Towards a More Inclusive Future

Understanding the Challenges and Needs of Unemployed and Labour-Market-Distant English-Speaking Women in Montréal

PERT

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Definitions

The following section provides a summary of definitions of variables and concepts used in this report, organized in alphabetical order. Complete definitions can be found in Statistics Canada's 2021 Census of Population Dictionary.[1]

Employment Income

Refers to income that a person receives as wages, salaries and commissions from paid employment, including self-employment.

Immigrant

Refers to a person who holds permanent residency in Canada granted by the immigration authorities or who has obtained Canadian citizenship.

Indigenous

Refers to people who identify as First Nations (North American Indian), Métis and/or Inuk (Inuit), and/or those who report being Registered or Treaty Indians who are registered under the Indian Act of Canada and/or members of a First Nation or Indian band.

Industry

Refers to a specific sector of economic activity engaged in by a given group. Industry data are generated under the 2017 North American Industry Classification System (NAICS).

Labour Force

Refers to all persons aged 15 and over who were either employed or unemployed and actively seeking employment.

Labour Force Participation Rate

Refers to the proportion of the working-age population (aged 15 and over) who are either employed or actively seeking employment, and are therefore considered to be part of the labour force.

Linguistic Identity

This report uses Statistics Canada's First Official Language Spoken (FOLS) classification to define English and French speakers in Québec. FOLS is a derived concept that takes into consideration a person's mother tongue, language spoken most often at home, and knowledge of Canada's two official languages. Based on this information, individuals are

[1] Statistics Canada, "Dictionary, Census of population, 2021," last modified June 21, 2023, https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm.

assigned their first official language as English, French, both or neither. Individuals who speak both official languages are divided evenly between the English FOLS and French FOLS populations.

This classification of English and French speakers is considered the most inclusive, as it acknowledges individuals who speak multiple languages and those who are not highly proficient in either official language but find themselves closer to English or French. It therefore provides an accurate count of individuals who may seek out or benefit from services in English or other language-specific services, such as French-language training.

Mobility Status

Refers to an individual's current place of residence (as of May 11, 2021) as compared to their place of residence on the same date 1 or 5 years earlier. People who live in the same residence as they did 1 or 5 years ago are referred to as "non-movers." The category of "movers" is integrated by individuals who have moved to a new residence, broken down into "non-migrants" and "migrants." This report distinguishes between two types of migrants to Québec: those from other Canadian provinces or territories, known as "interprovincial migrants," and those from other countries, known as "external migrants."

Unemployed

Refers to a person who did not have paid work during the reference week of May 2021, but had been actively looking for paid work in the last four weeks.

Visible Minority

Refers to individuals, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour, according to the Employment Equity Act. In the Census, visible minority populations consist of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese.

Work Activity

Refers to whether or not a person 15 years and over worked in 2020. For those who worked, this refers to the number of weeks they worked for pay or in self-employment during the reference year, even if they only worked for a couple of hours.

About PERT

The Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT) is a non-profit policy, research, and engagement organization that works with employment service delivery organizations, employers, partners in education, and government to research and address employment challenges and opportunities of the English-speaking communities across Québec. PERT is dedicated to building and strengthening employment support networks and ensuring inclusion in Québec's labour market for generations to come.

About Y des femmes

Y des femmes de Montréal is a community-based organization founded in 1875, with more than 150 years of service to women and girls in Montréal. Our mission is to build a better future together for all women, girls and their families. Our work is guided by values of equity, inclusion, non-violence, respect and solidarity.

We provide direct services and develop initiatives across several areas, including employment services, residential services, youth services and community services. We also work with a range of partners to raise awareness of issues related to exclusion, social and gender inequalities, and violence against women and girls, and to contribute to sustainable social change.

Executive Summary

This report examines the ongoing systemic exclusion experienced by women in the workforce, specifically focusing on the intersection of gender and linguistic identity in Québec. In particular, it seeks to understand the experiences and needs of unemployed and labour-market-distant English-speaking women living in Montréal,[2] who are part of a linguistic minority in a predominantly French-speaking province.

To better understand the experiences and needs of our target group, we collaborated with Y des femmes de Montréal, an organization that provides employment assistance services and a labour market integration program for this specific clientele. Our research included an environmental scan, an analysis of data from the 2021 Census of Canada, and interviews and focus groups with 30 unemployed and labour-market-distant English-speaking women in Montréal. Additionally, we conducted interviews and focus groups with eight staff members from Y des femmes.

Our findings indicate that English-speaking women in Montréal face greater employment barriers than their French-speaking counterparts due to their linguistic identity. The intersection of being a woman and a member of a linguistic minority results in poorer socioeconomic outcomes compared to both their French-speaking peers and men from either linguistic community. On one hand, gender influences how women navigate their job search; for instance, they may strategically prioritize remote or part-time positions to balance caregiving responsibilities, or focus their search on female-dominated industries to improve their chances. On the other hand, limited French proficiency directly affects their employability negatively and reduces their job opportunities. Without adequate French-language training, English-language employment services, and other wraparound supports, English-speaking women will continue to experience exclusion from the labour market and economic insecurity.

Our **key findings** are as follows:

- **English-speaking women in Montréal face the worst socioeconomic outcomes compared to their French-speaking counterparts due to gender and linguistic minority status.**
    - English-speaking women in Montréal have the lowest labour force participation rate (62.7%) compared to French-speaking women (63.0%) and men of both linguistic communities.

[2] For the purposes of this study, **"unemployed"** refers to women who did not have paid work at the time of the study and had actively looked for paid work during the previous four weeks. **"Labour-market-distant"** refers to women who did not have a paid job and had not actively looked for paid work during the previous four weeks, including women seeking to return to the labour market following, for example, a career gap due to caregiving responsibilities or other circumstances that led them to temporarily leave paid employment.

    - The unemployment rate among English-speaking women in Montréal is significantly higher than that of French-speaking women (11.6% compared to 8.9%).
    - English-speaking women in Montréal have a median employment income of $27,000, which is $5,800 less than that of English-speaking men and $5,400 less than that of French-speaking women.

- **Participants identified French as the main barrier to finding employment in Montréal.**
    - Participants indicated that employers often require advanced French language skills.
    - A survey on the matter found that employers are now more cautious about recruiting English speakers due to Law 14.
    - All women, including self-reported bilingual women, expressed their need to continue learning and improving their oral and written French skills.
    - Free French-language training options, such as those offered by Francisation Québec, have long waitlists due to high demand.

- **Participants were often unaware or unable to articulate how gender shaped their labour market participation.**
    - Participants often overlook how gender affects their employability or job search strategies. Impacts mostly involved caregiving responsibilities, such as limiting job searches to remote or hybrid roles due to children's needs.

- **Systemic barriers make it harder for women to participate in the labour market, while placing the responsibility on women to overcome these barriers.**
    - Limited access to affordable childcare, workplace bias in male-dominated industries, and a lack of access to English-language services, make it more difficult for women to participate fully in the labour market.

- **Participants expressed the need to reinvent themselves to enter the labour market through entrepreneurship, career changes, or new certifications.**
    - This reinvention faces numerous obstacles, including a lack of economic resources, entrepreneurial know-how, and limited English-language training programs for upskilling and reskilling.

- **Observations from Y des femmes staff highlighted that English-speaking women frequently face mental health challenges.**
    - Employer ghosting practices have further exacerbated their mental health issues, resulting in increased frustration and diminished confidence.
    - Specialized mental health support is critical; however, it is outside the scope of what employment service providers can provide.

To address the issues identified in our research, we propose the following **recommendations** to government policymakers and stakeholders working in the employment ecosystem in Québec:

1. **Ensure adequate, equitable funding for English-language employment support organizations to expand services and ensure access for all English-speaking women.**

2. **Enhance collaboration among employment service providers, government, health agencies and other community-based organizations to provide wraparound supports (e.g., specialized mental health services, affordable child care services and transportation) for English speakers.**

3. **Expand French-language learning options through formal and informal (e.g., linguistic mentorship and networking) programs that build field-specific vocabulary and are provided at a low cost or for free to participants.**

4. **Fund English-language reskilling and upskilling programs at low or no cost, especially to mature workers and/or immigrant women, to align and enhance their skills to current labour market needs and trends.**

5. **Sensitize employers, hiring managers, and recruiters about the challenges facing English-speaking women in the workforce to enhance inclusivity in hiring practices and workplaces.**

6. **Build partnerships and foster collaboration between employers and English-language employment services providers to provide a direct path to employment opportunities.**

In addition, we propose the following **recommendations** to English-language employment service providers:

1. **Prioritize the development of oral and written French skills clients need for the workplace.**
2. **Introduce conversational French groups focused on practical, life-skills vocabulary and scenarios, such as navigating medical appointments, public services, and communicating with their children's educators.**
3. **Conduct an assessment of each client's digital skills to understand their specific needs and tailor the training accordingly.**
4. **Create awareness of mental health needs and available support, and ensure effective referral and follow-up for clients seeking specialized services in English.**
5. **Offer an introductory module on entrepreneurship and self-employment in Québec.**
6. **Hold regular check-ins with former clients to provide support until they secure a job, as they may need extra assistance.**

Introduction

Women's participation in the workforce has always been a complex issue. In Québec, a strong history of labour movements and efforts to reduce gender inequality and pay gaps has resulted in Québec being one of the provinces with the highest median employment incomes for women.[3] However, recent labour market shifts and events have changed the nature of the labour market for all workers, particularly for women. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed many women out of the workforce as care responsibilities surged, and for those who stayed, paid work often collided with unpaid domestic labour in the same hours and spaces.[4] Meanwhile, rapid technological change, the expansion of artificial intelligence, and global economic volatility have reshaped and will continue to change industries in ways that increase the fear of widening existing inequalities.[5] These forces have the potential to compound long-standing barriers, putting women at greater risk of economic insecurity.

As members of a linguistic minority, English-speaking women face challenges at the intersection of gender and language. In 2021, their unemployment rate was 10.9%, compared to 6.7% for French-speaking women.[6] In Montréal, where English speakers are more concentrated, the rate rises to 11.6%.[7] While a number of organizations work to improve English-speaking women's employment outcomes, there is little recent research exploring their specific circumstances, making it challenging to design programs that fully respond to their realities.

This project, conducted in partnership with the Y des femmes of Montréal, aims to address that knowledge gap. Through interviews with 30 unemployed and labour-market-distant English-speaking women living in Montréal, we explored their employment experiences, the barriers they face, and their perceptions of available employment support, both at the Y des femmes and other organizations. These findings, combined with an environmental scan and analysis of 2021 census data, formed the basis of our policy and programming recommendations. Our aim is to provide policymakers and program administrators with the evidence they need to dismantle systemic barriers and create employment solutions for women that are not only effective but also equitable, paving the way toward a more inclusive future.

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[3] Statistics Canada, "Table 11-10-0240-01 Distribution of employment income of individuals by gender and work activity, Canada, provinces and selected census metropolitan areas," April 29, 2026, https://doi.org/10.25318/1110024001-eng.
[4] Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, "Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women," 43rd Parl., 2nd sess., Rept. 6, March 2021, https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/parl/xc71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf.
[5] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "OECD Employment Outlook 2025: Can We Get Through the Demographic Crunch?,", 2025, https://doi.org/10.1787/194a947b-en.
[6] Provincial Employment Roundtable, "Employment Profile of English Speakers in the Province of Québec," 2025, https://pertquebec.ca/reports/employment-profile-of-english-speakers-in-the-province-of-quebec/.
[7] Ibid.

Methodology

In this project, we utilized mixed methods to advance our understanding of the situation, experiences, and employability needs of unemployed English-speaking women in Montréal. These included an environmental scan, a statistical analysis of data from the 2021 Census of Canada, and interviews and focus groups with unemployed and labour-market-distant English-speaking women residing in Montréal, as well as Y des femmes staff.

Environmental Scan

We conducted an environmental scan of research available on the subject of employment of English-speaking women in Québec and Montréal. We utilized both Google and Google Scholar search engines, as well as the internal search tool of the Québec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN) and the document centre of the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN). We also consulted Concordia's and McGill's online library databases and Canadian government data portals such as Statistics Canada and the Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ) for official statistical releases, analytical reports, and survey data. We used the following keywords in every possible combination: "women," "employment," "Montréal," and "Québec." We performed a preliminary scan for eligibility and then extracted and analyzed the information related to the research project.

We additionally reviewed internal Y des femmes documentation regarding the status and needs of their clients and the organization itself.

Census Data

We ordered custom data tables from Statistics Canada's 2021 Census of Canada with the relevant labour force information disaggregated according to gender and language. The census data comes from the approximately 25.0% of Canadian private households that received a long-form census questionnaire, and all data pertain to persons aged 15 years and over.

Interviews and Focus Groups

We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews and focus groups with past and current Y des femmes clientele, as well as other unemployed and labour-market-distant women in Montréal who met the following eligibility criteria:

- Be at least 18 years of age
- Self-identify as a woman
- Self-identify English as their first official language spoken (FOLS)
- Be a resident of Montréal, Québec

- Be currently unemployed and/or distant from the labour market
- Willing to provide electronic consent

Participants were recruited through a call for participation via email, printed posters displayed at the Y des femmes foundation building in Montréal, and word of mouth, with the support of the Y des femmes employment counsellors. Their participation took place between June and January 2026 on a first-come, first-served basis until we reached 30 participants. Interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes, while focus groups ranged from 90 to 120 minutes. Participants received a $30.00 gift card as compensation for their time and participation in this research.

Below are the characteristics of the women we interviewed:

- Close to half of the participants (14) were immigrants to Canada within the last five years (newcomers), followed by eight immigrants with more than five years in Canada and eight Canadian-born individuals.[8]
- 86.7% were current or former clients of Y des femmes. The remainder (four) were not clients.
- Women were between 23 and 58 years old.

In addition, we conducted informational interviews and focus groups with eight Y des femmes staff members. Participants included the director of programming of employment services, employment and psychosocial counsellors, program coordinators, and program managers who work in programs and employment assistance services serving English-speaking women at Y des femmes.

The results from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed using Delve, a specialized software designed for qualitative data analysis. The information was coded into patterns with various qualitative coding methods, then organized into themes in the Findings section.

Ethics Consideration

This project engaged 30 research participants through interviews and focus groups. As such, it required an ethics review submitted by the PERT research team to the Community Research Ethics Office (CREO) and approved in the fall of 2024.

[8] The mix of immigrants and Canadian-born women aligns with the figures presented in the Y des femmes internal documentation and reporting on programs for English speakers. This consistency highlights the ongoing trends in participation and the demographic makeup of the participants in these programs.

Findings

1. Environmental Scan

The following environmental scan reviews available research on gender and employment in the province of Québec and Montréal. In total, we examined over 40 documents available online, which covered various themes in women's employment experiences, including women's economic participation and outcomes, the connection between language and employment in Québec's context, the employment support infrastructure, and systemic barriers, which we discuss below.

Overall, we found that there is limited research documenting the experiences of English-speaking women in Québec. Even in disaggregated data sets, English-speaking women are often represented as a demographic data point, with little qualitative insight into how factors such as job searching, caregiving responsibilities, and navigating institutional barriers influence their pathways into the labour market. We identified that gender and language have been studied separately, while discussions around linguistic marginalization are often linked to immigration studies.

Women's Economic Participation and Outcomes

Multiple sources highlight general trends regarding women's labour market participation in Québec. Compared to the majority of provinces, Québec has demonstrated strong rates of female workforce involvement, with one of the smallest gender employment gaps.[9] The literature points out that this is mainly linked to provincial policy with regard to the implementation of low-fee universal childcare and extended parental leave programs.[10] These measures have been credited with increasing labour force participation among women and closing gendered gaps in labour market entry.

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[9] Statistics Canada, "Women and Paid Work, in Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report,", March 8, 2017, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14694-eng.htm;
Institut de la statistique du Québec, "Québec mothers more active in the labour market than mothers in other provinces," November 12, 2024, https://statistique.Québec.ca/en/communique/meres-Québecoises-plus-actives-marche-travail-autres-provinces;

[10] Pierre Fortin, Luc Godbout, and Suzie St-Cerny, "Impact of Québec's Universal Low Fee Childcare Program on Female Labour Force Participation, Domestic Income, and Government Budgets," *University of Sherbrooke*, May 2012, https://cffp.recherche.usherbrooke.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/cr_2012-02_impact_of_Québecs_universal_low_fee.pdf;
Pierre Fortin, "What Have Been the Effects of Québec's Universal Childcare System on Women's Economic Security?," brief submitted to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women (FEWO) of the House of Commons, March 2017, https://www.ourcommons.ca/content/Committee/421/FEWO/Brief/BR8806290/br-external/FortinPierre-e.pdf.

However, despite this advancement, challenges remain to achieve economic equality in the province. In general, many of the barriers to employment faced by women in Québec mirror global patterns, including persistent wage gaps regardless of age group or level of education, overrepresentation in part-time jobs, and being more often paid minimum wage than men.[11]

These economic disparities also have long-term consequences for women's financial security. Women's longer average life expectancy means they must fund more years of retirement, yet their savings are consistently lower than men's due to career interruptions and reduced earnings over their lifetime.[12] Parental leave temporarily reduces income and slows salary progression, while women's disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities further limits earning potential. In 2023, women logged 3.5 times more hours of work absence for personal obligations than men in Québec.[13] Women are also more likely to forego career advancement to manage family obligations, with lasting consequences for their wages and financial security in old age.[14]

These disparities are further pronounced for English-speaking immigrant women. In Montréal, English-speaking immigrants are nearly three times more likely to be overqualified for their jobs than French-speaking non-immigrants (23.3% compared to 8.6%), with English-speaking immigrant women in particular facing the highest rates of overqualification at 27.7%.[15]

English-Speaking Women in Rural Québec

Rurality itself is a powerful determinant of women's lives, with rural women experiencing higher rates of health and mental problems, financial insecurity, and domestic violence, alongside reduced access to health and social services.[16] For English-speaking women, these conditions intersect with linguistic marginalization to create particularly acute barriers to employment and economic participation.

Evidence from the Estrie region illustrates this dynamic. English-speaking women are less active in the labour market than both English-speaking men and French-speaking women, with low levels of post-secondary education and limited French language skills identified as

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[11] Guillaume Hébert and Julia Posca, "Salaires inégaux, à qui la faute? Les femmes choisissent-elles d'être moins bien payées?," Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS), 2017, https://iris-recherche.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/E_quite__salariale_WEB_03.pdf; Gouvernement du Québec, "Economic and employment equality" last updated on November 13, 2024, https://www.quebec.ca/en/government/quebec-at-a-glance/rights-and-freedoms/gender-equality/economic-and-employment-equality.

[12] Retraite Québec, "Women and Retirement Planning," Gouvernement du Québec, last accessed on June 22, 2026, https://www.retraitequebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/quite-simply/women-retirement-planning.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Statistics Canada, "The overqualification of French and English-speaking university graduates working in the Montréal census metropolitan area, 2016," February 1, 2022, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2021078-eng.htm.

[16] Cheryl Gosselin, "Assessing the Needs of Rural, Anglophone Women in Québec: The RONA Project," *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 24, no. 4 (2005): 142-146, https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/6079.

key contributing factors.[17] When employment is secured, it tends to be part-time or seasonal, shaped by economic conditions and the disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving.[18] Provincial health policy shifts have compounded this further by transferring caregiving responsibilities from public institutions to families, a burden that has fallen disproportionately on women in minority-language households and constrained their labour market participation.[19]

Access to services also remains a significant gap. English speakers in rural areas such as the Gaspé coast report difficulties navigating social services due to language barriers, inadequate staffing, and high social worker turnover.[20] Organizations like the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre—the only women's service group in Estrie serving English-speaking women—represent isolated examples of targeted support in an otherwise largely undeserved landscape.[21]

Why Does Linguistic Identity Matter?

Québec's unique sociolinguistic landscape adds another layer to disparities. A growing body of research has highlighted that language laws, such as Bill 101 and Bill 96, are contributing to the limited access to English-language services, education and employment opportunities for English speakers, creating systemic barriers to employment across the province. For example, a 2025 survey found one-third of Québec businesses have reduced or halted hiring English speakers due to Bill 96 uncertainties.[22] We also found literature indicating that when language intersects with gender and race in Québec, it becomes a gendered mechanism of economic exclusion, disproportionately limiting women's economic participation and access to employment.[23]

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Joanne Pocock, "Language, Gender and Generation: The Social Economyunderserved Approach to Health and the Case of Estrie's English-Speaking Communities" (PhD diss., Carleton University, 2009), https://repository.library.carleton.ca/concern/etds/5999n382b?locale=en.
[20] Sarah Finlayson, "Seeking social services on the Gaspé Coast: a narrative analysis of anglophones' experiences of access and care" (master's thesis, University of Victoria, 2017), https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/256d9bc2-936c-4990-b247-90c75154c434/content.
[21] Gosselin, "Assessing the Needs of Rural, Anglophone Women."
[22] Léger, "Web Survey: Employer Perceptions of English-Speaking Employees," Commissioned by the Comité consultatif des Québécoises et Québécois d'expression anglaise, 2025, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/696e3b6d0320762d9f3f661e/t/69de6558189db356863eb1c4/1776182616741/16456-002_CCQEA_Rapport_Final_EN_QA.pdf.
[23] Hezmine K. M. Alvis, "Intersection of Language, Gender, Race: Its Impact on Psychological Safety for Black Anglophone Women in the Québec Workplace," *International Journal of Community Development and Management Studies* 7 (2023): 134–148, https://indire.net/Articles/V7p134-148 Alvis552.pdf.

Other studies also highlight specific mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination rooted in the language you speak, referred to as linguicism.[24] This form of linguistic discrimination occurs when an individual faces bias because of their French accent and/or limited recognition of their bilingual skills in the Québec context. Research also points out that this is particularly salient for English-speaking Black Quebecers, which shows that discrimination based on language compounded with gender and race creates layered vulnerabilities in access to stable and well-paid employment.[25]

Employment Support Infrastructure

Research also identifies systemic issues within Québec's employment support infrastructure. Despite the existence of English language employment services, PERT research has demonstrated the need for more support to address the distinct employment challenges faced by English-speaking Quebecers.[26] This need is particularly pronounced in the Québec regions, where the number of clients often falls short of the critical mass required to effectively deliver these services.[27] When exploring employment services specifically for English-speaking women, we found that very few services are available, and those that do exist are largely confined to the Montréal region.[28]

Systemic Barriers

Québec is facing a shortage in childcare spots across the province, which complicates labour market inclusion for mothers.[29] Despite the introduction of low daily fee child care in Québec, the supply of subsidized spots has not kept pace with demand, as recent estimates cite a shortfall of over 60,000 childcare spots and as many as 34,000 children on waitlists in the province.[30] These intersecting barriers point to a broader pattern of economic vulnerability for English-speaking women in Québec, who encounter additional barriers as mothers, such as limited availability and access to English-language childcare services or challenges interacting with unilingual staff at early childhood centres.[31]

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[24] Richard Y. Bourhis, "Inclusion of English-Speaking Québecers in the Equal Access Employment Program," *Québec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN)*, https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescren/docs/Working_Paper_12_Bourhis_EN.pdf.

[25] Ibid;
Hezmine K. M. Alvis, "Intersection of Language, Gender, Race: Its Impact on Psychological Safety for Black Anglophone Women in the Québec Workplace."

[26] Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT), "2021 Employment Survey of English-speaking Quebecers and Organizations," 2022, https://pertquebec.ca/reports/2021-employment-survey-of-english-%20speaking-quebecers-organizations/.

[27] Ibid.

[28] For example, Y des femmes de Montréal and Dress For Success Montréal.

[29] Patrice Bergeron, "CAQ Still Hasn't Fulfilled Promise to Create 37,000 Daycare Spots," *CityNews*, September 10, 2024, https://Montréal.citynews.ca/2024/09/10/caq-hasnt-created-daycare-spots/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20latest%20data,its%20goal%20by%20next%20March.

[30] The North Star, "Quebec's public childcare is crumbling, workers and families are paying the price," December 28, 2024, https://thenorthstar.media/2024/12/Québecs-putotalofblic-childcare-is-crumbling-workers-and-families-are-paying-the-price/.

[31] Shannon Bell, "Challenges in Early Learning and Child Care for Quebec's English-Speaking Community," Research Brief no. 13, Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN), Concordia University, June 2024, https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescren/docs/Brief_13_ENG_FINAL.pdf.

Gender-based discrimination and workplace culture are also systemic barriers for women in Québec's labour market, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as construction and other trades.[32] Research highlights challenges including harassment, exclusionary workplace cultures, gender stereotypes, and the minimization of complaints.[33] These barriers can undermine recruitment, retention, career advancement, and economic equality for women, limiting access to well-paid occupations and reducing workforce participation.[34]

The increasing shift toward telework introduces an additional layer of gendered complexity. While working from home can provide flexibility that helps women balance caregiving responsibilities, research suggests it may also perpetuate existing gender inequalities.[35] In 2022, women in Québec were more likely than men to engage in telework, with 39.1% teleworking compared to 30.6% of men.[36] Among parents aged 25 to 54, 46.3% of mothers teleworked, compared with 37.7% of fathers.[37] Although telework can provide greater flexibility in balancing work and family responsibilities, the literature suggests that its benefits are not experienced equally. Women are more likely to face interruptions related to caregiving and household responsibilities while teleworking, and may experience increased domestic workloads, reduced opportunities for career advancement, and greater professional isolation.[38]

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[32] Lauren Hamel-Roy and Élise Dumont-Lagacé, " 'You Think You're 'One of the Boys' but You Never Really Are': The Impact of Discriminatory Violence on the Retention of Women in the Construction Industry in Québec," *The Future of Diversity,* ed. Christiane Kuptsch and Éric Charest (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2021), 151-169, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356945116_You_think_you're_'one_of_the_boys'_but_you_never_really_are_The_impact_of_discriminatory_violence_on_the_retention_of_women_in_the_construction_industry_in_Quebec.

[33] Ibid;
Marta Burczycka, "Workers' Experiences of Inappropriate Sexualized Behaviours, Sexual Assault and gender-based Discrimination in the Canadian Provinces, 2020," *Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics* (2021): 1-50, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00015-eng.htm.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Anne Gillet and Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay, "Dynamiques et effets du télétravail," *SociologieS*, June 29, 2023, https://doi.org/10.4000/sociologies.21060.

[36] Institut de la statistique du Québec, "Portrait du télétravail au Québec en 2022 : un phénomène à géométrie variable," February 6, 2024, https://statistique.quebec.ca/en/document/portrait-du-teletravail-au-quebec.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid;
Cécile Boulay-Espéronnier, Stéphane Sautarel, and Pierre Cukierman, "8 Questions sur l'avenir du télétravail: Vers une révolution du travail à distance?", Report no. 89 (2021–2022) (Paris: French Senate, 2021), https://www.senat.fr/rap/r21-089/r21-089.html.

2. Gender and Employment in Québec

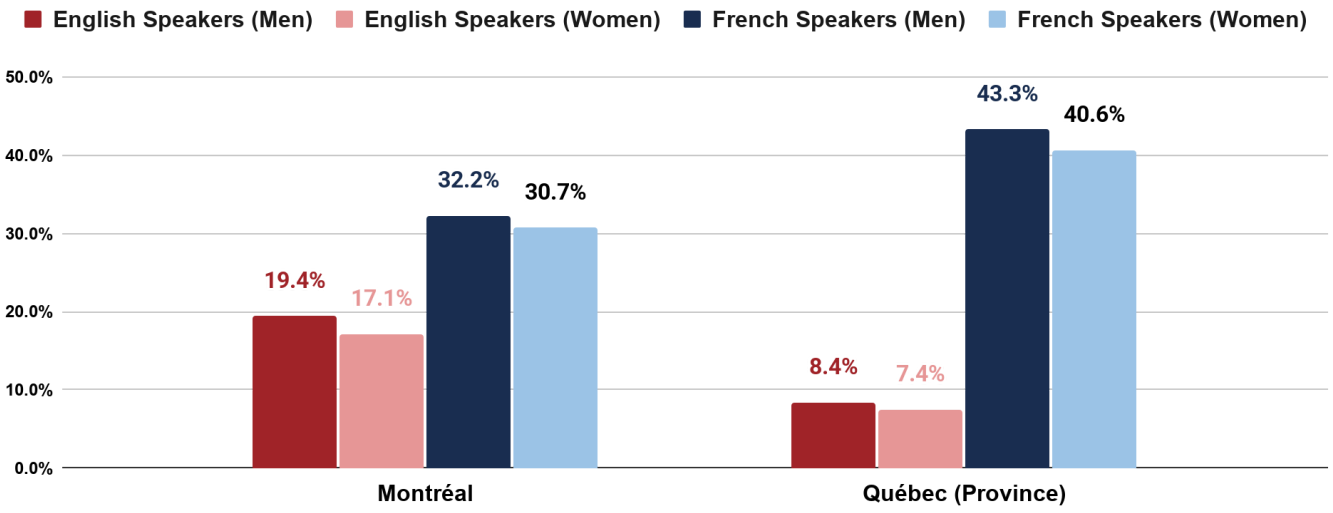
This section analyzes the employment situation of English-speaking women in Montréal, drawing upon data from the 2021 Census of Canada. It is divided into two parts: the first examines their labour force composition, participation, employment income, unemployment rates and work activity, while the second outlines the key demographic characteristics of unemployed women.

2.1. Employment Status

Labour Force

English-speaking women make up 17.1% of the labour force in the Montréal region, totalling 184,608 individuals in 2021. There is a higher proportion of English-speaking women in Montréal's labour force than at the provincial level (9.7 percentage points higher).

Graph 1: Québec and Montréal's Labour Force Composition by Gender and Linguistic Community in 2021

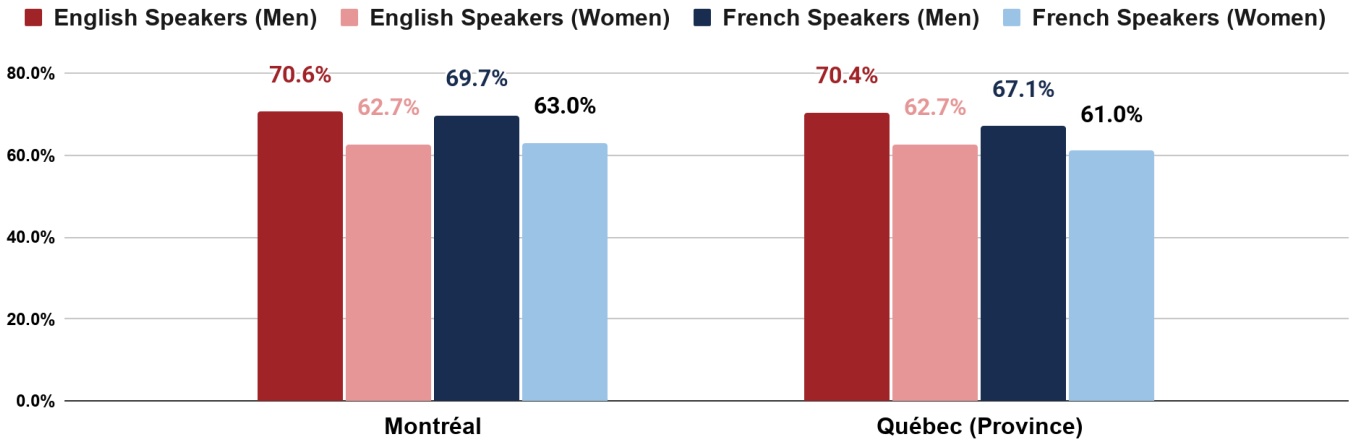


Labour Force Participation Rate

English-speaking women in Montréal have the lowest labour force participation rate (62.7%) compared to the broader French-speaking labour force (63.0%) and also men of both linguistic communities.

At a provincial level, English-speaking women have a slightly higher labour force participation rate than French-speaking women, at 62.7% compared to 61.0%, respectively.

Graph 2: Québec and Montréal's Labour Force Participation by Gender and Linguistic Community in 2021

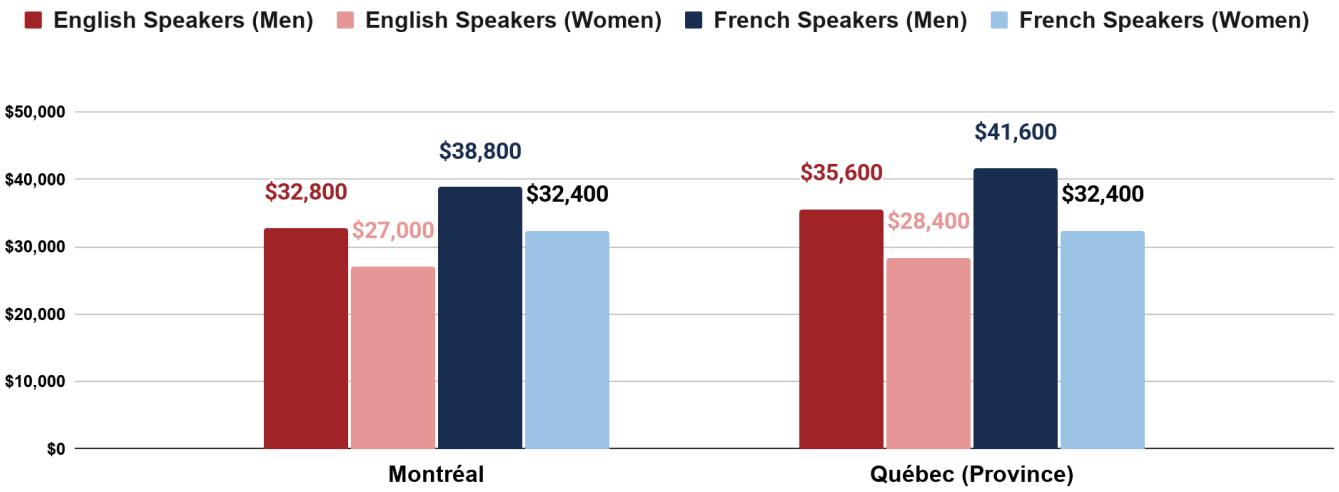


Employment Income

In Montréal, English-speaking women earn $27,000, $5,800 less than English-speaking men and $5,400 less than French-speaking women. French-speaking men, who earn the highest income ($38,800), earn $11,800 more than English-speaking women.

In Montréal, English-speaking women earn $1,400 less than the provincial median income for the same demographic ($27,000 compared to $28,400).

Graph 3: Québec and Montréal's Median Employment Income by Gender and Linguistic Community in 2021

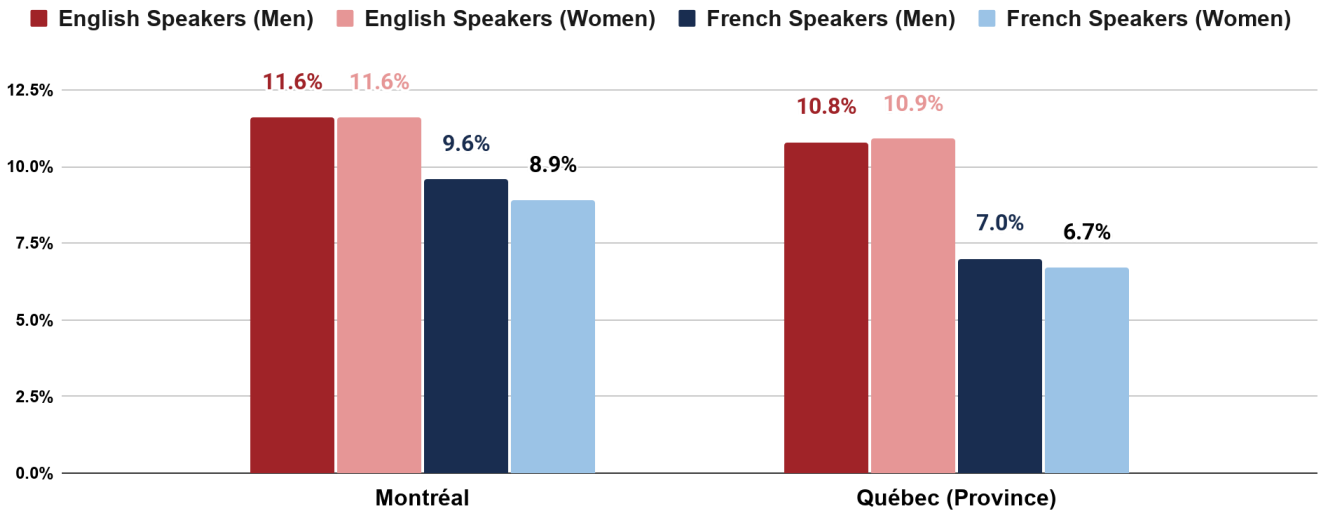


Unemployment Rate

The unemployment rate of English-speaking women in Montréal is significantly higher than that of French-speaking women (11.6% compared to 8.9%). However, English-speaking men in Montréal experience the same unemployment rate.

Notably, the unemployment rate of English-speaking women in Montréal is also 0.7 percentage points higher than that of Québec's English-speaking women (10.9%).

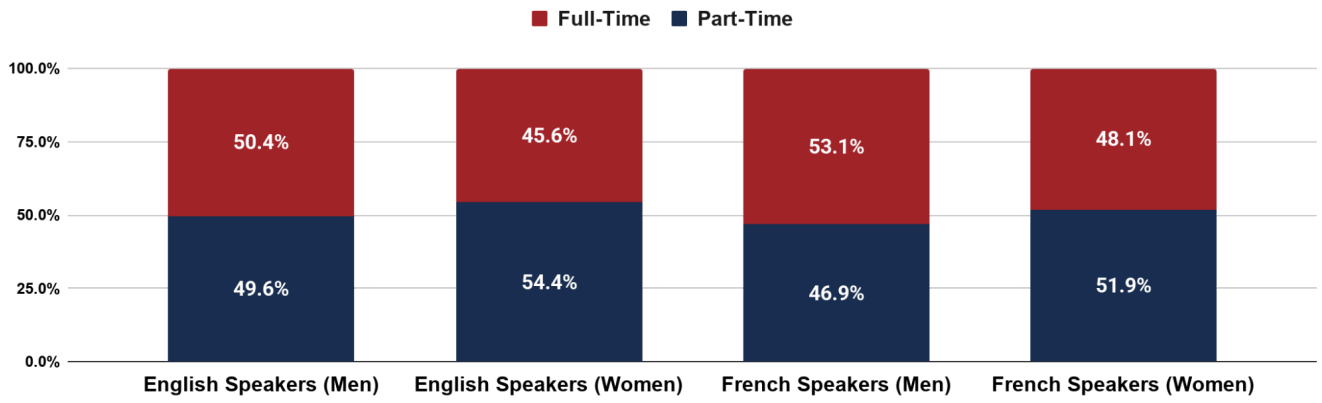
Graph 4: Québec and Montréal's Unemployment Rate by Gender and Linguistic Community in 2021



Work Activity

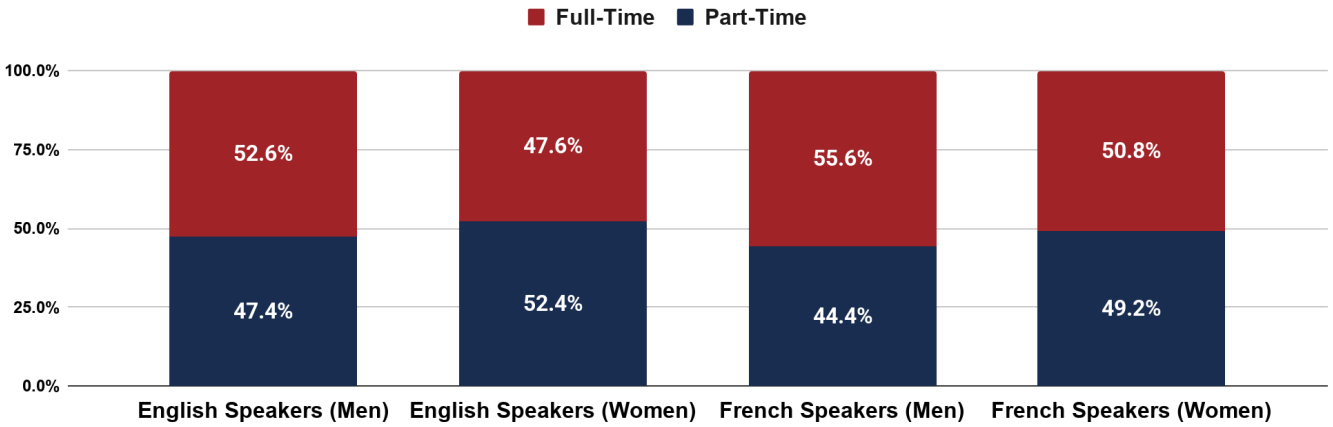
Within the Montréal region, roughly 54.4% of English-speaking women participate in part-time or part-year work, a figure that exceeds both French-speaking women (51.9%) and English-speaking men (49.6%).

Graph 5: Montréal's Work Activity by Gender and Linguistic Community in 2021



A similar trend is observed across the province, where approximately 52.4% of English-speaking women are engaged in part-time or part-year employment. This proportion surpasses that of French-speaking women (49.2%) and English-speaking men (47.4%).

Graph 6: Québec's Work Activity by Gender and Linguistic Community in 2021



2.2. Profile of Unemployed English-speaking Women in Montréal

In 2021, there were an estimated **21,358** unemployed English-speaking women in Montréal.

The following table provides the key characteristics of these 21,358 unemployed English-speaking women in Montréal.

Table 1: Characteristics of Unemployed English-speaking Women in Montréal, 2021

Characteristic	Figure
Canadian-born vs. Immigrants	• 46.4% were Canadian-born • 43.2% were immigrants
Visible Minority	• 50.9% were a visible minority
Indigenous Identity	• 1.0% were Indigenous
Age - 15–24	• 21.9%
Age - 25–34	• 23.2%
Post-secondary Education	• 66.3% had a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree
Bilingualism Rate	• 60.6% identified themselves as bilingual
Top Industries	• 'Accommodation and food services' (19.2%) • 'Retail trade' (12.4%) • 'Health care and social assistance' (9.8%)
Mobility Status - 5 Years	• 46.8% resided in the same residence • 8.8% moved from another city, town, township, village or Indian reserve in Québec to Montréal • 6.6% moved to Montréal from other provinces • 16.5% moved to Montréal from other countries

3. Interviews and Focus Groups

This section provides an overview of key findings from interviews and focus groups with research participants and Y des femmes staff, on the experiences and needs of unemployed and labour-market-distant English-speaking women in Montréal, as well as the outcomes and impacts of those experiences.

We identified the following themes:

1. Gender roles
2. French language
3. Ageism
4. Digital skills
5. Endless job applications, no response
6. Immigrant women
7. Canadian women
8. Positive experiences with employment services
9. Mental health challenges and lack of confidence
10. The urge for reinvention

Gender

When initially asked about how gender may impact their employment experiences, all participants faced challenges in describing how being a woman has impacted their job search and employment experiences, with some indicating that gender should not or did not influence their employment outcomes. For example, participant #7, a mother of young children, noted that her family situation is not disclosed on her resume and should not influence hiring decisions. Additionally, participant #6 mentioned that she was looking for a job in human resources, a field largely dominated by women, and that gender should not be a consideration or bias in the hiring process.

As the interviews continued, participants began to elaborate on how their responsibilities at home influenced their job search experiences. For example, participant #7 later shared that she was seeking hybrid or remote positions due to her family commitments with children.

> “I am looking for hybrid job options because of the time. I have kids. It's hard for me to be in an office and go pick up my kids.”
>
> - Interview participant #7.

Some women noted that they were based in Montréal because of their partners' jobs. One woman mentioned that she wanted to relocate to another province in Canada where English is the majority language, but could not because of her partner's job in Québec.

All 30 women reported having prior work experience, whether in Canada, in their home countries, or in both. A few mentioned experiencing employment gaps due to their roles as primary caregivers, particularly for their children. Only one participant disclosed having a long career gap while taking care of her kids. She shared that, now that her children are teenagers, she wishes to re-enter the workforce and was enrolled in an employment program to gain the tools and the confidence she needed to reintegrate into Québec's labour market.

Y des femmes staff shared that they have encountered cases in which women have never had a job or had restrictive partners who did not allow them to work in the past. They have also seen firsthand how women's roles as family caregivers limit their commitment to their programs and influence the types of jobs their clients end up seeking, either part-time or hybrid.

French Language

All 30 women identified French as the main barrier to employment in Montréal. They expressed that employers often require advanced French language skills and are generally not flexible in hiring French language learners. Even those who self-reported as being bilingual or having a good proficiency level in French believed that employers have a preference for French native speakers. For the majority of participants, this was a perception, as they had not received any feedback or heard back from employers.

Very few of them received confirmation from employers that French was the main reason they were not hired or did not move into the next phases of the hiring process. Interview participant #5 was one of the few women who had heard back from employers. She shared what a recruiter told her*: "We really like you, but the client is not going to accept you because of [the French]."* Interview participant #1 also confirmed that French was the main reason for rejection: *"I've been receiving a lot of phone calls from recruiters to know if I'm a bilingual person. If I'm not bilingual, they will stop and say I'm not suitable for this position."*

Most participants shared their intent in taking French courses to improve their French language skills. Three participants who self-reported as bilingual also felt the need to continue strengthening their writing skills and/or acquire field-specific French vocabulary. Some shared that they were in the process of enrolling in, or wanted to enroll in, part-time or full-time Francisation Québec courses. The majority of them felt pressured, not only to achieve French fluency to find a job, but also to improve their accents to gain acceptance among employers and in Québec's society as a whole.

Many participants identified French language courses provided by employment service providers as the most critical area needing improvement. These courses are usually not the primary offering from employment services; instead, they focus more on confidence-building, CV workshops, interview preparation, and similar strategies to prepare them for the job search and recruitment processes. During the focus groups, women discussed that the French classes they attended were too few to make a real improvement in their spoken French skills, lacked structure or were heavily focused on vocabulary. Therefore, they recommended more practical, conversational formats that could help them in various daily life situations in Québec, such as visiting the doctor or dealing with a government office, and other formats more related to the French needed to work in different fields.

> "I think that the best way to learn a new language is just to learn every day. [...] And I would say one-on-one tutoring [...]. And some may speak French more than others, or some who don't speak French as well as the others in the group. So at least one-on-one, you get to tell the teacher exactly what you need help with, and she will have the time to help you with it."
>
> - Focus group #1.

Focus group participants also emphasized the importance of employment service providers offering guidance on how to continue French classes after completing employment programs. In focus group #1, women proposed that organizations providing employment services to English speakers should collaborate with Francisation Québec and other providers to ensure their continuity in French language learning courses, especially when they are in such a vulnerable situation.

Ageism

Women across various age groups expressed concerns regarding the potential impact of their age on their employability. For example, interview participant #2, a woman who was recently laid off due to industry changes, expressed difficulty in securing employment as she nears retirement age, stating, *"You know, I'm 57, so it's really hard to get hired back."* Similarly, interview participant #10, a woman in her 30s, worried about employers perceiving her as a less suitable candidate due to her age and the likelihood that she would soon start a family.

Digital Skills

Focus group participants and a few interview participants mentioned that digital skills, especially after COVID-19, were essential for the job search and the skills needed to work in almost any job. Some appreciated the help employment services have provided to update their skills, particularly with new communication platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and

Google Meet, which are often used in recruitment processes for interviews. Others said they felt confident in their digital skills, and that being required to participate in digital skills programming offered by employment services sometimes felt excessive. In this regard, a focus group participant in her 30s said in reference to the computer classes, *“It's the same class for everybody. I mean, it's not that it's not useful. I think there is no need to spend so much time learning the same thing.”*

Endless Job Applications, No Response

Women reflected on the complex current state of the job market. They mentioned that they have seen or heard about hiring freeze policies or budget cuts across multiple sectors. They also identified industries, such as public administration and information technology, as now having fewer job opportunities. One interview participant in particular considered that her current struggles were related to the limited job generation by the current economy.

All women who were actively searching for a job expressed little to no success in their search in Montréal. Participants reported submitting numerous applications over several months and, in a few cases, for longer than a year. The unemployment situation varied depending on each individual; however, immigrant women were frequently unemployed since their arrival in Canada and had little to no work experience in the Canadian job market. In contrast, participants born in Canada reported entering unemployment fairly recently, attributing their situation to factors such as the American trade tariffs, shifts within specific industries, or a desire to pursue a career change.

The vast majority of women actively searching for a job have not received feedback from employers, which has led to visible frustration and fatigue among them. Some said they would appreciate any feedback to understand what they should focus on to improve their chances of a successful application.

> “I am thinking that some of the job postings on LinkedIn are untrue. So they repost and repost for some, but they don't hire anyone.”
>
> - Interview participant #1

In response to the high number of unsuccessful job applications, many women have begun applying outside their primary fields, arguing that the pressing need for income makes this necessary. These jobs often do not match their education and skills and are frequently below their actual qualifications. Furthermore, some women reported seeking employment in administrative roles, a field traditionally dominated by women.

Focus group participants discussed the need for a bridge between the program and the labour market. They suggested establishing this connection by forming partnerships with employers willing to hire or accept English speakers as volunteers or interns who are still learning or mastering their French skills. Y des femmes staff also emphasized this point and expressed the need for such partnerships: *“A list of organizations willing to offer short-term job shadowing or internships would be very helpful.”*

Immigrant Women

In both focus groups and interviews, immigrant women described additional challenges in finding employment in Montréal. Beyond the language barrier, they cited a lack of credential recognition. Those in regulated professions, such as accountants, engineers, pharmacists, or lawyers, highlighted their inability to find a job in their respective fields without the provincial certification or license required to practise in Québec, and their discouragement with the recognition and licensing processes, which are often lengthy and costly.

Another common barrier among interview participants was the absence of professional networks in Montréal. They emphasized that having relevant networks in their fields was vital for their job search, as these connections can facilitate getting an initial opportunity and potentially lead to an interview. Interview participant #7 said, "*I feel like nobody here,*" and shared that in her country of origin, she would be employed thanks to connections.

The Y des femmes staff also highlighted the barriers mentioned above for immigrant women and discussed additional barriers. One of them was a lack of understanding of the Canadian job market and workplace culture, and of how their programming was designed to reduce friction in their clients’ job applications and interviews.

Canadian Women

Canadian focus group and interview participants, whether born in Canada or naturalized, reported being excluded from certain employment programs or French courses aimed at immigrants. These programs, they say, could help them find jobs or enhance their language skills needed for employment.

This group tended to self-report as bilingual in both official languages or to have greater confidence in their French than their immigrant counterparts. Whether Québec-born or from an English-majority province, these women had prior work experience using French or greater exposure to French through prior education or by having grown up in Québec.

The Y des femmes staff noted an increase in the representation of Canadian English-speaking women participating in their employment programs in recent years. Specifically, they have seen more women returning to Québec after many years spent living in an English-majority province. This has shifted their recent statistics on the programs, which usually serve mostly immigrants.

Positive Experiences with Employment Services

Participants who have received or are currently receiving employment services in Montréal reported positive experiences. All women were able to contact the available employment services providers offered in English easily. They learned about the services through various channels, including online, word of mouth, or a poster in a library. However, participants noted that the majority of employment services in Montréal were offered in French, and the ones in English were limited to a few organizations.

Focus group and interview participants who had received services or had participated in the Y des femmes programs mentioned feeling well supported. Women had assistance with their CVs and cover letters. They also received guidance on their job search and constant encouragement with regular check-ins from their employment counsellors. About the experience, one woman said:

> "It's been positive, and it has helped me significantly. I think without it [the Y des femmes program], I wouldn't have known where to start in my job search."
>
> - Interview participant #3

Women who had been enrolled in the in-person programs at Y des femmes reported being offered access to a safe, women-only space. Participants shared that they felt more confident and comfortable during their time at the Y. Y des femmes staff also discussed this point and noted that, for example, intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors benefit greatly from the safe space and interaction with other women. However, they remarked on the need for more specialized psychosocial support that they are unable to provide for the most challenging cases or complicated backgrounds, such as women with more severe mental health issues.

Focus group participants discussed how employment programs should not have fixed start and end dates. Instead, they should offer support and services as needed until the participant secures a job. Interview participant #3 said, "*I guess I don't really understand why there has to be a cut-off if somebody hasn't yet found a job.*"

The eligibility criteria for employment programs and services were raised by two interview participants who were asylum seekers. These two women expressed frustration that, despite holding work permits that legally allow them to work in Canada, they cannot access services or enroll in the Y des femmes programs until they secure protected person status, leaving them to search for jobs with no support. Y des femmes staff confirmed during the focus group that this is a funder requirement and that asylum seekers are a vulnerable group that would benefit from their employment services.

Although women's experiences with Y des femmes employment services and programs were highly positive, many expressed frustration because they still face difficulties finding work. Despite feeling more confident and better prepared to enter the labour market, current economic conditions, hiring practices, and other factors remain beyond their control. They recognized the limitations faced by service providers, who do their best to support their job search journeys.

> "They [Y des femmes] have done a fantastic job, so I'm happy…the only issue is I still can't find a job. I think the government needs to do something. I don't think it's the employment services. There's an issue with the economy, and the government doesn't create jobs, which people need to understand, but they can create the conditions that make it easier for job creation, for people to get hired and have job opportunities."
>
> - Interview participant 5

Mental Health Challenges and Lack of Confidence

Only one interview participant explicitly acknowledged having had mental health issues, a topic generally difficult to discuss because of associated stigma. However, the Y des femmes staff provided further insight, noting that this is a major, common theme across their clientele and that many were often unaware of their need for mental health support. They noted that, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, many women grapple with mental health challenges such as anxiety, trust issues, grief, depression, and social isolation. They have also had clients who are survivors of IPV or other forms of abuse, which hinders their social engagement.

A lack of confidence in their competencies and abilities was also a major theme across focus groups and among interview participants. Low confidence took many forms, including limited French-language abilities, strained social interactions due to isolation, and a perceived lack of value for the job market stemming from endless job applications with little to no response. This issue was also observed by the Y des femmes staff, who identified low self-esteem, lack of self-assurance, and perfectionism as common issues among their clients.

> "Also, self-confidence, right, because it does get mentally taxing after going through many applications, just to send them and hear nothing."
>
> - Interview participant 15

The Urge for Reinvention

Most participants, whether they were immigrants or Canadian, expressed a shared sentiment regarding their job search frustrations. This dissatisfaction has led many women to feel the need to reinvent themselves and their careers. They are considering options such as obtaining new certifications, pursuing vocational or technical training, or even becoming self-employed or starting their own businesses.

However, those interested in enrolling in educational programs often report a lack of financial resources. One participant noted that her desired program was only available in French, but she did not feel confident enough in her language skills to enroll. Moreover, those who aspire to launch their own businesses—with the intention *of creating jobs for themselves and others*—indicated that they lacked the financial means, tools, and knowledge to do so successfully.

Discussion

Gender and Labour Market Exclusion

Gender creates significant disparities that hinder women's employability and negatively impact their inclusion and outcomes in the labour market. Quantitative data indicate that English-speaking women living in Montréal face the most severe socioeconomic challenges compared to other groups. Their unemployment rate is notably higher than that of French-speaking women, at 11.6% compared to 8.9%. Additionally, they earn significantly less, making $5,800 less than English-speaking men and $5,400 less than French-speaking women. Furthermore, they have the lowest labour force participation rate, at 62.7%.

In our interviews and focus groups with research participants, we found that gender often plays an invisible role, shaped by cultural norms that define societal expectations. Women frequently mentioned how they prioritize their responsibilities at home as caregivers, especially for their children. While not all participants drew a clear connection between these responsibilities and their job search and/or distance from the labour market, some revealed that their caregiving duties affected their time, availability, and flexibility for certain types of work, particularly full-time, on-site jobs that demand a significant time commitment.

Caregiving responsibilities often limit employment opportunities for women. They also make it challenging for women to participate in employment programs, such as those offered by Y des femmes de Montréal. This observation is consistent with existing research on women in the labour force, which shows that they are more likely to engage in part-time and informal work.[39] In Montréal, for instance, 54.4% of English-speaking women work part-time, compared to 51.9% of their French-speaking counterparts. This situation not only widens the wage gap but also restricts women's ability to gain work experience and have better job opportunities in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant setback for gender equality, both globally and in Québec, with effects that continue to be felt. Women were disproportionately affected across multiple dimensions of social and economic life, bearing a greater share of invisible and unpaid domestic labour while often sacrificing career advancement and employment opportunities. At the onset of the pandemic, women experienced higher rates of job loss than men, female entrepreneurship declined more sharply than male entrepreneurship, and thousands of women withdrew from the labour market altogether.[40]

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[39] World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2023," June 20, 2023, https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/.

[40] Secrétariat à la condition féminine, "Government Strategy for Gender Equality 2022-2027," Gouvernement du Québec, 2023, https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/org/SCF/publications/plans-strategiques/STR-strategie-egalite-femme-homme-2022-2027-ENYthat-SCF.pdf.

Staff at Y des femmes have observed these enduring impacts of the pandemic. Women who have dealt with social isolation and acted as primary caregivers often find social interactions anxiety-inducing. This challenge is especially pronounced for survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), as trust issues make engaging with others—particularly men—difficult. Such factors create barriers in their efforts to enter the job market and affect their overall readiness for employment. Research participants who had previously engaged with Y des femmes programs emphasized that the women-only spaces provided a sense of safety, making it easier for them to restart social interactions after a long period of isolation.

French as a Barrier to Labour Market Access

Lack of French skills is the primary barrier to employment for English-speaking women in Montréal. All interview and focus group participants identified their French-language skills as the main reason for unsuccessful job searches. This finding aligns with previous PERT research, which states that limited French language skills are the leading barrier to employment.[41] However, the intersection of gender and linguistic identity places English-speaking women at the bottom of all the socioeconomic indicators, with higher unemployment rates, lower income, and reduced labour force participation compared to their French-speaking counterparts.

Most participants acknowledged the importance of enhancing their French skills to succeed in a French-speaking labour market. A few participants, mostly Canadian-born women, mentioned they already possessed sufficient French proficiency or had previous experience working in French, yet still struggled to find jobs. Notably, even those who identified as bilingual or highly confident in their French skills felt the need to keep improving—whether refining their accent or learning industry-specific terminology—to increase employment opportunities. This reflects ongoing feelings of inadequacy related to language skills and the motivation to keep working on themselves for better job prospects.

Furthermore, current hiring practices by employers indicate a lack of inclusivity for those still learning French or who are non-native speakers, as highlighted in the testimonies of the women in this research. The demand for strong French skills varies by industry, with higher proficiency in French tending to be less relevant in the primary and industrial sectors and some employers tending to prefer stronger oral French skills over written ones. However, strict French-language requirements can also be overridden by other factors, such as in workplaces where English is the primary language of work.

Although several French courses are available in the market, issues with access and quality require further consideration. Unemployed and labour-market-distant English-speaking women cannot afford many courses due to economic precarity, and free options like those from Francisation Québec face long waitlists due to high demand. As for course quality, research participants who have taken free courses often find them inadequate for significant

[41] Provincial Employment Roundtable, “2021 Employment Survey of English-Speaking Quebecers & Organizations.”

skill improvement, as they tend to follow a one-size-fits-all approach. Hence, these factors need to be taken into consideration, as interventions should not solely focus on increased access to free-of-charge courses, but on learning approaches that are most helpful for their labour market inclusion.

Confidence Culture and Reinvention

The job search has caused immense frustration and fatigue among these women. All participants who were actively searching for a job at the time of their interview or focus group participation felt completely ignored or invisible to employers. This was a key factor that eroded their confidence and self-esteem. Not only did they believe they needed to improve their French language skills, but they also felt they had to reinvent themselves to secure a job. Because they cannot directly influence systemic issues affecting them as English-speaking women in Montréal, such as employers' hiring practices or labour market conditions, they focus on the one thing they can control: themselves.

In any case, reinvention requires significant time, financial resources, and wraparound supports—such as affordable childcare and transportation services—over several months or even years, resources they often lack. Without meaningful support, many women remain trapped in a cycle of economic precarity that is difficult to break on their own. Some participants reported feeling discouraged to the point of abandoning their search for employment aligned with their education and professional experience. Instead, they expressed a willingness to accept "survival jobs" to secure income and support themselves and their families. This shift reflects a growing resignation that leads many to set aside their career aspirations and pursue any available employment opportunity. The experience can further erode confidence, self-esteem, and professional identity. Even when applying for positions that do not require their qualifications, women still reported receiving few responses or interview invitations. Factors such as perceived overqualification and language barriers may contribute to these persistent employment challenges.

These findings are consistent with the concept of confidence culture,[42] which locates responsibility for success and failure within individuals rather than in the structures and systems that affect them.[43] Rather than recognizing the systemic barriers they face, unemployed and labour-market-distant English-speaking women are often encouraged to continuously improve themselves, while internalizing the belief that they are not doing enough to meet labour market expectations. In this way, the burden of labour market integration is shifted onto them rather than onto institutions and systems.

[42] The "confidence culture" is a theoretical framework developed by Professors Shani Orgad from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Rosalind Gill from the University of London. The confidence culture is a gendered phenomenon that targets individuals, especially women, as the ones responsible for successes or failures, which often leads to an intense focus on self-improvement when facing disparities.

[43] Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, "The Confidence Cult(ure)," *Australian Feminist Studies 30*, no. 86 (2015): 324–344, https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001.

Conclusion

English-speaking women in Québec face a difficult and increasingly complex labour market, influenced by global trade tensions and rapid AI development. As jobs and industries evolve, these changes could disproportionately widen existing disparities and disadvantage this demographic group even more, hindering their inclusion in Québec's labour market even further.

Our quantitative findings show that employment outcomes are strongly shaped by the compounding effects of intersecting gender and linguistic identity. English-speaking women in Montréal have the lowest labour force participation, the highest unemployment rate, and the lowest median employment income compared with their French-speaking counterparts. By contrast, our qualitative findings show that, although low French proficiency remains the primary barrier to employment within the English-speaking community, its intersection with gender exacerbates inequities for women.

In response to these challenges, women adopt inward-facing strategies that emphasize personal development and self-improvement to become more employable on their own terms. They work to build confidence, strengthen their French language skills, pursue further education, and expand their professional networks. While these efforts are commendable, they are often insufficient to overcome systemic barriers rooted in gender inequities and linguistic discrimination within a predominantly French-speaking labour market. These findings underscore the urgent need for gender-responsive targeted support and broader systemic actions to ensure that they continue to receive employment services for women in English and have systemic support to enter or re-enter the labour market.

To address the issues identified in our research, we propose the following recommendations:

1. **Ensure adequate, equitable funding for English-language employment support organizations to expand services and ensure access for all English-speaking women.**

    a. Increase funding to hire new staff, support the establishment of new partnerships with other organizations and employers, promote the program and services to expand outreach, and evaluate their services and programs for continuous improvement.
    b. Offer flexible funding that enables service providers to continue offering check-ins and assistance to former clients until they find employment.
    c. Revise funding terms to include all vulnerable English-speaking women, such as asylum seekers and temporary immigrants, to ensure they can access essential employment services.

d. Provide funding to develop and/or enhance existing programs focused on entrepreneurship or self-employment for women.

2. **Enhance collaboration among employment service providers, government, health agencies and other community-based organizations to provide wraparound supports (e.g., specialized mental health services, affordable child care services and transportation) for English speakers.**

   a. Establish a network of complementary services to comprehensively address women's issues, including specialized mental health, credential recognition, support for practicing regulated professions in Québec and French courses.
   b. Mandate clear communication and proactive outreach from service providers and government agencies to ensure that all eligible English-speaking women, including Canadian citizens, are fully informed about and actively encouraged to enroll in complementary programs, such as those offered by Francisation Québec.
   c. Expand affordable child care services to help women gain access due to increased demand.
   d. Subsidize transportation fees to alleviate the financial burden they may cause and promote their labour market integration.

3. **Expand French-language learning options through formal and informal (e.g., linguistic mentorship and networking) programs that build field-specific vocabulary and are provided at a low cost or for free to participants.**

   a. Increase French language training opportunities, both formal and informal language learning approaches. This can include linguistic mentorships, language immersion programs, conversational groups, networking events, and other similar activities.

4. **Fund English-language reskilling and upskilling programs at low or no cost, especially to mature workers and/or immigrant women, to align and enhance their skills to current labour market needs and trends.**

   a. Provide financial assistance to women who are seeking to re-enter academia or pursue vocational training for reskilling or upskilling.

5. **Sensitize employers, hiring managers, and recruiters about the challenges facing English-speaking women in the workforce to enhance inclusivity in hiring practices and workplaces.**

   a. Sensitize employers on the situation of English-speaking women.
   b. Develop a campaign on the benefits of hiring English speakers as a form of diversity and inclusion.

c. Revise hiring processes and practices to enhance inclusivity in the workplace, such as accepting diverse French accents.
d. Implement new policies to ensure timely communication and constructive feedback to job applicants.

6. **Build partnerships and foster collaboration between employers and English-language employment services providers to provide a direct path to employment opportunities.**

    a. Develop partnerships between employers and employment service providers to help women access job opportunities and gain work experience, particularly for immigrants without Canadian work experience and for women returning to the labour market after a career gap.

In addition, we propose the following recommendations to English-language employment service providers:

1. **Prioritize the development of oral and written French skills clients need for the workplace.**
2. **Introduce conversational French groups focused on practical, life-skills vocabulary and scenarios, such as navigating medical appointments, public services, and communicating with their children's educators.**
3. **Conduct an assessment of each client's digital skills to understand their specific needs and tailor the training accordingly.**
4. **Create awareness of mental health needs and available support, and ensure effective referral and follow-up for clients seeking specialized services in English.**
5. **Offer an introductory module on entrepreneurship and self-employment in Québec.**
6. **Hold regular check-ins with former clients to provide support until they secure a job, as they may need extra assistance.**

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