ISSUE BRIEF

East Asian Women in Canada: Breaking Stereotypes, Building Solidarity

WomanACT

Acknowledgement

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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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East Asian Women in Canada

The experiences of East Asian women in Canada have long been shaped by historical events, discriminatory policies, and enduring stereotypes. These measures specifically target people associated with the diverse cultures of China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan, which are often called East Asia. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated anti-Asian racism and the ongoing "perpetual foreigner" and "model minority" stereotypes that position Asian people as outsiders. In this brief, we explore the historical roots of anti-Asian racism and examine its impact on East Asian women's economic and social realities today. We also celebrate the powerful ways East Asian women have resisted and redefined their place in Canadian society, building communities of care, demanding justice, challenging harmful stereotypes, and creating spaces where future generations can thrive.

Not the Whole Story...

This brief offers a summary of some of the key challenges East Asian women face in Canada, including racism, gendered violence, and economic exclusion. It does not capture the full breadth or diversity of experiences among East Asian cultures but aims to highlight critical structural issues alongside stories of resilience and contribution.

While this brief focuses on ongoing barriers, it also honours the powerful ways East Asian women have resisted, redefined, and reclaimed their place in Canadian society.

We recognize that East Asian women in Canada are leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and caregivers. Many are business owners and community advocates, creating support networks and spaces of care for others. They carry forward rich cultural traditions and strong family and community values, despite a long history of discrimination aimed at erasing or devaluing these contributions.

Perpetual Foreigner

The "perpetual foreigner" myth is a stereotype where Asian people are viewed as outsiders, regardless of their citizenship status or how long they or their families have been in Canada. This stems from the belief that Canada is rightfully the home of White settler colonists.

The "model minority" myth is a harmful stereotype that portrays all Asian people as successful and hardworking. It ignores systemic racism and erases diversity within Asian communities.

The Numbers

71%

According to the most recent data, in 2021, most Chinese (71.6%) and Korean people (77.2%) in Canada were immigrants and less than half of Japanese people (32.8%) were immigrants. These numbers highlight the high proportion of first-generation immigrants in many Asian Canadian communities and the importance of considering migration experiences in service delivery.

53%

Chinese, Korean, and Japanese immigrant women have high levels of education with 53% of Chinese women, 47% of Japanese women, and 58% of Korean women have obtained a university degree.

70¢

Chinese women earn 70 cents, Japanese women earn 67 cents and Korean women 55 cents for every dollar made by white men. These gaps are the result of racism and sexism, including things like being shut out of good jobs and not having their education or credentials recognized.

0.9%

CPAC, formerly Chinese Professionals Association of Canada, reported that despite making up 11.1% (men and women) of the population in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), only 0.97% of senior leadership positions in the GTA were held by Chinese Canadian women.

1in5

1 in 5 working Korean Canadian women are self-employed, being the highest self-employed women group in Canada, followed by Chinese Canadians.

60%

A Canadian survey found that during COVID-19, Asian people in Canada faced increased discrimination, including being blamed for the virus, denied services, harassed, and physically attacked. Women made up 60% of those who experienced violence.

23%

23% of Chinese women in Canada, have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime. Statistics Canada does not present data on Japanese and Korean women's experiences.

Ha-eun's Story

Ha-eun came to Canada with her two sons and husband, Joon-ho, from South Korea in 2018. Her children were just entering high school and the family decided to make the move to support their children's education, giving them access to Canadian career opportunities and, they hoped, a pathway to citizenship.

The move represented a significant sacrifice for Ha-eun and her husband. In South Korea, they had both worked as engineers, a field that Ha-eun was especially proud of. Joon-ho got a temporary work permit to work for a large engineering firm, paving the way for his family to join him in Canada.

Shortly after arriving the family settled in North York, where the children enrolled in a diverse school and immediately started to thrive. Ha-eun began the process of applying for an open work permit, hoping that she could soon find a job as well, particularly as the family's finances began to dwindle following the expensive move and immigration fees.

Though she missed her parents in South Korea desperately, Ha-eun felt energized by the opportunities that her family now had in Canada. It felt like a bright future lay ahead of them, full of possibilities.

Anti-Asian Racism in Canada

Anti-Asian racism is not a recent phenomenon: it is deeply woven into the history of Canada's nation-building. From the late 1800s onward, Chinese and Japanese migrants were brought to Canada as labourers to build railways and work in resource industries, like agriculture, fishing, and forestry. At the same time, they were excluded from full participation in society through racist laws and immigration restrictions. Asian communities were seen as necessary for economic growth but treated as threats to a White settler vision of Canada. This section traces key moments in that history and the ways Asian women, in particular, have been targeted by harmful stereotypes as well as exclusionary policies.

Between 1881 and 1884, over 17,000 Chinese men came to Canada to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Japanese immigrants arrived in Canada between 1877 and 1928 in search of economic opportunities. As Chinatowns and Japantowns grew across the West Coast of Canada, so did anti-Asian hate. Policies and Acts to limit East Asian entry to Canada were introduced including:

- 1885 $50 Chinese head tax;
- 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement
- 1885 Electoral Franchise Act
- 1920 Dominion Elections Act
- 1923 Chinese Immigration Act

These policies kept men from bringing over their families. This anti-family-reunification approach was designed to prevent East Asian men from settling permanently in Canada and having children, based on racist ideas that East Asian people were "inferior." The intergenerational effects continue to impact Asian women's equity today in several critical ways including reinforcing perceptions of them as secondary earners and pushing them into low paying jobs.

The history of anti-Asian racism has long included harmful stereotypes about Asian women, in which they are often fetishized and seen as sexual objects and sex workers. This fuels anti-Asian hate and violence.

Particularly in the first half of the 20th century, there was public pressure to limit Asian women's immigration, claiming it threatened Canada's Whiteness and morality. In other words, stereotypes that portrayed Asian women as immoral or dangerous were used to justify keeping them out of the country and preventing them from joining their families.

During World War II, the War Measures Act forced over 20,000 Japanese Canadians from their homes into internment camps or settlements east of the Rockies. Japanese Canadian men were separated from their families and sent to labor or prisoner-of-war camps. In many cases, women had to lead the resettlement process alone, taking on the emotional and financial burdens of caregiving, securing housing, and navigating unfamiliar communities.

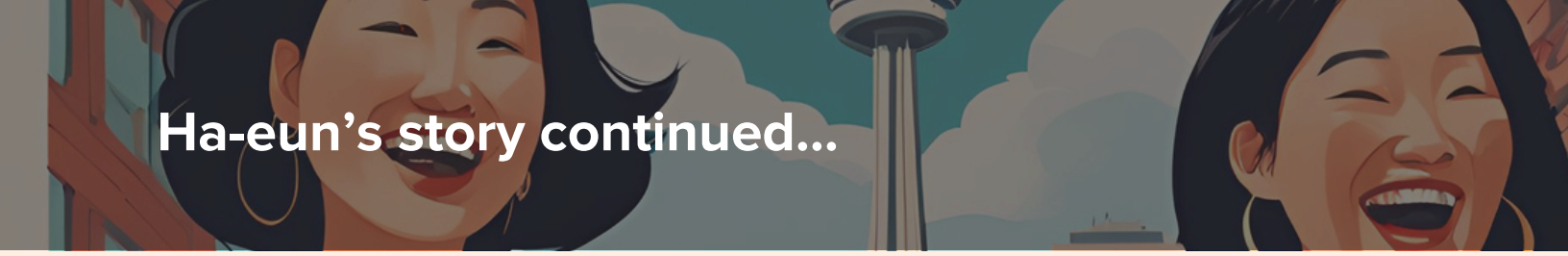
After the war, rather than allowing Japanese Canadians to return to their homes, the Canadian government offered them two options: move east of the Rockies or be deported to Japan, a country many had never seen. This policy tore apart families and communities once again and was widely opposed by civil liberties groups.

The Cooperative Committee on Japanese Canadians (CCJC) was formed in Toronto in 1943 to help Japanese Canadian families forced from their homes during World War II. Led by women and supported by Protestant churches, the CCJC found housing, jobs, and recreation for those resettling in Toronto. They also worked to stop the forced deportation of Japanese Canadians.

Women's experiences were rarely documented in official records and often remained unspoken within families, due to shame. As a result, the gender-based harms of internment are only emerging in recent decades, through oral histories, feminist scholarship, and survivor testimonies.

The trauma of internment was deeply felt by children, many of whom were too young to understand why their lives had been so abruptly uprooted. Separated from one or both parents, forced to live in unfamiliar and often harsh conditions, many carried the emotional scars for years to come. Joy Kogawa, a celebrated Canadian poet and novelist, was one of those children who was separated from her family in an internment camp. Her words offer a glimpse into the everyday heartbreak of family separation:

> Every morning I wake up in a narrow bunk bed by the stove. I wish and wish we could go home. I don't want to be in this house of the bears with newspaper walls. I want to be with Mommy and Daddy and my doll in our real house. I want to be in my own room where the picture bird sings above my head....But no matter how hard I wish, we don't go home.
>
> - *Joy Kogawa*



Ha-eun's story continued...

But in the spring of 2020, just as the family was beginning to find its rhythm, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Within weeks, Joon-ho was laid off from his engineering job. Because his temporary work permit was tied to a single employer, he suddenly lost not just his income, but his legal ability to work. The family was given 90 days to adjust their status or leave the country, but with travel restrictions in place returning was not a realistic option. The family were devastated at the thought of moving away from Canada, the place that had only recently started feeling like home.

Out of status Joon-ho desperately tried to find another employer willing to take him on and sponsor a new permit. Every job lead ended the same way: "We're not hiring foreign workers right now." Others simply didn't reply.

Ha-eun, who had recently received her open work permit, now felt a growing pressure to support the household. But as an East Asian woman looking for work during the height of COVID-19, she was met with suspicion and thinly veiled racism. She even began using the name "Susan" on her resume, thinking this might draw attention away from her obviously Korean last name. She stopped taking the bus unless she had to. Despite her engineering degree and years of experience, she couldn't get hired even as a receptionist.

With no income and no social supports, the family withdrew into their small apartment. The children, now attending high school online, could sense the stress building at home. Joon-ho spent long days at the kitchen table writing and rewriting his resume. Ha-eun applied for jobs late into the night while the house was quiet. They considered asking for help, but feared that doing so would expose Joon-ho's precarious immigration status.

Korean communities in Canada are shaped by a relatively recent but rapidly growing migration history, with most immigration occurring after the 1970s, and primarily from South Korea. Despite high levels of education, Korean women face systemic barriers in the labour market, including racism and credential devaluation. Korean women may face additional pressures navigating dual expectations from gender roles as homemakers and caregivers alongside Canadian workplace norms.

Cultural identity remains strong, with Korean Canadians maintaining ties through Korean-language churches, cultural associations, and Korean-language media. However, this strong sense of community and cultural continuity exists alongside the ongoing need to address the systemic inequities that shape Korean Canadian women's experiences in work and public life.

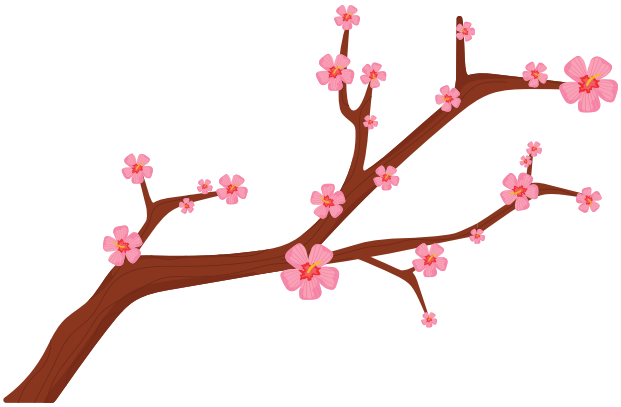


Image source: Philadelphia/Orchestra, Photo of Juliette Kang by Jeff Moon

Korean-Canadian Violinist

Juliette Kang, a Canadian violinist of Korean heritage, is a celebrated musical prodigy who began violin at age four and made her orchestral debut by seven. A Curtis Institute alumna, she became the youngest winner of New York's Young Concert Artists Auditions at just 13.

Now First Associate Concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Kang has performed with major orchestras worldwide. Known for her mastery from baroque to contemporary, she continues to captivate global audiences with her artistry, precision, and cultural impact.

The Legacy of Anti-Asian Racism in Canada Today

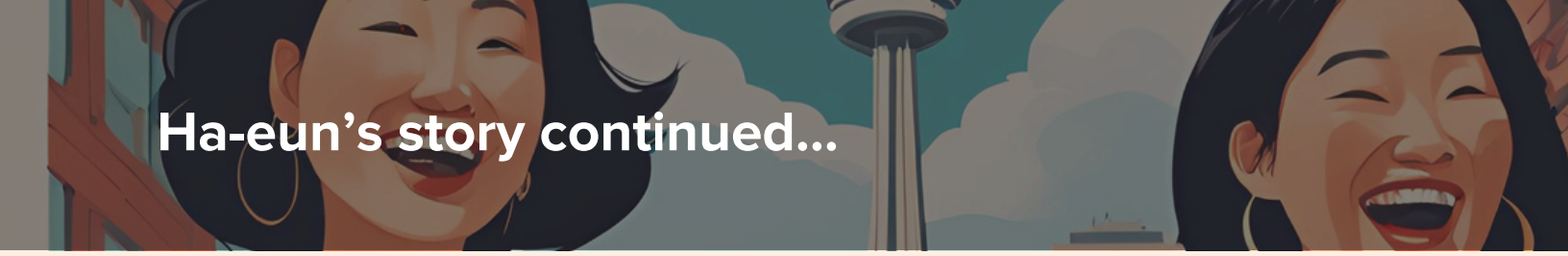
While Canadian laws no longer explicitly restrict immigration based on race or gender, systemic barriers remain deeply embedded in the process. Legal protections and reforms may exist on paper, but in practice, many women do not know how to access them, are discouraged from trying, and do not meet eligibility criteria. Additionally, high immigration fees, re-credentialing requirements, and complex legal processes continue to act as gatekeeping tools, quietly reinforcing patterns of exclusion.

Chinese, Japanese, and Korean families who immigrate to Canada are often highly educated and skilled. According to the 2021 Census, 50% of Chinese immigrants who came to Canada in the last 10 years have a Bachelor's degree or higher, and 49% of Japanese and Korean recent immigrants have a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Unfortunately, credentialism and racial discrimination within the labour force leads to underemployment and unemployment of racialized men and women who are immigrants. Racialized immigrant men earn 71 cents for every dollar that non-racialized immigrant men earn; racialized immigrant women earn 79 cents for every dollar that non-racialized immigrant women earn.

Some East Asian job seekers feel pressure to adopt Western-sounding names in order to be considered for employment. One study found that applicants with Asian-sounding names were 20 to 40 percent less likely to receive a callback compared to those with more traditionally Western names.

One outcome of this inequity is that husbands may often return to their country of origin for stable and well-paid opportunities. Chinese and Korean immigrant women may choose to remain in Canada to support their children in attaining a Canadian education that will advance their career prospects in the global economy. In these types of situations, women are left to manage all the household and caregiving work while their husbands send money from abroad. Today's transnational family arrangements among East Asian immigrants reflect earlier racist settlement policies that aimed to prevent Asian families from living together in Canada, and to preserve Canada as a White-dominated society.



Ha-eun's story continued...

Eventually Ha-eun was offered a part-time job at a chain grocery store on the edge of the city.Though the job gave her legal status through her open work permit, it was not considered a high-skilled position under immigration rules and it didn't allow Joon-ho to apply for a spousal work permit. The job also came with new humiliations she had not anticipated.

Within a week of starting, a customer approached her while she was stocking shelves and asked quietly if she "did anything on the side." When she froze, he slipped her a crumpled piece of paper with his number and the words "I'll pay you well."

Her supervisor, a man in his 50s, began making comments during her closing shifts. "You're lucky I'm letting you stay late," he'd say with a smirk. Another time, when she asked for a schedule change so she could take her son to a doctor's appointment, he leaned in and said, "I like when you say please." She didn't know how to respond. She needed the job.

Ha-eun didn't tell Joon-ho. She didn't want to add to his burden. Ha-eun cried in the shower, where no one could hear.

Alongside these public acts of racism, many East Asian women also face quieter, more personal forms of exclusion shaped by their intersecting identities. Many East Asian women in Canada navigate multiple, overlapping identities (for example, they may belong to the 2SLGBTQI+ community and live with disabilities) that are often silenced due to stigma or fear of standing out. These layers of identity can deepen experiences of exclusion, yet they are rarely acknowledged in mainstream conversations. This pressure to blend in or erase parts of oneself speaks to the deeper forces of assimilation and invisibility that many East Asian women continue to face.

East Asian women experienced a rise in intimate partner violence (IPV) during the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. With many social supports disrupted, women were left to navigate abuse and isolation at home, often without safe ways to seek help. For East Asian women, this was compounded by language barriers, immigration-related fears, and cultural pressures to keep family matters private, all of which made it even harder to access support or leave unsafe situations. In Canada, many East Asian women experience IPV, but it often goes unreported. Research shows that this can be due to a combination of cultural beliefs, social pressure, and immigration-related barriers.

In some East Asian communities, strong values about maintaining family unity and avoiding shame can make it difficult for women to speak out or leave an abusive relationship. Some women may believe it is their duty to endure harm for the sake of their children or to protect the family's reputation. Others may not seek help because they have limited English proficiency, lack information about available services, or fear that reporting violence could affect their immigration status.

Although many East Asian women in Canada are highly educated, they are often excluded from well-paying jobs and may, instead, work in small, family-run businesses. One reason for this is the difficulty of having foreign credentials recognized in Canada, which prevents many immigrant women from returning to their professions. This type of work can lead to social isolation and make it harder to seek support. For some East Asian women, financial dependence and the pressure to maintain the family business can make it extremely difficult to leave when they experience IPV, especially when the abuse happens both at home and at work.

Sex Work

Sex work is the exchange of sexual services for money or goods. People do sex work for many reasons, including survival, flexibility, or lack of options: other jobs are closed off due to racism, sexism, or immigration status. Laws rooted in White settler colonial values often treat sex work as immoral and criminal. This harms racialized women, in particular, who are more likely to be targeted by police, profiled as trafficked or illegal, and pushed into unsafe or isolated working conditions. These laws ignore cultural differences and deepen the discrimination that racialized women already face.

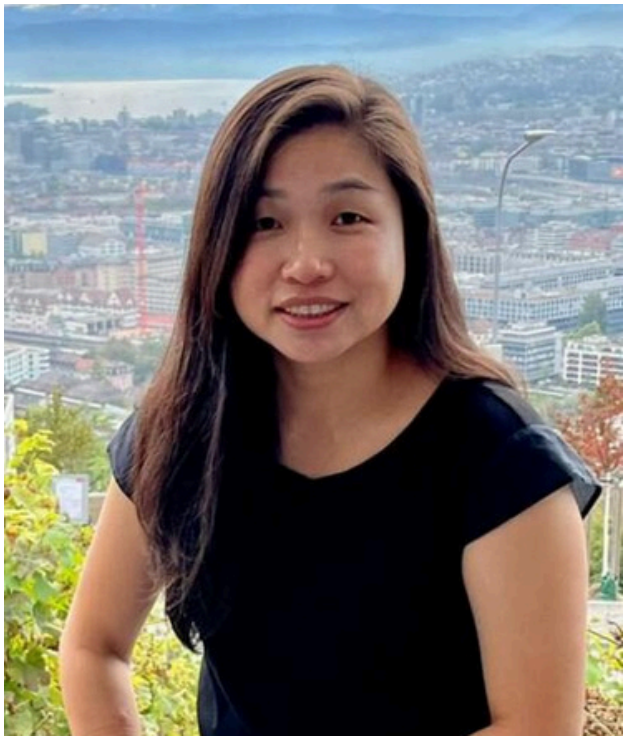


Image source: York University, Elene Lam

Activist and Founder of Butterfly

Elene Lam, is a Hong Kong-born activist, Founder and Executive Director of Butterfly and the Migrant Sex Workers Project, with over 20 years of advocacy for migrant, sex worker, labour, and gender justice.

In Not Your Rescue Project, Lam and co-author Chanelle Gallant challenge the harms of anti-trafficking policies and uplift migrant sex workers' leadership in fighting systemic violence, border imperialism, and criminalization, centering autonomy, justice, and dignity for all

Ha-eun's Story

By the end of 2021, as COVID-19 restrictions began to ease, so did some of the weight pressing down on Ha-eun's family. Joon-ho finally connected with a small engineering consultancy willing to support his work permit application. It wasn't at the level he had worked at back home, but it offered him stability and, most importantly, a pathway back to legal status.

Ha-eun left the grocery store shortly after. A friend introduced her to a community organization that supported immigrant women returning to professional careers. Through them, she attended a workshop on workplace rights and learned, for the first time, how common the sexual harassment of Asian women was in Canada. It was shocking but also a relief to know that she wasn't alone.

She started volunteering with the organization, helping other Asian newcomer women navigate job searches, practice interviews, and understand their rights. Supporting others gave her strength. It helped transform her own experiences into something useful, something powerful.

Building Economies, Challenging Stereotypes

East Asian women in Canada have long responded to systemic racism and exclusion from formal labour markets with resilience and resourcefulness. Often barred from stable or well-paying jobs due to language barriers, immigration status, and racial discrimination, many women created their own paths to economic survival. They started family-run businesses like laundromats, restaurants, and convenience stores; they worked in fields that were not controlled by government oversight. Others worked in agriculture or entered caregiving roles through programs like the live-in caregiver program. These forms of labour have often been informal, community-based, and led by women, reflecting a broader pattern of resisting marginalization by building economic security within their own networks.

At the same time, racist and sexist stereotypes continue to play a role in shaping Asian Canadian women's experiences in Canada, leaving them particularly vulnerable to gendered violence. These stereotypes are rooted in White supremacy, which has long positioned racialized women as sexually available or "exotic".

Hypersexualization occurs when women and girls are portrayed or valued mainly for their sexual appeal or behavior. It is common in media, advertising, and even children's clothing and entertainment. Hypersexualization is not unique to East Asian women—it is experienced across racialized communities. Repeated exposure to these messages can lead girls to see their worth in terms of how they look, while also encouraging harmful gender roles in boys.

The hypersexualization of Asian women feeds into stereotypes that may wrongly link them to sex work, shaping laws and policies that treat them as either criminals or victims. These harmful ideas are also reinforced by laws that frame sex work as immoral and criminal, fueling the ongoing stigma and marginalization of Asian women in Canada.

The criminalization of sex work in Canadian policies and legislation (such as the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking, and some amendments to the Criminal Code) authorizes the surveillance, detention, and deportation of sex workers. These policies have disproportionately impacted East Asian women, who are often stereotyped as either helpless trafficking victims or members of criminal networks.

As a result, East Asian women working in sectors like massage, spa, or holistic wellness are frequently targeted by police raids, fined, or harassed, based on little more than racialized suspicion. Rather than protecting sex workers, these laws make it harder for them to work safely and delegitimize sex work as a legitimate source of income. Local businesses in the holistic wellness industry (like massage parlors, spas, reiki) have been targeted, searched, and fined by law enforcement for unfounded suspicions of sex work and sex trafficking.

One example of how laws are used to reinforce White supremacist and hypersexualized ideas about Asian women can be seen in Newmarket, Ontario, where a 2021 bylaw change imposed new restrictions on massage parlours.

The law requires workers to have Canadian-accredited training, and it bans sex work entirely, even though sex work itself is legal in Canada. These changes disproportionately target Asian women, many of whom gained their skills through informal training or cultural knowledge; these same women may face language barriers when navigating complex systems.

Community Organizing and Advocacy

East Asian women in Canada have long been at the forefront of community-building, addressing systemic challenges through culturally responsive initiatives. Their efforts have been instrumental in creating supportive environments that promote equality.

Asian Women for Equality (AWE) is a feminist organization that provides information, advocacy, and support to Asian women. Their work focuses on fostering connection among women of Asian descent and creating space for meaningful civic participation and leadership. With a commitment to advancing gender equality, AWE centres the voices and experiences of Asian women in its efforts to promote justice and inclusion.

Project 1907 is a grassroots collective led by Asian women and non-binary people that challenges anti-Asian racism through community storytelling, data collection, and public education. Named in reference to the 1907 anti-Asian race riots in Vancouver, the group mobilizes around solidarity, healing, and visibility, creating space for Asian voices in racial justice movements across Canada.

These organizations reflect the leadership, creativity, and care East Asian women bring to their communities.

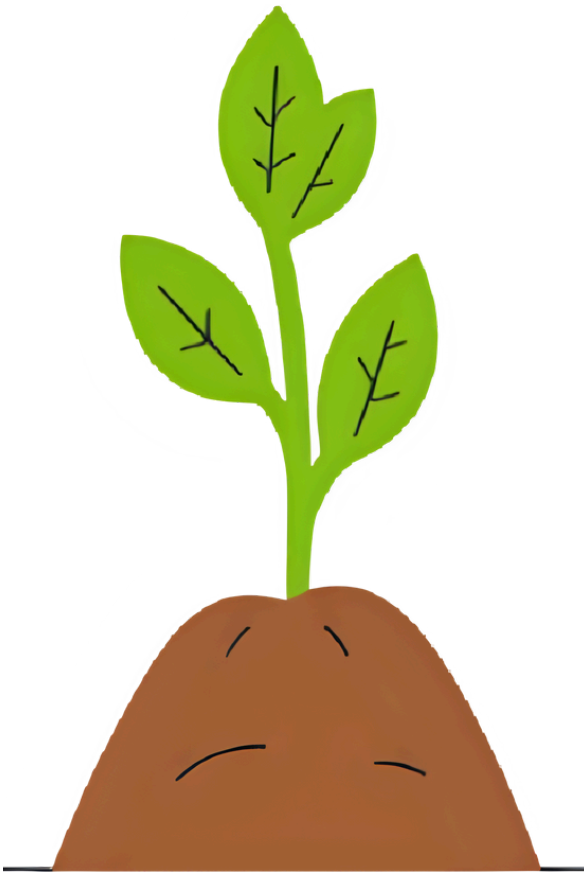


Image source: StopAsianHate, Hannah Mariko Bell

Japanese-Canadian Artist

Hannah Mariko Bell is a fourth-generation Japanese Canadian artist raised on Treaty 7 Territory (Calgary, Alberta). A neurodivergent, pansexual member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, her identity and heritage shape her equity-focused artistic practice.

Hannah's work highlights Japanese culture and challenges audiences through diverse theatrical forms. Her debut devised play, Kansha, premiered in 2018 with support from the Victoria Nikkei Cultural Society and the National Association of Japenese Canadians Young Leader Fund (CYLF).

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