



South Asian
Women's
Collective

BOLD FUTURES REPORT 2025

Exploring the Career
Development and Employment
Needs of Young South Asian
Women across the Greater
Toronto Area

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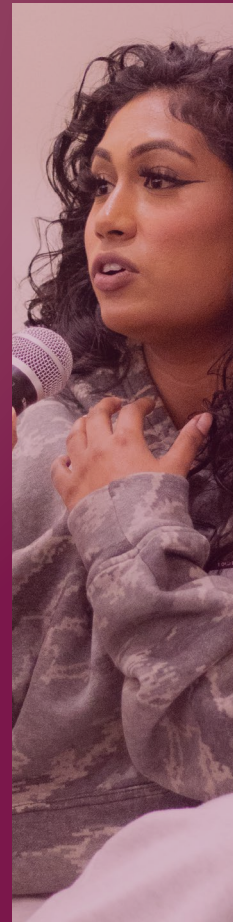


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Foreword

**Akosua Alagaratnam, First Work
Executive Director & SAWC Employment
Research Project Community Advisor**



The intersection of race, gender, and youth often result in compounded inequalities, which can hinder economic and social mobility for young jobseekers. As a South Asian leader working in Ontario's workforce development sector, I am acutely aware of the unique challenges that young racialized women and gender-diverse individuals face when navigating the workforce. These barriers, ranging from systemic discrimination to a lack of culturally relevant career guidance, make it difficult for many to not only enter the job market but to thrive within it. In this context, data and research on this subject are crucial but often lacking. Without comprehensive studies that explore the specific challenges faced by young, racialized women and gender-diverse individuals, our understanding remains incomplete, and the development of effective solutions is hindered. As we continue to advocate for equity, it is essential that we recognize and address these disparities, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background, have the opportunity to succeed in their careers.

Exploring the Career Development and Employment Needs of Young South Asian Women, is a significant step toward filling this void. Led by the South Asian Women's Collective, this report offers valuable insights into the specific needs of young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals, providing evidence-based recommendations for employers, academia, government, parents, and the larger community. It is an essential contribution to a broader body of research that is critical for understanding and addressing the barriers faced by marginalized groups in the workforce.

This work is not just important for the South Asian community but for all of us, as it reflects a broader vision of an equitable and diverse workforce that benefits everyone. The hope is that this research will catalyze meaningful change, fostering an environment where young racialized women and gender-diverse individuals are empowered to reach their full potential, contributing to a more inclusive and just economy for all.

Executive Summary

Exploring the Career Development and Employment Needs of Young South Asian Women across the Greater Toronto Area

South Asian communities have immigrated to Canada since the late 19th century, now forming the country's largest racialized group, with over 2.3 million people (Statistics Canada, 2021). Many South Asian-Canadian youth, including second-generation Canadians and young immigrants, are now a significant part of the Canadian workforce, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area.

While much research exists on youth career development, youth unemployment, and racialized youth in the workforce, little attention has been given to the career development and workforce experiences of young South Asian women living and/or working in Canada specifically. Members of this group are either first, second or third generation Canadians and are influenced both by a distinct ethnic and racial history as well as a personal history grounded in "Canadian" experiences (Sundar, 2008).

To fill this research gap, the South Asian Women's Collective (SAWC) led a community action research project to better understand the career development and employment needs of young South Asian women and gender

diverse individuals between the ages of 18-30 living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The motivation to lead this project stemmed from several years of community programming and gatherings led by SAWC, at which young South Asian women consistently shared stories about the challenges and barriers they experienced with navigating career pathways, finding employment, and advancing in their careers. Drawing from a sample of 274 survey responses and 12 virtual learning circles with a total of 57 participants, this community action research project sought to better understand the lived experiences of young South Asian women and the unique challenges they face in navigating their career paths and entering the workforce. The research project also aimed to identify recommendations that serve to address community needs in career development programming, inclusive workplace policies and practices, and resource development.

Major Emerging Themes

Family and Cultural Influences on Career Pathways

Family and parental relations have a significant influence on young South Asian women's career and educational choices. The influence was perceived in two key ways by participants:

- 1** Family and parents are a crucial support system and resource in shaping career and employment pathways.
- 2** Family and parents' expectations about careers and educational choices contribute to challenges and stressors. These stressors include, but are not limited to, cultural expectations for pursuing mainstream career paths ("doctor, lawyer, engineer"); pressures to stay close to home to pursue training, education, or employment; expectations to care for family members (i.e., parents, elders, siblings); and financially supporting the household (i.e., bills, contribute to rent/mortgage payments, etc.).

Common Career and Employment Barriers

Post-Secondary Education: 46% of survey respondents shared that the cost of education and the time it takes to get through school (40% of survey respondents) were the biggest career barriers.

Mentorship and Sponsorship: 41% of survey respondents shared lack of mentorship opportunities as a key

challenge in navigating their careers. Mentorship was perceived critical at all career stages, yet structured programs frequently fail to reflect the experiences of young South Asian women, leaving them without relatable career guidance and support.

Structural Challenges: Structural challenges navigating the job market, such as gender inequality, religious and ethnic discrimination, continue to limit opportunities for employment and career advancement. In addition, microaggressions, racial and religious discrimination, and the lack of inclusive and culturally responsive workplaces were raised as major issues in learning circles.

Underrepresentation of South Asian Women Leaders: A major concern raised by participants is the underrepresentation of South Asian women in leadership roles across various industries, which contributes to feelings of isolation and limited opportunities for advancement. According to the Pink Attitude 2021 national study on the South Asian women's labour force in Canada, South Asian women are vastly underrepresented in senior roles due to barriers in career progression, despite being among the most highly educated segment.

Need for Resources and Supports: 55% of survey respondents shared the need to create sponsorship and networking programs specifically tailored for young South Asian women and gender diverse individuals. In addition, expanded access to affordable education and training programs was the second most chosen need (50%).

Key Recommendations

Create Culturally Responsive Career Development Programming

Career development programming must incorporate a cultural and equity lens that recognizes the unique experiences, assets, and challenges of South Asian women entering and navigating the workforce at all career stages. This includes career services, supports, and resources that are intentionally designed to reflect, affirm, and address South Asian women's cultural identities and lived experiences. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, post-secondary institutions, community organizations, and employers should collaborate to develop targeted programming and initiatives that address systemic and structural barriers such as workplace discrimination, limited mentorship and career development.

Engage Parents and Caregivers on Education and Career Pathways

Conduct further research on intergenerational experiences among South Asian parents and children to understand how diverse lived experiences impact parenting relationships and approaches. Utilize research to inform the design of programming and resources to support education on parenting relationships and approaches, mental health awareness, and navigating education and employment pathways.

Enhance Workforce Inclusion for South Asian Women

Employers must recognize and actively dismantle the systemic and structural barriers that hinder workforce inclusion and career advancement for South Asian women. To achieve this, organizations must implement inclusive recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and career development practices that address the unique challenges faced by South Asian women. Additionally, organizations should commit to collecting disaggregated employment data to track the representation and career progression of South Asian women in leadership roles.

Address Systemic Workforce Exclusion through Policy Change

There is great need to build an inclusive workforce that goes beyond representation and actively responds to the needs of South Asian women by providing decent wages, equitable treatment, workplace flexibility, and access to opportunities. Acknowledging and confronting the structural and systemic barriers that lead to exclusion is essential to building an inclusive workforce, rather than placing the burden on women to overcome imposter syndrome, continuously upskill, or code switch to fit in. Addressing systemic workforce exclusion in a rapidly evolving technological, demographic, and economic climate requires continuous

policy reviews and changes to current employment systems using an intersectional lens (i.e. Ontario's Integrated Employment System, modernizing the federal employment insurance program, and modernizing digital and data systems for tracking and forecasting).

Invest in Research on South Asian Women's and Gender-Diverse Individuals' Experiences in the Workforce

To better understand the evolving challenges faced by South Asian women, governments and academic institutions must allocate funding to better understand racialized women's career development, employment, and workforce experiences. Funded research should examine the intersectionality of gender, race, and migration in the workforce, specifically focusing on how South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals navigate different industries, career advancements, and the barriers they encounter.



A Message from the Co-Founders of South Asian Women's Collective

Founded in 2015 as a grassroots organization, the South Asian Women's Collective has been actively collaborating with diverse South Asian communities to drive research, develop impactful programming, and host events that advance the economic and social well-being of South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals.

At the heart of our work is data-informed community planning that prioritizes culturally responsive frameworks rooted in lived experiences and community knowledge. By centering the voices and expertise of South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals, we create programs that are relevant, impactful, and driven by the needs of the community. Our decolonized approach challenges mainstream models that often overlook the unique histories, needs, and systemic barriers faced by South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals. By centering community-driven research, we move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions to develop programming that embraces traditional knowledges, holistic wellness practices, and culturally specific approaches to care. A key part of this work is ensuring South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals have the resources and support to enter the workforce and

navigate barriers such as systemic discrimination and gaps in culturally relevant employment services. Through targeted career development programs, mentorship networks, and advocacy efforts, we strive to create pathways to economic empowerment while shaping policies, services, and resources that are evidence-based, accessible, and transformative.

As a growing and evolving collective, our vision is to build a strong, supportive network that empowers South Asian women and gender-diverse communities across Canada. Through identity-affirming research, programming, and initiatives, we strive to foster meaningful change and create opportunities for connection, growth and collective care.

To learn more about our work and focus areas, please visit sawcollective.ca



Ayesha Syed
Ayesha Syed



Herleen Arora
Herleen Arora

Acknowledgements



First and foremost, we would like to thank all the young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals who participated in this community action research project, and trusted our research team with their data, stories, and experiences. We acknowledge and understand the power dynamics in leading and conducting research with communities facing structural and systemic barriers; we take our role as community leaders and researchers to be in collaboration with the community, in which our differences can help us build a better world where we thrive together. **Our research team is grateful to our community advisors** for supporting us

through each phase of this project, and providing their guidance through the process. **Community advisors include: Akosua Alagratnam, Ritika Arora, Zaina Gohar, Antu Hossain, Amar Nijhawan, and Shagufe Syeda.**

We sincerely thank Rajvi Mehta for all her creative work in leading the communications and design in key project phases, and supporting the research team. We also want to thank our editor, Sunny Chan, for spending the summer months with and editing this report, and Natasha Sidi for designing this report.

Thank you to Dan Alferov for collaborating with our research team, and supporting us with the quantitative data analysis and key insights. We also want to say a special thank you to students and youth, Dharshini Kannan, Hiya Goyal, Lucksin Raveendran and Simran Gosal for their support with the research project. We are also grateful to community champions who supported this project by engaging in meetings with us, sharing information to networks, creating pathways for collaboration, and joining us at our Bold Futures event series across the Greater Toronto Area.

We express our gratitude to our funder, Ontario Trillium Foundation – Youth Opportunities Fund for the financial resources and capacity building to conduct this community action research project, that spotlights the career and employment needs of young South Asian and gender-diverse individuals across the GTA. **We sincerely thank our organization trustee, ACSA Toronto, for their continuous guidance and support** with building South Asian Women's Collective's organizational infrastructure and capacity to lead this work in the community.

Finally, we are grateful to our readers, who have taken the time to engage with this community action research project and key themes that impact the economic and social mobility of young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals across the GTA. We trust that you will

continue this important discussion beyond the report and find meaningful ways to engage with the research approach, data and key findings, to advocate for systems and structural change in building thriving communities and re-imagining better futures.

About the Authors



Almeera Khalid (she/her)

Project Manager – Employment Research Project

This project has been deeply personal to me. As a young South Asian woman, I saw my own experiences reflected in the research, and at times, it was emotional to put into words the systemic barriers we navigate. We are ambitious, yet the structures around us often fail to recognize or support the value of that ambition. I am incredibly grateful that research like this exists and even more so to have been part of a team committed to amplifying these voices.

This research matters—data matters—but what we do with it next is just as critical. My vision for impact is to ensure these findings lead to tangible change, whether through advocacy, policy reform, or the creation of culturally relevant career supports. Young South Asian women deserve workplaces that recognize their potential, and I hope this project serves as a foundation for continued progress.



Herleen Arora (she/her)

Co-founder and Managing Director at South Asian Women's Collective (SAWC)

Building South Asian Women's Collective for the past several years has been a labour of love and a commitment to the community. At the collective, we have been dreaming and designing third spaces that foster knowledge sharing and relationship building through intergenerational programming, research and resources on topics related to career development, leadership, health and well-being, and more.

It is also through designing these third spaces, that we continuously heard stories from South Asian women across generations on the challenges of navigating their career paths and finding employment that ultimately motivated South Asian Women's Collective to lead this community action research project. In leading this research project, it was apparent that there is limited data and understanding on the unique barriers and challenges South Asian youth and women experience in entering, navigating and advancing in the Canadian workforce. My personal hope is that this research can further inform the need for greater investment in careers and employment research focusing on South Asian communities, culturally relevant designed career development programming and resources, and inclusive workplaces and policies that support racialized women and youth to thrive in the workforce.



Seema Taneja (she/her)

Research Consultant

As a South Asian woman in Canada, the path to career advancement is filled with both opportunities and challenges. While Canada values diversity and inclusion, many South Asian women, including myself, still face systemic barriers in the workplace and along their career journeys.

A key challenge is the intersection of gender and racial bias. Cultural stereotypes often leave South Asian women feeling unseen, misunderstood, and excluded from leadership discussions. Despite being highly educated and skilled, many of us remain stuck in mid-level positions with limited access to senior leadership roles. The lack of mentors, sponsors, and role models from similar backgrounds further complicates our advancement. Cultural expectations also influence career trajectories. Many South Asian women balance family responsibilities with professional growth, yet workplaces often fail to accommodate these realities. Limited access to promotions, networking, and leadership training makes it harder to progress.

However, resilience and community support remain powerful tools. More South Asian women are forging their own paths, fostering mentorship, and challenging traditional workplace norms. By amplifying each other's voices and advocating for systemic change, we can break barriers. I hope this research inspires employers, governments, and communities to foster true inclusion and ensure equal opportunities for all women.



Rajvi Mehta (she/her)

Graphic Designer and Communications Coordinator

Working on this special project focusing on the career development and employment needs of young South Asian women was one of the most meaningful projects of my journey as a graphic designer. As a young South Asian woman, myself, I don't see a lot of South Asian representation in my field. I felt a deep responsibility to ensure that the graphics and

communications for this project respected and uplifted the voices behind the research. Working on this research project allowed me to blend my creative skills and my personal identity and values, and reminded me why I chose design as my way of making an impact.

Introduction



South Asian communities have been immigrating to Canada since the late 19th century (Government of Canada, 2024), resulting in generations of youth born in Canada as well as immigrants who have arrived here at a young age. Changes in Canada's immigration policies over the past decade have significantly increased the number of young newcomers, immigrants, and international students, primarily from India. These new generations of South Asian youth are also now a major part of the Canadian workforce. South Asian communities make up the largest racialized population, with over 2.3 million Canadians reporting South Asian ethnicity, most residing in the Greater Toronto Area (19%) and the rest of Ontario (10.8%) (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Despite the economic disadvantages and financial hardships experienced by immigrant parents and families of this generation of youth, immigrant families tend to invest resources into nurturing their children's human capital (Nee & Sanders, 2001). Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences possessed by an individual that can be used to create economic value (Becker, 1964). It includes education, training, health, and other attributes that enhance a person's productivity and potential in the labour market (Becker, 1964).

Unlike their immigrant parents and families, South Asian-Canadian youth navigate the labour market with the advantages of a Canadian education and cultural fluency, yet they continue to encounter entrenched inequities shaped by their racialized and gendered

identities (World Education Services & Canadian Council of Youth Prosperity, 2023). Their experiences underscore how systemic inequities persist across generations, highlighting the need for targeted interventions, from a variety of different partners, to address these challenges in the workforce.

This research seeks to explore these inequities through a deeper understanding of the employment experiences of young women of South Asian descent, specifically within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) where the largest South Asian population resides. These young South Asian women, many of whom are born and raised in Canada, continue to face unique challenges stemming from the intersection of gender, race, and cultural expectations. The term "South Asian," for the purpose of this research, includes youth whose origins or ancestors are from the Indian sub-continent, which includes the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Fiji, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

While much research exists on youth career development, youth unemployment, and racialized youth in the workforce, little attention has been given to the career development and workforce experiences of young South Asian women living and/or working in Canada specifically. Members of this group are either first, second or third generation Canadians and are influenced both by a distinct ethnic and racial history as well as a personal history grounded in "Canadian" experiences (Sundar, 2008).

To fill this research gap, the South Asian Women's Collective (SAWC) led a community action research project to better understand the career development and employment needs of young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals between the ages of 18-30 living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The motivation to lead this project stemmed from several years of community programming and gatherings led by SAWC, at which young South Asian women consistently shared stories about the challenges and barriers they experienced with navigating education and career pathways, finding employment, and advancing in their careers.



Based on the literature review, including gaps, the research team, **the research team developed three guiding questions** to inform the design and development of the research project. For young South Asian identifying women and gender-diverse individuals:

1

What are the career development, advancement needs and barriers experienced?

2

What are the main pressures they experience or have experienced that guide and shape what career paths they will enter?

3

What and who impacts their dreams and career trajectories?

The research project utilized a mixed-method research approach that included surveys and learning circles to explore the career development and employment needs of young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals across the GTA. Instead of reporting on the two sets of data separately, the qualitative and quantitative data are presented together, often complementing one another but sometimes sharing different lenses and insights.

The purpose of this report is to add to the field of evidence on youth career development and youth employment for young South Asian women, with a focus on the systemic challenges and cultural barriers they face, to draw attention to the resulting challenges with their socioeconomic integration into the workforce. Findings from this community action research project aim to inform recommendations and solutions that support the social and economic needs of young South Asian women in education, employment, and cultural environments. Especially within the current economic climate in Canada, there is an opportunity to re-imagine career development and employment services to build experience, resilience, and sustainable futures.

This report begins with a brief review of the literature to provide a historical, systemic, and pandemic-specific context for understanding the employment experiences of South Asian women and young racialized women in Canada. By framing South Asian women's experiences within this broader historical and systemic context, this community action research project provides a nuanced understanding of the unique barriers and opportunities they face.

This report is the first of its kind in Canada as it explores how cultural barriers intersect with institutional, gender, and racial inequities for young South Asian women from ages 18–30. There has been a gap in investigating the cultural dimensions of employment alongside these systemic factors, making this research a critical contribution to understanding the education and workforce experiences of racialized youth and young women.

The report also delves into the complexities that shape labour market outcomes for young South Asian women, a demographic often under-researched in education, career development, employment, and workforce studies. **Key themes explored include the impact of systemic discrimination on gendered and racialized labour outcomes, the role of cultural and societal norms in shaping career pathways, and the generational dynamics that influence employment patterns.** By delving into these intersecting factors, this report aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about career development, career identity, and employment experiences of young racialized women.

The findings offer actionable insights to inform government and organizational policies, employment and career development programming, and workplace practices. Understanding the context surrounding young racialized women's early experiences in the labour market and supporting them as they navigate barriers they face is of vital importance – it not only shapes the future of their careers, but also has persistent effects in different areas of their lives, including interpersonal relationships, income, and health outcomes (von Wachter, 2020).



Literature Review

Historical Context of South Asian Women in the Canadian Labour Force

Understanding the historical and socio-economic experiences of South Asian women in Canada requires an exploration of the term “South Asian” itself. This term is a colonial and racial construct (Gandhi, 2014), historically employed to categorize individuals from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Bhutan, and the Maldives for political, economic, and geographical purposes (Shankar, 1999). While this categorization was instrumental in migration policies, it also served to erase distinct cultural and ethnic identities within the diaspora.

The South Asian diaspora includes communities that have experienced targeted political oppression, forced migration, and systemic marginalization. Notably, Tamil, Indo-Caribbean, and other minoritized identities have often been excluded from dominant South Asian narratives. This exclusion underscores how intra-diasporic divisions, rooted in faith, language, and colonial histories, have been used to perpetuate systemic inequities (Anouch, 2014). Recognizing these nuances is essential in understanding the colonial framing of “South Asian” and addressing the diverse needs and experiences of South Asian communities that have settled in Canada. As a cautionary note, it is important to remember that the South Asian community, like other cultural groups, is not homogeneous: beliefs, values, and behaviours will vary based on

religion, language, country of origin, social context in the host country, and individual experiences (Ibrahim et al., 1997).

Canada’s labour market has long been shaped by immigration policies that have systematically marginalized racialized women. Early 20th century immigration policies explicitly excluded South Asian women, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that positioned them as dependents rather than economic contributors (Gupta, 1994; Ralston, 1999; Bannerje, 2020). Even after the points-based immigration system in 1967 reduced overt racial barriers, South Asian women continue to face challenges such as credential devaluation, language barriers, and employer discrimination (Premji et al., 2014).

Cultural and Familial Expectations of South Asian Women in Canada

For South Asian women, systemic barriers are compounded by internalized cultural pressures to prioritize family responsibilities. Historically, South Asian families emphasized caregiving and domestic responsibilities for women, often relegating career aspirations to secondary importance (Doman, 1984; Tirone & Pedlar, 2013). Hochschild (1989) describes the “second shift,” the unpaid domestic labour women perform after formal work hours. These cultural expectations persist, reinforced by collectivist values and rigid gender norms, discouraging women from prioritizing career advancement and perpetuating traditional gender roles.

Children of first-generation immigrants often inherit a strong work ethic and high educational expectations, balancing dual influences of tradition and opportunity.

However, the framing of South Asians as inherently “hard workers” contributes to the model minority myth, which obscures their challenges and reinforces false narratives about upward mobility (Philip, n.d.; Achēv, 2023).

The Education Employment Disparity for South Asian Women

Although women’s labour force participation in Canada has increased significantly since the 1960s, disparities remain between Canadian-born and immigrant women. By 2021, the full-time employment rate for Canadian-born women was 70%, compared to 65% for immigrant women. South Asian women had a full-time employment rate of 59.7%, lower than other visible minority groups including Filipino, Latin American, and Black women (Philip, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2021). This gap is influenced by factors such as lower labour force participation among South Asian mothers with young children and challenges in credential recognition for immigrant women.

Between 1981 and 2016, the population of racialized immigrant women in Canada grew significantly (from 55%-84%) , yet their labour market outcomes lagged behind their peers (Momani et al, 2021). Systemic barriers such as credential recognition issues, language difficulties,

and cultural challenges prevent South Asian women from accessing jobs aligned with their qualifications. Studies highlight that up to 60% of racialized women in Canada work outside their fields of education, driven by credential devaluation, lack of mentorship, and discriminatory hiring practices (Achēv, 2023). Even among Canadian-born South Asian women with higher education and cultural familiarity, the combined pressures of systemic discrimination and cultural expectations continue to obstruct equitable workforce participation (Yan, 2012; Achēv, 2023). This disconnect between education and employment reveals a structural mismatch that limits economic mobility, particularly for racialized immigrant and second-generation South Asian women.



Structural Barriers in Leadership and Career Progression

Women in Canada remain underrepresented in leadership roles: they hold just 30.5% of parliamentary seats, 47.4% of ministerial roles, and 30.9% of senior management positions in the workforce (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2024). Women of colour are even more starkly underrepresented, occupying only 6.2% of all board, executive, senior management, and pipeline-to-senior-management roles. More broadly, Canada ranks 31st globally in gender parity, with a parity score of 77.4%, highlighting ongoing disparities in economic participation and political representation (Global Gender Gap Report, 2024). Despite closing the gender gap in tertiary education—with women's enrollment surpassing men's by over 30 percentage points—this has not translated into equitable labour market outcomes.

South Asian women navigating the workforce also encounter workplace discrimination in industries such as healthcare, technology, and education. They are overrepresented in sectors such as retail, caregiving, and hospitality, characterized by job insecurity, low wages, and limited opportunities for growth (SAWRO Final Report, n.d.). The absence of South Asian women in senior leadership further entrenches their exclusion from decision-making spaces that influence equity and workplace inclusion.

Structural Barriers in Workplaces, Education, and Beyond

Racialized women in Canada experience “racialized gendering” in workplaces, underrepresentation in leadership, and overrepresentation in precarious jobs (Brah, 1993; Premji et al., 2014). Many also rely on informal community networks to find work, which often leads to jobs with minimal opportunities for advancement (SAWRO Final Report, n.d.). These barriers are not adequately addressed by general employment programs or policies. Without targeted interventions, systemic inequities continue to push racialized women into precarious employment while limiting access to higher-paying, stable roles (SAWRO Final Report, n.d.).

The pandemic further exposed and intensified these structural inequities. According to Scott (2024), “the COVID-19 pandemic wiped out 35 years of women's economic gains in two short months,” with women's labour force participation rates dropping to 1991 levels. South Asian women, heavily represented in “essential” but vulnerable sectors, reported reduced income and job instability (SAWIS, 2022).

The Pandemic's Impact on Racialized Women

The socioeconomic position of South Asian women, shaped by intersecting prejudices and historical disadvantages, has long contributed to their labour market challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these inequities, disproportionately affecting racialized women across Canada.

South Asian women, heavily represented in pandemic-vulnerable yet “essential” sectors such as hospitality, retail, and caregiving, reported significant financial instability. Nearly 75% experienced reduced incomes, and 70% faced increased job insecurity (South Asian Women's and Immigrant's Services (SAWIS), 2022). In addition to financial instability, the pandemic intensified existing systemic barriers, particularly around access to stable employment and equitable working conditions. Crises like COVID-19 deepened gender inequities, with racialized women in Canada assuming increased unpaid caregiving responsibilities (UN Global Compact, 2024). These additional burdens significantly impacted their ability to participate in the labour market, leading to further marginalization.

Employment barriers—including limited access to career guidance, credential recognition, and employer accommodations—were amplified during the pandemic, particularly for women managing caregiving responsibilities. A 2022 SAWIS report noted that many women were forced to

leave their jobs due to a lack of employer support, while others in frontline roles, such as healthcare aides, faced heightened exposure risks without the option of remote work (Luna, 2021). Although recent immigration programs, such as Express Entry, have modestly improved economic participation for racialized women, systemic barriers persist. Community-driven initiatives like mentorship and professional networking have started bridging opportunity gaps, but institutional reforms remain essential to ensuring equitable access to employment (Achēv, 2023). Adopting an intersectional and generational equity lens in policymaking is necessary to address these persistent disparities and improve outcomes for marginalized groups (Sultana & Stepic Lue, 2021).

In addition to broader caregiving and employment challenges, young racialized women aged 18–30 also faced significant economic disruption during the pandemic. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation's Resetting Normal report, young Black, Indigenous, and racialized women were among the groups most affected by pandemic-related job losses—particularly in precarious, low-wage, and frontline sectors that already lacked stability and wage equity (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2021). These young women also faced heightened financial stress while contending with systemic racism, workplace discrimination, and limited access to leadership or career advancement opportunities.

Similarly, the Future Skills Centre's 2023 report on Labour Market Implications for Racialized Youth found that racialized

youth encountered disproportionate impacts from pandemic-related labour market shifts. These included increased competition from older, more experienced workers who had been laid off, growing barriers to job entry, and upskilling (Future Skills Centre, 2023).

Youth Unemployment and the Evolving Design of Work

Youth unemployment in Canada has been a persistent and significant challenge, consistently exceeding the unemployment rates of older age groups. Young workers face systemic barriers, including limited access to stable employment, precarious work conditions, and the shifting design of the labour market. This disparity worsened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted industries heavily reliant on youth labour, such as hospitality and retail. According to the Facing Challenges, Finding Opportunity 2024 report, the youth unemployment rate in Canada often doubles that of older workers, creating long-term economic and social consequences (Castillo-Cifuentes et al., 2024). Recent findings from Statistics Canada (2025) highlight that the current youth unemployment rate of 14.6% is the highest it has been since 2010 (excluding during the pandemic) and has risen by 4.3% over the past 2 years. South Asian youth in particular experience a higher youth unemployment rate of 17.1% (Statistics Canada, 2025). Moreover, an article by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives notes that the average time it takes for youth to secure employment has doubled since 2019 and that the unemployment rate has

increased by 5.6% among female youth specifically (Aragão, 2025). This surge in youth unemployment across Canada can be attributed to employers cutting back on entry level opportunities, impacts of technological disruption, economic and trade uncertainty, and affordability crises (Norman, Valencia, & Bartlett, 2025).

Another critical factor contributing to this disparity is the evolving structure of work. Precarious employment, characterized by temporary contracts, part-time roles, and gig work, has become increasingly prevalent among young workers. This shift towards flexible but unstable labour arrangements reflects broader changes in the design of work, often prioritizing employer flexibility over employee security. According to Castillo-Cifuentes, Johnson, and Galambos (2024), these precarious roles rarely provide benefits, stability, or pathways to career advancement, leaving young workers vulnerable to “wage scarring” – a phenomenon where early underemployment impacts lifetime earnings and career trajectories.

For racialized and marginalized youth, these challenges are compounded by systemic inequities. Structural barriers such as lack of career development programs and resources, labour market discrimination, limited access to networks, and more employment precarity disproportionately affect these groups. The 2021 Failure to Launch Report emphasizes that racialized youth, particularly women, face heightened difficulties in securing employment aligned with their education and skills. These barriers force many to accept roles outside their fields of expertise,

perpetuating cycles of underemployment and economic insecurity (Deloitte Canada, 2021).

The rise of freelance and gig economies has also normalized non-traditional employment models, often accompanied by fewer protections and benefits. This shift disproportionately impacts youth, who are more likely to occupy these precarious positions. This trending reality exacerbates economic vulnerabilities and limits opportunities for upward mobility (Castillo-Cifuentes et al., 2024).

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to address youth unemployment through targeted interventions. Investments in experiential learning, such as co-op programs and internships, can help bridge the gap between education and employment. Policies that incentivize employers to provide stable, entry-level roles and reduce barriers to credential recognition for marginalized youth are critical. Furthermore, Castillo-Cifuentes, Johnson, and Galambos (2024) underscore the importance of accessible upskilling programs to better prepare youth for emerging industries and help “future-proof” their careers.

Young people graduating during the pandemic have been hit especially hard, entering a labour market with fewer opportunities and heightened competition. Industries traditionally offering entry-level roles, such as retail and hospitality, were severely disrupted, leaving many young workers unable to gain crucial first job experiences. For racialized youth, these challenges

are further magnified by systemic discrimination, including biases in hiring and devaluation of credentials, forcing many into underemployment or sectors outside their fields of expertise. As work structures continue to favour flexibility for employers over stability for workers, young racialized individuals risk being locked into cycles of economic precarity, with limited pathways to long-term career growth (Castillo-Cifuentes et al., 2024; Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2021; Deloitte Canada, 2021).

“

Young people graduating during the pandemic have been hit especially hard, entering a labour market with fewer opportunities and heightened competition.”



Methodology & Limitations



This community action research project utilized a mixed-method research approach that included surveys and learning circles to explore the career development and employment needs of young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals aged 18–30 across the GTA.

A Literature Review to Inform Research Design and Analysis

As part of the methodology for this report, a targeted literature review was conducted to contextualize the research within existing scholarship and identify key themes, gaps, and perspectives relevant to South Asian women’s career development and employment needs and experiences in Canada. The review aimed to synthesize qualitative and community-based research, particularly research studies that centre the lived experiences and culturally informed understanding of South Asian and racialized women and/or youth experiences with employment and career development in the Canadian labour force.

The review included over 30 peer-reviewed journal articles, academic papers, industry and community reports published between 1988–2024. Search terms were tailored to reflect both the thematic focus (e.g., “career development”, “employment”, “youth unemployment”, “Canadian labour market”, etc.) and population-specific contexts (e.g., “South Asian women”, “South Asian youth”, “racialized women”).

Sources were identified through academic databases with support from YouthRex Data Hub and Google Scholar, as well as targeted searches of relevant think tanks, advocacy organizations and industry associations.

Priority was given to qualitative studies employing surveys, interviews, focus groups, narrative inquiry, and ethnographic methods. The insights gained from the literature review informed the research design, survey and learning circle questions, thematic codes, and how we interpreted participant narratives in relation to broader structural and cultural patterns.

Community Engagement Plan

Virtual Project Launch Event: This research project officially launched with a public virtual launch event in November 2023. The goal of the virtual event was to gain support and feedback from community members about the research design and process, and ideate ways on how they would like to be engaged through this project.

The launch invited community members to connect with the project and explore alignment with areas of interest, contribute to the literature review by sharing resources and/or connections to researchers, and collaborate with the project to co-host learning circles and community events in the GTA.

Community members were also invited to join the mailing list and follow the project on social channels where regular updates

about the research project were shared. The virtual project launch with community members helped build relationships at the start of the project that were informative throughout the project phases.

Social Media Engagement Strategy:

The research team developed a social media engagement strategy to support recruitment of participants for the survey and learning circles. This social media engagement strategy included partnering with community leaders and influencers across generations to create video and audio content on the importance of engaging in community action research focusing on South Asian women's employment needs and experiences.

The curated content helped share stories and experiences that promoted participant engagement in the surveys and learning circles. In addition, content was shared with community partners that work closely with South Asian women/youth to recruit research participants on their social media and digital communication channels. These community partners included Laadliyan, Didihood, LotusSTEMM, South Asian Boss Women, Accelerate Her Future, Mehfil, South Asian Women's Network, Tamil Civic Action, Brown Girls Thriving, South Asian Health Alliance, Tamil Women Rising, York Region Women's Network, Queer South Asians, CASSA, etc.

In addition, the research team conducted targeted outreach on Instagram and LinkedIn by messaging various South Asian student and youth leaders affiliated with post-secondary education

institutions and or organizations (i.e., York University Tamil Student Association, York University South Asian Student Association, TMU Punjabi Association, Tamils in Public Service, UofTSouth Asian Women's Society, UofT Muslims Association, etc.).

Survey Launch at SAWC Well-being Conference and Community Events:

The survey was initially launched at SAWC's Well-Being Conference in March 2024 with over 100 youth participants between the ages of 18-30. Digital and print marketing materials were created to promote the research project and survey with all conference attendees. In addition, all conference attendees were also sent a post-conference email about the community action research project and survey link to participate.

At the end of March 2024, SAWC's research team joined Laadliyan's Gender Equality Conference and shared details about the community action research project and how community members can get involved. Similar to the SAWC's Well-Being Conference, all conference participants were provided with print and digital materials to participate in the survey and/or share with their community networks.

Online Surveys

An initial online survey was administered through the community engagement approaches outlined above. A total of 274 young South Asian woman participants across the GTA completed the initial online survey between March - May 2024. A raffle incentive was created to encourage survey participation, with 10 participants winning a digital gift card for completing

the survey. All survey participants were also invited to register for a virtual learning circle.

Learning Circles

A total of 12 virtual learning circles were hosted across the GTA (Toronto, York Region, Durham Region, and Peel Region), engaging 57 young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals (see Data Map 3). Community advisors and youth researchers were provided with training and resources prior to conducting and facilitating learning circles. Each virtual learning circle was approximately 60 – 90 minutes long, and each member of the research team was responsible for being a Zoom host, a note-taker, or a facilitator. All learning circle participants were asked to complete a short pre-survey (second survey) to participate in the learning circle (see Data Map 2). A total of 99 young South Asian woman participants completed the pre-survey. Data from this second survey was analyzed prior to the learning circles and emerging themes were used to augment the learning circles (i.e., through context, prompts, etc.) All learning circle participants were provided an incentive in the form of a digital gift card.

Supporting Participants with Sensitive Conversations

In an effort to provide trauma-informed care, recognizing that conversations on racial identity, gender, migration experiences, family dynamics, education, and employment challenges could trigger past and current emotions, the research team engaged with South Asian-focused integrated therapy

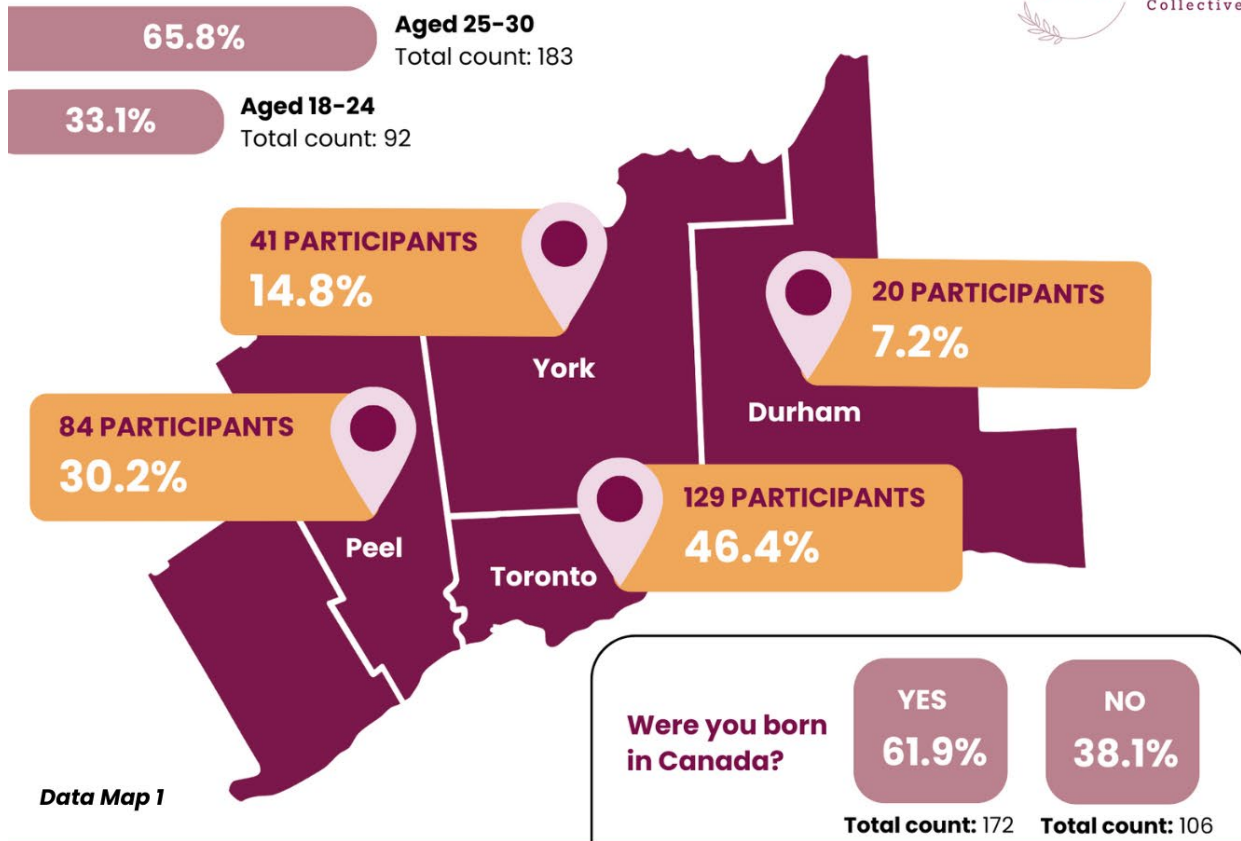
services that participants could privately reach out to for up to 30 days after the consultations. The professional therapy services were introduced at the beginning and at the end of learning circles and participants were guided on how to connect and access a free confidential counselling session.



Limitations

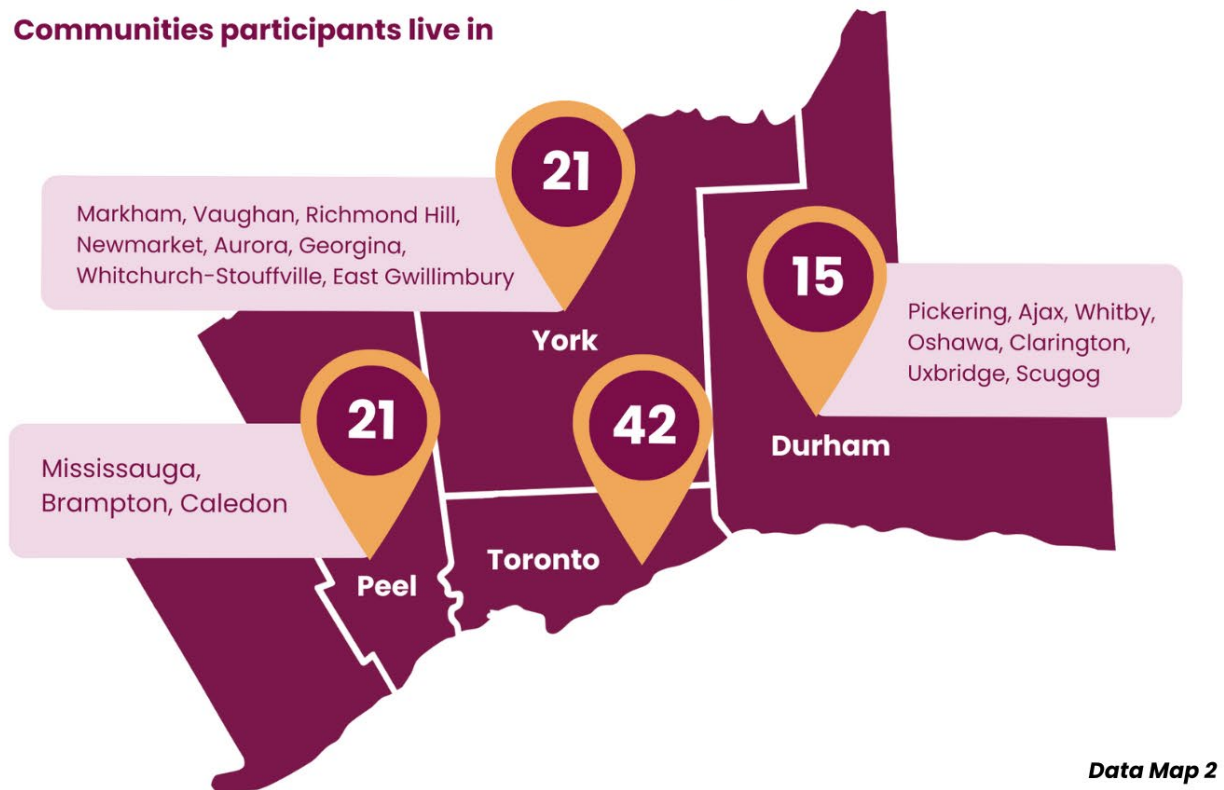
1. Limited availability of evidence-based research specific to the research topics made it more challenging to hone in on specific challenges and experiences that could have been explored in both the surveys and learning circle questions. Additionally, the participant sample size analyzed for the surveys and learning circles was small relative to the actual population figures of young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals. According to the 2021 Census, there are approximately 131,840 South Asian women ages 15-29 in the GTA, compared to our 278 participants.
2. Furthermore, the research had limited engagement from South Asians with intersectionalities with 2SLGBTQI+ identities or those living with disabilities. Thus, this research project does not provide a full intersectional lens on the diverse identities and lived realities of young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals' career development and employment needs.
3. The virtual format of the learning circles may also have created barriers for some potential participants. Lastly, the research team acknowledges the risks of subjectivity and researcher bias in data interpretation, as they are closely connected to the stories and experiences that were shared.

Survey 1 | Total Complete Survey Respondents: 274



Learning Circle Pre-Survey Total Responses **99 participants**

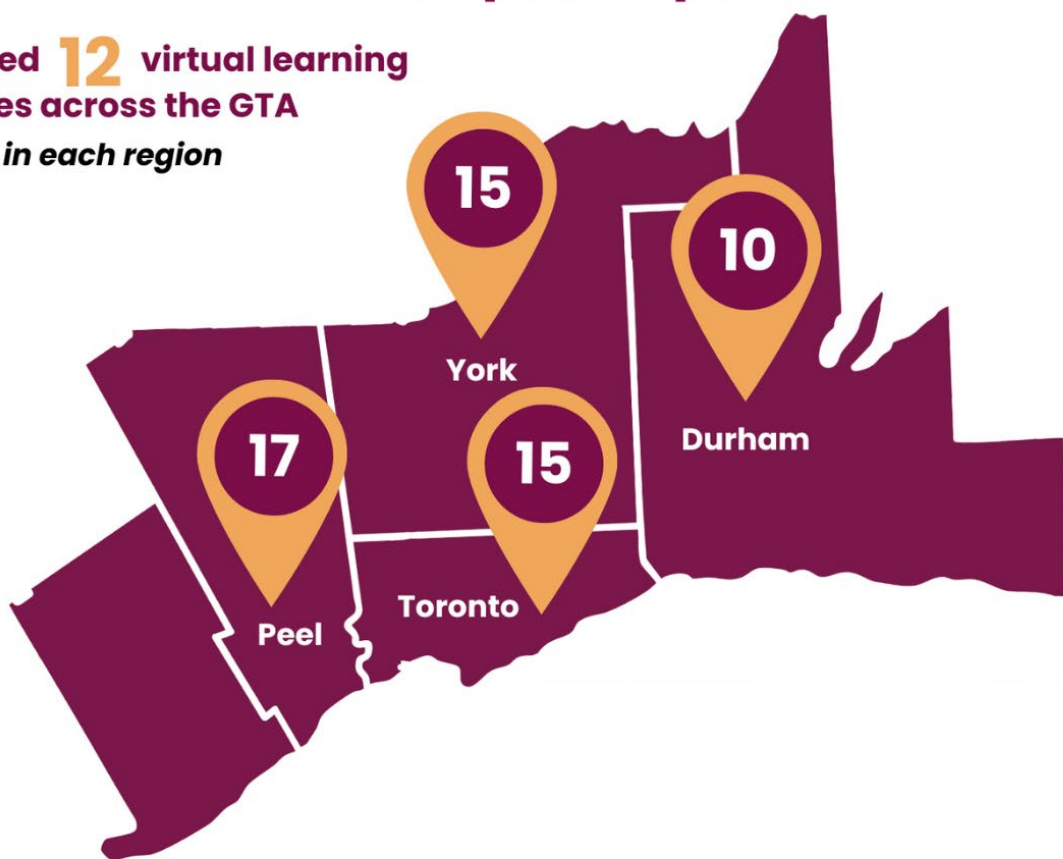
Communities participants live in



57 participants

Hosted **12** virtual learning circles across the GTA

--- 3 in each region



Data Map 3

Total South Asian young women from 2021 census data.
Data was obtained by a special request from YouthRex.

Ontario | South Asian Women
ages 15 – 29: **178, 580**

GTA | South Asian Women
ages 15–29: **131, 840**

Toronto: 46, 140 | Peel: 62, 785 | York Region: 13, 975 | Durham: 8, 940

**Note – This data is from 2021 Census Data and the numbers have increased*

Key Findings & Learnings



Challenges and Barriers to Navigating the Workforce for Young South Asian Women and Gender-diverse Individuals

According to the Future Skills Centre's 2023 report on Labour Market Implications for Racialized Youth, racialized young people in Canada face numerous barriers to employment. At the societal level, these barriers include socioeconomic status, differential access to social and financial capital, as well as systemic discrimination and implicit biases (Cukier et al., 2023). At the organizational/institutional level, there are barriers within educational institutions and employment support services and among employers themselves (Cukier et al., 2023). And at the individual level, racialized youth contend with limited visible role models, a lack of support in pursuing career and educational goals, and inadequate support from educators and educational institutions (Cukier et al., 2023).

Findings from our survey and learning circles identify the nuanced barriers faced specifically by young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals at the societal, organizational, and individual level – all of which impact career development, economic participation, and career advancement. These findings reveal troubling challenges in how they navigate post-secondary education, employment, and career pathways.

Societal Barriers

Family and Cultural Influences on Education and Career Pathways

Family is typically seen as the most accessible social resource for young people to receive career guidance and to support access to the labour market, as youth can leverage the social ties their parents, siblings, relatives, and friends have created (Yan, Lauer, & Chan, 2012). The ability to leverage social ties – including networks, relationships, and connections to access resources, information, mentorship, and opportunities – is defined as having social capital. Another term is cultural capital, defined by Nee and Sander (2001) as resources transmitted largely through family socialization; relevant cultural capital here would include labour market information, knowledge, values and experiences obtained from family that contribute to understanding and accessing the labour market.

Many first generation racialized immigrant parents, who are often in low paying entry-level jobs, may lack both the cultural and social capital to help their children find employment that aligns with their children's skills, education, experiences, and interests. Access to cultural and social capital is crucial in supporting racialized youth with social and economic upward mobility (Yan, Lauer, & Chan, 2012). In contrast, second-generation Canadian-born South Asian parents are often better positioned to guide their children through the education and employment systems, offering support with career decision-making and connecting them to valuable

resources and networks. (Yan, Lauer, & Chan, 2012).

Given the collectivist nature of South Asian cultures, family and parental influences were a complex topic of discussion for our research participants. Many shared that their family dynamics and parental relations had a significant influence on their career and educational choices. Participants described this influence in two key ways: a. family and parents are a crucial support system and resource in shaping career and employment pathways, and b. family and parents' expectations about careers and educational choices contribute to challenges and stressors. These stressors include, but are not limited to, cultural expectations for pursuing mainstream career paths ("doctor, lawyer, engineer"); pressures to stay close to home to pursue training, education, or employment; expectations to care for family members (i.e., parents, elders, siblings); and financially supporting the household (i.e., bills, contribute to rent/mortgage payments, etc.).

Notably, 19% of participants identified familial pressure as a career-related challenge. When broken down further, 23% of Canadian-born participants cited this challenge, compared to 12% of internationally-born participants. Stories of how parents' expectations stemmed from their own experiences in navigating the workforce, their career identity as an immigrant or refugee to Canada, and their financial hardships to achieve economic security added to the complexity of familial pressure as a societal barrier.

“

As one learning circle participant shared, “I started my university journey with pre-med, wanting to become a doctor. That was heavily influenced by my Tamil parents, who wanted to live through their children. I convinced myself that I wanted it too. But during my first year, I realized it wasn’t for me. I struggled and questioned if I really wanted to pursue medicine. I also felt restricted by how long the process would take, including medical school and residency. After I graduated med school, I took some time to figure things out and eventually confronted my parents about not wanting to go down that path. It was scary, but I stood firm, even though they tried to convince me otherwise. I felt like I was betraying them because they had fed me that idea since childhood. But now that I’m doing what I want, they’re happy for me. I realized they had those expectations because of the financial insecurity they faced growing up. They wanted me to have stability. I understand that, but I’ve found other ways to secure my career while exploring my interests. Culturally, it was a challenge, but now I’m carving my own path, which has opened doors not just for me, but also for my younger cousins. They see that there are other options.”

Insights from the learning circles revealed that parents’ own lived experiences in navigating the Canadian workforce, their career identity, and economic realities influenced the expectations, values, and “norms of success” they put onto their children.

One participant shared the importance of financial independence in her household: ***“I grew up in a single-parent household with two sisters, and we had to be independent from a young age. This taught me that I needed to be successful and financially independent. However, my mom empowered us to follow our interests, and there was no pressure to pursue traditional career paths like becoming a doctor or engineer. I’m grateful for this freedom, which allowed me to pursue a career in public policy and nonprofit, aligning with my passions.”***



In many South Asian households, children are socialized from a young age to prioritize family loyalty and a deep sense of duty toward parents and relatives. Parents often use guilt, shame, and moral obligation as tools to influence their children's choices – a pattern well-documented in cross-cultural research. Segal (1991) notes that these emotional cues are central to how behaviour is regulated in South Asian families. Similarly, Ngo (2006), in a study of Asian students in the U.S., found that guilt was frequently used by parents to reinforce familial responsibility, emphasizing that children should ***“work hard and make decisions only with the approval of their parents.”*** Bhattacharya (2000) echoed this sentiment, noting that many children of South Asian immigrants in the U.S. ***“felt a sense of obligation to fulfill their parents’ dreams.”***

A number of learning circle participants also shared their perspectives on the need for financial security and stability to support not only themselves, but their families as well. This was reflected through stories about being expected to care for aging parents or requiring the financial resources to not only fund further education and training but also the family's living expenses. As one participant shared, ***“Family expectations definitely influence career choices, especially when it comes to caring for elderly parents or supporting them financially. These expectations often make you feel obligated to follow their guidance, and not doing so can lead to feelings of guilt.”***



Recommendations



SYSTEMS LEVEL

Recommendation

Invest in Research on South Asian Women's and Gender-Diverse Individuals' Experiences in the Workforce

To better understand the evolving challenges faced by South Asian women, governments and academic institutions must allocate funding to better understand racialized women's career development, employment, and workforce experiences. Additionally, the experiences of gender-diverse South Asian individuals in the workforce often differ significantly from those of cisgender women as they face compounded discrimination and marginalization, and would benefit from additional research. Funded research should examine the intersectionality of gender, race, and migration in the workforce, specifically focusing on how South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals navigate different industries, career advancements, and the barriers they encounter. Further qualitative studies are essential to capture the nuances of their lived experiences and to explore how systemic inequities shape career outcomes and further impact income, health, and well-being. Findings should then be socialized and leveraged to inform policies, programming, and practices that can address these challenges more effectively.

Calls to Action:

- **Conduct** longitudinal studies on the career trajectories of South Asian women to better understand their evolving workforce challenges, needs, and assets. Utilize research to better understand how South Asian women's career needs, challenges, and assets evolve across changing career and life stages.
- **Conduct** a comparative analysis study that compares how South Asian women navigate employment and career challenges under different political and economic conditions. This will allow for a deeper understanding of the impact of migration patterns on career trajectories and the policies and political infrastructure most conducive to career growth and workforce progression.
- **Examine** the intersectionality of gender, race, abilities, and migration in the workforce, specifically focusing on how South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals navigate different industries, career advancements, and the barriers they encounter. Utilize data and insights to improve workforce policies, career development programming, and resources that address their needs.

SYSTEMS LEVEL CONT'D

- **Increase** understanding of the career experiences, challenges, and assets of South Asian 2SLGBTQI+ communities and those living with visible and indivisible disabilities across different life stages.
- **Incentivize** researchers from academic institutions, funding bodies, and policy makers to conduct community-based research studies on South Asian women and work that capture the nuances of lived experiences and explore how systemic inequities shape career and economic outcomes.

Recommendation

Engage Parents and Caregivers on Education and Career Pathways

South Asian communities' expectations and norms of success influence the expectations and pressures parents place on the academic and career paths of their children. These expectations can also be major contributors to mental health stressors for South Asian young women and youth. Conflicts regarding career paths as well as social and personal choices have been documented as major sources of conflict within South Asian families (Islam et al., 2017). Although this research project did not deeply explore parent and youth conflicts experienced by young South Asian women in relation to career identity and

Calls to action:

- **Conduct** further research on intergenerational experiences among South Asian parents and children to understand how diverse lived experiences impact parenting relationships and approaches. Utilize research to inform the design of programming and resources to support education on parenting relationships and approaches, mental health awareness, and navigating education and employment pathways.
- **Implement** community-led initiatives that focus on bridging generational gaps in knowledge and comfort with different careers and workforce realities by educating parents on diverse career and academic pathways and reducing stigma around non-traditional fields.
- **Facilitate** collaborations among community organizations, educators, and parent networks on intergenerational dialogues to support South Asian young women and youth with navigating career expectations and academic pressures within their families.

Recommendation

Address Systemic Workforce Exclusion through Policy Change

There is great need to build an inclusive workforce that goes beyond representation and actively responds to the needs of South Asian women by providing decent wages, equitable treatment, workplace flexibility, and access to opportunities. Acknowledging and confronting the structural and systemic barriers that lead to exclusion is essential to building an inclusive workforce, rather than placing the burden on women to overcome imposter syndrome, continuously upskill, or code switch to fit in. Addressing systemic workforce exclusion in a rapidly evolving technological, demographic, and economic climate, requires continuous policy reviews and changes to current employment systems using an intersectional lens (i.e., Ontario's Integrated Employment System, modernizing the federal employment insurance program, and modernizing digital and data systems for tracking and forecasting).

Calls to action:

- **Modernize and update** the Employment Equity Act, the Working for Workers Act, and the Anti-Racism Act to align with the rapidly evolving changes in the labour force. This includes mandating intersectional data collection in the private sector, requiring anti-racism and equity policies across public, private, and non-profit sectors, and enforcing transparency in areas like pay, accessibility, and hiring and retention processes.
- **Review and audit** AI systems across the entire employment sector, and enforce policies for the ethical and transparent use of AI that impact hiring, recruitment, and surveillance of workers. With rapid shifts in AI, there needs to be greater attention on the exclusion of workers through the use of AI in hiring and recruitment practices.
- **Facilitate** stronger collaboration among employers, post-secondary institutions, municipalities, and community organizations to create targeted workforce development initiatives that address workforce barriers such as access to pathways, systemic discrimination, and hiring and recruitment practices.
- **Invest** in barrier-free, culturally responsive career development programming and initiatives that support South Asian women with entering, navigating, and advancing in the workforce (e.g., adapted mentorship, career coaching, counselling, settlement supports, etc.).
- **Conduct** comprehensive wage reviews in all sectors to ensure pay equity and alignment with living wages.
- Implement policies that encourage a shift towards skills-based hiring practices over traditional measures of competency that allow more room for

hiring bias and structural barriers (e.g., qualifications, degrees, etc.), and support South Asian women entering or navigating the workforce at different career stages.

- **Lower** the cost of post-secondary education, training, and professional development opportunities and access to barrier-free supports for learning, training, and skills development.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Recommendation

Enhance Workforce Inclusion for South Asian Women

Employers must recognize and actively dismantle the systemic and structural barriers that hinder workforce inclusion and career advancement for South Asian women. To achieve this, organizations must implement inclusive recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and career development practices that address the unique challenges faced by South Asian women. Additionally, organizations should commit to collecting disaggregated employment data to track the representation and career progression of South Asian women in leadership roles. This data will enable organizations to identify gaps and take meaningful steps toward increasing representation, ensuring South Asian women are not only entering the workforce but advancing within it.

Calls to action:

- **Mandate** employers to conduct an in-depth analysis of their organization's employment systems, policies, and practices to identify barriers and address gaps in their workforce.
- **Enforce** policies that require employers to prioritize hiring and retention strategies that support young South Asian women to enter the workforce and advance in transparent and inclusive ways.
- **Mandate** transparent hiring and promotion criteria to reduce bias and increase representation of South Asian women in leadership roles. Clear and consistent criteria will mitigate unconscious bias and ensure South Asian women have equal access to career advancement opportunities based on their skills and performance.
- **Require** employers to invest in leadership development programs specifically targeted at South Asian women and their intersectionalities. These programs should focus on building critical leadership skills to help increase their representation in senior positions while also addressing systemic challenges such as unconscious bias and lack of access to influential networks (e.g., sponsors and mentors).

Recommendation

Reform DEIA Programs to Create Systemic & Structural Change

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs must evolve beyond performative initiatives that focus mainly on representation or one-off training. Organizations need to ensure that their DEIA efforts lead to real career opportunities and leadership development. Furthermore, DEIA programs should focus on sustained leadership training, career development, and institutional change that addresses the systemic barriers South Asian and racialized women face, moving beyond performative efforts to create tangible, lasting change. Employers should be mandated to prioritize the following DEIA calls to action.

Calls to action:

- **Ensure** DEIA programs lead to measurable change for South Asian and racialized women by introducing key performance indicators (KPIs) in programming that focus on tangible metrics such as the number of South Asian women promoted into leadership positions, the diversity of the candidate pool, or employee satisfaction.
- **Require** employers to implement long-term learning plans on DEIA that include reflection, feedback, and accountability frameworks in the workplace.
- **Uphold** accountability for the outcomes of their DEIA initiatives by tracking outcomes. Organizations should measure the effectiveness of their diversity efforts and make the necessary adjustments to ensure sustained progress. Transparency in reporting DEIA progress to external interest holders and the public is key for building trust and maintaining accountability.
- **Prioritize** partnerships with racialized community groups, leaders, and consultants to co-design programming, policies, and resources.
- **Embed** DEIA into all organizations functions as a strategic infrastructure that impacts all areas of organization development and sustainability. This includes strategy and operations, research and design, communications and marketing, human resources, budgeting, procurement, etc.

Recommendation

Create Culturally Responsive Career Development Programming

Career development programming must incorporate a cultural and equity lens that recognizes the unique experiences, assets, and challenges of South Asian women entering and navigating the workforce at all career stages. This includes career services, supports, and resources that are intentionally designed to reflect, affirm, and address South Asian women's cultural identities and lived experiences. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, post-secondary institutions, community organizations, and employers should collaborate to develop targeted programming and initiatives that address systemic and structural barriers such as workplace discrimination, limited mentorship and career development, and cultural expectations that appease dominant white culture in the workforce. Programs and initiatives should acknowledge the role of culture and values, family expectations, migration history, racism, and discrimination in shaping education and employment pathways and career development goals. Additionally, these programs should bridge gaps in access, opportunity, and networks by centering the strengths, assets, and challenges specific to the communities they are serving (e.g., young South Asian women, newcomers and immigrants, caregivers, etc.).

Calls to action:

- **Deliver** career development programming, initiatives, and resources that prioritize a cultural lens, ensuring that mentorship, work integrated learning, and networking opportunities reflect the lived experiences of South Asian women.
- **Develop** accessible training and career development programs to support South Asian women at exploration, early career, mid-career, and late career stages. Across all career stages, South Asian women should have access to resources and support for their development and employment needs.
- **Complement** formal employee mentorship and career development programs with community-based support networks that offer South Asian women the opportunity to connect with peers, mentors, sponsors, and leaders to share experiences and provide mutual support. These networks can take the form of peer mentorship programs, networking events, and community forums where South Asian women can discuss workplace challenges, share resources, and offer guidance and resources.
- **Mobilize** funding from the private and public sectors to support accessible career development programming and the creation of digital infrastructure to support mentorship, skills training, and industry-specific work integrated learning opportunities, internships, and fellowships for South Asian women.

Recommendation

Beyond Mentorship, Elevate Sponsorship as a Career Accelerator

Full economic participation for young South Asian women is more than workforce entry: it demands comprehensive strategies that include career progression, economic security, and representation in decision-making spaces. While much attention has been given to mentorship in our research findings, it is crucial to emphasize sponsorship as a key driver for career advancement. Sponsorship is a proactive intervention where senior leaders advocate for someone's career progression, ensuring they are considered for promotions, leadership opportunities, and high-impact projects. For young South Asian women, the absence of such sponsorship remains a significant barrier, and mentorship alone often fails to challenge the systemic biases they face. To ensure equitable career advancement, organizations must develop formal sponsorship programs that include diverse leaders and actively creating pathways for young South Asian women to enter the workforce and access leadership opportunities.

Calls to action:

- **Facilitate** collaborations among employers, educational institutions, and community organizations to develop culturally responsive mentorship and sponsorship programs to support South Asian women at different career stages, particularly in industries where they are underrepresented.
- **Encourage** HR departments to co-design programming, policies, and resources by prioritizing partnerships with racialized women networks, groups, or leaders to support the design of sponsorship initiatives (i.e. program advisory council, program mentors, etc.).
- **Advocate** for funding and investment into third spaces (i.e., network groups or collectives) to co-create culturally responsive sponsorship programming to support the career development and advancement of young South Asian women in the workforce.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Recommendation

Bridge the Digital Divide in Career Development

The rise of digital tools for job searching, networking, and career development has created a digital divide among marginalized communities. Young South Asian women, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds or rural communities, may lack access to the internet or sufficient digital literacy to fully benefit from online resources.

Calls to action:

- **Facilitate** partnerships among employers, educational institutions, and community organizations to provide access to technology, digital literacy training and upskilling, and career development workshops that focus on utilizing digital tools for finding employment, networking and relationship building, and developing a professional digital presence. For example, partnerships with libraries and community centres to offer designated working spaces and a digital device lending program designed specifically for those without access to the internet to support with finding employment.
- **Mandate** standardization of job posting/requirements formats that are cognizant of online accessibility needs and user-friendly application portals with clear instructions.
- **Revise** and update career education and guidance curriculum for students in high school and post-secondary to include updated and relevant information on the use of digital skills and AI in career development and employment systems.



Recommendation

Expand Culturally Grounded Mental Health Support and Service Knowledge

South Asian women across all career stages experience unique stressors related to the intersection of career identities, familial expectations, and workplace discrimination. These stressors can negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing, which may further create barriers to career growth and professional development. The mental health of South Asian women must be prioritized both through a preventative and intervention lens. Workplaces must enact policies and practices that create inclusive environments conducive to mental wellness. Culturally responsive mental health resources in the community are also essential to supporting individuals who may be currently struggling with their mental health. Additionally, there is a need for further research to examine the specific mental health needs of South Asian women across all career stages experiencing burnout and career-related stressors.

Calls to action:

- **Invest** in funding to support collaborative partnerships with service providers, community agencies, educational and health care institutions to support mental health research, programming interventions, and sustainable infrastructure to support the needs of young South Asian women and women in Canada.
- **Implement** comprehensive mental health programs in collaboration with educational institutions and ethno-specific community agencies to offer culturally responsive resources such as therapy services, stress management workshops, and support groups tailored to young South Asian women.
- **Create** workplace cultures that normalize mental health conversations and provide culturally-relevant supports for individuals experiencing mental health challenges. This will support stigma reduction and enable employees to navigate emotional distress (e.g., South Asian Therapist Resource Guide, culturally responsive mental health sessions for staff, etc.).
- **Create** barrier-free resources to support students, youth, and South Asian women in contract or self-employed work environments with access to culturally responsive mental health counselling, resources, and support.

Recommendation

Empower Young South Asian Women and Youth with Early Career Guidance

To support the next generation of South Asian women, there should be a greater focus on career guidance programs at the high school, college, and university levels. This includes creating mentorship opportunities, providing work-integrated learning opportunities, and internship experiences that specifically cater to the unique needs of young South Asian women. These intentionally designed career development initiatives should support young women with building their social capital and navigating a complex workforce.

Calls to action:

- **Mandate** collaborations among schools, community organizations, and employers to offer career exploration programs that give young South Asian women exposure to a wide range of professions and industries, breaking down traditional career expectations and encouraging them to explore career pathways that align with skills, interests, and goals.
- **Encourage** high schools, universities, and colleges to develop culturally informed career programming and services that address the specific barriers faced by young South Asian women and gender-diverse students and graduates (e.g., counselling, industry engagement and networking, peer mentorship).
- **Provide** public or private funding and resources for South Asian student-, youth-, and women-led organizations to create networking and professional development initiatives that support learning about diverse career pathways, skill building, and building social capital.



Conclusion



This research underscores the urgent need to address the systemic and structural barriers faced by young South Asian women and gender-diverse individuals as they navigate the Canadian workforce. Despite their qualifications, ambition, and skills, these individuals encounter significant challenges due to the intersection of gender, race, cultural expectations, as well as other lived experiences. The barriers identified in this report, from cultural pressures imposed by family to discriminatory hiring practices, and the lack of culturally responsive career development programming demonstrate the deep-rooted inequities that hinder both entry and progression in the workforce for South Asian women.

Our findings reveal that family expectations play a dual role, serving as both a source of support and a significant challenge. While families provide essential guidance and financial assistance, the pressure to pursue certain career paths limits the career aspirations of many young women. These cultural and familial norms shape not only career choices but also the ways in which individuals approach their professional lives, resulting in feelings of conflict and isolation, particularly when their career aspirations deviate from the expectations set on them.

The lack of mentorship and sponsorship is another critical barrier. Although mentorship is a widely acknowledged support system, it often fails to address the unique experiences of South Asian women, particularly in male-dominated and predominantly white-led industries.

Without access to sponsorship, where senior leaders actively advocate for their career advancement, these women remain excluded from leadership roles and high-impact projects, reinforcing barriers to their career progression. Moreover, the lack of inclusive, culturally relevant career development programs has left many young South Asian women to navigate their career journeys largely on their own. The absence of mentors who can relate to their cultural identity and workplace experiences leads to a sense of disconnection and invisibility, making it even more challenging for them to enter and advance in the workforce.

Our study also highlights how systemic discrimination, including ethnic and gender-based biases, remains pervasive in the workforce. Whether through overt hiring practices or more subtle exclusion from professional networks, South Asian women are often denied the opportunities to advance in their careers. These microaggressions and biases not only affect their sense of belonging but also reinforce the structural inequalities that continue to shape their professional trajectories.

The findings of this research are a call to action for government, employers, education institutions, and community organizations to take proactive steps in dismantling these systemic barriers. It is clear that South Asian women need targeted, culturally competent career development programs, mentorship models, and sponsorship initiatives that are aligned with their lived experiences and intersectionalities. There must be

an emphasis on workplace inclusion, where diversity is not simply celebrated but integrated into the decision-making processes that shape organizational cultures and leadership structures. While South Asian women continue to face significant hurdles in their careers, they also represent a vital force of talent, resilience, and potential. The findings from this report should serve as a foundational call for sustained, intentional efforts to empower South Asian women in the workforce. This will not only create a more inclusive workforce but also contribute to a stronger, more diverse economy for Canada. Moving forward, it is imperative that we foster a workplace environment where young South Asian women can thrive, contribute, and ultimately lead, free from the systemic barriers that have long hindered their advancement and economic mobility.

The path to a more equitable and inclusive workforce is not just about providing opportunities but about ensuring that those opportunities lead to decent work, inclusive workplaces, career development, and advancement. Only by addressing the cultural, systemic, and institutional barriers head-on, can we unlock the full potential of young South Asian women and build a workforce that truly reflects the diversity and strength of our communities.



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Appendices



Appendix A: Survey 1 Questions

Survey Participant Requirements:

- **Be within the age range of 18 – 30 years old**
- **Be a Canadian Citizen or Permanent Resident status in Canada**
- **Identifying as South Asian and/or Tamil**
- **Self-Identifying as a woman or gender diverse individual**
- **Attending school, or working, or unemployed**
- **and live in York Region, Peel, Durham or Toronto**

Demographic Questions

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age? _____ years of age
2. From the table below, please indicate which communities are relevant to you.

	Durham	Toronto	Peel	York Region	N/A
I work in...					
I live in...					
I go to school in....					

3. What language would you feel most comfortable speaking in
Check ONE only.

Amharic

French

Punjabi

Tamil

Arabic

Greek

Russian

Tigrinya

Appendix A: Survey 1 Questions

ASL	Hindi	Serbian	Turkish
Bengali	Hungarian	Slovak	Twi
Chinese (Cantonese)	Italian	Somali	Ukrainian
Chinese (Mandarin)	Karen	Spanish	Urdu
Czech	Korean	Tagalog	Vietnamese
Dari	Polish	Nepali	Farsi
English	Portuguese	Other (<i>Please specify</i>) -----	
Prefer not to answer	Do not know		

4. Were you born in Canada?

Yes

No

5. My current citizenship or immigrant status (Check all that apply):

- Canadian Citizen
- Permanent Resident
- Landed Immigrant
- On a work visa/permit
- On a student visa/permit (International Student)
- Protected Persons
- Naturalized Canadian Citizen
- Prefer not to say
- Other: -----

Appendix A: Survey 1 Questions

6. Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic group? *Check ONE only.*

- Asian – East (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean)
- Asian – South (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
- Asian – South East (e.g., Malaysian, Filipino, Vietnamese)
- Black – African (e.g., Ghanaian, Kenyan, Somali)
- Black – Caribbean (e.g., Barbadian, Jamaican)
- Black – North American (e.g., Canadian, American)
- First Nations First Nations – Inuit, Metis, Indigenous/Aboriginal not included elsewhere
- Indian – Caribbean (e.g., Guyanese with origins in India)
- Indigenous/Aboriginal not included elsewhere
- Latin American (e.g., Argentinean, Chilean, Salvadoran)
- Middle Eastern (e.g., Egyptian, Iranian, Lebanese)
- White – European (e.g., English, Italian, Portuguese, Russian)
- White – North American (e.g., Canadian, American)
- Mixed heritage (e.g., Black – African and White – North American)
- *(Please specify)*

- Other(s) *(Please specify)*

- Prefer not to answer
- Do not know

Appendix A: Survey 1 Questions

7. Gender identity is the gender that people identify with or how they perceive themselves, which may be different from their sex assigned at birth. How do you currently identify? Please select all that apply.

Woman

Man

Trans

Cis

Gender non-binary (including gender fluid, genderqueer, androgynous, gender nonconforming, or gender questioning)

Two Spirit

Prefer to self-describe

Prefer not to answer

8. My current status: (Check all that apply)

- Employed part-time
- Employed full-time
- Self-employed
- Looking for work
- Attending a designated post-secondary institution part-time
- Attending a designated post-secondary institution full-time
- Graduated from a designated post-secondary institution
- Other (please specify)

9. Years of work experience

- 0-1 years
- 2 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 15 years
- 16 +

Appendix A: Survey 1 Questions

1.To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

- a. I had or/and have people in my life that positively impacted my career aspirations.
- ☐ Strongly Agree
 - ☐ Somewhat Agree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Strongly Disagree
- b. I had or/and have people in my life that discouraged me from my career aspirations.
- ☐ Strongly Agree
 - ☐ Somewhat Agree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Strongly Disagree

2.What are/were your biggest challenges in attaining/getting into your career? [select all that apply]

- Cost of education
- The time it takes to get through school
- My family does not want me to go into that career/sector
- I don't feel like I have the language skills to go into that sector
- Caring for children and/or elders
- Other: _____

Appendix A: Survey 1 Questions

3. Which of the following do you consider as the most significant challenges in preparing for your career and entering the workforce? (Rank)

- Limited access to educational resources
- Discrimination with my chosen career path
- Lack of mentorship opportunities
- Cultural barriers and expectations
- Financial constraints
- Caring for children and/or elders
- Other (please specify)

4. Do you remember a pivotal experience that has shaped you to pursue the career you want or have? [open text box]

5. What additional support or resources do you believe would be most beneficial in addressing the career development and advancement needs of young South Asian & Tamil women and gender diverse communities in the GTA? (Ranking)

- Expanded access to affordable education and training programs
- Implementation of equity, diversity, and inclusion policies in workplaces
- Creation of sponsorship and networking programs specifically tailored to young South Asian and Tamil women and gender diverse individuals
- Managers' performance tied to supporting the growth and advancement needs of South Asian and Tamil women and gender diverse individuals
- Advocacy for legislative changes to address discrimination and inequity in the workplace with regards to gender, ethnicity, and race
- Other (please specify)

Appendix A: Survey 1 Questions

6. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

- The current Canadian education system adequately prepares young South Asian & Tamil women and gender diverse individuals for the workforce.
- Employers in the GTA provide equal opportunities for career advancement regardless of gender, race, and ethnicity.
- Existing support programs and initiatives effectively address the career development needs of young South Asian & Tamil women and gender diverse individuals in the GTA.
- Government policies and regulations adequately address discrimination and inequity in the workplace.

7. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The needs of South Asian and Tamil women and gender diverse individuals as they prepare for their careers and enter the workforce are unique as compared to women from different cultures?

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

8. In your perspective, What are the challenges faced by South Asian and Tamil women and gender diverse individuals as they prepare for their careers and enter the workforce? [open text box]

9. In your perspective, How would South Asian and Tamil women and gender diverse individuals like to be supported as they prepare for their careers and enter the workforce? [open text box]

10. Would you be interested in participating in a virtual learning circle? If yes, please provide your email address to be contacted from our research team.



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Learning Circle Survey

Learning Circle Survey

1. Who has supported you over the last 5 years with your career and employment goals? [Select all that apply]

- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Teachers
- ☐ Guidance Counselor
- ☐ Colleagues
- ☐ Manager
- ☐ Supervisor
- ☐ Leaders
- ☐ Mentors

☐ Community Program Staff

☐ Therapist

☐ Faith Leaders

☐ Other (please specify)

☐ None of the above

2. What supports and/or resources do you rely on to support you with your career and employment needs?

	1 (Do not depend on)	2 (Somewhat depend on)	3 (Depend on)	Not Applicable
An influential manager/leader at my workplace	☐	☐	☐	☐
A sector focused skills training program (i.e. healthcare, education, technology, trades, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Job and Career Fairs	☐	☐	☐	☐
Career Development Events and workshops	☐	☐	☐	☐
Networking and building relationships	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Placements/Internships/Co-Ops	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social Media, Job Sites [Linkedin, Indeed]	☐	☐	☐	☐

Learning Circle Survey

	1 (Do not depend on)	2 (Somewhat depend on)	3 (Depend on)	Not Applicable
Mentorship from a mentorship program at work	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mentorship from a mentorship program in the community	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sponsorship from senior colleagues/leaders	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sponsorship from peers (friends, co-workers)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Employment service programs focusing on youth or women	☐	☐	☐	☐

Other (please specify)

3. Please tell us to what extent family expectations have influenced your career choices and aspirations. [Select all that apply]

	No Influence	Somewhat Influence	Significant Influence
Care for family members (i.e., raising/parenting siblings, caregiving for elderly parents, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Prioritize time to care for and raise children	☐	☐	☐

	No Influence	Somewhat Influence	Significant Influence
Get married after completing undergraduate degree	☐	☐	☐
Be the first in my family to have a professional title (i.e. doctor, lawyer, teacher, accountant, social worker, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Inability to move or leave home to pursue training, education or a job opportunities	☐	☐	☐
Prioritizing mainstream careers paths and industries (healthcare, business, engineering) over other industries (creative, education, nonprofit)	☐	☐	☐
Provide financial support to the family as soon as possible (i.e. pay bills, contribute to rent/mortgage payments, etc.)	☐	☐	☐

	No Influence	Somewhat Influence	Significant Influence
Dedicate time to family and/or cultural obligations (i.e. attending events, managing the household duties, supporting family members)	☐	☐	☐
Prioritize my family's care first, over my career	☐	☐	☐

Other (please specify)

4. Are there any other family expectations you would like to share that have influenced your career choices and aspirations? Please share a short story or experience to illustrate these influences.

5. Have you faced any specific **challenges** related to your gender, ethnicity, and religion in your career?

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. Have you faced any specific **advantages** related to your gender, ethnicity, and religion in your career?

☐ Yes

☐ No

7. If yes, has it been your gender, identity and/or religion that have provided challenges or advantages? [Select all that apply]

☐ My gender identity has provided me with advantages

☐ My gender identity has been a challenge

☐ My ethnic identity has provided me with advantages

☐ My ethnic identity has been a challenge

☐ My religious identity has provided me with advantages

☐ My religious identity has been a challenge

☐ Other (please specify)

8. Does your culture shape the type of career path and/or employment opportunity you gravitate towards?

☐ Yes

☐ No

9. If yes, please explain how/why?

10. Are there varying cultural pressures that South Asian or Tamil women and gender diverse individuals experience that impact their career-related decisions?

☐ Yes

☐ No

11. If yes, please explain why/how

12. From your perspective, are these pressures positive or negative?

☐ Positive

☐ Negative

☐ Both

13. Please share any thoughts, comments, or feelings about careers and employment that are important to

you.

2 / 2

100%

Prev

Done

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Learning Circles Questions:

Question 1: What barriers and/or challenges (personal, professional, or environmental challenges) have you experienced with your career development and/or employment needs (ex: finding a job, career advancement, lack of mentorship/guidance, access to programming/resources, etc.)?

Question 2 (Facilitator Script): From our registration survey, we have learned that about 80% of participants indicated that they have faced challenges related to their gender, ethnicity, and religion in their career and that close to 55% of participants indicated that they have faced advantages related to their gender, ethnicity, and religion in their career. **Do these survey responses surprise you? How does your personal identity (e.g., cultural background, gender identity) intersect (either as a challenge or advantage or both) with your career experiences and aspirations?**

Question 3 (Facilitator Script): From the registration survey we learned that prioritizing mainstream careers paths and industries (healthcare, business, engineering) over other industries (creative, education, nonprofit), providing financial support to the family (i.e. pay bills, contribute to rent/mortgage payments, etc.), and caring for family members (i.e., raising/parenting siblings, caregiving for elderly parents, etc.) had a significant influence on career choices and aspirations. Areas that had a somewhat influence on career choices included time dedicated to family/cultural obligations, and inability to move or leave home to pursue training, education, or job opportunities. **We understand from the research and what we are hearing in the registration survey, that family expectations influence your career choices and aspirations – can you tell us more about this?**

Follow up Questions for Question 3:

- Can you share any specific cultural values or traditions that have impacted your career decisions?
- Do you consider your culture as something that has pushed you to progress in your career aspirations or something that has limited you? Or both? Please explain

Question 4 (Facilitator Script): “From the registration survey, SATWC learned that social media, job sites, and networking were the most popular resources, and mentorship programs, community and/or job fairs were the least chosen.” We are interested to hear from you in helping us understand the survey results and also....
What supports and/or resources do you rely on to help you with your career and employment needs?

Question 5 (Facilitator Script): From the registration survey, 60–77% of participants expressed that family and/or friends were the ones that supported them the most with mentors, colleagues, and teachers leading behind those two options. **When you reflect on your life, who are the people that supported you over the last few years with your career and employment needs (i.e. family, friends, colleagues, manager, mentors, etc.) and how have they shaped/influenced your career choices and aspirations?**

Question 6: What support (policies, practices, initiatives, changes, etc.) would you like to see to help you with your career and employment needs?

Question 7: Is there a cultural lens that needs to be taken when supporting you with your career and employment needs?

Follow up Question for Question 7:

- Do services and supports need to be adapted to your culture? Please share with us what that should look like.

Question 8: Are there any additional thoughts, comments, or feelings about careers and employment that are important to you and you would like to share with us?