Strengthening Pathways to Integration: Cross-Sectoral Collaborations for Immigrant and Newcomer Women and Families in Canada

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Submitted by Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA)

Punam Dalal is an experienced nonprofit leader and educator with over 20 years of leadership in education and community development, both internationally and in Canada. She is currently the Department Manager at Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA), where she advances newcomer inclusion through employment programs, cross-sector partnerships, and community engagement. Punam Dalal holds two Master of Science degrees- in Mathematics and Software- and a Bachelor of Education.

Gurpreet Kaur brings over 19 years of experience in the language sector, including 11 years dedicated to supporting newcomers in Canada. With a Master of Arts in English Language and Literature, Gurpreet is passionate about language as a tool for empowerment. Her work has focused on helping immigrant women overcome language barriers and achieve their personal and professional goals. As Manager of Language Training and Childcare at CIWA, she leads with

Immigrants face systemic challenges such as limited access to employment, affordable housing, language barriers, social isolation, and lack of culturally responsive mental health services, which often impede the process of integration for newcomer women and their families. Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) has developed a holistic, integrated, cross-sectoral model to address some of these challenges, leveraging partnerships across employment and training, language and education, mental health and healthy relationships, and other social services to create sustainable pathways for integration. This article will demonstrate CIWA's collaborative approach and actionable recommendations for stakeholders through case studies and evidence-based insights from its five core departments: Employment and Training, Language, Family Services, Wellbeing and Resiliency, and Settlement and Integration.

Supporting immigrant and newcomer women and families on their settlement journey requires more than the efforts of a single agency; it calls for an integrated ecosystem of partnerships, shared strategies, and collective accountability. At the 27th Metropolis Canada Conference, CIWA Senior Managers Punam Dalal of Employment Training and Bridging, and Gurpreet Kaur, Manager of Language Training and Childcare at the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA), highlighted how cross-sector collaborations are creating inclusive and responsive systems that centre the needs of immigrant women and their families in Calgary. Their reflections underscored CIWA's role as a trusted leader in collaborative integration work.

As one of the fastest-growing and most diverse cities in Canada, Calgary is home to newcomers who make up one-third of its residents. A significant proportion of this demographic is composed of women and children, whose integration experiences are compounded by intersecting barriers such as language, isolation, lack of recognition of foreign credentials, trauma, family responsibilities, and socio-cultural expectations.

Founded in 1982, CIWA is a nationally recognized non-profit and registered charity with a gender-specific mandate. Our organization exists to serve immigrant and refugee women and their families with culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and outcomes-driven support. Today, we deliver over 50 holistic programs across language learning, employment, health, parenting, and social inclusion, grounded in partnerships and a commitment to system change. Clients receive wraparound supports, including first-language assistance and on-site childcare, ensuring accessibility and inclusion at every stage. In the last year, CIWA offered 163 distinct services and over 50 programs while working with 350 partners spanning from social service agencies to employment and industry partners. We work internally and externally to break down barriers, foster belonging, and build pathways to economic security, social inclusion, and family wellbeing.

Immigrant women often face a wide range of challenges when settling in Canada, balancing work and family responsibilities while navigating childcare shortages, inflexible job options, cultural isolation, language barriers, and difficulties with credential recognition. These challenges are further compounded by limited access to professional networks, financial barriers to education, and systemic service gaps.

CIWA's cross-sector model is designed to respond to this complexity. We understand that integration is about more than employment. It requires addressing the full spectrum of social determinants that shape a woman's ability to thrive.

Through coordinated programming in five core areas:

- **Income and Social Status:** Through financial coaching, tax filing support, and matched savings initiatives, CIWA equips women to achieve financial stability. Our RESP savings and budgeting workshops empower participants to build long-term financial resilience.
- **Education and Opportunity:** CIWA delivers Language training, parenting workshops, and employment preparation. In the past year alone, $53,500 in scholarships were awarded to 26 recipients pursuing post-secondary education and professional certification.
- **Employment:** Our approach goes beyond job placement. We work directly with employers to cultivate inclusive workplaces and organize hiring fairs, upskilling, and employment interventions tailored to immigrant women.
- **Social Support:** and Inclusion: CIWA's volunteering, civic engagement, youth, and senior programs build connections, empower women, and build leadership skills to integrate, contribute, and thrive.
- **Healthcare Access:** In partnership with Alberta Health Services and others, CIWA connects women to prenatal/postnatal care, mental health resources, and interpreter-assisted healthcare navigation. CIWA also supports clients experiencing food insecurity and housing instability by partnering with food banks, providing grocery gift cards, diapers, and supports to access affordable housing through programs like 'Find Me a Home' and the Canada Housing Benefit.

Child development and culturally sensitive parenting are emphasized through programs like Home Instructions for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) and home visitation, which integrate first-language services and culturally sensitive approaches. Specialized supports for survivors of gender-based violence are central to our work, ensuring that women regain safety, dignity, and self-determination, all within our internal ecosystem of care and our external partner safety net.

The journey of "Gloria," a composite client profile of many CIWA clients, illustrates this holistic and multi-partner integration approach.

Upon arrival, Gloria faced housing instability, language barriers, financial insecurity, and social isolation. CIWA conducted a needs assessment and connected her to ESL classes, social groups, and programs for her elderly mother.

Financial coaching and a matched savings program enabled Gloria to open an RESP and gain confidence in managing household finances. She then enrolled in employment readiness programs, entrepreneurship training, and mentorship.

Through her transformation, she gained confidence, found employment, and became active in community initiatives. Gloria's path is emblematic of the outcomes possible when agencies work together to remove systemic barriers. CIWA's model thrives on cross-sector collaboration.

Our referral-based and co-delivered programs include:

- **Literacy and Learning Support** through programs like Pebbles in the Sand, and our outreach learning specialists extend services across community agencies. Our Mentorship and Employment Resources, where we work with Making Changes and Dress for Success, to ensure women have access to professional attire and build confidence through mentorship. Or providing Digital Access and Inclusion through our partnership with the Electronic Recycling Association (ERA), where we provide laptops to participants facing technology barriers, allowing them to participate fully in language and employment training.
- **CIWA also partners with the Tsuut'ina Nation and The Confluence Historic Site** to promote awareness of Indigenous histories and foster respectful engagement between immigrant and Indigenous communities. And we are also a founding member of Calgary Newcomer Collaborative (CNC)—a coalition with Centre for Newcomers, Immigrant Services Calgary, and The Immigrant Education Society. CNC has hosted employment workshops and fairs, including events tailored for Ukrainian newcomers, connecting over 700 clients with more than 25 employers annually. This reinforces our role and commitment to initiatives that have a collective Impact

CIWA plays a critical role as a Family Resource Network (FRN) hub, ensuring consistent, high-quality, evidence-based services to children and families across Alberta. FRNs offer prevention and early intervention services aligned with provincial standards.

To deliver results-driven training and workforce development, CIWA employs a four-part strategy:

- **Partnerships with Industry experts:** through collaborations with Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) and Bow Valley College, providing technical training and certifications in fields like hospitality, Early Childhood Educator (ECE), and interpretation.
- **Community-based learning** through visits to places like the Calgary Public Library and Calgary Courts Centre helps participants explore career paths and understand legal rights.
- **Evaluation and Feedback:** Through post-training surveys and follow-ups, CIWA tracks participant progress and adjusts programming to ensure relevance and impact for clients
- **Certification for employability,** such as training in WHMIS, ProServe, and security training to open doors to jobs in in-demand roles.

We also integrate civic education through collaborations with the City of Calgary, presentations by the Calgary Police Service, Fire Department, and City Waste & Recycling, as well as workshops from Momentum and the Workers' Resource Centre, to inform participants about safety, rights, and services in their new community.

At CIWA, integration is both a process and a partnership. Our model is data-driven, informed by ongoing client assessment and shaped by continuous learning. This transparency builds trust and ensures continued relevance. The result is a responsive, replicable approach that builds individual confidence while shifting systems toward equity.

The impact of this collaborative model is evident: immigrant women gain the skills, networks, and confidence to build successful lives in Canada. As we often say, "When we collaborate across sectors, we give newcomers more than services—we give them opportunities to thrive."

CIWA's experience reinforces a vital truth: no single agency can address the complex realities of immigrant settlement alone. Shared responsibility, mutual learning, and co-designed solutions are essential. Cross-sector partnerships have extended CIWA's reach, strengthened service quality, and remain responsive to Calgary's evolving demographic landscape.

As Canada redefines its immigration strategy for a new era, CIWA's model stands as a proven blueprint, scalable, inclusive, and rooted in collaboration. By placing immigrant women and families at the centre of the integration journey, and by working hand-in-hand with communities, institutions, by staff and systems, CIWA continues to show that real progress is made by building bridges, not silos. This work is sustained by the shared commitment of our dedicated staff, who bring compassion, expertise, and cultural insight to every program and partnership, uplifting CIWA's mandate with purpose and integrity every day.