

An illustration of a group of Southeast Asian women in a city setting. They are depicted in various poses, some smiling and talking. The background shows stylized buildings and trees. The women are wearing traditional and modern clothing, including sarongs and blouses. The overall color palette is warm, with oranges, yellows, and blues.

Southeast Asian Women in Canada: Migration, Structural Racism, and Community





Acknowledgement

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CSSP Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples

CGHH Centro para Gente de Habla Hispana

Disclaimer: The story presented here is a fictionalized account based on the real-life experiences of gender-based violence survivors. It is presented for educational purposes and does not depict the experiences of any specific individual.

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Southeast Asian Migration, Colonialism, and the Struggle for Justice

Southeast Asia¹ is a large and diverse region made up of eleven countries, including Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Southeast Asian communities are often grouped together in statistics and policies; however, they still represent diverse cultures, languages, and histories. Many Southeast Asians have faced war, colonization, and forced migration.

Across generations, Southeast Asian women have led efforts to protect their families, assert their rights, and build stronger communities in the face of structural violence. Recognizing both the shared experiences of communities as well as their differences helps ensure that policies and services meet the needs of South Asian survivors of intimate partner and gender-based violence.

Not the Whole Story...

This brief is just a starting point in understanding the lives of Southeast Asian women in Canada. While many have faced war, exploitation, and cultural isolation, these challenges form only a part of their experience.

Southeast Asian women are also leaders, artists, and advocates who build strong communities and push for justice. Their stories exemplify the priority they place on caring for one another while working towards a more just future, especially for women.



Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system where businesses are privately owned and focus on making profit. Prices are set by supply and demand, with little government control. While it can lead to economic growth, it often creates unfair working conditions and large gaps between rich and poor.

Capitalism relies on many low-wage workers, often filled by immigrants and temporary foreign workers.



¹ Statistics Canada separates Filipino and Southeast Asian groups. We include Filipino in our definition but sometimes show stats separately because that is how the data are reported.

Grace's story

Grace came to Scarborough, Ontario, in 2014 from the Philippines with a neatly folded nursing degree in her luggage and her heart full of hope. She came under the Live-in Caregiver Program (LPC), leaving behind her only relatives, two young sisters. The dream of bringing her sisters to Canada through the Family Reunification Program once she became a permanent resident kept her going and made the separation bearable.

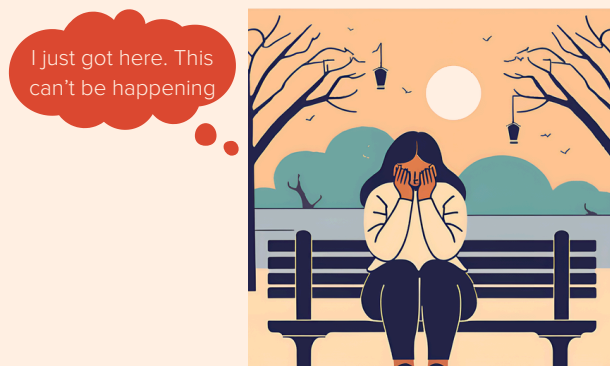


She cared for an elderly woman, Dorothy, working long hours for minimum wage, sending a little money home each month. But when Dorothy passed away unexpectedly, Grace's dreams were thrown into jeopardy.



Overnight, she lost her job, her housing, and her temporary residency status.

She explored options for staying in Canada, but the barriers were steep. There were English language requirements, expensive fees, and the harsh reality that her nursing degree from Manila wasn't recognized.





The Numbers

3% About 3.7% of people in Canada identify as Southeast Asian.

55¢ Southeast Asian women in Canada earn about 55 cents for every dollar earned by White, Canadian-born men, making them one of the lowest-paid racialized groups.

23% According to Statistics Canada, 23% of Southeast Asian women and 21% of Filipino women report experiencing IPV, however these numbers are likely under-reported due to cultural pressure to stay silent and the systemic racism they can encounter when seeking help.

33% About 33% of Southeast Asian women and 44% of Filipino women work in low-paying service jobs.

79% In Toronto, 79% of personal support workers are immigrants and among these 30% are Filipina.

22% From 2006 to 2021, the number of Southeast Asian women without a diploma or degree dropped from 31% to 22%, the biggest drop among racialized women.

History of Colonialism and Militarization

Southeast Asian communities have been deeply affected by colonization and foreign interference, which has led to war and forced displacement. These larger political events have shaped the experiences of Southeast Asian women for generations and continue to impact their lives in Canada today. While this brief does not cover the full history of this region, the following section provides context to help better understand the lived experience of Southeast Asian people.

In Vietnam, decades of conflict began with resistance to French colonial rule and eventually led to a civil war between North and South Vietnam. The United States became heavily involved in the war, supporting the South in an effort to stop the spread of communism. During the war, Vietnamese women experienced extreme sexualized violence from U.S. soldiers and South Korean forces allied with the U.S. After years of intense fighting, the North took control and thousands of people fled the new socialist government by sea, often in unsafe boats, to seek refuge in other countries, including Canada.



Grace's story continued...

Dorothy's son, Robert, offered her a place on his couch while she sorted out what to do next. With no real connections in the city and nowhere to turn, she took him up on his offer. Robert seemed to take an interest in her situation, suggesting that he could connect her with someone who might need a live in support-worker.



Robert was kind and listened to Grace's story of losing both her parents at a young age and her deep love for her sisters back home. For the first time since coming to Canada, Grace felt cared for, and the two soon began a sexual relationship – one that grew out of her gratitude and loneliness.



However, months went by and Robert still didn't make good on his promise to connect her with work. She began to feel more like a housekeeper than a friend, and with no clarity about what would come next for her. Robert was very casual about their relationship and seemed content to let Grace takeover all the cooking and housework.



She talked to her sisters often but never told them about Robert, nor let them know that she had lost her job and was, effectively homeless and living in Canada illegally.



I miss you two so much!

We miss you too!
What's Canada like?





Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Refugees and asylum seekers are those who flee their home countries due to persecution, war, or violence. Refugees are resettled from abroad and recognized as a refugee before their arrival, while asylum seekers arrive in Canada first and then apply for refugee status. They must demonstrate to the Immigration and Refugee Board that they meet the legal definition of a refugee. If their claim is rejected, they face deportation.



Image source: [Getty Images](#), Phan Thi Kim Phuc

Global Symbol: Fleeing A Napalm Attack in Vietnam

Phan Thi Kim Phuc, famously known as the “Napalm Girl,” became a global symbol of the horrors of war after a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph captured her fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam at age nine.

Now a Canadian citizen, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, and founder of the [KIM Foundation International](#), she has dedicated her life to healing and helping child victims of war through advocacy and humanitarian aid.



In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge regime took power in 1975 and aimed to turn the country into a classless, agrarian society. They brutally targeted intellectuals, urban residents, Buddhist monks, ethnic minorities, and anyone seen as being connected to the Euro-Western world and capitalism. The Khmer Rouge used widespread violence and fear to maintain control, including gender-based violence such as forced marriages and reproductive coercion.

An estimated 1.5 to 3 million people died under their rule. This genocide created a large-scale refugee crisis, with many Cambodians fleeing to Thailand under dangerous conditions. Canada accepted thousands of Cambodian refugees during this time, though often without the culturally specific supports they needed to heal and rebuild their lives.

In Laos, civil war and U.S. military intervention during the Vietnam War era led to massive bombing campaigns that devastated the country, making it the most heavily bombed nation in the world. After the war, the communist Pathet Lao came to power in 1975 and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Many citizens, especially those associated with the former royalist government or Western allies, were imprisoned in "re-education camps" where sexualized violence, especially towards ethnic minority women like the Hmong, was commonplace.



Image source: U of T News, Souvankham Thammavongsa

Laotian-Canadian Author: *How to Pronounce Knife*

Souvankham Thammavongsa, born in a Lao refugee camp in Thailand in 1978 and raised in Canada, is an acclaimed poet and author whose work explores the immigrant experience with clarity and emotional depth.

Her award-winning short story collection How to Pronounce Knife captures the struggles and quiet triumphs of marginalized lives, establishing her as a powerful voice in contemporary literature.

Grace's story continued...

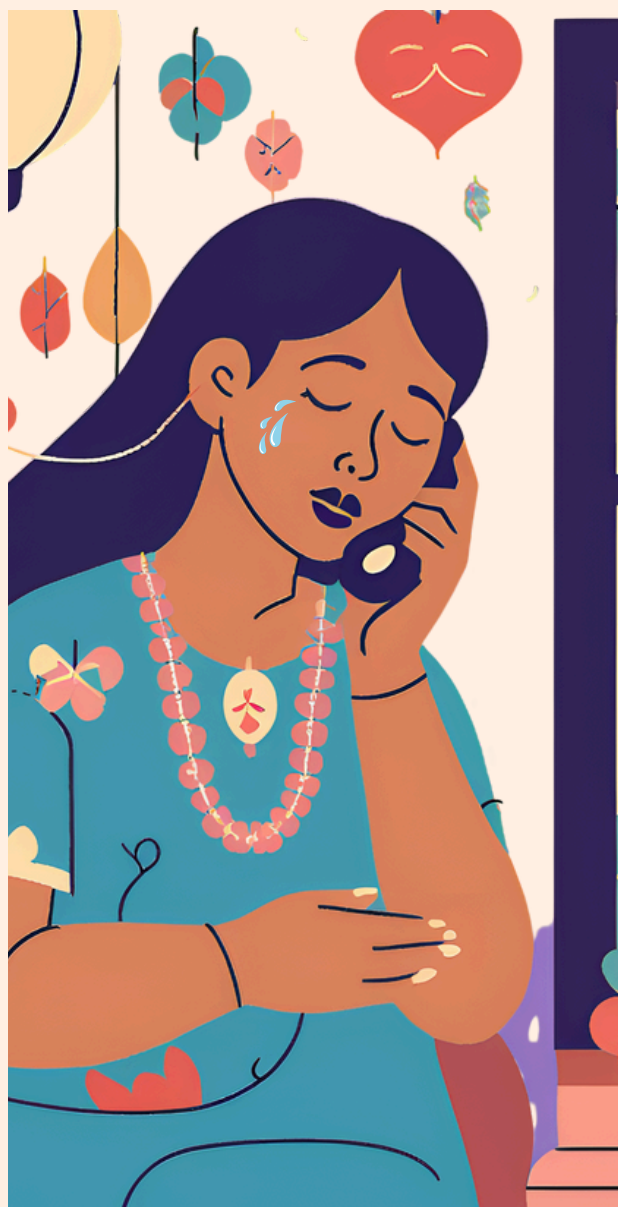
With more time on her hands now that she wasn't working, Grace started going to a Catholic church, something she had been connected with in the Philippines. Here, Grace met Sofia, another Filipina woman who had also come to Canada under the LCP.



Sofia now lived with her two teenage sons and worked at a long-term care facility. She invited Grace to stay with them, an offer Grace accepted with quiet relief.

Over the next four years, Grace did whatever work she could find: babysitting, cleaning, cooking for neighbours. She continued to live with Sofia, who became like a sister to her. Slowly, Grace began to build a life shaped not by the broken promises of the immigration system, but by the strength of the community around her.

Still, it wasn't enough to give her what she wanted most: to be with the only family she had left. Video calls were filled with forced smiles and blurry tears. She missed birthdays and milestones but always stifled her sadness with a brave face.





In Myanmar, decades of conflict followed British colonial rule, which ended in 1948. The country has been plagued by military coups, authoritarian rule, and an ongoing civil war involving the military and various ethnic minority groups seeking autonomy. The military has been widely accused of ongoing human rights abuses, including the violent persecution of ethnic minorities such as the Rohingya, Karen, and Kachin peoples. Recent reports note a rise in sexual assaults by the military, particularly towards women and girls. These conflicts have displaced hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom have fled to neighbouring countries or sought resettlement abroad.

The Philippines was colonized by Spain for over 300 years and then by the United States until 1946. These overlapping histories brought strict patriarchal family values and a strong foreign military presence. Even after independence, political instability and poverty led many Filipinos to leave the country for work. These colonial legacies continue to shape how Filipina migrants in Canada are seen and treated, with the expectation that they should be self-sacrificing and obedient, especially in care work.



Forced Displacement

Forced displacement happens when people are pushed to leave their homes because of things like war, violence, natural disasters, or poverty. Unlike those who choose to move, people who are forcibly displaced have no choice and must flee to stay safe. They may become refugees, asylum seekers, or people who are displaced within their own country. As a result, they often face significant challenges in finding safety, stability, and basic rights in the places they move to.





Migration, Gendered Labour, and Exploitation

Canada's response to Southeast Asian refugees in the 1960s and 70s is often seen as a humanitarian success, however this approach was also shaped by racism, classism, and economic interests. Many refugees, especially women, were pushed into low-wage, insecure jobs that supported Canada's need for cheap labour. Gender stereotypes and the hyper-sexualization of Southeast Asian women have further shaped their experience in Canada, often limiting them to roles as caregivers or domestic workers. At the same time, Southeast Asian women have built strong community networks, supported one another across generations, and created spaces of care, activism, and cultural pride.

Programs like the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (introduced in 1973) and the Home Care Worker Immigration Pilots (introduced in 2025) have created pathways for migrant women to enter Canada but often without full labour protections or access to permanent residence. These immigration policies leave women vulnerable to exploitation continued today.

Barriers in credential recognition and systemic discrimination also mean that well-educated Southeast Asian women who arrive in Canada can be pushed into low-status jobs that offer little opportunity for economic mobility.



Precarious Work

Precarious work refers to employment that is insecure, unpredictable, and often low-paid, with little access to benefits like healthcare, job security, or legal protections. Workers in precarious jobs, such as temporary, contract, or gig work, have less control over their working conditions and are more vulnerable to exploitation.





Since the 1960s, many Southeast Asian women have been coming to Canada through these temporary foreign worker programs and caregiver streams. While these immigration policies are often framed as opportunities, they have historically come with strict rules, few protections, and end up entrenching racial and gender inequalities. The Southeast Asian women who make up a large portion of these programs continue to be stereotyped as "naturally suited" for care work due to their cultural backgrounds.

As well, pregnancy is not sufficiently accounted for under current programs and permits, especially if it results from an intimate relationship with the employer. This leaves women vulnerable when their immigration visa depends on that job or if their status in Canada is temporary. A child born in Canada is typically a Canadian citizen, but this does not grant the mother permanent residency or citizenship. When the mother's permit ends, they will need to either apply for an extension or leave Canada, sometimes being unable to take the child with them.

Advocacy groups like Migrant Worker's Alliance for Change have worked to bring attention to the human rights violations across Canada's foreign worker programs, especially for caregivers. However, progress has been slow, and many caregivers still experience insecurity and exploitation in their workplaces.

Colonial Legacies and the Sexualization of Southeast Asian Women

During European and American colonial occupations in Southeast Asia, women were frequently depicted as submissive, exotic, and available for male pleasure. This perception was shaped and reinforced during the Vietnam War and around U.S. military bases in the Philippines, where sex industries emerged around military sites.

When Southeast Asian women migrated to Canada, they continued to experience these racialized and gendered stereotypes. The stereotype of the "exotic, docile Asian woman" creates barriers to economic mobility, as many employers view Southeast Asian women primarily as caregivers or objects of desire rather than professionals or leaders. Southeast Asian sex workers in Canada are heavily targeted by law enforcement, not only because of their involvement in sex work but also due to immigration status, race, and gender, often under the justification of "anti-trafficking" measures.

Canadian laws like the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (2014) have increased policing of sex workers while making their working conditions more dangerous and limiting their access to legal protections.

Grace's story complete.

When COVID-19 hit, everything changed. Hospitals were desperate for nurses, yet Grace couldn't apply because of her lost status. Anti-Asian racism surged, and the city she had come to call home felt like it had turned its back on her. Grace was used to waiting - waiting for papers, waiting for work, waiting for a future that always seemed just out of reach. But COVID-19 made the waiting unbearable.

That's when a conversation around the dinner table changed everything. One of Sofia's sons had just started a university course on human migration.



Grace's story exposes the deep injustices faced by migrant care workers in Canada, women who arrive with skills, strength, and dreams, only to be met with systemic barriers, exploitation, and isolation. Her journey underscores how immigration policies meant to support family reunification often fail the very people they're designed for, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and precarity. Yet, it also shines a light on the power of community and grassroots advocacy in the fight for dignity, safety, and justice. Grace's eventual reunion with her family was not a result of the system working but of her perseverance and the solidarity of those who refused to let her fall through the cracks.

He told Grace about the Migrant Rights Network, a grassroots movement fighting for the rights of undocumented and precarious workers like her.

For the first time in years, Grace felt a flicker of possibility. With hope and desperation, she reached out and, with their support, applied for permanent residency on humanitarian grounds, a process that took nearly two years.

Seven years after she first arrived in Canada, Grace finally got what she had been longing for. At the Toronto airport she stood with tears on her face as her sisters, now teenagers, ran into her arms.

While Grace was able to reunite with her family, she never forgot that many other migrant workers are not as fortunate.

Their reunification came about in spite of immigration laws, not because of them, and through the tireless work of so many in her community who had consoled her and advocated on her behalf, something Grace never let herself forget



The Live-In Caregiver Program

Introduced in 1992 and closed in 2014, the [Live-in Caregiver Program](#) (LCP) brought thousands of people to Canada, overwhelmingly women from [Southeast Asia](#), to work as in-home caregivers. While the program is no longer in operation, it is highlighted here because of its significant impact on the migration experiences of Southeast Asian women. The LCP shaped how many women entered Canada, the types of work they did, and the challenges they faced around [labour rights](#), [isolation](#), and [family separation](#).

The LCP was framed as a way to address Canadian labour shortages in domestic care. Many caregivers worked long hours for low pay, often well below the standard for similar jobs outside the program. Because their work permits were tied to a specific employer, they had very [little power to leave abusive workplaces](#) without risking deportation.

[Housing insecurity](#) was another serious issue with the program. Because the LCP required caregivers to live in their employer's home, they had very little personal space or privacy. This arrangement blurred the line between work and rest, leading to overwork and exhaustion. Many caregivers reported [feeling isolated](#) from their communities, as they worked long hours and had limited

opportunities to build social connections outside their employer's home.

The program also had a profound impact on [family separation](#). Many caregivers were mothers who left their children behind in their home countries to work in Canada. This prolonged separation weakened family relationships and created emotional stress for both caregivers and their children.



Home Care Worker Immigration Pilots

Canada has introduced new pathways to permanent residency called the [“Home Care Worker Immigration Pilots.”](#) Applicants must meet the requirements of speaking English, have the equivalent of a Canadian high school diploma, have relevant work experience, and receive an offer of employment.

The program, which launched on March 31, 2025, reached its 2025 application cap within hours and is [closed](#) to new applicants at the time of this report.



Image source: [House of Commons Canada](#)

First Filipina Canadian elected to Canada's Parliament

Rechie Valdez, born in Zambia to Filipino parents, made history in 2021 as the first Filipina Canadian elected to Canada's Parliament and became the first Filipina to serve as a Cabinet minister in 2023.

Representing Mississauga-Streetsville, she champions immigrants rights, caregiver pathways to residency, and proudly uplifts her Filipino heritage in national leadership.

Community Organizing and Advocacy

Despite the challenges, Southeast Asian women in Canada have played a central role in holding on to cultural traditions, sometimes as a way to resist both the regimes they fled and the pressures of cultural erasure in Canada. Many Southeast Asian women, especially migrants and refugees, arrive in Canada without strong institutional support systems. Community-led organizations fill these gaps, providing housing assistance, employment services, legal aid, and culturally relevant mental health support.

One of the most impactful organizations is Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network. Founded by sex workers, social workers, and legal and health professionals, Butterfly advocates for the fundamental rights of Asian and migrant sex workers in Canada, regardless of their immigration status, fighting against racism, stigma, and discrimination and building platforms for sex workers to have their voices heard.





Inspiring the Rights of Filipino Workers in Canada

[Carmencita “Ging” Hernandez](#) was a long-time community activist in Toronto who fought for the rights of Filipino workers in Canada. She was one of the co-founders of the [Kababayan Multicultural Centre](#).

Originally founded as an organization that provided support to Filipino immigrants, Kababayan has gone on to serve over 70,000 newcomers to Canada from around the world. Through her activism, Ging helped build stronger networks for migrant justice and was a leading voice in campaigns for the rights and dignity of racialized and low-wage workers.

Through this activism and a strong sense of community solidarity, Southeast Asian women assert their rights and resist erasure in Canadian society. These spaces play an important role in [combating the isolation](#) that many migrant women experience, offering a sense of belonging and empowerment.



Image source: [Remembering Carmencita “Ging” Hernandez Site](#)

