

Immigrant Women ...Why Volunteer?

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If you immigrated to Canada in 2005, you were one of almost 135,000 women who came to this country in that year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006). Research tells us that many of you found that your skills were not recognized, making it difficult to enter the job market (Gupta & Iacovetta, 2000; Man, 1995; Ng, 1988, 1993) and leaving you more likely than Canadian-born women to be under- or unemployed (Miedema & Tastsoglou, 2000). Despite your credentials, you likely entered Canada as a dependent, limiting your access to resources (Cote et al., 2001).

Volunteering is one way you can overcome these challenges. It can help you gain valuable skills, learn about Canadian culture, develop social and professional networks, and 'continue a journey' that began in your country of origin (Fletcher & Gibson, 2003).

To help you understand why you should consider volunteering, we held focus groups and interviews with 24 immigrant women in Edmonton during the summer of 2006. These women represented a mix of cultures and backgrounds, including newcomers, long-time residents of Canada, retirees, stay-at-home moms, business professionals, and students. All of our interviewees had been or were currently serving as volunteers. Here is what they had to say about their volunteer experiences.

Why volunteer?

No matter how busy you are with work and/or family or how difficult you have found adjusting to life in Canada, volunteering will help you to:

- Change or advance your career by using your skills or learning new ones in a Canadian work environment.

"I think sometimes people think they have to be in a professional role to use their skills, like if they were an engineer at home.... [But] you need to see that the skills can be used in lots of ways, and you need to bring them to every [position]."

- Learn about Canadian society by interacting with people outside of your family and community.

"I wanted to learn more about Canada, about the culture, the environment, the language, and I wanted to adopt the Canadian way of life."

"I think that volunteering was a way to have a sense of purpose, to be doing something to make the world better, or to help others."

- Give something back to society.

"I think that a lot of immigrant women volunteer in order to feel a part of something and to feel like they belong. Many women long for a sense of community or sense of belonging in their new country."

- Make a difference by working with others who share your passion and commitment to a certain cause.
- Be a role model by sharing what you have learned with more recent immigrants.
- Be involved in your children's or family's activities.
- Do something fun and enjoy yourself.
- Overcome feelings of isolation.
- Increase your self-esteem by giving you a chance to do something you have never done before.
- Build self-confidence and the belief that who you are and what you are doing is valued and appreciated.

Challenges of volunteering

Some challenges you may encounter as a volunteer include:

- Difficulty juggling multiple roles.
- Challenges mastering the English or French language and/or Canadian customs.
- Being asked to do something other than what you want to do.
- Not feeling heard or appreciated.
- Difficulty finding childcare and/or transportation.

By following the tips below, you can overcome many of these challenges and have a rewarding volunteer experience.

Tips for finding the right volunteer opportunity

A good first step to finding the right volunteer opportunity is to think about the skills, knowledge, and other strengths you have to offer. Examples include:

- Previous professional and volunteer experience.
- Knowledge of multiple languages.
- A different perspective.
- A good work ethic.
- Connections to the immigrant community.
- Enthusiasm for volunteering.
- Post-secondary education.
- Ability to mentor others.

Once you know what you have to offer, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why do I want to volunteer?
2. Do I have the time to volunteer and how will it fit in with my other commitments?
3. What organization can offer the type of volunteer experience I am looking for?
4. Can I travel easily to and from the organization?

Before you make any decisions about where to volunteer, ask the organizations you are considering the following questions:

1. Do you have experience with immigrant women as volunteers?
2. Do you have a position that will provide the experience I am looking for?
3. What will you expect from me?
4. Will I receive orientation and training?
5. Who can I talk to for advice and support?

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