

Immigrant women, like women everywhere, suffer violence and look for support to help them deal with it. This article describes some of the findings of research conducted in 2005 and 2006, which found that being an immigrant was a factor not only in immigrant women's experiences of violence in Atlantic Canada, but also in their access to support services. Immigrant women and the professionals who provide services to them describe some of the barriers they face and conclude that fully funded and coordinated prevention and intervention programs and services to immigrant women are needed in Atlantic Canada.

Providing Services to Immigrant Women in Atlantic Canada

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In November 2005, my colleagues Peruvemba Jaya and Evie Tastsoglou and I began a research study, funded by the Status of Women Canada Policy Research Fund, on how immigrant women in Atlantic Canada who experienced violence and abuse navigate support services. We interviewed 49 immigrant women who had experienced violence and 51 service providers in five sites in Atlantic Canada: Halifax, Sydney, St. John's, Moncton and Charlottetown. In order to be able to understand "violence" from the perspective of the immigrant women, we invited them to describe their experiences in their own words.

According to the women, their immigrant status and ethno-cultural background were the factors that made their experience of violence and their access to services different from other women's. The women recounted numerous stories of racial violence, and one said she had thought about buying coloured contact lenses and replacing her hijab with a hat. Some participants said that they believed Canadians are afraid of Muslims. One participant who described herself as "half Muslim" said that when she tells people of her parentage:

Their eyes just open up....It's ridiculous. It's a good thing I don't look Arabic....I have a lot of friends that do look Arabic and people look at them...because they think he's a terrorist. My best friend, he looks like one of those guys who like to blow up things. But he is Catholic.

Racially biased employers made finding work and economic independence difficult for many immigrant women. In some cases, the name on the woman's résumé or the fact that her education and experience was outside Canada meant that, although qualified for the position, the woman was not even offered an interview. The non-recognition of credentials was a frequently discussed barrier to immigrant women's economic independence, particularly for educated women who had immigrated to Canada from areas outside of Northern Europe. Although at the time of the study there were programs designed to help individuals obtain credentials that would be recognized in Canada, for some immigrant women these programs were difficult to negotiate. The women had difficulty finding appropriate employment and were often forced to accept employment in less than ideal conditions. They were frequently subjected to poor working environments, part-time employment and reduced pay scales. The reality of these working conditions had a direct and lasting effect on the women's mental, physical and financial well-being. As one service provider stated:

If they came from a country where they are working and making a living and have a good income, and respect, and they come here and nobody wants to hire them, it must really hurt their self-esteem, and you can see the

frustration; they don't understand why they can't get ahead here when they want to be here so much and they want to work so much....They're here, but they're going to leave.

Although women faced these barriers regardless of their family situation, the impact was more severe on women attempting to leave or ameliorate domestic violence. Without incomes, they could not support themselves and their children and had difficulty gaining the self-confidence they needed to deal with their situation. This was not limited to women from low-income households. Those who came from wealthier backgrounds shared similar experiences related to income and employment opportunities, although these women were less likely to seek support services. The majority of immigrant women the service providers saw tended to have limited financial resources and fewer options regarding their response to violence. One provider said her organization had been aiding women who had been forced into prostitution by their spouses.

Finding help was not easy for a number of the participants. Some had no close friends or family here to turn to. Some did not know how to seek help from organized services. In some regions, particularly those that had smaller numbers of immigrants, there were no support services. Not knowing their rights also stopped women from seeking help. For instance, one woman was afraid that she would be sent back to her country if she told anyone about the violence she had experienced. Another was afraid her husband would kill her if he lost his right to stay in Canada. One woman thought one could only see a doctor for physical health problems. For some, their previous experiences with police was also an issue. One woman said, "I remember how the police were in Peru. I have a broken nose." Not being able to communicate well in either of the official languages and being wary of confidentiality in their own community prevented some women from seeking support:

I could not communicate in any of the official languages. Using an interpreter would not work for me and I think other immigrant women think the same way. I do not feel comfortable to talk about my private life in front of a stranger or someone from my culture. People not always respect the confidentiality terms. (A Hungarian woman from Romania.)

Those who did turn to their friends, family, sponsors or church to help them cope with the violence found these supports helpful, especially if the person could speak their language. Some found support from service organizations, such as women's shelters, police and doctors. These women were grateful when the supports were free of charge and when supporters wanted to learn about their culture, values and faith or when their religion was respected. A woman from Congo stated:

The family services where I went for counselling, even their books, helped me very much. I attended sessions where they taught us how to talk to our children and how to listen to them; that gave me good examples. Now I listen to them, we discuss things together, I treat them like an adult and not the way we treat them in our country....There is a difference in the culture between my country and Canada.

Unfortunately, not all received such support. Some women believed it was because they were immigrants that they did not receive adequate or appropriate help and protection. They felt they were looked at differently or not understood because of the stereotyping of immigrants. Others found a lack of sensitivity to immigrants' problems, particularly those who had prior experiences of violence. An African woman stated:

There are no competent services for immigrant women [here] compared to other provinces because, for example, if I would have experienced my problem in another province such as Ontario, I would have received a better service. Because here is not as multicultural, or maybe I was an isolated case; they did not have a similar case before, you understand.

A number of immigrant women experienced difficulties with government service workers whom, they felt, did not understand their problems and experiences, and did not provide them with sufficient information about Canada.

Service providers acknowledged that they were unable to meet the needs of their immigrant women clients:

Why can't I help them any more than what I'm already doing?...There's three of us here in this office, and we see it. We see the need. (Name) has been sitting here for almost

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three months. She's so bright, so intelligent. She's probably going to end up going back to Pakistan or going to Toronto, or going somewhere....My insights are that you realize how much farther we have to come in order to get these people here and get them to want to be here. Because right now we can't do it.

Service providers expressed a strong desire to respond effectively and respectfully to the cultural backgrounds of their clients, and to increase their understanding of the cultural backgrounds of their clients. They recognized their clients' strengths:

I look at these women and how strong they are and how difficult it must be to just pick up and move from somewhere to come to a totally different country to try to start over. Having the education they do and not being able to get a decent job because they are from somewhere else, and I guess mainly what sticks out to me is their strength and determination and their skills.

The problem, according to service providers, was their own lack of training in cultural competency. Some who had completed a professional degree, such as social work, had received some general training or background information regarding cultural diversity and providing culturally competent care, and some organizations had attempted to provide their employees with training in the form of professional development workshops, but, for the most part, this training was fragmented and did not bear a direct relationship to the demands of their current employment. In some cases service providers were frustrated by their lack of skill in working with translators. Service providers' lack of training placed them in an impossible situation and resulted in many immigrant women "falling through the cracks":

I really thought you know they're going to come here, and they'll go through the program, and they'll find a job. But they're not finding a job. Because we can't just give them what they need. I didn't know how to tell

them how to get their credentials recognized. I wouldn't have a clue...You need someone to...tell them. (Service Provider)

In spite of their commitment to providing effective support, a number of service providers did not see cultural competency as a priority because immigrant women constituted such a small part of their client base. With limited budgets, they had to spend their resources where it was most in demand.

Some service providers saw violence against women, particularly domestic violence, as a cultural import. This bias was sometimes coupled with the belief that, in contrast, the violence experienced by Canadian-born women was culturally acceptable. One provider stated that, when approaching women from different cultural backgrounds, she would ask herself, "Is this unfair, is this abuse or is this standard?" This was, in turn, reflected in the counselling offered to the immigrant women who sought assistance from their organization. To quote one provider:

The husband, sometimes in his culture, feels that he has a right to discipline the woman and sometimes that may include physical [violence], you know, and that is sometimes something that is hard to deal with....A few times we've had to explain things are different in Canada, and our laws are different, and that there is no gender bias, and there's no gender domination, that it's equal partnership.

To some extent, some immigrant women agree with this analysis.

A woman from Uganda said:

A lot of it also had to do with our own cultural beliefs and religious beliefs. In my culture there is a belief that a man has to dominate in the home, a man can do anything he wishes to do with his family and usually there is little intervention from our side.

Leaving a violent marriage partner often meant leaving their community as well. One woman said people did not appreciate how big an achievement it was for her to feel the fear

associated with going against beliefs and culture and yet “walk out of it.”

Other immigrant women believed that their experience of violence was the same as for other women. One participant said:

I always think that there is an element of universality to the experiences that women go through. And that is one of the things that frustrates me when people say, “Oh you from Mexico and your cultural things are different.”...I think that men are very similar and, well, at least in Canada and in Mexico men are very similar. We do things differently, but I just feel like the things that women go through here and in Mexico are very similar. And women there might be poor and might not have access to different services, but, you know, the same things happen there and here. I just don't feel like my nationality has any bearing.

Whether or not the incidents of violence are culturally based, the immigrant women agreed that service providers need to be made aware that immigrants come from different cultures:

First, it is really essential that when we talk of a culture, we need to understand that culture. We can't generalize in the sense this is going to happen, this is how it is going to happen here in this culture, so maybe this is the same reaction that is happening with every immigrant woman who comes from away. Every culture is unique.

The fragmentation of existing services was another key source of frustration for service providers and a problem for their clients. While collectively providing an umbrella of available services for violence prevention, many organizations in Atlantic Canada operate independently from each other and often vary considerably between regions. In some cases, the organizations represented in this study operated not only with separate mandates but were in conflict with each other. Those housed under departments of the Federal Government tended to be more consistent between provinces than community-based and user-driven organizations. However, what was lost in regard to consistency appeared to be mediated by a more personal approach to the solution of issues of violence and a more textured understanding of the systemic nature

of racism, classism and violence against women.

We asked the participants what they thought would make them feel more secure and safe in asking for help. Some women said they would seek help only from someone they knew or had been referred to by someone they trusted. Others thought it would help if they could talk to people who knew something about their culture, but had reservations about talking to someone from their own community:

First of all, I would like to know well and trust the person from whom I am asking for help. Confidentiality is also important to me. And, definitely, the person should be knowledgeable about my culture but not someone from my country. I would trust maybe more another immigrant woman who experienced similar situations and not necessarily a professional counsellor.

The women felt that social services should be accessible in the immigrant's own language, or translators should be available to help them understand available resources. They also thought it would help if the counsellors were women, and of the same country of origin as the clients. They strongly recommended that government agencies should employ people from diverse cultures or appropriately train their staff in cultural sensitivity; staff should have a general knowledge about different religions and cultures, be more sensitive to immigrants' problems and understand the source and nature of violence.

Many of the immigrant women who talked to us said they needed to be better informed about the Canadian society. For instance, one immigrant woman said women need to hear that in Canada they have the right to leave or divorce their husbands in case of abuse. They also wanted to be informed about available resources they could turn to for help in cases of violence because, as they pointed out, not everyone has access to the Internet or knows information is available in embassies:

Sometimes you do not know even where to go to complain. Maybe you would have the opportunity to ask immigrant women what can be done, what opportunities are available, where to turn for help in case of psychological violence, what can we do. What resources do we have? We have been told that the information is in the telephone book, but I don't know where.

A German woman stated:

Not having any resources and not knowing about your rights, that was the main thing. That shows a language barrier that was then present. And being in a rural area [made it] very complicated.

The women said that it would be helpful to them if, rather than having to depend on friends and a multitude of services (like transition houses, lawyers, psychiatrists, doctors), services were more centralized and/or a cultural centre was established for newcomers where women could share their experiences, learn about available resources and meet people who would accompany them to the police or other services to help them understand the system more clearly. A woman originally from Colombia discussed what is needed in her community for immigrant women to receive help with their problems:

This is something that this country can do because the human resources are there. There are very well-educated people from our country who can help, who can work in this kind of field....I think that immigrants need more support, more workshops, or more meetings where they can go and they can find out about services. They can find a way to manage with their own problems when they face them. We have in the Association a women's group but this women's group is more a social activity, like playing bingo games or they go to the beach to roast marshmallows, or they go to the garden or they go walking.

The women suggested that a resource information manual would be helpful, and established organizations should advertise their services more broadly in the immigrant communities. Failing that, support people could be assigned to new Canadians to keep in touch with immigrant families to see how they are doing and provide them with information about their rights, about services.

To have services in their own language would help:

We are part of the same country but everybody does different things...In Ontario... you have the possibility to go to a physician who can speak Spanish and you can ask for a psychologist who can speak Spanish. I think if you have this kind of social service in your own language, because that's good when you say that we are a multicultural country.

This research study has brought us to the conclusion that fully funded prevention and intervention programs and services to immigrant women are needed in Atlantic Canada. These services should form a multiple, integrated response involving collaboration between provincial governments, settlement and multicultural NGOs, law enforcement agencies and organizations that provide support to women. It is not sufficient, though, to provide the services. Immigrant women need to be made aware of them and helped to navigate the system. Research to find out who is not using services, and why, would help identify women's needs. These are policy decisions. As one service provider said, these changes have "to come from a bigger power."

About the author

BARBARA COTTRELL was Co-researcher and Project Manager of the Navigating Anti-violence Work in Atlantic Canada in a Culturally Sensitive Way (2005-2006), Coordinator of the Security and Immigration Research Project (2003-2005) and Co-researcher of the Parent Abuse in Immigrant Communities Project with Saint Mary's University (2004). She also conducted research with the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA) on violence in immigrant families (2003) and wrote an Ethnocultural Research Report for Heritage Canada (2003). She has written numerous reports and articles on family violence and is the author of *When Teens Abuse Their Parents*, Fernwood Books, 2004.