



Immigrant Women Services Ottawa
Services pour femmes immigrantes d'Ottawa

Brief to The Standing Committee on the Status of Women Study on Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence in Canada

March 2022

Background Information

Immigrant Women Services Ottawa (IWSO) was established in 1988 to provide services to immigrant and racialized women and their children experiencing violence in the Greater Ottawa area. Belonging to diverse racial and ethnic communities, these women often experienced violence and challenges that were often rooted in complex family, religious and cultural dynamics, and were compounded by systemic barriers. They encountered significant obstacles in disclosing and reporting abuse, including linguistic barriers, receiving culturally responsive support, and navigating complex legal and social systems. Immigrant and racialized women also had additional needs that required different responses than the established supports for non-racialized-cisgender survivors of violence. Consequently, IWSO was established to fill that critical gap in services and continues to implement service delivery models to meet the unique needs of immigrant and racialized women, including gender-diverse individuals.

IWSO has grown to include other services such as Settlement & Integration Services, Language Interpretation & Translation Services and offers a full suite of programs tailored to the unique needs of immigrant and racialized women. On average, IWSO serves 3,000 immigrant and racialized women annually and is dedicated to empowering immigrant and racialized women in the City of Ottawa to participate in the elimination of all forms of abuse against women.

The impact of COVID-19 has been devastating to Canada's economy, the health of its citizens, and has further complicated efforts to curb Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Studies show that GBV increased during the COVID-19 period¹ as Canada's imposed restrictions by its federal, provincial and municipal governments isolated immigrant women further from their support networks. Immigrant and racialized survivors of violence who were experiencing compounded isolation and had no escape options were in constant fear, anxiety, depression, and danger. Many disclosed that shelters were not an option for them since most were full, leaving survivors with few options such as hotels and motels which posed additional safety and emotional challenges. With GBV now more prevalent in immigrant communities, besides job losses during the restrictions, COVID-19 has created a further dependency of immigrant women on their spouses.² This dependency in addition to the burdens placed by societal influence, laws

¹ Shalini Mittal and Tushar Singh, "[Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mini-Review](#)," *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 1 (2020),

² Imam Uddin, Touhida Choudhury, and Sohelia Khan Bonhi, "Impact of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) on the Mental and Physical Health of Bangladeshi Canadian Women," *Canadian Centre for Information and Knowledge*, January 2022

and policies that discriminate against immigrant women, have further isolated them from reporting GBV.³

Many immigrant and racialized survivors seek transitional housing support when fleeing abusive relationships to help secure affordable and safe housing. Unfortunately, they encounter significant challenges when seeking these supports. Certain communities have become oppressive enclaves that reinforce the structural and systemic abuse–racism (Islamophobia, anti-black, anti-Asian etc.) that trap these survivors. Further, society through its prejudices (e.g. high proportion of immigrant women in low-paying jobs or financial dependency on their spouses⁴) often discriminate against newcomer women when receiving justice, finding safety or accessing support such as housing, perpetuating structural violence.⁵ IWSO has identified a vicious cycle where immigrant survivors move from community to community while transferring from one housing to another, seeking safety as their trauma increases and continually repeating the cycle.

It is important to note that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) among immigrant and racialized women are grossly under-reported in Canada. Findings from a 2021 research show that general fear of the police and fear of police being racist or culturally insensitive continues to be principal reasons women do not call the police.⁶ Furthermore, Newcomers traumatized by war or oppressive regimes are much less likely to report physical or sexual violence to authorities for fear of further victimization and/deportation.⁷ Plus, IPV affects all financial and educational levels as educated and financially secure women immigrants from higher-income countries sometimes experience sexual violence from men who believe they “own” their women⁸ even though they report violence more often than those that have language barriers or lower education and finances.⁹ Similarly, the extent of the violence also matters, as women who experience physical abuse frequently report it more often than others.¹⁰

³ Tanya Park et al., “[Domestic Violence and Immigrant Women: A Glimpse Behind a Veiled Door](#),” *Violence Against Women* 27, no. 15–16 (December 1, 2021)

⁴ Syeda Salma Akter, “Dangerous Silences: South Asian Immigrant Women and the Threat of Domestic Violence” (North Dakota State University, 2021)

⁵ Western Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children Learning Network, “Intimate Partner Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women,” September 2018

⁶ Amanda Couture-Carron, Arshia U. Zaidi, and Nawal H. Ammar, “[Battered Immigrant Women and the Police: A Canadian Perspective](#),” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 66, no. 1 (January 1, 2022)

⁷ Rupaleem Bhuyan et al., “[Unprotected, Unrecognized- Canadian Immigration Policy and Violence Against Women, 2008-2013](#),” 2014,

⁸ Cecilia M Benoit et al., “[Issue Brief: Sexual Violence against Women in Canada](#),” 2016,

⁹ Amanda Couture-Carron, Arshia U. Zaidi, and Nawal H. Ammar, [Battered Immigrant Women and the Police: A Canadian Perspective](#)

¹⁰ Amanda Couture-Carron, Arshia U. Zaidi, and Nawal H. Ammar

In Ontario, OAITH reported 33 cases of femicide from January to July 2021, compared to 17 cases over the same period in 2020.¹¹ These numbers reflect over a 94 percent increase in femicide cases within the same period. Unfortunately, the cases remind us of the brutal and fatal stabbing of Hanadi Muhammed in June 2021 by her partner in Ottawa. These numbers and reminders are a wake-up call to reassert Canada's goal of advancing its National Action Plan to end GBV and the creation of strong and safe communities for everyone.

In working extensively with immigrant and racialized women survivors of violence, IWSO is well-positioned to provide the following recommendations to help eradicate GBV, particularly amongst immigrant and racialized women.

1. On-going government support and policies are needed to address GBV in marginalized communities with a focus on the root causes of systemic racism and the cultural and social norms that continuously support the patriarchal systems of oppression.
2. The implementation of a robust national awareness and prevention of GBV strategy including providing information and resources on Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence to newcomers at points of entry in their language of choice. As a preventive measure, the role of men in fighting GBV is critical. Immigrant and racialized men need to be active participants in finding solutions to GBV. Additionally, awareness must be raised among community members to view GBV issues as societal, not familial.
3. Government-mandated training and education of police officers on all forms of violence against women and its potential impact on immigrant, refugee and non-status women with additional training on intersectional and trauma-informed approaches. Training is also needed on how to effectively use interpreters during sensitive interviews of this kind. Police training must be examined for potential stereotypes about immigrant and racialized women, to avoid further stigmatization.
4. Implementation of a housing strategy that reflects the needs of marginalized communities seeking safety.
5. Governmental review of social and economic underlying causes of GBV such as poverty, housing, cultural and linguistic factors, low-paying jobs, immigration status etc.
6. Multi-year improved and sustained funding for women's organizations providing culturally responsive services to survivors.

Signed,



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¹¹ As per data collected by the Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses (OAITH).