needs of South Asian daughters across Canada.

The Udaari Program was developed in response to the growing needs of women-identifying international students, particularly those navigating financial, employment and housing precarity, limited social support, and unfamiliar legal systems. As students increasingly juggle education, employment, and rising costs of living, some engage in unauthorized or exploitative work arrangements to survive (Kahlon, 2021). Udaari seeks to address these realities through a wrap-around support model that centers safety, legal literacy, and community connection. Laadliyan's engagement with international students initially began in 2019 during the COVID-19 pandemic through providing emergency financial support for essential items such a hygiene products and groceries. As needs became clearer, the Udaari program quickly expanded into a comprehensive wrap-around model. The program now offers system-navigation support to ensure students had access to resources related to settlement, mental health, food security, and more. In addition to direct services, Laadliyan partners with academic institutions and employers, offering workshops on safety and legal rights, while also building institutional capacity to better serve international students.The Udaari Program further supports students through mentorship opportunities and professional development.

Evidence of Exploitation: Community-Based Research Findings

In 2022, Laadliyan received funding from the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement to examine and address employment-related exploitation experienced by international students in the Peel Region. Community consultations revealed deeply concerning patterns of exploitation, harassment, manipulation, and blackmail. Many students reported limited awareness of their rights as tenants, employees, as well as the legal responsibilities of employers and landlords. These gaps in legal literacy, combined with the precarious nature of their temporary resident status, leaves International students vulnerable to exploitation by employers, landlords, community members, and intimate partners. Students often refrain from reporting harms or illegal activities in fear of jeopardizing their status in Canada. These findings underscored the urgent need to strengthen and understand international students' legal capacity and informed Laadliyan's commitment to further addressing systemic vulnerabilities faced by newcomer students.

These insights led to a project called Enhancing Legal Capacity of Women International Students, funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario. The goals of this initiative were two fold; to identify and educate. Firstly, we wanted to understand the international student experience to identify major challenges for these students. Secondly, with this information we hoped to create 15 educational videos on legal topics to educate international students, particularly young women in Peel Region who are at greater risk of exploitation by employers and landlords. Ultimately, our hope was that this will lead to a decrease in the exploitation faced by women international students and build their capacity to access appropriate support in the community Focus groups with women international students revealed consistent challenges related to employment and housing. Participants described difficulty finding work, pressure to accept unpaid training, and employers deliberately scheduling hours beyond legal limits while withholding pay. One participant shared:

> *" So it was like really hard to find a part time job and when I got one I had to do the training that is for about like 2 weeks. The free training that was like a hard part, but there was nothing else to do. it was like hectic schedule for me because I used to go for this training and after this training because our doctor (Boss) came to know that we had the college only from 6:00 right, so he still used to take advantage of that. So it's like we can only get 20 hour pay. Means 20 hours pay per week, so he used to ask us to come like the other days too, but we can't take that money and he's not ready to give us"*

Others described experiences that pointed toward sexual harassment and coercion during job searches. One participant recounted being asked to provide personal photographs for a receptionist position and being told that physical appearance was a requirement for employment. Such accounts revealed gendered forms of exploitation that extend beyond labour violations into sexualized control and intimidation.

Notably, multiple discussions also raised concerns related to sex trafficking, an issue not initially anticipated in the project design. These findings highlighted the ways in which gender, migration status, and economic vulnerability intersect to create heightened risk for women international students.

Translating Knowledge into Accessible Resources

In response to these findings, Laadliyan developed a series of short educational videos addressing key legal topics, including employment rights, housing standards, immigration considerations, and personal safety. Content development was informed by an analysis of existing social media resources for international students, which showed higher engagement with conversational, concise, and culturally relatable formats.

Scripts were reviewed by legal and human resources professionals drawn from Laadliyan's Laadli to Laadli mentorship network to ensure accuracy and relevance. In July 2024, Laadliyan launched Laadliyan's Survival Guide for International Students on YouTube. The playlist includes 19 videos, each approximately two minutes long, designed as entry points for legal awareness rather than exhaustive instruction. 15 videos were created around legal topics but an additional 4 videos were also developed to cover this sex trafficking.

All videos are presented in English with Hindi and Punjabi captions, and each includes links to trusted community and legal resources. A culturally relevant resource list was also developed and made available on Laadliyan's website.

Best Practices

Through our work, we have noticed that the best practices for supporting this community include: facilitating access to community supports and services, ensuring accountability and transparency at work, and promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity.

We have found that system navigation has been a key support for many international students, as most are unaware of what resources are available to them. At Laadliyan, we collaborate with workplaces, academic institutions, religious organizations, and community groups to make it easier for students to access these supports and services. We've also observed that clearer employment contracts help students better understand their legal rights and responsibilities, promoting transparency in how to report workplace harassment. Lastly, workplaces that provide cultural sensitivity training create environments where students feel more comfortable, as employees/colleagues gain a deeper understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds.

By consistently applying these three practices, access to supports, clear accountability, and cultural sensitivity, we can ensure that students receive comprehensive, wraparound support to thrive academically, socially, and professionally

CONCLUSION

Implications for Policy and Practice

Laadliyan's work with women international students reveals how exploitation and harm often occur in plain sight, normalized by power imbalances and institutional blind spots. While international students are increasingly framed as economic contributors, their protection remains fragmented and reactive. Community-based, gender-responsive interventions offer critical insight into how legal education, culturally relevant resources, and early engagement can mitigate harm.

As Canada reassesses its immigration and international education policies, greater attention must be paid to the lived realities of women international students. Protecting students requires not only individual awareness but systemic accountability across educational institutions, employers, and policymakers. By centering student voices and community-based knowledge, Canada can move toward an international education system that is not only globally competitive, but also just and humane.

References

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