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## **Domestic Violence and Immigrant Women's Access to Services in Edmonton, Alberta**

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### **Abstract**

Domestic violence is a growing concern in Canada because immigrant women's abuse situation in many ways is very different from most other women. Some immigrant women often struggle to cope with the abusive situation in Canada because they lack knowledge of shelters and other resources available to them.

This study recognizes to what extent local Edmonton shelters or organizations are accessible to immigrant women and how individuals in the field understand the strengths and challenges of accessibility. Four in-depth interviews with a front-line worker, program coordinator, and two executive directors from three different organizations were conducted in 2009. Participants disclose their experiences and impressions as someone who has worked in the field. A textual analysis approach of the three organizations' websites is used to determine what messages are portrayed about the services offered to provide support to immigrant women who may or may not speak English. Four key themes emerge from this study: knowledge of immigrant women's needs, working together, programs and services, and accessibility. This research study contributes to the development of support programs by identifying how shelters or organizations make themselves accessible.

### **Introduction**

In carrying out this "Domestic Violence and Immigrant Women's Access to Services" research study I have discovered

that the problem goes beyond having access to the services that are offered to immigrant women. Shelters must work together to make a difference as they continue to assist immigrant women. I want this paper to be written, not just for myself and other academics but for all of those women out there who are experiencing violence in their lives.

### **Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is identified by violence perpetuated by partners. The western definition of domestic violence refers to the various types of abuse as physical, sexual, psychological, and financial tactics used to control partners. A common definition of domestic violence does not exist, and this term continues to be debated among existing scholars as it varies culturally. In this paper, I use the term *domestic violence* as it is the most prevalent in the existing discourse, and addresses violence in the private sphere (household). Domestic violence cuts across all genders, races, classes, and ethnicities, but existing literature expresses that immigrant women are more vulnerable because of the unique challenges they encounter (Migliardi *et al*, 2004). A few of these challenges include isolation from friends and family members, language barriers, financial dependency on spouses, lack of rights, fear of deportation, cultural differences and settling in a new country. These prevent immigrant women from seeking help from various service providers to protect themselves from abuse.

### **Service Provision**

Existing domestic violence research has not examined the effectiveness of what shelters are offering immigrant women, and whether the services provided are capable of addressing the women's needs. Instead a Statistics Canada (2008) report indicates that Ontario has 160 shelters, Quebec 126, British Columbia 110, and Alberta only 50. The report does not indicate what types of shelters have been included in the results, or specifically how many immigrant women have been turned away. Today, there are two different types of shelters

in Canada; they are referred to as first and second stage. The types of shelters women seek out vary according to their needs. The first stage is the most prevalent, offering approximately three weeks, or twenty one days of short term support, and is often referred to as an emergency crisis shelter for women. Second stage shelters are less common but provide long term independent living accommodation for at least six to twelve months and are mostly used for high risk women (Tutty and Rothery, 2002). Second stage is also described as a transitional house service that women are usually sent to through referrals from other agencies. This type of a shelter offers additional services to meet the long term needs for women and their children because usually a three week stay is not enough. Taylor (1993) states that second stage housing is limited but preferred because often these women do not want to return to their husbands and require a longer stay.

The executive director of one Edmonton area shelter estimates that approximately 300 people are turned away from shelters in that city every year (Second Interview with Jennifer, October 27, 2009). However, over the next few years we can estimate that these numbers will increase. Thus, when focusing on Edmonton, Alberta we will need more culturally appropriate programs and services (including shelters) to meet the needs of diverse abused women.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, all of these shelters have refused more women than they serve because of a lack of space in the facility to meet their needs. Taylor (1993) addresses how shelters in Canada have increased dramatically since 1979, but a shortage of space still continues to exist (p. 225). Conway (2003), similarly outlines how Canadian shelters, since 1979, continue to turn away women because they are full.

Consequently, while networking with others in this field I have been informed that the first ever second-stage immigrant women shelter in Edmonton opened its doors to women in May of 2010. I argue, however, that in introducing a new immigrant women shelter, front-line workers still will not change the current situation of violence. Thus, there is a need to understand the cultural issues in various immigrant com-

munities that lead to domestic violence, and the solution is not more shelters. The focus should be on reducing violence against women by understanding the cultural dynamics instead of accommodating more immigrant women into shelters.

### **Purpose and Scope of this Research Study**

There are few studies concerned with the issue of accessibility of shelters and its association with the overall effectiveness for abused immigrant women. Thus, my research study will help to fill an existing gap in the literature, which does not incorporate the examination of front-line workers' interaction with immigrant women accessing shelter services. Although I have become interested in this larger question of how the experience of violence differs for some immigrant women, when compared to their Canadian counterparts, the findings presented below are only a small piece of this puzzle as they only focus on Edmonton, Alberta.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

In the fall of 2009 I explored to what extent local Edmonton shelters or organizations are accessible to immigrant women, and how individuals in the field understand the strengths and challenges of accessibility. The research design was based on two methodologies also known as a mixed methods approach of in-depth interviews and a textual analysis of websites. Four in-depth interviews took place in Edmonton and surrounding areas with participants who have been working within this field for eight years or more.

### **Sampling**

Invitation for participation was sent out through an email to the few members of the target population that were affiliated with organizations assisting immigrant women in abusive situations. Four of twelve organizations responded to my request, and the other eight agencies did not reply. One organization was not eligible for participating as it did not deal with

immigrants. This recruitment method allowed me to speak to four individuals with expertise in dealing with vulnerable populations. Jennifer and Leah are both executive directors of a first stage shelter, Katie is a first stage front-line worker, and Ashley is a program coordinator at a second stage shelter.

### **Informed and Voluntary Consent**

Each of the interviewees was informed that they were asked to participate because of their affiliation with a shelter that delivers services and programs to immigrant women experiencing domestic violence. I explained how I hoped that their participation in the study would contribute to understanding how the needs and experiences of immigrant women differ from non-immigrant women. I further elaborated on how I was interested in what training and support they provide these women, and most of all, their experiences and impressions as someone who has worked in the field. Once a summary was given of the purpose and procedures of the study, a letter of consent to participate in the research was explained. I asked all the participants to repeat what they believed the research project was about to ensure that they were indeed well informed through verbal and written consent, thus willing to participate.

Informed and voluntarily consent to participate was received from all the interviewees who agreed that they would be guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. At the time of this study, I was aware that I was dealing with a sensitive topic and thus ethics was taken into consideration to minimize any risk that might have occurred to the participants during their involvement with this project. For example, during the interviews some of the participants discussed other people or situations that were sensitive or confidential, so I agreed to keep the information anonymous about other people or organizations. Pseudonyms have been used in all written work (field notes and research papers) and presentations resulting from this research to protect individual identities and to prevent the general public from identifying participants. The field notes once they had been transcribed continued to remain anonymous. Addition-

ally, participants were given the right to opt out of answering any questions or withdraw from the study at any time before the publication of materials resulting from the data collected. I further outlined how the data collected would be kept on my personal computer in a secure password-accessible file which was agreed upon and where only the researcher had access to them. The program OneNote by Microsoft Office, which I used for the transcribing process, allowed me to use a login code and secure password key to protect the data. I believe the participants did not experience the regret of releasing information during the interview because of the procedures taken.

Each of the face-to-face informal interviews lasted longer than 60 minutes and were guided by a number of broad questions. The questions pertained to how services were offered and delivered, how dealing with immigrant women is unique, and most of all, their personal experiences in helping others with the level of training they received. In all four cases, I was granted permission by the participant to have the interview audio recorded, transcribed, and typed. Participants were given the option to refuse audio recordings of the interview, however, in this study no one disagreed. The tape recordings were kept in a secure location, as were the transcriptions. I protected privacy by destroying the original tape recordings of each of the interviews after transcribing the recordings and editing the transcribed notes. This helped avoid the identification of any of the individuals involved from the selected organizations. A number of different themes emerged from this study, but the most important was the lack of knowledge regarding immigrant women's needs, which identifies the current gap that exists in service provision.

The textual analysis section was included near the end of the interview questions and only three of the participants were able to address questions about their organization's website. In particular, I focused on what messages the organization sends out about their services available for immigrant women who might not speak English. I questioned how the interviewees (program coordinator, and two executive directors) felt about

their organization's website. These interviews are narratives in themselves as the interviewees have explained the ways in which the organization views the website in giving access to information about the shelter. I further examined the websites' effectiveness in terms of accessibility by completing my own reading at a later time. I focused on mission statements, descriptions of programs, images, and contact information to determine how accessible and user-friendly the website was.

### **Data Analysis**

The key findings from this study illustrate some challenges front-line workers experience when providing services to immigrant women and this will in turn; contribute to the existing gap in the literature. The interviews were all audio recorded, transcribed verbatim in English as the data was collected and coded for emerging themes. Grounded theory - an inductive approach - was used to interpret the results from the interviews, identifying recurring themes with the aid of a software program, OneNote by Microsoft Office, for qualitative data analysis. Field notes were also taken during/after each interview and when networking with individuals working in the field, they were coded as well but due to space limitations they have not been included in this paper. In this next section, I use the interview excerpts and the website textual analysis to report the findings.

### **Findings**

The four interviews yielded some surprising findings beyond the issues of accessibility.

### **Knowledge of Immigrant Women's Needs**

Each of the interviewees emphasized the need for introducing or improving culturally appropriate services. Many immigrant women simply normalize the abuse, so there is a need for more information to be available in different languages. Most of the interviewees were extremely concerned with language barriers

more than cultural issues. Improving language resources and providing training for staff can reduce language barriers immigrant women experience when accessing services, but there are also the cultural issues surrounding abuse.

Furthermore, each of the interviewees felt that sometimes immigrant women do not even hear about the shelters, or are reluctant to report abuse. Often immigrant women are coming from countries where they might not have shelters or other social services (Agnew, 1998; Chokshi et al, 2010). This idea is reinforced by Jennifer, who stated, "often they are unaware of this idea of shelters and the purpose behind them" (Second Interview with Jennifer, October 27, 2009). So if they are unaware of shelters because they cannot read the information that is produced in English, how do they even enter in? "Well I mean we would have our standard brochure, but I think we would need to have one that is more specific to that service, and listing all the partners. You know from there on we can possibly print [brochures] in different languages" (Fourth Interview with Leah, November 3, 2009). Leah also mentioned how a twenty-four hour interpreter service crisis line program called Language Link might be introduced soon in order for the front-line workers to be more accessible to immigrant women. Jennifer also commented on how shelters are trying to introduce better protocols to ensure that tools are being developed for immigrant women from diverse backgrounds:

- J. I think again we need to be well resourced and I think a shelter that serves immigrant women needs to be... umm... (paused) aware of all the different needs of different women in different places because one doesn't fit all. Anyways, so I think that's what you would need... you would need protocols. You would have to make sure that your tools are developed for immigrant women. You would need to make sure you have staff that understand some of those concepts.

(Second Interview with Jennifer, October 27, 2009)

However, there is still a need to develop resourceful information not just for immigrant women, but also for staff working

directly with the women once they arrive at the shelter. The interviewees all agreed that it would be wonderful to have more training on different cultural backgrounds in order to become aware of the diverse needs of women because often they might not be familiar with the cultural issues that lead to abuse. Katie, a front-line worker, stated how she felt she had not received adequate training about different cultures:

- K. I haven't received any specific training, for immigrant families yet.
- I. Do you find the need for more training about different cultural groups? Do you think such training about various groups would help? For example, if you were to receive information about cultural practices or even how power is situated in different cultures? This is how abuse usually occurs in this culture etc.
- K. Yes, that would be nice to have training about different cultures... I think that ah not huge stuff but little workshops, and stuff like that might help. So, like how families are like you know who is at the head of the household, or when they come from another country and this is how it is over there. That would be really helpful.

(Third Interview with Katie, November 3, 2009)

Although some of this work is well underway with some of these shelters, there still continues to be a need for more ongoing training about different cultural groups. Leah reinforces this point "I think we had [training] in the past but I think now because we are seeing more situations, and because of opening this new shelter [for immigrant women] we are starting that up a bit again" (Fourth Interview with Leah, November 3, 2009).

### **Working Together**

Although language and cultural barriers affect accessibility, the problem seems to be beyond this issue of knowledge of immigrant women's needs. Referrals and support take place

through “Canadian” generic like services because often these women are disconnected from pressures within their own cultural community. However, the difficulty seems to be with how these organizations network with other service providers in the community. Although Ashley, Katie, and Leah find it easy to work with others this is not always the case. Jennifer seemed to be upset and surprised at how the other organizations do not work together. The others share a positive experience of working together. Jennifer unfortunately expressed some concerns when it came to working with other immigrant women servicing agencies in the community. This is best depicted in the following passage:

- J. I think part of it is that they are very narrow focused. So you call this other organization and they don't work with immigrant women. They work with people (taps table to get point across) who have been here for only a certain amount of time right so if you're a year over that you don't meet the criteria. Right. So it makes it really difficult.

(Second Interview with Jennifer, October 27, 2009)

This makes it difficult and unclear for me to understand whether there is an underlying issue of not working together present in this field.

### **Programs and Services**

There is limited research on programs and services that are used to meet women's needs. Taylor (1993) state's that “[m]any of the effective programs designed to resolve the problem of wife abuse have been developed by women – those who have been abused and women committed to feminism” (p. 228). This study in particular did not reveal this but instead it offered insight into how support programs are being offered. The main focus behind the programs is safety planning, addressing various health needs, self-esteem, and communicating with other women at the shelters. Programs are usually based on one-on-one or group counselling sessions, which allow women to have the opportunity to discuss their situation with others.

The programs are not just for the women but also for the children who often witness violence. All of the shelters run programs with sympathy to ensure that the women and children are comfortable. The information about the programs they offer is available on their websites which provides more information to those interested in learning more. Sometimes there are misconceptions in the general public about the services these shelters provide. Despite this, there has apparently been positive feedback from the women who have accessed the services at these shelters. This is often because the idea of shelters does not even exist in the country where some women have come from. Thus, many of the women feel pleased with their stay as they have been welcomed by gracious and supportive staff.

The goal of the programs and services is not just to be able to acknowledge cultural and individual differences, but to encourage independence. This is often done through a support worker who will assist the women in simple tasks such as signing up for a bank card, signing a lease, getting groceries and so forth. This is because usually they have not done any of this due to the amount of control that was part of the relationship they escaped from. In order to ensure that they are comfortable and becoming independent, part of the programming is to allow them to learn these skills. Ashley and Katie find that by empowering women, they are helping them become independent so they can learn to do certain things on their own. This means that staff are not setting out to do all the work for the women but guiding them actively through the learning process.

### **Accessibility**

All of the interviewees have spoken about some issues in training, working together, and delivering programs and services which all in turn effect how accessible shelters are for immigrant women. As indicated earlier, in the literature these women often are not even aware of the existence of the shelters and programs simply because of language barriers, lack of knowledge and other reasons.

Usually the women themselves do not call for help but someone else does and then the crisis line is contacted in order for them to be referred to a shelter. Admission to a shelter is required to be voluntary on the woman's part. The information on most of the organizations' websites is fairly accessible because it addresses how women or other people can find more information about abuse and what they offer. This is indicative of how the shelters are advertising their services directly in the community through the use of a website. The websites provide information on domestic violence for benefactors, funders, the women themselves, or others who are interested in knowing more.

Once the referrals are made, admission really depends on whether the shelter has accommodation to offer and if certain legal documents are present. This illustrates that not all the shelters are accessible to women in general, especially if they operate on a first come first served basis and require two pieces of identification. Thus, the challenges are pre-existing and continuing as it is difficult to deal with women without legal status. "Abused immigrant women face several barriers to self-disclosure even in trust-based environments due to lack of knowledge, limited social resources, legal and emotional dependency on husbands, fear of police involvement and deportation" (Bauer *et al* 2000 as cited in Ahmad *et al*, 2005, p. 244). Evidence from this research literature and Ashley's narrative below also emphasizes how fear of deportation is a barrier in accessing services: "[The] usual thing, is that you will be deported or also that if you call police... that is so shunned in any way doesn't matter what is happening" (First Interview with Ashley, October 19, 2009).

Canada's immigration policies have an impact on access to services and fear of deportation is real, especially the loss of economic support that may accompany it. Some women may not be aware of their rights and the immigration laws in Canada. In Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), a three-year (previously ten-year) support clause prevents those who are sponsored, typically women, from applying for social

and economic supports available to non-immigrant women. It becomes the shelter's responsibility to try to sort out immigration status for the woman because often the sponsor, usually the husband, is responsible for taking care of the dependent for three years according to the IRPA. Unlike any other domestic violence situation occurring in Canada, immigrant women are disadvantaged because of this three-year support clause and unlike other victims, they are required by authorities to prove that abuse has actually taken place before they become eligible for financial assistance. This means she requires a longer stay in the shelter because of this legal status issue as she may not be able to do anything about the abuse without surpassing the three years.

In using loosely structured interviews, this allowed me to learn from the women operating and working at these shelters. They raised issues such as language and cultural barriers; legal status that they felt was significant in understanding the challenges of accessibility. The participants further outlined concerns that they felt were significant, and I believe the length of time invested in each interview allowed issues and perceptions to emerge. It allowed me to research with the flexibility to pursue issues such as "working together," which I did not anticipate.

### **Website Analysis**

Websites for the shelters serve different purposes as they each display different messages about domestic violence. All of the websites seem to be full of different information. For example, visual images and a lot of fictional stories are used as tools for trust building. All of the shelters, except the first, which was a second-stage shelter, display pictures of their facility on the website. The first organization Ashley works for prefers to use texts to describe what the shelter is like. For example, 20 independent apartment style units with two or three bedrooms are available. This gives people a sense of what the place is like and allows them to determine whether it will fit their needs. Furthermore, in terms of images both executive

directors Jennifer and Leah were strongly against the idea of portraying pictures of a diverse group of people on their websites. They felt that this would be displaying false information as the perception would then become that immigrant women from diverse cultures only get abused. This was an interesting observation they shared as Ashley's organization does use a few pictures to portray that multicultural feeling. The other two organizations seemed to be more concerned about their reputation and the messages they would be portraying by using pictures of women from diverse backgrounds. However, Leah did acknowledge during the interview that not displaying pictures of a diverse group of people could be conveying a message that under represents the voice of immigrant women. She responded quite positively to my observations of the website during the interview by stating perhaps this is an area that the organization can work on.

The website of the organization that Jennifer is affiliated with shows how they are reaching out to immigrant women with stories. This is a great strategy as an immigrant woman reading this might be able to relate and reflect upon her own experiences which might allow her to tell her own story. Jennifer shared the purpose behind posting fictional stories as she concludes with the following, "I think it helps to just show how we are accessible. That these are people that we help and that you are welcome if you are an immigrant woman. We wanted to make that really clear" (Second Interview with Jennifer, October 27, 2009). Jennifer's narrative reflects how women of different classes, races, cultures are accepted. However, the information on the website was all in English so an immigrant woman accessing these sites is underrepresented. The websites produce altered messages about domestic violence and immigrant women compared to what the interviewees disclosed. For example, all the interviewees to some extent recognized immigrant women's needs and how they must improve their knowledge towards them. However, these websites speak minimally to language and cultural barriers as the voices of immigrant women seem to be excluded. Perhaps this is because of a lack of funds in

maintaining an accessible yet user-friendly website for immigrant women who speak languages other than English. It is clear that much more research is needed however the shortcomings of this research should be avoided in future studies.

Despite the few limitations of the websites they are still fairly indicative of how the shelters are advertising their services directly in the community. The websites provide information on domestic violence in English mainly for benefactors, funders, abused women, and others who are interested in learning more about these particular shelters or safety planning. However, when discussing how accessible the shelters are we must keep in mind that admission to a shelter is required to be voluntary on the woman's part, but having more information about what is offered at each shelter can assist a woman in planning her own escape, and it can further allow others to become more knowledgeable of services so that they may also make referrals.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The goal of this research study was to bring the issue of accessibility specifically to immigrant women to the foreground as it is not present in the existing literature. Evidence from the interviews and textual analysis clearly demonstrates that accessing services is a challenge for immigrant women. Some immigrant women are unaware of the support services available and at times it may seem as if they are adequate enough to meet immigrant women's needs, but that may not always be the case. I have outlined some of the challenges shelters are experiencing providing access to services.

## **Limitations**

A number of different limitations could have potentially affected the results collected in this research study. However, due to the time constraints it was impossible to reach out to all immigrant serving agencies. The small sample size of four interviews did not allow for direct comparisons between all immigrant serving shelters. Hence, these findings cannot be broadly

generalized as all immigrant serving shelters in Alberta and/or Canada were not included.

Another limitation is participation by email which excluded those who may have been willing to participate but were not contacted by other means. In addition, I only dealt with first and second-stage housing which means I did not include interviews with family resource centre workers and emergency shelters (1-3 day stay) workers. This would have allowed me to cover a wide range of different residential facilities.

### **Future Research and Recommendations**

The collection of more data with the use of a larger sample size would be beneficial. This would help in indicating whether existing policies and programs need to be revamped to effectively serve immigrant women. This would allow researchers and policy makers to determine whether there is a need for a culturally sensitive approach and if there should be more training for staff at the shelters. Future research should address these above mentioned areas so we can begin to support immigrant women experiencing domestic violence in Canada at a greater level by offering more.

It is important to include the lived experiences of immigrant women who have escaped domestic violence. Immigrant women accessing these services should be sampled about their shelter stay. They should first be interviewed immediately after their stay and then a follow-up interview should take place six months later. This will help determine whether the programs were effective and if they had to regain access to the shelters. The questions should be about initial access and entrance into the shelter, interactions with shelter staff and other abused women, and overall how she would rate the experience. At the same time shelters should keep track of how many immigrant women are actually accessing these services. At the moment, there are no reports indicating how many immigrant women have accessed services but this would be important especially when determining whether there is a need for more resources for reaching out to this group.

There are many barriers to accessing services, which is a reality some immigrant women in Canada tend to experience. As the gap between service providers and abused immigrant women widens, access to services becomes challenging. Some immigrant women may be reluctant to report abuse, while others are simply terrified of leaving with nowhere to go. To make matters worse, many of the programs designed within the shelters are used to help with income supports, affordable housing, employment, childcare and so forth but the problem with this is that they are generic “Canadian-like” services. These shelters thus fail to acknowledge the diversity and complex situations of immigrant women especially when gender, race and class intersect with status as this further marginalizes these women as the “other” group in society.

I believe service providers need to build and sustain a relationship with other agencies to bring forward culturally appropriate programs or partnerships. This means adopting a community-like approach or partnership to work together to raise awareness and consciousness about domestic violence among immigrant women. By bridging together this gap, I have witnessed throughout this study with service providers, I think we can guide these women in the right direction. Practicing social justice for me as a researcher is about raising questions about issues like domestic violence and creating awareness towards the social injustices women especially from immigrant communities experience when accessing services in Canada. Researchers should begin to apply knowledge by engaging in the process of social activism by taking the voices of front-line workers seriously and applying into practice what can be learned to make services more accessible. Narrowing down on what works and what doesn't allows front-line workers to try new things and adapt other approaches to providing services. Thus, there is always a need for increased research where all voices of immigrant women accessing services are heard and feedback is given to front-line workers because no size fits all. Domestic violence will always exist, but the services and resources available need to shift as immigrant communities continue to increase in Edmonton, Alberta.

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### **Endnote**

1. Currently, in Edmonton, Alberta, separate shelters for women from different racial backgrounds do not exist.