ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN POST-MIGRATION GENDER RELATIONS: A PREREQUISITE FOR BUILDING SUSTAINABLE, RESILIENT IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC): Knowledge Synthesis

SUMMARY OF REPORT

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Introduction

Funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this project was designed to explore in a systematic fashion the currently available data on domestic violence within Canadian immigrant and refugee communities (hereafter 'immigrants' or 'newcomers'). Newcomers to Canada constitute not only a substantial percentage of the total national population,[1] but are also becoming increasingly important to sustaining the Canadian economy and providing support for the rapidly aging portion of society.[2] Although the arrival to a new country can be a positive and exciting time for newcomers, they often lose support networks they previously relied on in their home countries. They also face the challenge of navigating new gender role expectations, language barriers, and shifting family dynamics.[3] Among the diverse range of stresses faced by newcomer families, domestic violence has been identified as a major source of concern.[4] The serious and long-term consequences of domestic violence (including both physical and emotional effects that impact both parents and children),[5] make obvious the need to address and reduce domestic violence rates among newcomers to Canada. Left with limited and/or ineffective support systems and services to combat domestic violence, newcomers will face additional barriers as they adjust to life in Canada.[6] Moreover, the consequences of domestic violence impact not only immigrant families, but also their host country's health-care related costs and spending.

We know that changes in gender relations experienced by newcomer families are extremely important to early post-migration adaptation.[7] Men are often seen as the key players in migration and are presented with greater opportunities to forge new social ties and pursue available economic prospects.[8] The women, however, are routinely expected to rebuild the family as well as community support networks.[9] The gendered status of migration and settlement could easily render women more vulnerable to domestic violence than men. A previous scoping review conducted by the investigators in this project revealed that immigrant women are more likely to be unaware of services available to support them when experiencing domestic violence; some of them are not properly informed about domestic violence as a punishable crime in Canada.[10] This combination of factors, we suggest, also places women at a higher risk of domestic violence.[11] To examine the relationship between domestic violence and capacity-building in immigrant families in the current literature, we carried out a scoping review of literature and relevant non-academic sources. This review, to our knowledge, is the first of its kind in Canada and, therefore, highlights the urgency and strategic nature of our study.

Approach

In order to provide a holistic assessment of information available on this topic, we completed a scoping review of academic literature alongside a policy document analysis. The research team, Dr. Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Sophie Yohani (Co-Investigator) worked with two policymaking bodies (Status of Women Canada; Status of Women [Alberta]), and a major immigrant serving agency (Centre for Newcomers [Calgary]). Our research assistants, Alphonse Ndem (Anthropology), Janine Muster (Sociology) and Brittany Tetreault (Nursing), brought significant interdisciplinary insight into the study. The Arskey and O'Malley five stage method was adopted for the scoping review,[12] and Covidence[13] software was used to enhance the efficiency of the review process. For the document analysis, we used a basic qualitative approach which evaluated relevant policy and service provider documents that were located by our research assistants and community collaborators. However, due to a relative deficit in the number of retrievable service provider and policy documents, our original design for this facet of the project had to be significantly scaled down.

The following findings and suggestions for future policymakers and researchers emerged from our analysis of both the scoping review and document analysis. What we have provided below is a summary of

our larger report. A journal manuscript from the latter, including the complete scoping review chart, has been submitted for publication.

<h1 align="center">Findings and Implications</h1>

Of the 30 reviewed articles, most used qualitative or concept-mapping approaches and were cross-sectional. Many of the authors focused on South Asian immigrant women in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA);[14] the rest addressed the experiences of women from a smaller number of immigrant groups.[15] Similarly, only one city-specific document was available for the policy analysis and it focused solely on Toronto.[16] Moreover, Ontario produced most of the provincial documents that were reviewed.[17] This is a significant gap in current knowledge and one that should be urgently addressed.

It is also notable that all the articles that met the review criteria focused only on heterosexual and monogamous relationships; there were no references to other forms of intimate partner relationships. This pattern reveals an obvious paucity in the current body of research. Most studies aimed to understand how migration and settlement mediate immigrant women's experienced, viewed and dealt with domestic violence. Four major themes revolving around this topic emerged as the documents were analyzed in-depth: (1) the diversity in experiences of and viewpoints about domestic violence in immigrant women; (2) the diversity of coping mechanisms and responses to domestic violence among various groups of immigrant women; (3) the limited and in many instances problematic, policies and services related to domestic violence that were available to immigrant women; and (4) a trend of representing, both covertly and overtly, the lived experiences of domestic violence among immigrants as anomalous. It also became apparent as we completed this study that both current knowledge about and resources to deal with domestic violence in the context of Canadian immigrant communities were grossly deficient. Our study underscores the need for research that could expand this knowledge base as well as inform strategies for tackling domestic violence concerns in immigrant families.

Diversity in Experiences of and Viewpoints about Domestic Violence among Immigrant Women

Taken together, the articles we reviewed suggest that domestic violence is rooted in the experiences of immigrants before, during, and after migration. A number of the studies noted key differences between immigrant and Canadian-born women's experiences in this regard. For instance, learning the language(s), rights, and laws of a host country, as well as dealing with social isolation, unemployment, and discrimination, were the most important factors that mediate how immigrant women live out and think about domestic violence. These factors create significant markers that differentiate immigrant and Canadian-born women's experiences.[18] Similarly, a few studies on both Nigerian Canadian women and Iranian Canadian women[19] suggested that these same factors could create frustrations in family life that render women vulnerable to domestic violence.

Most of the articles that were selected for the scoping review emphasize the need to avoid homogenizing domestic violence among immigrants into a similar pattern of behaviour. The definitions of domestic violence, many of the authors find, are broadly consistent across cultures and there are some shared commonalities in experiences of domestic violence among immigrant women. However, the authors argue that the diversity of cultures create different ideologies, values, behaviours, beliefs, and norms that bring important specificities into the immigrant women's experiences of domestic violence.[20] There are, for instance, some remarkable cultural differences in immigrant women's views about the nature and impact of domestic violence in their lives. Among Tamil women, psychological abuse was identified as particularly harmful; they used their own personal parameters to decide whether domestic abuse has occurred.[21] Portuguese and South Asian immigrant women that share strong patriarchal beliefs

were less likely to identify actions by men as abusive.[22] Further, perceptions of domestic violence by immigrant women appear to vary depending on the length of time living in Canada, age, educational status, activity limitations, and household income.[23] These factors add another layer of complexity to a diversity of experiences and perceptions. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the studies reviewed focus on a single cultural group rather than on the broader population of immigrant women. Most of these authors opted for specific measures designed to meet the diverse needs of immigrant women than forms of intervention created for the immigrant population. A good number of the authors made suggestions for community education that bear on these variables, especially for the South Asian populations.

Exploring the range of viewpoints about and experiences of domestic violence among immigrant women, then, is an important prerequisite to also understanding the variety of ways and reasons why immigrant women respond to and cope with domestic violence. By targeting important cultural and social determinants of domestic violence, future policies and practices could be designed to effectively serve specific groups of immigrant women while developing foundational strategies for tackling domestic violence within the broader immigrant population.

Diversity in the Ways that Immigrant Women Cope with and Respond to Domestic Violence
Our review revealed some important differences in the manner immigrant women deal with domestic violence compared to Canadian born women.[24] For instance, both Japanese and Tamil immigrant women often adopt passive/emotion-focused coping strategies over active/problem-focused ones.[25] Emotion-focused coping involves strategies to reduce negative outcomes and psychological stress while problem-focused coping uses behaviors to change the circumstances that trigger stress.[26] These strategies were generally perceived by immigrant women as strength-based approaches to stress management. However, many of the authors noted that using emotion-focused coping strategies appeared to give more leverage to men over women in ways that increased the risk for self-harm and suicidal ideations by women.[27] Our analysis showed that while problem-focused coping was considered to be more likely to successfully resolve a domestic violence situation than its emotion focused counterpart, immigrant women were often reluctant to implement problem-focused coping strategies such as accessing formal support services or filing for a separation from their intimate male partners. The literature pointed to a diverse range of socio-cultural reasons why immigrant women may not favour problem-focused strategies, including the risks that stigma, patriarchal beliefs, and self-blame could attract, as well as the high premium they place on marriage as a life-long commitment.[28]

In addition, a number of structural and systemic factors affecting the likelihood of disclosure were discussed by the articles we reviewed; they include the risk of deportation, economic instability, the awareness about mandatory charges against and the removal of abusive male partners from the home.[29] For example, the outcomes of domestic violence for Guyanese women in one of the studies we reviewed were influenced by a willingness to seek outside assistance; this willingness is, in turn, mediated by factors such as age, income, English fluency, housing, and level of education; participants used long-term and short-term strategies to cope with their abusive situations.[30] Short-term solutions included avoiding escalation of violence and physically fighting back. Long-term solutions frequently occurred after a so-called 'turning point', and included both filing for restraining orders, divorces, or separations, with an emphasis on developing plans to continue living independently.[31] The limited capacity of current services and policies to address immigrant women's needs is cited as the primary reason why many of them are reluctant to disclose the violence against them and seek assistance. Our review calls not merely for a scaling up of the relevant services and support systems, but also a need to grant immigrant women some level of agency to think and act for themselves. These women know their situation best and therefore should be actively engaged in initiatives aimed at addressing domestic violence within their families and communities.

Existing Policies and Services Designed for Domestic Violence among Immigrants are Insufficient and Problematic

Our review also shows that, at the national level, policies which explicitly address the needs of immigrant women are extremely limited. Canada's Department of Justice further notes that the research carried out so far at the national level is insufficient; the General Social Survey (GSS) of Canadian families, in particular, confirms that family violence in immigrant/refugee communities is highly under reported. Women from newcomer and other vulnerable populations who experience domestic violence do not see engagement with official authorities as a viable prospect.[32] Only a handful of non-governmental bodies produce policy documentation on domestic violence; these documents tend to focus on only small groups of immigrant women, a pattern we have already identified as problematic.[33]

The limited knowledge on domestic violence within immigrant communities significantly undermines the potential to develop sufficient and effective policies and services. Beyond the inadequate research on the subject, there are additional challenges that stand in the way of addressing domestic violence among Canadian immigrants. For instance, the lack of or failure of support systems on which women survivors can lean is one common reason why many women either stay with or return to abusive spouses.[34] The current Westernized approach to domestic violence offers limited options for women leaving abusive situations. Documented evidence strongly emphasizes the need to provide visible minority women with culturally competent services, including non-English resources and effective communication strategies. Neglecting these key facets of abused immigrant women's support system could bar them from making any attempt to seek assistance. Some of the articles reviewed suggest ways to develop and deliver more supportive services such as educating already existing community services on how to break the cycle of violence, the creation of culturally-sensitive transition homes for immigrant women, and offering women the option to involve their partners in treatment.

There are also other complications related to policy that must be considered in dealing with immigrant women's concerns about domestic violence. Mandatory charging and some aspects of current immigration laws and policies, are instances that could undermine intervention measures. A study on Canadian criminal justice interventions to help abused women, for example, went so far as to argue that until mandatory charging is eliminated, immigrant women may not receive the support they need to escape or cope with their abuse.[35] Although the Government of Canada recently abolished conditional permanent residency, a policy[36] that put abused immigrant women at risk, the existence of the family class sponsorship still creates a problem for immigrant women. Due to socio-cultural, structural, and legal reasons, immigrant women that were sponsored by their partners are left with only a few options for support if they choose to leave their spouse.[37] Filing for permission to stay in Canada on humanitarian and compassionate grounds following a breakdown of family sponsorship status often requires that the affected spouse provide evidence of abuse. Immigrant women may find this option problematic or untenable. The current state of affairs suggests that rather than forcing immigrant women to choose between their marriage and their wellbeing, attending to these policy challenges would be a better way forward.

A Tendency to Embrace Racialized Understandings of Domestic Violence among Immigrants

Although many of the studies that were selected for review identified both pre- and post-migration stressors as major factors that contribute to domestic violence against immigrant women, a good number of authors projected immigrant women as vulnerable intimate female partners to men from patriarchal societies.[38] In one instance, an author suggested that the discriminatory laws and racist practices of host countries also trigger or reinforce domestic violence within immigrant families.[39] Others highlighted the changing structures and networks in migration as mediating domestic violence through shifts in post-migration gender relations.[40] Only one study cautions against using "culturalized" explanations for family

violence, as this perpetuates the image of the oppressed and less 'developed' non-Westerner.[41] Such aspersions, we argue, do not serve immigrant women's interests and only push the blame for their concerns about domestic violence to their respective communities.

Conclusion

While it is tempting, and perhaps convenient, to assume that all immigrant women view, experience and cope with domestic violence in similar ways, this systematic review point us, instead to the need to address the huge gaps in literature - as a starting point to tackling the problem of domestic violence in Canadian immigrant communities. Although the broad understanding of domestic violence may be similar across cultures, the ways in which immigrant women view, experience and cope domestic violence are dependent not only on culture, but also on each woman's particular personal experiences, economic status and social circumstances. Creating racialized explanations for why non-Western groups experience domestic violence could further marginalize immigrant communities and reduce the likelihood that women within these communities will access existing support services. More studies are needed to inform future policies and practices. Future research should not only target specific immigrant groups, but also pay attention to the existing community networks within immigrant populations. Further, the active engagement of stakeholders within these networks could enhance women's willingness to access existing services and support systems related to domestic violence.

Obviously, the current Canadian literature and policy documents have clear limitations and problems. Beyond recognizing the challenges these gaps in knowledge pose, it is equally important to initiate a discussion on developing comprehensive provincial and national policy guidelines on domestic violence for the broader Canadian immigrant population. This discussion should go alongside as well as direct future research.

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