

I Am an Immigrant Woman with Big Leadership Dreams

Being a Canadian Is Not the End of My Dreams; It Is the Beginning!

LILY POURZAND

I am a Woman!
I am an Immigrant!
I am an Immigrant Woman!
I am an Immigrant Woman with Big Dreams!
I am an Immigrant Woman with Big Leadership Dreams!

These two identity elements are so intertwined that I cannot define one without the other. I have no abstract description for either of them. They both were shaped under the influence of many external and internal factors during the past 24 years since I migrated to Canada.

They have often been reshaped or redefined. They have repeatedly been denied or accepted. They have often been hated or loved. They have often been used or abused. They have often been honoured or ashamed. They have often been highlighted or forced into the shadow.

Since November 1999, when the immigration officer at Vancouver International Airport landed her stamp on my Iranian passport, these two identities intersected. They became me, and I became them! Sometimes, I hated them, and sometimes, I loved them. Sometimes, they made me proud and sometimes, they failed me. In some situations, one has been in contrast with the other one. They could never have a break from each other, and I could never step away from them.

During the past 24 years, many different elements have been added or removed from my identity list; however, being a woman and an immigrant has never been replaced or removed:

I have been a Non-Status Immigrant Woman!
I have been a Refugee Immigrant Woman!
I have been a Permanent Resident Immigrant Woman!

I have been a Canadian Citizen Immigrant Woman!
I have been a Jobless Immigrant Woman!
I have been an Immigrant Woman in a Customer Service Position!
I have been an Immigrant Woman, Retail Manager!
I have been an Immigrant Woman Undergraduate/Graduate Student!
I have been an Immigrant Woman in Politics!
I have been an Immigrant Woman, Part-time Faculty!
I have been an Immigrant Woman, a Frontline Advocate!
I have been an Immigrant Woman and a Program Director!
And the most challenging one:
I have been an Immigrant Woman in Leadership Positions!

During the first few years after immigrating to Canada, life was tough, and I barely found time to think about myself. I was a young immigrant woman with no support network. I neither had family members in Canada nor any financial backup. My law degree from Iran was useless, and I could not go back to school because I had no status.

I was a hard worker and never denied employment, even cleaning bathrooms or doing the dishes. I did anything and everything to earn some cash to rent a room in a basement, pay for my transportation and eat one full meal per day.

While waiting for my Immigration Hearing, I remember everyone suggesting that I receive Social Assistance; however, I disagreed and instead, I applied for a Temporary Work Permit. The day after I received my work permit, I went to the chain print shop in my neighbourhood to make a few copies of my resume and drop them off at

the local stores. I was using one of their black and white photocopier machines in the self-service area when a young man approached me and asked if I needed any help. Before I said anything, he introduced himself and said he was the store manager. In response, I appreciated his offer of help and assured him that I was doing OK. He walked away and went to the next customer. When he walked back, I surrendered and said, "Actually, I need help."

I am not sure why I did say so! He then came closer and asked, "How can I help you?" After a long pause, I said, "My name is Lily. I came to Canada a few months ago. I received my temporary work permit yesterday and am waiting for my immigration hearing. I am looking for a job. I will do anything. I will work any shift." I added, "I have my law degree from Iran; however, I don't have experience with photocopier machines. But I am sure I will learn so fast." I had tears in my eyes, and I was blushing. When I finally looked up, I saw tears in his eyes, and his face was blushing, too.

He said his mother was an immigrant woman from Poland and that when I was talking, he could recall a similar conversation his mother had with a business owner thirty-something years ago. He asked me to come back on Monday and "start your job." I was looking at him in shock and didn't know how to react to this dream. I asked him, "Don't you need my resume?" He put his hand on my shoulder and replied, "You don't need a resume! You are a young, brave immigrant woman in Canada, just as my mom was 35 years ago. Bring yourself to work and always dream big, Lily!" He walked away and said, "See you on Monday at 10 a.m."

On that Monday, in the middle of October, in the year 2000, I started my first official job in Canada. Everyone had been so lovely and supportive at work, and I was enjoying being there. I learnt everything so quickly, and after a few months of working there, I applied for a Project Coordinator position. Four months after that, I was promoted to an Assistant Manager position. Soon after my promotion, my colleagues turned against me. I was the newest member of the team, a new-immigrant woman, not even a permanent resident yet and spoke broken English with a thick accent. Interestingly, while I worked in entry-level positions, all my colleagues found my accent very cute. As soon as I landed in leadership positions, the same individuals could not understand me, anymore!

No one could complain about my performance; however, they formed a negative campaign against me. A few of them filed an allegation against my manager that he was in love with me and was promoting me based on favouritism; otherwise, how would it be possible for a new-immigrant woman to get into a leadership position just in a few months? The Human Resources Department

opened up an investigation, and indeed, no evidence could have been found.

In February 2001, I was called for my Immigration Hearing. My case was assigned to a Francophone female officer who was famous for rejecting applicants within 10 minutes. I was anxious yet confident. She barely looked at my face. She was throwing challenging questions out and then was typing so fast. After a few minutes, she asked if I had my Social Assistance statement. I told her I had never received Social Assistance. She raised her head for the first time, took her glasses off, and asked how I had paid for my rent. I told her I was working. She smiled with a bit of a humiliated gesture and said, "Working... where?!" I handed her my letter of employment and my past few pay stubs. She put her glasses on, read it carefully, and again typed for a while. She passed me all the documents I had already given her in profound silence. I was sure she would say, "go back to your own country!"

She printed something and stamped it. She raised her head, looked into my eyes, and said, "Lily, welcome to Canada. You are a Permanent Resident now and will be a Canadian Citizen in a few years." I was shocked and did not know how to react! I wanted to grab the paper and run as fast as possible, so she doesn't take it back from me. Shyly, I said, "Thank you, Officer. You gave me a second life." She looked into my eyes steadily and said, "You have to appreciate yourself, not me. You earned what you have." I nodded and packed my items. Before I stepped out of her office, she called me again. I turned, and she said, "I want you to know that you will face so many challenges as an immigrant woman. Always remember that being a Canadian is not the end of your dreams; it is the beginning! Dream big!"

A few months later, I had to call an emergency meeting at work to address an urgent printing, cutting, and perforating task. I could not pronounce the word "perforating," and I struggled each time to repeat it. Everyone giggled, and I laughed with them. When I directed the team to go back to their work and get the tasks done, one of the male team members started to copy my sentences while speaking in my accent. Everyone started laughing except me! I knew this was not funny, anymore. He was trying to put me down exactly when I was practising my leadership role. I waited until everyone finished laughing, and then I began, "I usually don't take these jokes personally as I am aware that I have an accent and speak English as my second language. However, this is a different situation. I strongly suggest everyone take a few minutes and reflect." Everyone kept quiet and was uncomfortable with the situation. The male member of the team who began this game threw all the papers he had in his hands towards me, took off his apron uniform, said, "F*&\$ you," and walked out of the store.

I was emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted! I was humiliated as an immigrant and insulted as a woman in my leadership role. I called our Human Resources Department the day after and explained everything. They supported me as much as they could. There was no Workplace Harassment Legislation (Bill 167 and Bill 132) in place back in 2002. The male team member was requested to deliver a formal apology. In our Human Resources Department's presence, he burst into tears and apologized many times for his racist and sexist attitude. At that moment in time, all I could say was, "it's OK," but in fact, it was not OK!

Later, I moved on from that position to follow my bigger dreams. I returned to school in 2006 and received my second undergraduate degree in Women's Studies from York University. In 2010, I graduated with an LLM degree from Osgoode Hall Law School with a full scholarship specializing in Feminism and Social-Legal Systems. I began to work as a professional in the Violence Against Women sector in York Region. I became a part-time faculty professor at Seneca College, teaching Diversity Issues in Canada. However, none of these achievements could protect me from being judged as an immigrant woman in leadership positions. Almost in every leadership position I have entered, I either experienced sexism or racism, or the combination.

In 2011, a new professional chapter of my life began when I was offered a Women's Counsellor's position in a Violence Against Women Agency in the northern part of York Region. I was the only immigrant woman in that agency. I felt lonely; however, I quickly found a way to blend in with the team. I took the initiative to organize a few outreach events, internal celebrations, and media reports. My colleagues had been a bit distanced from me; however, at the same time, they were pleasant and supportive. They all admired my hard work with my academic and professional achievements. We were exchanging ideas and were sharing personal stories during lunchtime. They all could understand my accent, and no one had any issue with me speaking English as my second language.

After a few months, I evolved and became a key figure amongst my colleagues. I represented the organization on various committees/tables in the community and became the organization's face. Furthermore, I started to feel a shift in my coworkers' behaviour and attitude towards me. Everything was pleasant when I was working within the capacity of a frontline worker. As soon as I started to accept more leadership roles, although it was not official, my past came back to haunt me. Some began to ignore me. The same colleagues said they could not understand my accent and complained about my case notes. I thought, how come that many of them used to come to me to get

my feedback on their case notes as I was the only one with academic training and now, all of a sudden, they found my notes unclear!

One went even further and filed an allegation against me and claimed that I was not fully competent to provide counselling to women from the 2SLGBTQ+ communities based on my cultural background. Once again, the investigation was opened up and closed in a few days as there was no evidence for such a significant allegation.

I was well aware that my colleague's real concern was not my 2SLGBTQ+ knowledge and clients' services; it was about me! An Immigrant Woman taking leads in media presentations and event organizations and becoming the organization spoke person while speaking English as her second language and having a thick accent. At the end of the investigation, my colleague, who initially filed the complaint, was required to deliver a formal apology to me. In the presence of our Human Resources Department, she burst into tears and apologized many times for her judgmental attitude. At that moment in time, all I could say was, "it's OK," but in fact, it was not OK!

Later, I moved on from that position to follow my bigger dreams. In 2013, I made a big decision and entered into the Federal Liberal Nomination race in one of Toronto's most diverse ridings. Among all the other four male candidates, I felt I was the most qualified one. I had lived in that particular riding for over ten years. Not only was I an active member of the Liberal Party both provincially and federally, but I also, in fact, had worked as the Constituency Officer at the MP's office in that riding from 2008 to 2010. I had entered that race with an important goal, raising first-generation immigrant women's voices in politics. I wanted to engage immigrant women in a grassroots campaign. I was clear that I would do my best to win, and regardless of the outcome, I would not come out of the race as a loser.

When I officially announced my candidacy, I was a few months pregnant with my daughter. In the beginning, everyone was very welcoming and expressed their excitement and happiness for having a voice of an immigrant woman in the race. No one was taking a pregnant immigrant woman seriously in the Nomination race. In their view, it was charming to have a young, ambitious woman as a candidate with her growing belly and her thick accent! They all thought I entered the race to build a public profile for myself and eventually will drop out.

The campaign grew successfully and became a platform for many immigrant women who never had a place in politics to be heard. Immigrant women took over the campaign's lead and were canvassing tirelessly. The campaign started small and snowballed naturally, and while it was growing bigger and bigger, my pregnant belly was

getting rounder and rounder. I was going from event to event, providing vital speeches and participating in public debates along with other male candidates. On 8 February 2014, I went to the labour room straight from an event and gave birth. While in labour, I recorded a message and sent it to the event's host to play it for the audience. In that message, I proudly said, "I am sorry for not being there with you tonight. However, I am here in the labour room waiting for my baby girl to be born, and I am hoping, together, we make a better world for girls and women." Just ten days after my baby girl was born, I was on a plane heading to Montreal for a day trip to attend the Federal Liberal Convention.

A few months after I announced my official candidacy, the campaign took over the lead, and an unpleasant reality again showed its face. Speaking English as a second language and being a woman, particularly pregnant, became the hot topic of negative campaigns against me.

They could not condemn my personality, bravery, goals, abilities, capabilities, and political experiences. However, they were quick to point out my accent and speaking English as my second language. Since English was my second language, they believed I could not represent consistency as strongly as the other candidates could. Second, due to me being pregnant or later because I had a small child, in their view, I had no time or energy to be a good representative in Parliament.

These sexist and racist comments and the negative campaigns against me were addressed a few times in different ways on different channels by me. But, as I expected, no serious action was taken to end those behaviours. It was easier for everyone to advise me to keep calm and remain focused! It was easier for them to give me long speeches about building a thicker skin if I wanted to be an active player in politics. In response, I told them, "it's OK!" but in fact, it was not OK!

I did not win the nomination; however, I was well aware that I did not lose it, either. I did not succeed because of the same reason back when my colleagues formed a negative campaign against me in the print shop in 2002, and later in a Violence Against Women organization in 2012. Being an immigrant woman and being in a leadership position, somehow, are in visible contrast. This combination creates fear and anxiety for others, and they unconsciously or consciously find a way to attack and break you down.

That is precisely when an immigrant woman's personal life becomes public or political. Her language proficiency becomes everyone's concern, and her accent becomes everyone's challenge to understand. Interestingly, if the same woman with the same language ability, accent, and appearance works at an entry-level position, nearly everyone will accept her in that position and understand her. Having

said that, as soon as she gets into the leadership position, no one can understand her, and "she" becomes an issue!

First-generation immigrant women with leadership skills suffer beyond imagination to get the confidence to express their talents or interest. On the other hand, when they get into official or unofficial leadership roles, they are frequently attacked and criticized. They have to prove themselves every single day. They accept more tasks to show they can do more and ask less to ensure they will remain a player. They apologize for more to please others and rarely receive apologies from others. Sometimes they get tired and give up their big dreams forever, and sometimes, they take a break to reflect for a while and come back stronger.

I am well aware that not every immigrant woman has leadership skills or interests, which is valid. However, I am also well aware many immigrant women have leadership skills, or are interested in improving their leadership skills and are not given opportunities. Either they choose to cut their leadership dreams short due to the unfair challenges along the way, or they are forced to cut their leadership dreams short due to painful experiences.

Living the life of an immigrant woman with big leadership dreams in the past 24 years taught me valuable lessons of confidence and resiliency. I learned more about where to speak up and where to keep silent. I realized I could not always fight but have to give in from time to time to survive. I know sometimes I have to sell myself short to gain bigger goals. I am aware I have to be more patient to not be judged. I understand I have to accept more than what I am supposed to, so I remain a player. Also, I better forgive and move forward more often than stay and fight. I also know I have been used as a token of diversity and inclusion in many different situations. I have to let that happen to gain a platform to represent myself and my leadership dreams. I know when individuals deliver apologies for their racist or sexist behaviours or comments, I better say "it's OK" when it is not OK!

After the nomination campaign, many people thought I shut down and pushed myself into a corner! No one even bothered to ask why I had chosen to be quiet. It was easier for them to think I had given up my big leadership dreams. I let them believe whatever they wanted to believe, as I did not want to waste my time and energy to convince them that I still had big dreams. Many individuals gave me judgmental attitudes and accused me of being weak and giving up when challenges were raised. I made an informed decision not to justify my silence to anyone. No one realized that a silent immigrant woman with big leadership dreams is refreshing her mind, learning new skills, reflecting on her goals, making new choices and dreaming even bigger. And one day, she will break her silence.

Twenty-two years ago, this immigrant woman with

big dreams promised the immigration officer to always remember that being a Canadian is not the end of her dreams; it is the beginning!

I am a Woman!

I am an Immigrant!

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I am an Immigrant Woman with Big Leadership Dreams!

Lily Pourzand—Expert in Gender Based Violence—Director at Sandgate Women’s Shelter of York Region Inc.—B.A. in Women’s Studies—LLM from Osgoode Hall Law School in feminism and socio-legal studies, I am a first-generation immigrant woman in Canada who overcame enormous barriers, unlearned, learned, grew, and moved forward. Resiliency is the highlight of my strengths, and I honour them through my unique life journey.

I embrace my successes as well as failures. This combination enriches my self-identity and defines my life narrative. As a racial woman in a leadership position in social services and an educator, I am aware of systematic barriers. I am motivated to work harder to create more equitable and accessible opportunities for the next generations.

I am a proud feminist operating through my core anti-oppression and anti-racism framework. I genuinely believe in inclusivity, diversity and equity in theory and practice. Intersectionality is at the centre of my day-to-day operation.

“Women’s Personal is Political,” and we need more diverse women in politics, decision making, and senior leadership positions to take meaningful steps towards eliminating gender-based violence and discrimination.

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MEGHAN EAKER

nehiyaw iskwew

you should talk less
about indigenous topics
my professors tell me
at my mid-term evaluation

they give me a good mark anyways
because i am white

they want to mold me
control me
assimilate me
into acting more like how i look

the admixture of white blood
tames the savage
and increases his intelligence
i once read
in a history book

if so, i am a failed
experiment in eugenics
because i refuse
to be tamed
to be assimilated
to be silent