



**Immigration in Québec in 2004:  
General overview and the situation  
of women immigrants**

**Background paper prepared for the  
Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas**

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## I. Introduction

This background paper was prepared for the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas to provide food for thought to parliamentarians as they reflect on women's immigration issues in Québec and the integration of immigrant women into the host society.

The paper begins with a general overview of the immigration situation in Canada and Québec and of current Québec immigration policy. This is followed by more specific information on the situation of women immigrants in Québec, including a statistical portrait, data on access to immigrant and integration services, current challenges, and prospects for the future. The paper concludes with information on women immigrants in political office.

## II. Immigration in Canada and Québec

### The Canada-Québec Accord on Immigration

Under the Canadian Constitution, immigration is a jurisdiction shared by the federal government and the provinces.<sup>1</sup>

The 1991 *Canada-Quebec Accord Relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens* (Gagnon-Tremblay/McDougall Accord) sets out Canadian and Québec government responsibilities for immigration selection, admission and integration. Under this intergovernmental agreement, Québec holds exclusive responsibility for the selection of independent immigrants—i.e., skilled workers and business immigrants—as well as refugees from abroad. A Québec Selection Certificate (CSQ) is issued by Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration (MRCI) to those who, unless they represent a risk to the nation's health or security, will be admitted to Canada as permanent residents.<sup>2</sup>

The 1991 agreement also gives Québec responsibility for the reception and linguistic, cultural, and economic integration of new arrivals.

In 2002, immigrants selected under Québec's criteria accounted for 67% of all admissions to the province. In recent years, Québec has sought to increase this share to ensure that immigrant selection meets the needs of Québec society as best as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution Act of 1867, S. 95.

<sup>2</sup> For the temporary admission of aliens (*foreigners*), the accord provides that Québec's consent may be required for foreign students, temporary workers, and visitors who want to come to Québec to receive medical treatment.

## Statistical Portrait of Québec Immigration

From fewer than 30,000 admissions a year in the second half of the 1990s, the number of permanent residents annually admitted to Québec has risen markedly in recent years, increasing from 29,214 in 1999 to nearly 39,500 in 2003.<sup>3</sup> This has increased Québec's share of overall Canadian immigration from 15.4% in 1999 to 17.9% in 2003.

Immigrants to Québec have very diverse origins. China and France account for the largest number of immigrants admitted between 1999 and 2003, i.e., respectively 9.2% and 8.5% of the total. They are followed by Morocco (7.9%), Algeria (7.6%), Romania (5.5%), Haiti (4.4%), and Lebanon (3.0%). Other countries account for the remaining 53.9%. As for continent of origin, 34.8% of immigrants to Québec from 1999 to 2003 were from Asia, 25.2% from Africa, 24% from Europe, and 15.9% from the Americas.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of language, the proportion of new arrivals who already have knowledge of French upon their arrival in Québec has grown steadily in recent years, from 42.8% in 1999 to 50.9% in 2003.

Lastly, for the period 1999–2003, fully 49.2% of immigrants to Québec were women. A more detailed overview of female immigration to Québec is presented in Section 3.

## Québec Immigration Policy

In the early 1990s, the Québec government released an immigration and integration policy statement entitled *Let's Build Québec Together*. The core elements of this statement, which are still considered relevant today, can be summarized as follows:

- Immigration should contribute to the development of a French-speaking society and prosperous economy.
- Successful immigrant integration depends on learning and using French, full participation in society, and harmonious cultural relations.<sup>5</sup>

In order to augment the impact of the policy statement through specific measures and actions adapted to present-day needs and realities, the Government of Québec recently developed an action plan for immigration, integration, and intercultural relations.<sup>6</sup> The plan, which covers the period 2004–2007, calls for the implementation of several dozen new measures with five main focuses: an immigration policy true to Québec's needs and values; reception and lasting job integration; learning French; a Québec proud of its diversity; and a commitment to action from Québec's capital, metropolitan Montréal, and the regions.

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<sup>3</sup> Preliminary data for 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration, *Tableaux sur l'immigration au Québec 1999-2003*, March 2004, pp. 15 et 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ministère des Communautés culturelles et de l'Immigration, *Let's Build Québec Together – A Policy Statement on Immigration and Integration*, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration, *Des valeurs partagées, des intérêts communs – Plan d'action 2004-2007*, May 2004.

In addition, as part of the immigration planning process, the Québec cabinet adopted the following guiding principles for the period 2005–2007:

- Increase the number of immigrants admitted annually to 48,000 by the year 2007
- Increase the proportion of active young people and young families
- Increase the number and proportion of selected workers admitted
- Maintain the proportion of immigrants with knowledge of French at a minimum of 50% of admissions<sup>7</sup>

The first three principles reflect the important emphasis the Québec government places on demographic concerns, as well as its determination to maximize the economic benefits of immigration. The fourth corresponds not only to the goal of sustaining the French language in Québec, but also reflects that fact that knowledge of French is one of the keys to immigrant integration.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that various amendments have been made to the *Act respecting Immigration to Québec* to facilitate its administration.<sup>8</sup> The amendments aim primarily at reinforcing verification and control mechanisms for the selection of foreign nationals, regulating immigration consultants, and preventing application backlogs abroad. To avoid backlogs, selection of foreign nationals can now be determined by source area

### **III. The situation of women immigrants to Québec**

#### **Women immigrants in Québec: Comparative portrait and recent trends**

Data on the number of immigrants admitted to Québec between 1999 and 2003 show no significant difference between the number of men and women. As noted above, 49.2% of immigrants to Québec during this period were women. However, women are proportionately more numerous than men in the family reunification category, and less well represented in the economic immigrant category.<sup>9</sup>

In the member countries of the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD), women immigrants have a systematically lower activity rate than their male counterparts. Generally, this is also the case for the overall population, but in most countries, the male-female activity gap is markedly greater within the immigrant population than the population at large. These gaps appear to be linked to a series of factors related to differences in family structure (family status or number of young children) and levels of education. Activity rates also vary significantly according to the nationality of migrants, a reflection, among other things, of the situation in their home countries.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration, *La planification triennale de l'immigration 2005-2007*, May 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Bill 53 – *An act to amend the Act respecting immigration to Québec* – passed and assented to on June 17, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See Table 1.

<sup>10</sup> OECD, *Trends in International Migration*, 2003 edition, Paris, p. 54.

The situation of women immigrants in Québec is no different in this regard. In 2001, the activity rate for women immigrants was 51.7%, compared to 67.9% for men. Activity rates for men and women in the overall population were 58.5% and 71.6% respectively.

On average, women immigrants tend to arrive in Québec at a slightly younger than their male counterparts. For the period 1999–2003, the number of women immigrants in the 15–24 age group was significantly higher than the number of men the same age, a situation due in part to the overrepresentation of wives in the family reunification category. In contrast, men outnumber women in the 25–34 and 35–44 age brackets due to their strong representation in the economic immigrant category.<sup>11</sup>

As for their education levels on arrival, MRCI statistics show that a clear majority of immigrants admitted between 1999 and 2003—70.9% of women and 76.8% of men—have at least twelve years of schooling or more.<sup>12</sup>

However, fewer immigrant women have a graduate education—i.e., 17 years or more— than their male counterparts (22.3% compared to 32.5% for the period 1999–2003). Once again, the over-representation of women in the family reunification category is one of the factors explaining this situation.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, available data for 1999–2003 shows that 43.8% of women immigrants and 50.6% of male immigrants to Québec during this period already had knowledge of French upon arrival.

### **The special needs of immigrant women and the services available to them**

Immigrant women can face a variety of obstacles when integrating into the host society.

As women, they may have highly demanding family obligations that can compromise their chances of obtaining well-paid, quality jobs. Women are also under-represented in non-traditional occupations where working conditions are often much better than in traditional sectors of female employment. Lastly, even when they do have equivalent employment, women are often less well paid than men, despite the pay equity legislation in force in Québec.

As immigrant women, new arrivals must also overcome the challenges of adapting to the host society, including learning French, familiarizing themselves with the job market and Québec culture, and achieving a new psychosocial balance, especially in the case of refugee women.

In addition, the migratory experience can create specific difficulties for immigrant women, who are often more vulnerable due to their status as migrants and their resulting dependence on a principle application (the spouse in most family reunification cases, the employer in the case of Live-in Caregiver Program).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See tables 2 and 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration, *Tableaux sur l'immigration au Québec 1999-2003*, March 2004, p. 36. This data applies for everyone aged 15 and over.

<sup>13</sup> Immigrants in the family reunification category are generally less well educated than economic immigrants.

<sup>14</sup> Guyon, Sylvie, *Les femmes immigrantes au Québec: une population défavorisée sur le marché de l'emploi*. Montréal: Comité sectoriel d'adaptation de la main-d'oeuvre, 2003, p. 4.

To overcome these obstacles and challenges, immigrant women may require special measures and support services to help them learn French, become more familiar with the host society, develop a new network, and gain access to the job market.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Services available***

In recent years, Québec has developed a series of universal, non-discriminatory measures and services to meet the needs of prospective immigrants and new arrivals. Here is a brief overview of these measures.

Foreign nationals wishing to immigrate from abroad are informed about Québec society and values when they apply. Special emphasis is placed on gender equality, respect for physical integrity, and peaceful conflict resolution.

Upon arrival at the airport, new immigrants are welcomed by a Québec immigration officer who assesses their immediate needs and helps direct them to their destination. They are then invited to visit the nearest integration center (carrefour d'intégration) for a meeting during which they are provided with basic information on health and social services, education, housing, and linguistic integration. The meeting is also an opportunity to draw up an integration plan to meet the needs of each individual and orient them toward the appropriate services for learning French or assisting with their social and economic integration.

These services include labor market integration and the comparative evaluation of studies completed out-of-province. Socioeconomic information sessions are also available to inform new arrivals about the social codes and values of Québec society and encourage them to participate fully in Québec's civil and democratic life.<sup>16</sup>

A number of special immigration and integration assistance measures have also been adopted for women in recent years, including the following:<sup>17</sup>

- Since 2000, the minimum age for a spouse has been set at 16. It was modified by the federal government at Québec's request.
- Sponsorship duration has been reduced from ten years to three years. This change came into effect in Québec in 1994 (2002 at the federal level)<sup>18</sup>
- Though its immigrant welcome, settlement and labor market integration services, MRCI funds a number of organizations that serve a primarily female clientele, including Centre des femmes de Montréal, Association des femmes immigrantes de l'Outaouais and the South Asian Women's Community Centre.

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<sup>15</sup> Régie régionale de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal-Centre, *Femmes immigrantes et empowerment*, Summary report, Montréal, August 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration (BDGAI/SJ), *L'intégration des nouveaux arrivants: vers une pleine participation à la société québécoise*, Québec, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration, *Des valeurs partagées, des intérêts communs – Plan d'action 2004-2007*, May 2004, p. 114 and 115.

<sup>18</sup> One of the effects of the decrease in sponsorship duration was to accelerate eligibility of sponsored immigrants and refugees for certain social programs.

- French-language training services provided by MRCI reach a clientele made up primarily of women. In 2003–2004, respectively 58.5% and 60.1% of students attending fulltime and part-time courses were women. Daycare allowances are provided to those attending these courses.
- French-language programs and the teaching materials produced by MRCI make explicit reference to gender relations and the rights set out in the *Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*.
- Through its programs, MRCI also funds twinning services designed to reach immigrant women who do not participate in any other integration measures.
- Lastly, MRCI also provides support to various nonprofit organizations to conduct workshops for women on the *Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*, civic participation, and spousal and family violence.

### **Prospects for the future**

As mentioned above, the Québec government has drawn up a new, three-year action plan for immigration, integration, and intercultural relations.<sup>19</sup> One of main thrusts of the action plan is to take into account the different needs of women and men with respect to their integration and full participation in Québec society. It contains a number of targeted measures designed to provide immigrant women and women who are members of Québec's cultural communities with services that take into account their particular situation so that they can achieve a level of social and financial autonomy on par with that of Québec women in general. The plan pays special attention to the spouses of principal application and to women who have been sponsored.

Here is an overview of these measures, some of which are specially targeted to women and others of which are slated for gender-differentiated implementation:

- Improve operation of the *Live-in Caregiver Program* and better protect the women participating in the program<sup>20</sup>
- Provide sponsored immigrants/refugees and those in the midst of the sponsorship process with information and tools to help them prepare for life in Québec and better understand their rights and obligations
- Reach immigrant women and women from the cultural communities who are isolated, notably by supporting organizations that help them and encouraging twinning programs involving new arrivals
- Extend and fine-tune foreign promotion and information campaigns. To this effect, MRCI will ensure that promotional and immigrant recruitment activities reach both a male and female audience.

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<sup>19</sup> Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration, *Des valeurs partagées, des intérêts communs – Plan d'action 2004-2007*, May 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Over the period 1999–2003, 1,419 were admitted to Québec as live-in caregivers, 74% of them women.



An overall evaluation of success in achieving action plan objectives will be conducted three years after implementation. Certain specific measures will also be evaluated separately. These evaluations will be conducted in a manner that allows for gender-based analysis of the outcomes.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that MRCI will soon complete an update of the statistical portrait of immigrant women. The updated portrait will allow for a more accurate comparison of immigrant women and Québec women in general. Conseil du statut de la femme subsequently plans to publish an information document on immigrant women in Québec in its *Des nouvelles d'elles* series.

### **Immigrant women in politics**

Our research found three women members of the Québec National Assembly who were born outside of Canada.

Marie-Claire Kirkland, a native of Massachusetts, U.S., was the first woman elected to the National Assembly of Québec (1961). Reelected in 1962, 1966 and 1970, she was also the first woman named to a cabinet post (1962). During her political career, Kirkland held the portfolios of transport and communications; tourism, hunting and fishing, and cultural affairs.

Marie Malavoy was born in Germany to French parents. She was elected to the Québec National Assembly in 1994 and has been minister of culture and communications.

Moroccan-born Fatima Houda-Pépin was also elected to the National Assembly in 1994, and was reelected in 1998 and 2003. She has held a variety of political and parliamentary positions and is currently chair of the Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and president of the Québec section of the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas.

We also found two women born outside Canada who currently represent two Québec electoral districts as members of the House of Commons in Ottawa: Greek-born Eleni Bakopanos, a member of Parliament since 1993 and parliamentary secretary to the minister of social development since July 2004, and French-born Raymonde Folco, an MP since 1997. Moreover, Senator Marisa Ferreti Barth, who was born in Italy, has represented the senatorial division of Québec in the Canadian Senate since 1997.

Despite the progress made in Québec in recent decades, women—and immigrant women in particular—are still under-represented in politics. To correct this situation, the Québec government set up a program in 1999 called *Decision-making - A matter of equality*. The goal of the program is to increase the number of women holding decision-making positions within local and regional bodies in all of Québec's regions. For 2004–2005, 46 projects presented by nonprofit organizations will be funded under the program for a total of \$1 million. Six of these projects are aimed specifically at immigrant women.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Québec is relying on immigration to meet important demographic, linguistic, and economic challenges it currently faces. To do so, Québec immigration policy seeks both to increase the number of immigrants and improve their level of social and economic integration.

Statistics show that in Québec, as in the majority of OEDC countries, the activity level of immigrant women is significantly lower than for non-immigrant women. In addition, the gap between the male and female activity rate is considerably greater for immigrant women than the population as a whole.

Québec cannot afford to do without the full social and economic participation of immigrant women. In order to address these economic concerns—and more fundamentally for reasons of equity, justice, and social cohesion—the Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration has undertaken to adapt its services to better meet the specific needs of these new arrivals. A number of measures have already been introduced to support immigrant women as they move forward on their march toward equality, with others soon to come.