

PURPOSE DRIVER

## EQUALITY'S CHAMPION

From battling workplace sexism to pushing for economic equity, Nancy Wilson founded the Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce to address gender disparities in business. **BY LIZA AGRBA**

**Before Nancy Wilson launched** the first-ever Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce (CanWCC), she held increasingly senior finance and accounting roles in the corporate world. One of her last jobs before leaving corporate accounting for good was at a small start-up, where it didn't take her long to notice a sharp dichotomy between the young, largely racialized female employees in customer service roles and the predominantly male sales team. It was during this exposure to a misogynistic atmosphere that she found the motivation for her future course of action.

Wilson demonstrated her unwavering resolve when she insisted on fair compensation for the customer service group's overtime work. Despite facing resistance from the company, she refused to yield on the matter. "They wanted me to be what I call a get-along girl—a female CPA who would make them look presentable to their board and just roll with the sexism," she says. Then, determined to be the proverbial change she wanted to see in the world, Wilson started a small accounting firm that would primarily serve women-identified business owners. But the persistent problem of sexism—which she had seen in varying shades and degrees throughout her career—followed her from the corporate world into the entrepreneurship realm.

Wilson began to notice common barriers among her clients, ones that went well beyond the standard difficulties of entrepreneurship—the most glaring of which was the disproportionate challenge of getting a capital loan as a woman business owner. That's about the time when she learned that Canada—unlike many countries around the world, including the United States, many European nations and a few African ones—





Nancy Wilson (far right) is joined by CanWCC members and colleagues: (from left) Celia Lopez, member and CEO/founder of Placemade.co; Maryam Masoumi, CanWCC's partnership manager; Catherine Chan, CanWCC's COO and Roxanne Zalucky, member and founder of Breaking Bay Street

does not have a dedicated Chamber of Commerce to represent the interests of women in business. And so she went home and googled how to start one.

Wilson incorporated CanWCC under the Not-for-Profit Corporations Act in 2017 and soon afterward ran a series of informal focus groups to help guide the Chamber's eventual priorities. At the beginning, it was just her and another volunteer working part-time, but in 2020, it became a full-time job. Today, CanWCC is a thriving team of 10 with a dedicated board of advisors and a fulsome agenda of government advocacy.

Systemic problems, Wilson realized through the course of her career, demand systemic solutions. She's leveraging her CPA designation to achieve just that.

**Did anything surprising come out of the focus groups you ran after incorporating CanWCC?**  
One surprising insight was that many people don't know what a Chamber of Commerce actually is or does—let alone one specifically for women. There's a common misconception that they're part of the government, and that's despite their more than

10

The dedicated number of people at CanWCC

100-year history in Canada. People seem to know that they are pillar institutions with power, and that's about it. And this part wasn't surprising, but access to capital came up a lot.

#### How and why does the business capitalization issue disproportionately affect women?

Women-owned businesses tend to be critically undercapitalized. If they're in an industry where equity-based investment is an option, there's the presence of implicit bias—venture capitalists and angel investors ask women founders very different questions than they do men, which is a whole conversation on its own, but the numbers tell the story. In a very good year, women-owned businesses get three to four per cent of VC investment. In an average year, it's two per cent, and more like 0.2 per cent for businesses owned by racialized women. As for debt financing—which is the available option for the majority of women-owned businesses, because they tend to be in service or e-commerce-based businesses rather than tech—there are all sorts of micro biases going on. And these sectors are considered particularly risky by lenders.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAY TRUONG

#### How does CanWCC advocate for change on that and other fronts?

Depending on the issue, an advocacy campaign might be directed to different audiences—formal policy briefs get sent directly to elected officials, and there are also more informal public campaigns. But the ultimate driver of change is almost always government policy, so even if the campaign targets the public, the purpose is to put additional pressure on the government to change or enact policy.

### NANCY WILSON FOUNDED CANWCC TO ADDRESS PERSISTENT ISSUES SHE ENCOUNTERED IN FINANCE

#### What's on the agenda right now?

One project we have on the go is an alliance of different organizations, including other entrepreneurship groups, artist groups and the Canadian Labour Congress, working to put pressure on the government to create policies that support self-employed individuals. Policies targeting women entrepreneurs generally refer to small and midsize

enterprises, but there are about one million self-employed women driving the economy. That group is very much ignored. We're also working on a project to help women access business financing, whether it's a bank loan or VC. The project trains folks on how to respond to questions from investors—which, as I mentioned earlier, tend to be very different for male versus female founders—in a way that increases the likelihood of them getting funded.

#### CanWCC focuses on businesses owned by people who identify as women and non-binary. What is unique about CanWCC?

Although we are organized like all other Chambers of Commerce, and our fundamental activity is advocacy, we are different in that our call to action is economic equity. All our activity is focused on economic equity for our members—but also for the general population. We believe that economic equity is a human right, and that business and community interests are not mutually exclusive. ♦

#### SOCIAL Qs

### PAY EQUITY AND 'GREEDY WORK'

"Greedy work" and its impact on women's career paths could pave the way to equality by redefining work dynamics

BY DORETTA THOMPSON



**Economic historian** Claudia Goldin's 2023 Nobel Prize recognizes her groundbreaking work on women's workforce participation and the gender pay gap. Her most recent book, *Career and Family: Women's Century-Long Journey Toward Equity*, focuses on what she calls "greedy work"—high-paying, high-prestige, high-pressure roles that demand elite workers be always on, always available. This style of performance and demand can be found across many sectors, including finance, law, management and, yes, accounting.

"Greedy work" is done by highly qualified individuals who are not

easily interchangeable, and so are highly rewarded for the sacrifice of personal time. Women remain under-represented in the most senior ranks—and it turns out education and ability are not the differentiators.

Women have long been the de facto family caregivers. These demands limit careers and feed the gender pay gap. As that gap widens, the reasons compound for women to take more flexible, lower-paid jobs.

Goldin sees the endurance of pandemic-driven flexible work arrangements, offering women potentially greater access to high-paid, high-prestige greedy jobs. In an interview with *Harvard*

*Business Review*, Goldin said, "Jobs can always be made flexible. The question is what the cost to the firm is and what the price to the worker will be in lower earnings."

But there's another pandemic legacy affecting the workforce: the heightened drive for work-life balance.

Perhaps the real question isn't how to get more women into "greedy work." But instead, the real question should be: How do we restructure work so it's less greedy for everyone? ♦

Doretta Thompson is financial literacy leader at CPA Canada.

# FIRST IN

PURPOSE DRIVER

## CHANGING LIVES

Cheri Burke-Gaffney, a Calgary-based CPA and director of operations for Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, has found inspiration through the organization's work to provide education, and hope, to Afghan women living through adversity **BY ALI AMAD**

When the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in 1996, the repressive regime imposed harsh restrictions on Afghan women, barring them from employment and banning them from leaving their homes without the accompaniment of a male relative. Afghan girls were prevented from attending schools and pursuing higher education. That same year, in a grassroots effort to help Afghanistan's women and girls, an informal fundraising group was created in Toronto by Deborah Ellis, acclaimed Canadian writer of *The Breadwinner* novel series, which revolves around the life journey of an 11-year-old Afghan girl.

The grassroots organization initially collected donations for community literacy classes, health clinics and vocational training for women in Afghanistan, as well as Afghan refugees in neighbouring Pakistan. It soon added chapters in Calgary, Victoria and Vancouver. After the Taliban's rule ended in 2001, the organization—which incorporated as a not-for-profit organization called Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan) in 2003—additionally began creating a network of village libraries and school science labs. They became a registered charitable organization in 2009. Over the next several years, CW4WAfghan helped more than 5,000 Afghan women learn to read and write and trained 10,000 teachers. They also launched the Darakht-e Danesh Library, the first multilingual collection of online educational resources for Afghans. Today, the library receives upwards of 65,000 visits a month.



In 2021, after the United States and NATO withdrew their military forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban quickly returned to power, reinstating many of the restrictions it had previously imposed. "This is why our work is now more important than ever," says Cheri Burke-Gaffney, a Calgary-based CPA who has been CW4WAfghan's director of operations since 2022. With no end in sight for the Taliban's regime, and, as CW4WAfghan enters its 28th year, Burke-Gaffney and her team plan to introduce comprehensive virtual education for Afghan women and girls over the next decade.

## "WITNESSING HOW THESE GIRLS ARE THRIVING AND BRIMMING WITH TALENT WAS HEARTWARMING"



Burke-Gaffney (middle) and her team at a strategic planning session in Banff, Alta., in 2022

### How did you first get involved with CW4WAfghan?

I started my career in Alberta's oil and gas industry. After 10 years, I became a self-employed CPA so I could have more work/life flexibility while raising my three children. I provided bookkeeping, advisory and tax services for clients in various sectors, and took on my first non-profit client in 2013. Through that client, I met Janice Eisenhauer, one of CW4WAfghan's co-founders. She was looking for someone to replace their treasurer, and I felt so inspired by her work and the passion of everyone involved. CW4WAfghan was providing hope by tangibly improving the lives of Afghan women and girls caught in a hopeless situation, and I wanted to be part of that. I started as their

**5,000**

The number of Afghan women CW4WAfghan has helped to learn to read and write

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CW4WAFGHAN

accountant and eventually became their director of finance. Today, I'm in charge of operations, including fund development, public engagement and human resources.

### How did you handle the challenges of managing the financial aspects of a non-profit?

The first thing I did when I joined CW4WAfghan was train to become a certified non-profit accounting professional (CNAP), a certification provided by Humanity Financial Management, a Vancouver-based accounting firm. Of course, there are certain different accounting principles and tax requirements, but overall, I learned that a non-profit's financial aspects aren't that dissimilar from the for-profit sector. Profit might not be the end goal, but you still have to monitor your expenses and you still have to generate revenue. We may not be accountable to shareholders, but we do provide detailed impact reporting to our donor base of 6,000 Canadian individuals and organizations.

### What about challenges in providing services within a volatile country like Afghanistan?

We have to accept that there are a lot of constantly changing variables in Afghanistan. All we can do is adapt and do our best. For example, we had a four-year Canadian government grant in place from 2019 to 2023, but when the Taliban took over in 2021, the government explained its funding had to end. It couldn't maintain a presence in Afghanistan since it was now being controlled by an unrecognized government. We scrambled to provide a comprehensive outline of how we can deliver our programs virtually—without being present in the country—and still make a big difference. I was overjoyed when the government was swayed to maintain our grant and adapt its funding toward our virtual programming. We now provide online teaching courses for Afghan educators, both men and women, in Afghanistan and in other countries. We've also launched virtual classrooms for girls who are locked out from regular school because of the Taliban's policies. Moving all our programming online has had the added benefit of helping to keep our students and teachers safe.

### What are some of the most rewarding experiences you've had while working with CW4WAfghan?

A memory that always sticks out for me is a recent celebration where two of our seventh-grade students expressed their gratitude to one of our donors through

special gifts. One of the girls shared a thank you message in flawless English, which she learned through our virtual classroom. The other student sketched a beautiful portrait of the donor. Witnessing how these girls are thriving and positively brimming with talent and ambition was truly heartwarming. Their stories have also inspired my children—my daughter and youngest son are both accountants who've taken up volunteering, while my eldest son is studying infectious diseases and the impact of malaria vaccines in Ethiopia. One day, I hope we can all safely visit Afghanistan and meet the wonderful women and girls who've crossed our paths.

### What are the future objectives of CW4WAfghan?

We've all seen the destructive societal and economic impact of just five years of denying women education when the Taliban ruled from 1996 to 2001. An entire generation of girls didn't attend school and grew up to be illiterate adults. In order to prevent another lost generation, we need to break that cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Education is power. It can shape your life and it empowers you to make your own choices and influence change. That's why we're scaling up our virtual programs and expanding our scholarship program, which provides girls with money for tuition, computers and other educational resources. We are also working to create an accreditation program so girls will be able to obtain high school diplomas that will ensure they're eligible for higher education.

### What role can CPAs play in advancing the cause of women's rights and human rights globally? And what advice do you have for CPAs considering a career in the intersection of finance and social impact within the non-profit sector?

CPAs are leaders, and we have an important responsibility to use our abilities and experiences to help make the world a better place. If you're passionate about making a difference in the lives of others, follow your passion and it will lead you to a rewarding career. The non-profit sector will enhance a CPA skill set while also providing personal growth and fulfillment. As a CPA, I also wouldn't shy away from the fact that there are major factors beyond your control in the non-profit sector. Those changing government and economic conditions can affect for-profit businesses too, and the non-profit sector has proven itself to be resilient—particularly during the recent pandemic. The skills that we bring to the table as CPAs can only help in strengthening that resilience. ♦

## THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

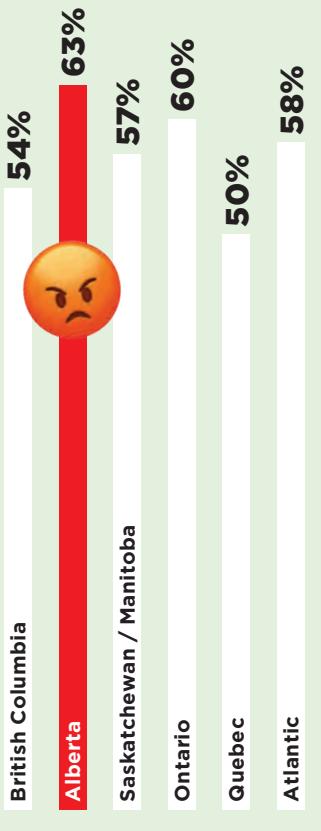
Angry? You're not the only one. Pollara Strategic Insights tracks the mood of Canadians related to our governments, economy and current events, capturing a disenchanted nation. **BY STEVE BREARTON**

### Percentage of Canadians reporting they are angry or annoyed by institutions, circumstances and events in November 2023:

The federal government	54%		Their provincial government	50%
Personal financial situation	43%		Latest stories in the news	70%
				
The Canadian economy	63%		Changes happening in Canada	60%

### Anger and annoyance highest in Alberta and lowest in Quebec

Average percentage of Canadians angry or annoyed by region:



### Women are angrier than men

59%

Percentage of women angry or annoyed by recent trends



54%

Percentage of men angry or annoyed by recent trends

### Angriest age group for each topic

The Canadian economy

18-34

Personal financial situation

35-49

Changes happening in Canada

50-64

The latest stories in the news

65+



PURPOSE DRIVER

## DETERMINED TO AMAZE

After experiencing the harsh challenges that immigrant women face in Canada, Ifeoma Ngwudike was inspired to help others who found themselves following a similar path **BY ALI AMAD**

**Growing up in Enugu**, a bustling city in south-eastern Nigeria, Ifeoma Ngwudike always had ambitions to build a career and explore the world. After obtaining a degree in accounting from the University of Nigeria, she and her husband moved to Treviso, Italy. Eager to also start a family, Ngwudike hit pause on her professional ambitions, taking 10 years off to raise their four children. However, after moving with her family to Calgary, Alberta, in 2008, she decided to resume her career, eventually becoming a CPA in 2012.

Drawing from her experiences and challenges as a Canadian immigrant and working mother, Ngwudike wrote a book titled *The Successful Immigrant Woman* in 2021 and launched a new career as a success coach later that year. Every year, hundreds of thousands of immigrants settle in Canada, with more than 470,000 people arriving in 2023 alone. These newcomers face numerous challenges, including increasingly unaffordable housing and a highly competitive job market. "Each immigrant comes here with their own personal dream of life in Canada," says Ngwudike. "But once they arrive, they often find themselves living in Canada without a dream." That's why Ngwudike is now focused on helping immigrants adapt, thrive and transform their dreams into reality.

### As a newly arrived immigrant to Canada, what was the biggest challenge you faced in kick-starting your accounting career?

My complete ignorance of the workplace culture. It really was a fear of the unknown: I was a newcomer to Canada, and to make things even more daunting, I hadn't set foot in an office for more than 10 years. I was preoccupied with raising my four kids at home, and for the most part, the only people I interacted with were other moms and kids at places like playgrounds and swimming pools. Despite that, I was confident of my accounting skill set—I had begun pursuing a CMA designation in a program for female immigrant accountants and picked up some bookkeeping and consulting work on the side. However, I needed help with understanding all those business norms that integrate you into the workplace: What is acceptable professional attire? How does one seek a job

### "IMMIGRANT WOMEN OFFER FRESH PERSPECTIVES AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO LONG-STANDING CHALLENGES WE FACE HERE"

or behave in a job interview? I was even clueless about the little things: How firm of a handshake does one give when greeting a prospective employer or client? How long do you maintain eye contact during a meeting?

#### How did you overcome this barrier?

To get answers for all those questions, I conducted information-gathering interviews with local professional women. I was curious to learn about workplace norms and how Canadian working mothers balance their careers with family life. I cold-called my first interview subject, a vice-president at Bow Valley College in downtown

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLISON SETO



Calgary, and, to my surprise, she was more than happy to help. As a fellow mother, she emphasized the importance of being organized at home to avoid spillover into work life. (She also recommended blouses as workplace attire—for their versatility!) But the most important thing I discovered is that if you take that perhaps intimidating first step of reaching out and asking for support, people are often more than willing to devote some time to giving you advice and mentoring you in your career path.

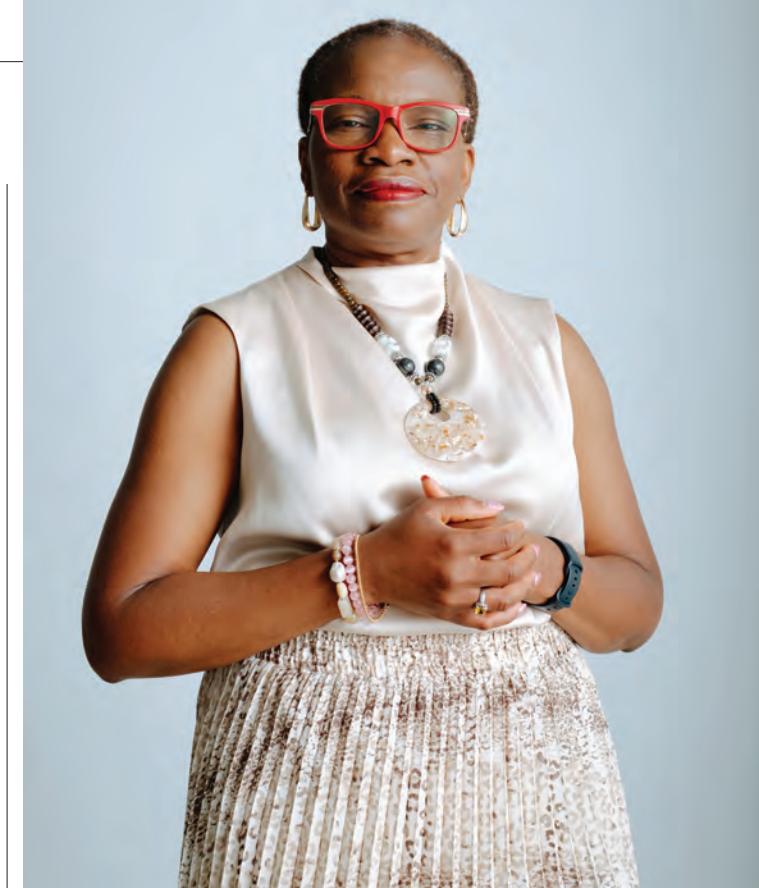
#### What motivated you to become a success coach?

After obtaining my CPA, I became a financial analyst at Bow Valley College, where my first Canadian mentor worked. Although I was in the finance department, I was always eager to expand my skill set. A colleague suggested I take an open position in student services, overseeing new student orientation. In this role, I helped students determine their career goals and set action plans to achieve them. This experience reminded me of the challenges faced by many immigrant women I met in my CMA program when I first arrived in Calgary. They had come to Canada to start their own businesses or climb the career ladder, but while they had taken the initial step of moving to Canada, they were struggling to progress any further.

Over the course of building a new life twice—first as a mother in Italy and then as a CPA in Canada—I realized that one of my strengths was helping others maximize their potential. Whether it was raising my children, guiding students or supporting other immigrant and BIPOC women in my community, I had a knack for empowering others. In late 2021, I decided to formalize this passion by incorporating my success coaching business, Yes2Amazing. The name reflects my belief that to excel, you first have to say yes to amazing and challenging opportunities that come your way!

#### In your experience, what is the most significant obstacle holding back your immigrant clients?

I was fortunate to be educated in English from a young age, but for many professional immigrants, lack of proficiency in English is a substantial barrier. Many arrive in Canada having been top of their class and highly accomplished in their fields back home. However, without strong English skills, they quite literally struggle to translate their expertise into success in Canada. This significantly impacts their confidence, causing them to question their abilities and develop a sort of imposter syndrome.



## “FOR MANY PROFESSIONAL IMMIGRANTS, LACK OF PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH IS A SUBSTANTIAL BARRIER”

That uncertainty then detracts from their focus, further worsening their communication challenges in the workplace or during job interviews.

#### What are the key approaches you use to help your clients succeed in Canada?

It's incredibly frustrating and demoralizing when you can't communicate your strengths and value to employers and colleagues. That's why I first help my clients identify their strengths and the best ways to express them. This leads me to the next important strategy I use with my clients: intentionality. Whether attending a meeting, job interview or networking event, being very intentional about what you're bringing to the table and aiming to take away distills everything to its essence. When language is an obstacle, breaking things down to their core helps in understanding and communicating even the most sophisticated ideas. This formula guided me in authoring my book, *The Successful Immigrant Woman*, which I wrote in the most basic, easy-to-understand language possible to reach a broad audience.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLISON SETO

**4.2 MILLION**

The number of immigrant women in Canada in the labour market in 2022, according to Statistics Canada

#### Can you share a memorable success story where you helped a client thrive?

Absolutely. Reflecting on the theme of intentionality, I recently met a Venezuelan woman at a Calgary event for immigrant entrepreneurs. She and her partner ran a renovation business, and while helping a few relatives move to Canada, she encountered the unaffordable housing crisis that is so prevalent nationwide. She explained that many people in her native country live in community-driven housing cooperatives, and she wanted to start a company to build similar housing complexes in Canada. However, she felt overwhelmed and didn't know how to start. I pointed out that she had already identified her key intention—helping Canadians obtain affordable housing. I advised her to focus on effectively conveying this intention in all her business dealings. She recently shared with me that this simple

philosophy had completely focused her efforts, and she now has her company up and running.

#### What are you working on next?

As you can see, many immigrant women bring a wealth of experience and insights from around the world. Sometimes, they offer fresh perspectives or innovative solutions to address long-standing challenges we face here. I aim to support them in achieving their aspirations and help Canada tap into this valuable resource. My next focus will be on providing tailored financial literacy courses for immigrant women. Financial literacy is crucial for success in the competitive Canadian market, especially for entrepreneurs seeking funding and managing finances. I see myself as a facilitator, empowering immigrant women and building their confidence, because ultimately, everyone stands to gain. ♦

## YOU NAME IT

In May, the Women's National Basketball Association announced it was awarding a franchise to Toronto. At press time, the team had yet to be named, but fans eager for the 2026 tipoff have already suggested they be called the Northstars, Huskies, Dragons or Aurora. Only one name wins and there will forever be a list of geographic features and local animals that almost made the grade. Toronto Racoons, anyone? —Steve Brearton



**Toronto Blue Jays**  
Major League Baseball

**FIRST GAME**  
April 7, 1977



**Toronto Raptors**  
National Basketball Association

**FIRST GAME**  
November 3, 1995



**Winnipeg Jets**  
National Hockey League

**FIRST GAME**  
October 9, 2011



**Ottawa Redblacks**  
Canadian Football League

**FIRST GAME**  
July 3, 2014



**Toronto**  
Professional Women's Hockey League

**FIRST GAME**  
January 1, 2024

In fall 2023, the PWHL floated a trial balloon for names of its six inaugural franchises. Among them were Montreal Echo, Ottawa Alert and Toronto Torch. “These PWHL names sound like they were created in 1997 for a soon-to-fail roller hockey league,” read one social media post. Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto will have team names for the coming season.