

Target Language Development for Immigrant Women: Key to Empowerment, Stability, and Growth

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ABSTRACT

As a result of political, economic, and social unrest, the number of immigrants living in and moving to the United States and Europe continues to grow (Migration Policy Institute, 2020a; 2020b; National Council on State Legislatures, 2019). Immigrant women are often isolated within monolingual homes and communities as a result of lack of transportation, family responsibilities, cultural and religious limitations. One major factor that creates this isolation is lack of access to education in the target language. Women rely on others to assist with shopping, doctor's appointments, communication about their children's schools, and, if they do work, are disproportionately represented in the service industries as a result of low- or zero-level knowledge of the target language (Haghighi, 2014).

However, when women learn the target language, studies have shown improvements related to job and financial stability, mental and physical health, connection to the greater community, and children's success in school (Bonder, 2016). As a result of these positive outcomes, language programs need to be created that align with where the women are as it relates to their communities and places of work so that more exposure to and education in the target language can be possible. Creating language classes at schools, places of work, and at community centers provides access and relevance for women immigrants, which allows for their empowerment, stability, and growth within the new country. This change in the women's lives positively affects them, their families, and their communities. Therefore, more funding from governments and businesses should be allocated for language immersion classes so that women are able to develop professionally and personally in the foreign culture that they now call home. From a practical standpoint, as part of the research, strategies and curriculum ideas are integrated in order to help guide language programs, governments, and schools in developing these specific language classes.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration to Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States has continued to increase as a result of unstable economies, lack of jobs, war, quest for freedom of religion, and other factors. This growth continues even though stricter policies/restrictions have been put into place as a result of the growing number of conservative governments that have tried to limit the number of new immigrants. For example, according to "Migration and Migrant Policies Statistics" (Eurostats: Statistics Explained, 2019), the European Union (E.U.) had migration flows of 2.4 million people

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in 2017 from non-E.U. countries. In addition, the same report indicated that as of January 1, 2018, the population of immigrants living in the E.U. has grown to 22.3 million. Although in the United States, the Trump administration has implemented stricter caps on asylees and refugees who can enter the country legally, the immigrant share of the U.S. population met a historic high in 2019 as 13.6% of the legal population was foreign-born (3.2% of the U.S. population are unauthorized immigrants) (Radford, 2019). Canada and Australia have also seen an increase in their immigrant populations. For example, in Australia, 5.5 million people are foreign-born out of Australia's total population of 23.5 million (Migration Policy Institute, 2020a), and Canada's total population of 33.8 million people includes an immigration population of 5.7 million (Migration Policy Institute, 2020b).

While these migrants have left their home countries for various reasons, most are arriving with little or no target language development or knowledge. The children enroll in local schools and learn the language through their daily education and interaction with their friends at schools. Most of the men go to work and have contact with other employees and their employers where they develop at least communicative skills in the target language. However, most women who migrate do not have these natural opportunities to develop their language skills (Haghighi, 2014). They are isolated within their homes or monolingual communities where they have settled thereby lacking natural interactions that facilitate language learning. One major factor that creates this isolation is lack of access to education in the target language. Women rely on others to assist with shopping, doctor's appointments, communication about their children's schools, and, if they do work, a large majority work in service industries as a result of low- or zero-level knowledge of the target language (Haghighi, 2014). Often women are responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare of their own children or other family members' children. Therefore, their responsibilities limit access to and the time it takes for language learning. However, when women learn the target language, studies have shown improvements related to job and financial stability, mental and physical health, connection to the greater community, and children's success in school (Bonder, 2016; Pottie et al., 2008; Ennemoser, 2014). As a result of these positive outcomes, language programs need to be created that align with where the women are as it relates to their communities and places of work so that more exposure to and education in the target language can be possible.

PURPOSE

As a result of the xenophobia that has plagued many of the target countries that immigrants and refugees have migrated to, the importance of establishing what this paper's purpose is not is as important as highlighting its intended focus and purpose. Although target language development in immigrant women has been shown to produce empowered women, stable families, and growing economies, this paper's focus is not a mandate for:

- Required language training for someone to remain as a resident of a country.
- One-language only countries.
- Allocating someone as "less-than" if she does not understand/use the target language.
- Required language development/acquisition for citizenship or residency.

However, this paper's purpose is to promote the following:

- Highlight the growing need for affordable and available language training for the increasing number of immigrant women.
- Highlight the advantages for the economies of the countries, cities, and communities when immigrant women are given the opportunity to learn the target language.
- Highlight the advantages for the families of immigrant women when they learn, use, and interact within the culture and language of the communities where they live.
- Highlight the challenges faced by the women that prevent them from accessing the language training classes.
- Posit options and opportunities for target language development for immigrant women.

These specific purposes will be further explained and supported in the following sections and will provide a basis for improving the conditions for immigrant women as they are provided with ways for developing the target language in the countries that they now call home, providing them with opportunities for empowerment, stability, and growth.

CHALLENGES IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWERING SOLUTIONS FOR IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Sometimes the lack of language development is not related to a woman's time or desire, but to the cost of the language classes. For most children, there are public schools where they are able to attend classes and learn the language. However, language classes are not always free to adult language learners. The United Nations has established education as a basic human right, and in

The Encyclopedia of Humans Rights, Claude (2009) has explained that the right to education is a basic fundamental right for all. In Article 26 of the United Nations General Assembly's focus on World Programme for Human Rights Education, one of the learning objectives is to:

Enable people to develop critical understanding of their life situations, for example, questioning the barriers and structures that prevent the full enjoyment of their rights and freedoms. Until unmet human needs are identified, diagnostic approaches cannot efficaciously ask the questions why or why not (Claude, 2009, p. 101)

Without the proper language development, a woman who is living as an immigrant in a place where she cannot communicate with the majority of the population will not be able to understand, enjoy, and exercise her freedom fully because she cannot ask questions, express her opinions, nor explain if she is being mistreated. This basic human right to education needs to expand to allow access to education for women immigrants who cannot afford private language classes or even classes at a public university or college.

Most European countries, Canada, Australia, and the United States do provide some type of free language classes to immigrants usually at the most basic levels. However, in reporting outcomes and population statistics, rarely is the role of gender considered (van der Slik et al., 2015). Therefore, van der Slik et al. (2015) conducted a test specifically to examine the role of adult language skills among men and women immigrants learning Dutch and found that when women are given the chance to learn the target language, they have better outcomes than men do, have more positive attitudes related to studying the foreign language, and acquire the language more quickly and with more accuracy.

As these statistics are related to women and language learning, there are also issues within the language programs that must also be discussed. For instance, the United States provides free English language classes through state and federally funded programs under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 although funding, trained teachers, space availability, and student attendance have been cited as deterrents in fully developing successful free programs throughout the United States (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2009). In Canada, free language classes for adults are taught in both English and French, but their language programs face similar problems to those in the United States, such as classes that are too large and too many levels within one class (Government of Canada, 2004). In addition, The Council of Europe in

its "Language Education Policy Profiles" (2020) lists many of the same issues facing language classes within its framework.

With these challenges facing the language programs, from a personal level, this also affects immigrants who want to learn the language, which specifically poses yet another barrier for immigrant women's language development. Even though the language classes are limited, are not perfect, and have problems, if a woman is able to attend the classes, her chances of improving her situation and her family's situation increase as she becomes more socially adept in the target language (Bonder, 2016). However, according to Bonder (2016), immigrant women often never receive the chance to take language classes due to challenges associated with independent transportation, easy access to childcare, funding to pay for childcare or transportation, cultural and religious limitations, and dependability on others for translation and interpretation to know when and where the classes are offered.

In Canada, Pottie et al. (2008) noted that women comprise 75% of all family class migrants. However, Adamuti-Trache et al. (2018) reported that 23% of immigrant women could not speak one of Canada's two official languages whereas only 13% of immigrant men struggled to speak one of the languages. The dates of these reports are important because according to Cummins and Swain (2014), basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) are obtained within two to three years with the development of cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) obtainable within five to seven years. Therefore, within this 10-year span, the number of women who had language acquisition should be higher since the number of immigrant women was reported as higher percentage than of men in 2008. In addition, as noted by van der Slik et al. (2015) when women are provided with the opportunity to learn, their acquisition and success within the target language is higher. Because such a high percentage of women report that they have not acquired the language, the conclusion can be made that either those women did not have access to language classes or because of the challenges faced by the language programs, a consistent learning environment was not provided. The more likely conclusion is that the women did not have access to the language classes, had inconsistencies in attendance, or had to stop taking the classes due to family or personal issues. Because even when sub-par language classes are attended by women, they tend to be self-motivated to learn and benefit from the interaction with other classmates and

the guidance given by the teacher (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2018). However, when women are not provided with or do not have access to target language classes, they feel shame when they have to interact with native speakers, resulting in isolation and experience more health problems and increased xenophobia (Naif & Saad, 2017).

However, when women do know the language, positive outcomes have been reported. For instance, children of immigrants are more likely to be provided with access to special programs, counseling, and tutoring because mothers are the ones who usually intervene and request these special conditions (Hanemann, 2017). If mothers do not know how to communicate in the target language, they do not know how to request the services even when they see that their children need them. Therefore, the children perform better in school because they have these special services, and even for those children who do not need special services, the mothers are able to help with their homework, answer questions about assignments, and give them guidance as it relates to interactions at school (Mies, 2006; Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016). Furthermore, children (and mothers) are healthier because mothers understand instructions from healthcare providers (Pottie et al., 2008; Villadsen et al., 2016). As these children grow into teenagers, they are also more likely to attend college, giving them access to higher paying jobs (Ennemoser, 2014). As women know, use, and interact within the target language, their families are more stable financially and rely less on government assistance (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2018). Additionally, when women obtain higher education in the target language, they tend to be more successful and profitable than men (van der Silk et al., 2015). These factors work together to provide the women with increased confidence, self-esteem, and sense of control (Bonder, 2016) and see positive outcomes for their grown children (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2018).

As women learn the target language, they benefit as do their families, but the communities they live in also benefit. In all immigrant communities, acquisition of the host language is an indicator of the economic stability within that area (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2018). For instance, immigrant-run businesses (especially those led by women) bring in tax dollars, revenue, revitalize communities, create microenterprises, thus, stimulating jobs (Bonder, 2016). As immigrants become more independent, they become less dependent on

welfare and government subsidies, directly correlating to the woman's education and financial status (Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016).

With these tangible positive outcomes for women, families, communities, and government, language classes for women should be made more readily available for them in places and situations that are accessible and relevant (Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016). Often women stop going to the classes because the content of the classes does not connect with the specific needs that the women have to use the language (food shopping, medical appointments, school interactions, work- or skills-related), or the classes are held in locations that are inconvenient as it relates to driving time or public transportation routes take too much time (Sotomayor-Morales et al., 2016). Sotomayor-Morales et al. (2016) posited that the way students are placed into classes should also be more closely monitored since women are discouraged and often stop attending when they are placed into a class that is either too easy or too difficult. The women do not want to waste their time since any time given to language learning is time away from some other responsibility they have.

Often government funding for the language classes is connected with a language school, community college, religious organization, or library, but these venues are not always in the vicinity of where the women live, work, and take their children to school, nor do they provide any means for the children to be cared for while the mothers are in class (Bonder, 2016). Therefore, women need language classes in more convenient places. The community centers in apartment buildings typically have meeting spaces, which would provide easy access to the classes while the women's children are in school. Schools could make space for the mothers of the children to learn English during school hours while their children are being cared for. Preschools and daycares could provide language classes for mothers who do not have school-aged children. These specific venues could work in correlation with other agencies and colleges that have teachers and curriculum already available.

For instance, in North Carolina, a program has been developed to promote literacy called Reading Connections (www.readingconnections.org). Through this program immigrant mothers have access to language development and are provided with language instruction while their non-school-aged children are cared for onsite. In addition, they have reading programs in the evening where the mothers (and some fathers) are provided with a

children's book, and they learn to read the book together with their children. Then the mothers read the book to their children and take the book home with them. They also provide career coaching, high school equivalency classes, among other services. However, within their program, they are reaching mothers where they are and helping them learn the language alongside their children and offer them guidance outside of their language development in a way that can help them find a better job, enhance their education, and interact more comfortably in the target culture.

In another example, Chris Goodnight who is an ESL teacher at Fred L. Wilson Elementary School in Cabarrus County, North Carolina, was inspired to provide English language classes for the parents of his students (Whisenant, 2019). Goodnight presented this request to his principal, who realized that the 20-minute drive to the local community college could provide an obstacle for the parents; however, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College's ESL department sent teachers to the elementary school two days per week where the classes would meet for three hours. Through this partnership, the mothers were able to receive these classes at no charge in the school where their children are also learning (Kidd, 2019). This also helped the mothers because at the community college, classes are held four days a week for three hours. The reduction in the class time and the convenient location provided a better opportunity for the mothers to receive instruction and interaction in English (Kidd, 2019). On June 6, 2019, the first students (all mothers of children at Fred L. Wilson Elementary School) graduated from Level 1, and the school allowed the children to attend the celebration so that they could celebrate with the mothers and see their achievements (Whisenant, 2019).

Furthermore, according to Villadsen et al. (2016), English classes located in medical centers can also serve women who are in pre- and ante-natal care with content topics in their classes specifically related to theirs and their children's healthcare. A Norwegian and Swedish study conducted has shown that "suboptimal obstetrical care more often occurred to women of non-Western origin, and that this was a cause of increased risk of perinatal death" (Villadsen et al., 2016, p. 101). Some of these deaths were specifically linked to the women's inability to understand the symptoms and signs of pre-eclampsia, which, when treated can save the lives of both woman and fetus (Villadsen et al., 2016). Pamphlets and midwife instruction are now given to the mothers that are translated into six additional languages, but

without the target language instruction and knowledge, women are still limited in what they can communicate and understand. Therefore, the integration of language learning classes using this material as content could serve the mothers and their children better, leading to better healthcare for the family.

In order to alleviate this issue of language barriers, Canadian based Mothers Matter Centre has designed language programs in conjunction with Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), which is an organization that is currently offered in over ten countries around the world that "works with families in the home to support parents, primarily mothers, in their critical role as their child's first and most important teacher" (Mothers Matter Centre, 2019). In addition, the added purpose of the Multi-cultural HIPPY in Canada, is to provide "isolated mothers with essential skills training and work-learn jobs; developing their capacity to support their children's success in school and helping them build bridges to social networks and organizations" (Mothers Matter Centre, 2019).

Furthermore, in the Netherlands and Sweden, the IDEAL-programme (Integrating Disadvantaged Ethnicities through Adult Learning) was started in 2011, as a way to teach the more vulnerable migrant women who were isolated and did not have support for social integration. Instead of the traditional teacher-centered language approach that did not connect language learning and real-life situations, such as topics related to family, health, self-care, and parenting, the classes were also taught by women who were of similar ethnicity and could relate to the women's newcomer status (Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016). The classes were taught from a dual-language perspective but with emphasis on using the target language, specifically through listening and speaking (Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016). Nieuwboer and van't Rood (2016) followed the participants through their study and reported that participants, "felt taken more seriously by Dutch counterparts, for example, by the family doctor or teacher, because they learned to ask for assistance and were better able to express their interests" (p. 35) in the target language rather than through interpreters. The participants in Sweden also noted that before they began the program, they were not able to communicate with medical personnel about their physical pain or illnesses and had to rely on interpreters. However, at the end of the program, the participants indicated that they felt more confident in expressing themselves and explaining their problems when they visit the doctor. In addition,

they also shared that their problems and complaints related to "stress, insomnia, shoulder and back pains, stomach problems, headaches, loss of energy, feelings of depression and weight related problems" had been reduced over the time of the program ((Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016, p. 35). Additionally, Nieuwboer and van't Rood (2016) pointed out that the women reported that they were better able to communicate with their children's teachers and that they felt more empowered as parents and wives and felt more confident in expressing their opinions and needs.

Even though connecting with women as parents and wives is important, there are also a number of women who may not have children or who may need to work, so these daytime language programs at schools and community centers may not be accessible or relevant for them. Therefore, workplace language classes are important for immigrant women because many have been relegated to low-paid, low-skilled labor due to their lack of language skills even though they may be highly trained and skilled workers in their home countries (Bonder, 2016). However, many of the language/literacy programs offered through employers create anxiety and often emit a fear-based mentality since women sense that their jobs depend on their language acquisition, so instead of feeling empowered when offered these classes, women feel anxious and afraid that their jobs may be in danger (Nash, 2001). The employers' communication and clear purposes for offering the classes need to be conveyed in a way that does not create anxiety or fear with the rights of the immigrant workers guaranteed despite their success or struggle with language development (Sotomayor-Morales et al., 2016). Communication related to the purpose of the language classes needs to be conveyed from the employers, which is crucial to student success.

Although communication is key, another aspect of language development at the workplace relates to the dilemma that employers have as it relates to whether to pay workers for their time in the language classes. For example, in Durham, North Carolina, workforce language development classes have been taught at several companies using the resources and instructors at the community college where I serve as the director of the curriculum and continuing education language programs. Through the continuing education program, one company had the employees take the language classes onsite during their normal working hours as a professional development time. The classes were held in a conference room of the

company, so there was no travel time for the employees. During one of the first classes, the vice presidents of their divisions came and spoke with the employees. The vice presidents explicitly told the employees that they were not offered the language classes because their jobs were in danger nor were their jobs dependent on certain score or skills level. These vice presidents told the workers that the company was interested in promoting from within; therefore, they wanted to provide the employees with this language class in order to give them an opportunity for advancement since language skills were necessary for higher paying jobs. Attendance rates were high as well as the success rates of the students. The employees were relaxed and participated freely and openly in the student-centered environment where the content of the classes revolved around specific components of their jobs and place of employment, so the material was relevant, meaningful, and could be used outside the class in their interactions and their day-to-day activities (Parrish, 2019). As indicated by Sotomayor-Morales et al. (2016) and Nash (2001), employees are more likely to succeed in acclimation to the host culture and language when provided opportunities for language development in an environment that is non-punitive and offered as a benefit of employment. Parrish (2019) has also shown that the relevance related to the content of the classes is essential for language development because if the employees have no place to use the language outside of the class and no connection to their reality, then language has no meaning nor application. If there is applicable reason to use the language, then acquisition is delayed or non-existent.

For this specific language learning opportunity at this company in Durham, North Carolina, the women specifically benefited from this integrated work and language classes arrangement since much of the familial responsibilities fall to the women in the family even if they do not have families of their own (Bonder, 2016), so the idea of leaving work after a long day and then going to language classes is often out of the question since they are expected to return home to care for their parents, grandparents, or even their siblings, and for those who also have children, care for their children and possibly other people's children who work at different times. The women at this company were provided with an opportunity to increase their skills during their working hours with supportive supervisors and a relevant content material. This company saw language learning as a professional development opportunity rather than an inconvenient reality of their lower-skilled workers and wanted to help these

workers, which in the end has been shown also to improve employee-employer relations. Through investment in language classes, companies also benefit because with improved relations/morale among the employees, companies see diminishing rates of turnover, reduction in costs related to training, miscommunication issues that cause mistakes, increased production, and fewer complaints (Hellman et al., 2019).

In another company in collaboration with the same community college, the language classes were also offered, but the employees had to use their days off or come to class when they would normally be working overtime, so they either had to give up their free time or their extra pay in order to attend even though the employer did pay for the classes. The employees told the instructors that they knew that their lower-skilled jobs were being eliminated, so they had to improve their language skills in order to stay in the area and keep their jobs. Even when the employees were able to come to class, they were anxious and were there because of the fear-based environment as it related to the lack of their language skills. As a result, attendance and success rates for this group were lower since many of the employees could not maintain the class schedule due to financial or family constraints. The women in the class were from more traditional cultures where they were expected to take care of the chores in the home in addition to their job responsibilities, so attendance by women in these classes was very low from the beginning, and for those who did sign up, found that persistence and practice in the language was almost impossible. In addition, as noted by Sotomayor-Morales et al. (2016) and Nash (2001), employees are less likely to improve when they are marginalized based on their language skills and position as opposed to when they experience positive reinforcement where the workers have shown more improvement in their skills level, job performance, and from a mental health perspective, feel appreciated and valued.

When employees feel valued despite their language limitations, their likelihood of improving their language skills increases because they are more relaxed and understand that the opportunity to improve their language skills means advancement in their jobs rather than worrying that their current job might be in jeopardy (Ennemoser, 2014; Nash, 2001). In addition, the employees' improved language skills have afforded them with an opportunity to improve their sense of identity since "people use language to negotiate both their sense of self and their access to experiences that shape their relationship with the world" (Bonder, 2016, p.

4). In most companies, professional development is offered at some level, so the addition of language courses as part of the companies' curriculum would serve to provide all of the immigrant population, but especially the women, an opportunity for learning that would not decrease their salaries or impede on their responsibilities at home, and would promote among the employees feelings of value and appreciation despite their lack of language skills through workforce development programs.

In addition to workforce development, another proposal to help immigrant women is through microenterprises (Bonder, 2016). Government, private, and non-profit sponsorship of microenterprises provides women with more flexibility and connection to the expertise that they may have through training, education, or experience in their home countries. Bonder (2016) has noted that microenterprises help women develop their identity within the new language and country in a way that provides them with a sense of purpose and direction, which has also been shown to promote better physical and mental health (Villadsen et al., 2016; Pottie et al., 2008). The problem with microenterprise is that women still need to know and understand the target language in order to operate and understand the laws, financials, and protocols of each city, state, area, or country. Therefore, as microenterprises are developed, then the sponsoring organizations or government agencies need to be a part of the women's day-to-day operations in order to help them develop their language skills and provide them with guidance related to financial decisions (Pearce, 2005). Microenterprise development programs need to provide immigrant women with support that goes beyond a simple microloan even though the financial aspect is an important factor, but those microenterprises that have shown the most success are those that have provided women with an overarching support system (Bonder, 2016). Bonder (2016) explained that the support system combines "small business training, mentoring, coaching, networking, business loans, marketing support, and technical assistance" (p. 7).

Currently, in the United States, there are Microenterprise Development Grants through the federal government that go to non-profit organizations in approximately 20 states. These non-profit organizations offer some of these support systems; however, at this writing, only one of those organizations, located in Philadelphia, caters solely to women but not specifically migrant women (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2019). Additionally, the E.U. offers

entrepreneurship for women, not exclusively for migrant women, but they also offer support to migrant entrepreneurship of both genders (European Commission, 2020). Since migrant women's needs and challenges are different than those of native-born women, specialized microenterprise development programs that include language development should be implemented in order to better assist women in their ventures to become independent and contributing members of society, which serves to help the government, communities, and their families.

CONCLUSION

Since the number of immigrant women continues to rise, and women make up the majority of the immigrant population of Western countries (Radford, 2019; Council of Europe, 2020; Pottie et al., 2008), language development is an essential component that needs to be made readily available where the women are located. Women are key factors in the health of their families and communities both from a physical and fiscal perspective (Hanemann, 2017; Valladsen et al., 2016). Although immigrant women tend to be isolated even when they are part of the workforce, language courses that are taught where they are, focusing on topics that are important to them, create space for the women to develop and grow to become an integral and empowered part of the new country. As a result of these positive outcomes, language programs need to be created that align with where the women are as it relates to their communities and places of work so that more exposure to and education in the target language can be possible. Creating language classes at schools, places of work, and at community centers provides access and relevance for women immigrants, which allows for their empowerment, stability and growth within the new country. This change in the women's lives positively affects them, their families and communities. Therefore, more funding from governments and businesses should be allocated for language immersion classes so that women are able to develop professionally and personally in the foreign culture that they now call home.

Even though extensive research was conducted as it relates to target language development for women, knowledge of what every country or community has in place for its population of immigrant women could have been overlooked or unavailable for this study. With acknowledgement of this possible oversight, the purpose was to highlight and bring awareness of the needs of the women and how to help women develop the target language in

a way that is applicable for any country or situation. The main feature rests on the reality that women are important to society but are often isolated and the means to alleviate this isolation are missing. If these components to help women are in place, then women are being empowered, and these can be used as examples for other countries, communities, and places of business as was the purpose of this paper.

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