

## **Immigrant Women, Family Violence and Pathways out of Homelessness: A Halifax Perspective by Christine Saulnier, Barbara Clow, Wilfreda Thurston, Andrea D'Sylva**

There have been few investigations into the connections between family violence, immigration, and homelessness of women. How does the intersection between migration and family violence increase women's risk for homelessness? This was the question that researchers in three sites in Canada sought to answer. Led by Dr. Wilfreda Thurston at the University of Calgary, this project included interviews with women and service providers in Calgary, Winnipeg and Halifax. The project was funded by the National Research Program of the National Homelessness Initiative and the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration.

While many of the findings applied to all three sites, there were some findings that were specific to each site. Halifax has a small immigrant population relative to most other major urban centres, however, it still exhibits a great degree of ethnocultural diversity. The overall size of the immigrant community has meant that there are fewer settlement services on offer in Halifax as a result. This has implications for our research because we only recruited women who had accessed services, and in particular shelters. Our challenge recruiting is an indication of the first issue: immigrant women in general tend not to access shelters. Only women who spoke English were interviewed, which is also a limitation of this study. This means we would not have reached the most vulnerable members of this population. In total, across the three sites, 111 interviews were conducted with immigrant women, with additional interviews being conducted with service providers, policy-makers, and other NGO representatives.

The ability of immigrant women to leave abusive situations is affected by their settlement context, particularly the availability of culturally competent services and language facility. In a place like Halifax where there is one major service provider, it is difficult for those with limited language facility to properly access available services. Similarly, a single service provider is not necessarily a safe place because it is equally accessible by the abuser as well as the one being abused.

In general, we found that women who knew the relevant laws and/or available social supports either before coming to Canada or shortly thereafter were more likely to access services. Instances of family violence emerged for some women during the migration process, and therefore settlement was concluded to be a critical point for intervention because this is when they accessed and became aware of available services. Often, however, these women did not have laws and services explained to them during this time. Most of the women we interviewed were being sponsored by their spouses and thus their spouses, as sponsors, are left responsible to ensure that these women are orientated to Canada.

In terms of the precipitants of violence, there were a number of factors such as changes in gender dynamics. For those who choose and/or are able to leave the abusive situation, the availability of affordable housing is a key factor in preventing homelessness. In essence, these women (and their children) can be forced into homelessness despite nominally having access to

housing through their spouses/partners. When there is a single male breadwinner, the ability to obtain adequate housing after leaving can be a difficult enterprise for the women. In some cases, these women were able to obtain housing, but would still be considered amongst the hidden homelessness due to the insecurity associated with living in housing that they considered inadequate due to lack of permanency, affordability and/or quality concerns.

Our findings highlight the fact that some abused women are more vulnerable than others. For instance, sponsored women who encounter an abusive situation (being abused by their sponsor) are in an even more precarious situation. Again, the importance of language facility and/or knowledge of Canadian laws and social services is important. Legal recourses exist, but these women shared with us their experiences of trying to engage with a legal system that operates only in one of the official languages, and entails a very lengthy process that is quite intimidating. In some cases, their immigrant status (or lack of status) was used by their partners to control their behaviour. When women are being actively dissuaded from engaging with the outside world, it makes obtaining assistance (even within their community) all the more difficult. Service-providers are another possible source of aid, but due to the limited range of services, language facility, and relative insecurity (since abuser can easily find them there); there are difficulties with adequately accessing their help. *At that time when my husband started to threaten my life and I had to go into hiding, I wasn't able to get social services because he was sponsor. Even I called immigration. I told them that he threatened to kill me, that he had a contract out to kill me and my children. I could not get support from them, I mean at all. They said we don't have anything to do with this. You need his sponsor[ship]. If you need some support, he has to help you. So that was very difficult for me to understand. I felt neglected, not supported. I thought of it like a victim. Society didn't help me.*

#### *Participant*

Upon leaving, the difficulties associated with being a single mother meant not only increased responsibility, but as in some cases facing discrimination. *I call everywhere... apartment, you know whatever to find a place to go to. It was tough. After when you mention that you're a single Mom, nobody wants you and you have kids, that's it, nobody.* Less overt discrimination is encountered because shelters give priority to women with children, meaning that women caring for adults faced barriers as well.

Another major issue relates to housing security. While some women were able to obtain subsidized housing, it was not always in neighbourhoods that were considered safe. A related challenge is that the public transportation system was viewed as inadequate for their needs. This would seem to exacerbate income/employment problems, as well as health/wellness. For the women in our study, once they left the abusive situations their health improved. However, all women experienced depression, sleep deprivation and chronic pain to some degree. Poor health status in turn affects ability to find jobs and to earn income. In terms of the services that are needed, some of the respondents hadn't had the opportunity to learn everyday skills, such as managing finances, making the task of heading a newly formed household on limited income all the more difficult. Further research is needed, particularly in terms of longitudinal analyses and studies which incorporate the perspectives of immigrant men regarding family violence.

In general, low income was one of the main challenges identified. Those women who found themselves unemployed felt that social assistance rates were too low, particularly since it meant that they would be forced to occupy substandard housing. In some cases, they were unable to find paid employment because of the lack of recognition of foreign credentials, language barriers including difficulties due to the presence of accents. Apart from these, some of the women did not know where services are available and how they could be accessed. For settlement services as a whole, this research suggests that there may be a case for ensuring that immigrant men and women have equal access to the services so that women experiencing family violence are made aware of available services and can begin to address some of the settlement and integration challenges that affect all immigrants i.e. language training, employment/skills training, social networking, etc. When they are the ones being sponsored, immigration tends to deal with the sponsor directly and solely.

Systemic factors are most relevant to prevention of homelessness in women who experience abuse. Almost all individual causes of homelessness and housing insecurity are embedded in systemic causes. This is an important point in terms of policies and programs; that is, programs aimed at systemic factors (e.g., enforcing labour standards) may have a better chance of widespread success than programs aimed at building individual capacity (e.g., knowing your workplace rights). Programs directed at “enabling” individual women to protect themselves and their children are likely to fail at reducing the incidence of housing insecurity in this population if the systematic causes are not also addressed.

Indicators of increased or decreased risk for homelessness are complex and not always opposites of each other. Indicators of increased risk and decreased risk are often different in important ways that affect program planning. One is not necessarily the reverse of the other. A woman with minimal English (or French) ability, for example, is more isolated and unable to obtain information in a context or system where services and information are not made available in languages other than English (or French). In such a case, lack of language capacity may be a barrier to obtaining crisis housing or to obtaining information from outside of a specific ethnocultural community. Thus, the interventions to decrease risk may not be just language training in a second language, but language training that builds a woman’s *literacy* about her rights and common social problems, such as family violence, that women face in Canada.

Advocacy is key to the ability of immigrant women to end family violence and to obtain secure housing. Advocacy is incredibly important to service accessibility among immigrant women experiencing family violence and housing issues. Networking among service providers, both within and between the different sectors, can support advocacy work by increasing awareness of services among service providers. This could also be assisted by a more broad-level coordination between immigrant serving agencies, family violence, and housing sectors.