

Domestic Violence in Sponsor Relationships among Immigrant and Refugee Women and its Links to Homelessness: Implications for Service Delivery

Final Report Submitted to
Housing and Homelessness Branch
Human Resources and Social Development Canada

by the
Canadian Council on Social Development
in partnership with

**Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society
and Immigrant Women Services of Ottawa**

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Executive Summary

Homelessness is described as “sleeping rough on the streets,” in emergency shelters and hostels, or staying temporarily with family or friends. More broadly, it also includes individuals who may be at risk of homelessness – for example, as a result of domestic violence and conflict, those at risk of eviction or in overcrowded households, or where individuals are in unaffordable housing by paying more than 30% of their income towards housing costs.

A 2001 study by Côté, Kérisit and Côté reported that new immigrant and refugee women were particularly vulnerable to homelessness, especially those who had been sponsored by their partners. Yet little is known about the causes of homelessness within this unique population, nor the links between their experience of homelessness and other critical factors such as domestic violence, unemployment, and poverty.

This study has been designed to respond directly to this knowledge gap, with a specific focus on the dynamics of the sponsor relationship. It looks at the specific factors within sponsorship relationships that contribute to and/or compound domestic violence and explores how these dynamics heighten the risk of homelessness for immigrant and refugee women. Its primary objective is to expand our knowledge of the experiences of immigrant women at risk of homelessness with a view to identifying effective strategies for empowering and supporting these same women to reduce the risk of domestic violence and homelessness.

Methodology

The current study focused on the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women in two cities: Vancouver and Ottawa. Qualitative research methods were used for sampling, data collection, and analysis. This included purposive sampling strategies, face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. In total, 45 interviews were conducted with immigrant and refugee women who had experienced homelessness, including women who were current or former shelter users. A majority had been sponsored by their spouses or partners and had experienced domestic abuse in their relationships. In addition to the personal interviews, three focus group discussions were held with 23 frontline workers from homeless shelters, transition homes for abused women, and immigrant settlement agencies. Other study components included a review of relevant research literature and interviews with key informants working in shelters or housing support services.

Summary of Key Findings

- Studies of homelessness over the past decade and anecdotal reports from shelters have identified the growing problem of homelessness among immigrant and refugee women.
- Immigrant and refugee women who experience homelessness tend to share certain characteristics, such as an inability to communicate in English or French, unemployment, large family size, lack of familial supports, and social isolation.
- Major causes of homelessness among this population include domestic violence, the breakdown of sponsorship arrangements, poverty, high rental costs, and a lack of affordable housing alternatives.

- Many immigrant and refugee women are unaware of services designed to provide support, and many existing services are inadequate to the unique needs of this population.
- Additional support services are needed such as translation and settlement services, shelters for abused women, language training programs, and affordable housing options.

Recommendations

In order to develop more effective strategies to empower and support immigrant and refugee women who are at risk of homelessness, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. The current sponsorship application process should more actively engage immigrant women, rather than putting them in a passive role. Immigrant women need to be the principal applicants for sponsorship based on their marriage or relationship to the partner. In this area, translation services are critical for those who may not be proficient in Canada's official languages.
2. In order to support the integration of immigrant families into Canadian society, the settlement process should focus special attention on immigrant and refugee women. In this area as well, language training is critical to their success, and customized settlement counselling would aid integration.
3. Language training must be a central part of the settlement process for immigrant and refugee women. The settlement process should include mandatory language assessments and opportunities for language training, including free language classes, with provisions for transportation and childcare.
4. Immigrant and refugee women need spaces in which to interact with others and with volunteer counsellors. As part of the integration process, such spaces would provide a forum in which immigrant and refugee women could socialize with other women, learn about Canada, and obtain information about the rights, responsibilities and benefits available in their new society.
5. Community education programs should be developed in conjunction with local faith leaders. Information would focus on Canadian laws, women's rights, and issues around partner violence, as well as parenting issues and other topics relevant to the successful integration of new immigrants.
6. Support services designed for homeless immigrant and refugee women and their families must incorporate cultural competency as part of the core delivery principles. For example, services should respect and reflect the beliefs, attitudes, and languages of this population. Services should also take into account the woman's immigration and socio-economic status, her access to the criminal justice system, her proficiency in English or French, as well as her vulnerability to racism, discrimination, and possible ostracism from her ethnic community.
7. The lack of affordable housing in Canada is a problem that must be addressed by all levels of government. More shelters for the homeless, transitional housing, and emergency shelters for abused women are urgently needed.
8. A monitoring system is needed to ensure fairness in the provision of social housing and low-income housing. This would help prevent racism and discrimination in the allocation of social housing units.
9. Public education programs should be developed to focus on anti-racism and anti-discrimination, thereby enhancing a more inclusive Canadian society.

Conclusion

Evidence from this study's key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and face-to-face interviews indicate that partner abuse is a major contributor to the growing problem of homelessness among immigrant and refugee women in Canada. In addition, the inherent power imbalance in many sponsorship arrangements, the breakdown of those sponsorship relationships, and a lack of proficiency in English or French are other factors which play an important role in contributing to this problem.

Unfortunately, many immigrant and refugee women are unaware of the social support services that are designed to help them. And in many cases, the social services that are available are insufficiently sensitive to the unique needs of this population.

Research for this study was led by the Canadian Council on Social Development, in partnership with the Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society and Immigrant Women Services of Ottawa.

Introduction

Simply stated, homelessness is the lack of a place to live. However, exact estimates of homelessness are not available. There are no reliable methods for counting the number of homeless people in Canada. Yet, the increase in the numbers using emergency shelters and evidence from service workers suggest that numbers have increased significantly since the mid 1990s. Indeed, the increase the individuals that we see on the street – those that are “absolutely” homeless – represent only the tip of the iceberg. Many more are living temporarily with family or friends or at grave risk of losing their housing either by, for example, eviction, poverty, threat of violence, lack of health services.¹

People without housing are a diverse population, tied together by one common characteristic: lack of housing. The traditional stereotypes of the homeless in Canada as itinerant men, “bums” or “hobos” has given way in the face of growing evidence about the diversity of the homeless population (Hargrave, 1999). In particular, according to recent studies, the number of homeless women living on the street has grown (Neal, 2004; Callaghan et al, 2002; CERA, 2002; Hargrave, 1999). And many more women – and particularly those with children – are at risk of homelessness due to poverty and threat of violence (Khosla, 2003; CERA, 2002; Hargrave, 1999).

The problem of homelessness has emerged as a particularly difficult issue among recent immigrant and refugee women. According to Klodawsky *et.al.*, (2005), immigrant and refugee mothers with children are a new and fast-growing group among the homeless. We know that visible minority and immigrant women now make up a disproportionate share of shelter users in centres with significant immigrant populations (Klodawsky, Aubry, Behnia, Nicholson and Young, 2005; Hargrave, 1999; Novac, Brown and Bourbonnais, 1996); moreover, many other immigrant and refugee women are at significant risk of homelessness (CERA, 2002).

Existing studies of homelessness among women – and indeed other homeless populations – have tended to treat their experiences and needs as being uniform (Gaetz, 2004; Mosher, Evans, and Little, 2004; Neal, 2004; and Sherkin, 2004). Yet little is known about the specific causes of homelessness among new immigrant and refugee women and the links between domestic violence and other critical stresses in their lives that compromise their health and well-being (Klodawsky et al, 2005; Gaetz, 2004; Callaghan, Farha and Porter, 2002; and Novac et al, 1996).

This study has been designed to respond directly to this knowledge gap, with a specific focus on the dynamics of the sponsor relationship. It looks at the specific factors within sponsorship relationships that contribute to and/or compound domestic violence and explores how these dynamics heighten the risk of homelessness for immigrant and refugee women. Its primary objective is to expand our knowledge of the experiences of immigrant women at risk of homelessness with a view to identifying effective strategies for empowering and supporting these same women to reduce the risk of domestic violence and homelessness.

The following paper outlines the findings. The next section provides an overview of the literature on homelessness and domestic violence among immigrant and refugee women in Canada. The rest of the paper includes a discussion of the methodology employed, a demographic portrait of the women surveyed in this research project, and the presentation and analysis of the qualitative findings. The final section identifies recommendations.

¹ According to one estimates, about 20% of tenant households in Canada are estimated to be at risk of homelessness, because they spend 50% or more of their monthly income on rent (Family Service Canada, 2003).

Literature Review

Homelessness and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence has been identified as a significant contributor to homelessness among women (Neal, 2004; CERA, 2002) and as such, it is critical to understanding the problem of homelessness among immigrant and refugee women. Domestic violence refers to a pattern of coercive control by one person over another in a family or household. This pattern is characterized by physical or sexual violence, emotional degradation, and/or economic deprivation that is used to dominate and exert control.²

In Canada, successive cycles of the General Social Survey on Victimization have found that significant numbers of women have experienced violent victimization. In 2004, 111 violent incidents per 1,000 women 15 years of age or older were reported. Notably, women made up the overwhelming majority of victims of reported cases of domestic violence and were more likely than men to report serious, injurious and repeated incidents of violence.³ Within immigrant and refugee families in Canada, the problem of domestic violence is compounded by additional vulnerabilities, including the women's lack of proficiency in English or French, problems of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, social isolation, and what is referred to as the "sponsorship effect" (Smith, 2004).

The 2003/04 Transition Home Survey reveals that a majority of women and children (76% and 88% in April 2004 respectively) were residing in shelters to escape domestic violence and abuse including psychological abuse, physical assault, threats and sexual assault (Statistics Canada, 2004).⁴ Many others fleeing violence move into overcrowded accommodations with other family or friends. This is case among immigrant and refugee women, many of whom are unfamiliar with existing social service supports and are fearful of losing custody of their children because of inadequate housing (Khosla, 2003; CERA, 2002). Others stay in violent situations and choose to sacrifice other necessities – such as food, clothing, and medical needs – in order to pay the rent or mortgage payments to maintain their housing.

The cumulative impact of domestic violence on women's psychological and physical health can be severe (Gaetz, 2004; Stewart, Cheung, Ferris, Hyman, Cohen and Williams, 2002). While most immigrant women arrive in Canada in good health, they are at an increased risk of poor health due to settlement-related stresses and financial hardships (Stewart et al, 2002). As a result, the presence of domestic violence further impacts the health of those who are already in a vulnerable situation.

² Other terms used to describe domestic violence include domestic abuse, family violence, spousal assault, and partner abuse.

³ Among visible minorities, the rate of violent victimization was roughly the same as the rate among non visible minorities. The rate of violent victimization was actually lower among immigrants, specifically recent immigrants. However, these data should be interpreted with caution. The survey was fielded only in English and French, effectively excluding potential respondents from other language groups. As well, it is reasonable to expect that many women – and certainly those from other ethno-cultural groups – would not have chosen to participate or share their experiences with regard to abuse with a stranger.

⁴ The Transition Home Survey is a biennial census of all residential facilities that provide shelter to victims of domestic violence. Residential facilities include transition homes, second stage housing, safe home networks, women's emergency centres, emergency shelters, family resource centres, and other.

Certainly those who experience violence are at heightened risk of homelessness, and they face the myriad of health problems related to this state (Novac et al, 1996).

Homelessness and Sponsorship Breakdown

Women who are sponsored by their husbands or partners to come to Canada as new immigrants are in a unique and highly vulnerable situation. The sponsorship agreement – a three-year period for a spouse – is based on the premise that the woman’s basic needs will be provided by her husband as the sponsor, thus creating a legal bondage of dependency which enforces patterns of inequality (Côté, Kérisit and Côté, 2001). In a brief submitted to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) described this principle as a de facto privatization of basic social security by the federal government, which often creates a dynamic of dependence and subordination in the spousal relationship and undermines the equality rights of new immigrant women (NAWL, 2001).

The environment created by the sponsorship arrangement gives power to the spouse through his ability to control the initial immigration procedures and makes the women who are sponsored vulnerable to control tactics (Côté et al, 2001; NAWL, 2001). For some time now, women’s groups have been sounding the alarm about the problems faced by women in sponsorship relationships. For example, more than 10 years ago, Table Feministe francophone de concertation provinciale de l’Ontario identified sponsorship arrangements as a key issue for women’s equality rights (Côté et al, 2001). Yet little attention has been paid to the issue. In a study on the impact of sponsorship on the living conditions of Francophone immigrant women in Ontario, Côté et al (2001) reported that sponsorship arrangements were likely to create or intensify the dependency and vulnerability of women in relation to men.

Of course not all sponsorship families experience domestic violence or abuse. However, Côté et al (2001) suggests that sponsorship can often be a source of conflict, tension, and blackmail – and sometimes, abuse. The British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence (Spring, 2004) has also reported that immigrant women who are sponsored by their husbands are particularly vulnerable to abuse or intimidation by their spouses because of fears that the sponsorship will be withdrawn. The threat of homelessness is thus present in all sponsorship agreements.

Homelessness and Poverty

In addition to domestic violence, problems of poverty and the lack of affordable housing options have also been identified as major contributors to homelessness among women (Callaghan et al, 2002; Buckland et al, 2001; Novac et al, 1996). Just under one-quarter of the women were in shelters for other reasons, and among those, the majority (75%) had sought shelter because they were unable to find affordable housing (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2005). The erosion of earnings and relatively high rates of poverty combined with rising rental costs have created an untenable situation for many women. Despite the overall prosperity of most Canadians over the last 10 years, certain marginalized groups such as immigrants, visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples have experienced an economic deterioration in their circumstances (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2004; Teelucksingh & Galabuzzi, 2005; Galabuzzi, 2003).

In fact, increasing poverty has been identified as a major contributor to the growth in homelessness among families in 10 Canadian cities (CMHC, 2003). This trend of increasing poverty is exacerbated

by problems of unemployment and underemployment, and by income assistance rates that have remained flat or declined while housing costs rose (CMHC, 2003). In Toronto, for example, between 1989 and 1998, the average annual income of single mothers fell by more than \$1,000.00 while rents rose by 42% or \$3,276 during the period (Callaghan *et al*, 2002). The situation is particularly acute among immigrant, refugee and visible minority women as they are more likely to have low incomes than non-immigrant and non-visible minority women, and consequently, experience or face serious “housing affordability” problems (Sherkin, 2004; Callaghan *et al*, 2002; Buckland *et al*, 2001; and Novac *et al*, 1996).

New immigrants in particular have lost economic ground compared to earlier cohorts of immigrants, in part, due to difficulties in having their academic and professional credentials recognized in Canada (Teelucksingh and Galabuzzi, 2005; FCM, 2004; United Way, 2004). Evidence from several studies also indicate that “women of colour” face very high rates of poverty, and they are most likely to find themselves isolated in communities of poor and racialized people (Khosla, 2003; CERA, 2002; Galabuzzi, 2002). In Toronto, for example, poverty rates among ethno-racial single women range from 75% (Latin-American origin) to 48% (South Asian origin), compared to 43% among those of European origin (Khosla, 2003).

In a report by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM, 2004), seven indicators were identified to measure the risk of homelessness. These included: households spending 50% or more of their income on rent; rental housing starts; waiting lists for social housing; vacancy rates; incidence of low income; unemployment; and lone-parent families. (The report also noted that the risk of homelessness was rising in 20 urban municipalities, including Ottawa and Vancouver.) These seven indicators of risk for homelessness also have significant implications for the risk of poverty, and the report notes with concern that five of the seven indicators deteriorated between 1991 and 2001. While unemployment and low-income rates among the general population remained unchanged over this period, recent immigrants experienced above-average increases in these two indicators, thus raising their risk of homelessness (FCM, 2004).

Homelessness and Cuts in Social Programs

Cutbacks in social programs – and particularly those in the area of housing – have led to shortages in affordable housing, long waiting lists for subsidized housing, and inadequate support services in shelters for abused women and other transitional houses (Mosher *et al*, 2004; Neal, 2004; Callaghan *et al*, 2002; Buckland *et al*, 2001). In some cases, women have stayed in or returned to abusive relationships because of inadequate support services or difficulties in accessing these services (Mosher *et al*, 2004; Neal, 2004; Smith, 2004; Callaghan *et al*, 2002). In addition, new immigrant and refugee women – especially those in sponsored families – may be unfamiliar with Canadian laws and the social support services that are available to help them (Mosher *et al*, 2004; Neal, 2004; Smith, 2004).

Key findings from a CCSD study indicated that immigrant and refugee women are less likely than other population groups to report abuse or to access available support services (Smith, 2004). In order to reach out to these women in crisis, culturally appropriate services are needed, including interpretation services and knowledgeable staff (Mosher *et al*, 2004; Smith, 2004). As well, gaps between existing services for the homeless, those designed to assist abused women, and immigrant-settlement programs also need to be addressed. Hargrave (1999) noted that while a variety of projects and programs throughout Canada are attempting to address the problem of homelessness, it

continues to be a crisis without an audience, and remains largely hidden in doorways and alleyways, abandoned buildings, shelters, and cheap hotels.

Summary of Literature Review

The research literature indicates that immigrant women are extremely vulnerable to a range of factors that have been linked to an increased risk of homelessness. These include risk factors such as poverty, barriers to economic self-sufficiency, social isolation, family violence, and a lack of safe, affordable, and appropriate housing (Neal, 2004; Sherkin, 2004). Few studies have examined the issue of partner violence and its links to an increased risk of homelessness, while the unique situation faced by immigrant and refugee women in relation to partner violence and homelessness has been largely overlooked (Gaetz, 2004; CERA, 2002; Novac et al, 1996). Their unique challenges, while acknowledged, have not been explored in detail (Neal, 2004; Sherkin, 2004; Callaghan et al, 2002; Noval et al, 1996).

The research literature has only recently begun to address the relationship between homelessness and immigration status (Klodawsky et al, 2005). As such, there remain gaps in knowledge about the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women, and consequently, knowledge gaps about the most effective and culturally appropriate service options for this vulnerable population.

An Overview of the Research Communities

Ottawa

Ottawa is one of the fastest growing cities in Canada, experiencing 7.3% growth between 1996 and 2001. Most of this growth (39%) has been the result of immigration. Today, one in five Ottawa residents is an immigrant, and by 2020, the ratio is expected to be about one in three (United Way Ottawa, 2004). About 75% of new immigrants to Canada now come from developing countries and as a result, Ottawa is a fast-growing multicultural community. More than 15% of the city's population are members of visible minority groups, and this is expected to double by 2020 (United Way Ottawa, 2004).

While the median income in Ottawa is well above the national median income – \$26,200 compared to \$21,600 in 2000 – low-income and immigrant families in the city are struggling (United Way Ottawa, 2004). About 12% of Ottawa families have incomes under \$20,000 per year, and employment rates in low-income neighbourhoods are falling (United Way Ottawa, 2004). Recent immigrants (those who arrived within the last 10 years) are skilled and more highly educated than ever before – with 51% having obtained a university degree – but they are having difficulties finding work (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2003). In fact, recent immigrants aged 25 to 44 with a university degree are four times more likely to be unemployed than residents who have lived in Canada for 10 years or more: 17% compared to 4%. As a result, about 50% of new immigrants have incomes of less than \$10,000 a year or no income at all (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2003).

The growing disparities in Ottawa are said to be even more acute in the area of housing (Klodawsky et al, 2005). About 58% of Canadian-born households own their homes, compared to only 11% of

immigrant households (United Way Ottawa, 2004). And while housing starts in Ottawa rose by 110% between 1996 and 2002 (compared to a 75% increase in Toronto over the same period), almost half of all tenant households are in “core housing need,” meaning they pay 30% or more of their gross income on rent (United Way Ottawa, 2004). Immigrant households are far more likely to be in core housing need than Canadian-born households (41% compared to 24%), and immigrant families are more than eight times more likely to live in crowded households than Canadian-born families (26% compared to 3%). The city is also characterized by a severe shortage of affordable housing, with 15,000 households on long waiting lists for social housing that can stretch up to eight years (Klodawsky et al, 2005). Waiting times for affordable housing in Ottawa have grown from three to five years in 1999, to five to eight years by 2002 (FCM, 2004). As well, about 1,000 people, on average, sleep in homeless shelters each night (United Way Ottawa, 2004).

Vancouver

Statistics Canada (2005) forecasts that by the year 2017, British Columbia will have the largest proportion of visible minorities in Canada. This cultural shift will be even more dramatic in Vancouver than in the rest of the province, with the current proportion of visible minorities expected to rise from 36% to 53% (Bagloele and Bisetty, 2005). The driving force behind these changes is immigration. About 21% of new immigrants to Canada settle in Vancouver each year, and immigrants comprise almost 35% of the current population in the city.

The Metro Vancouver region is one of Canada’s most expensive housing markets. The average value of a detached home is \$371,000 – 40% higher than an equivalent house in Toronto (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2003). Rental units in the city are also more expensive than in all other metropolitan areas, and Vancouver is the only major city in Canada in which a majority of the population are renters rather than home-owners. It is estimated that only about 20% of renters in Vancouver can afford to buy a “starter home.” A report to Vancouver City Council noted that affordable housing was an important issue, with 25% of all households in “core housing need” – that is, living in sub-standard housing, or having to pay more than 30% of their gross income to rent suitable (appropriate size) or adequate (reasonable state of repair) accommodation (Gray, 2001).

The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH, 2002) reported that the number of households and individuals who were at-risk of homelessness had increased dramatically in the Vancouver region between 1991 and 1996 – by 65% for individuals and 48% for households – while the region’s population had grown by only 14% over the same period. The report suggested that these increases were likely due to the combined effects of declining household incomes, high housing costs, low vacancy rates, and an insufficient supply of affordable housing (RSCH, 2002). A lack of coordination of support services, particularly those for marginalized groups such as immigrants and refugees, has also been identified as a concern that needs to be addressed (Gray, 2001).

Methodology

Data Collection

This study focused on the links between domestic violence, sponsorship arrangements, absolute homelessness, and relative homelessness. To understand the relationship among these issues, the study adopted a qualitative research methodology, one that provided a forum for direct engagement with the study participants.

An advisory group was established to help guide the project. It included representatives from the partner organizations in Vancouver and Ottawa, as well as workers from immigrant settlement agencies and shelters in the two cities. Throughout the project, members of the advisory group provided suggestions and comments on the overall project plan, reviewed the interview and discussion guides, and provided feedback on the final project draft. To help control costs, the group conferred primarily via telephone and e-mail.

The study focuses on two cities that have sizable yet distinct new immigrant populations: Vancouver (18%) and Ottawa (4%). These cities were selected, with the assistance of the advisory group, in order to assess whether the experiences of women from these varied new immigrant populations was similar or not. As well, Ottawa was chosen as it provided an opportunity to interview francophone women being served through francophone agencies as well as women who spoke English or another language.

Study participants for the face-to-face interviews were immigrant and refugee women who were absolutely homeless, relatively homeless, or at risk of homelessness (see Appendix A for the definition of these terms). This included immigrant and refugee women who had experienced domestic violence and had been former and/or current shelter users. In particular, immigrant and refugee women who had experienced sponsored relationships were sought. Through these interviews, participants shared their direct life experiences and provided first-hand perspectives on their experience of homelessness.

Additional data were also collected through focus group discussions with frontline workers from homeless shelters, transition homes for abused women, and immigrant settlement agencies. In addition to corroborating the experiences and perspectives obtained through the face-to-face interviews, the focus groups with frontline workers also provided a much broader perspective on the causal factors, interactions among these factors, and their effects on the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women. Data obtained through these discussions included direct narratives based on the workers' experiences and perspectives.

The study also included a series of key informant interviews with individuals and community organizations working in the areas of immigrant and refugee settlement and homelessness, such as academics, settlement counsellors, and shelter workers. Key informants were interviewed about their knowledge and experiences related to four main areas: 1) the major factors causing homelessness among the study population; 2) the interactions among factors of sponsorship arrangements, domestic violence, and homelessness; 3) challenges around obtaining affordable and adequate housing; and, 4) relevant programs and policy actions to effectively address the problem with this population.

With the personal interviews and group discussions, the CCSD followed protocols set out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement for Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (TCPS). This included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring the anonymity of study participants, measures to prevent harm to participants, and ensuring the confidentiality of all participant information obtained for this study. Because of the vulnerable situation of many of the participants, as well as the sensitivity of the issues to be discussed, the study incorporated additional ethical protocols and guidelines from the participating agencies to recruit women for the face-to-face interviews. During the interviews, issues of confidentiality and anonymity were discussed, as well as any other concerns raised by the participants.

Other key components of the study used processes of “good practice” as outlined in the TCPS. These included the use of community agencies which serve immigrant and ethnic populations as study partners; consulting with immigrant settlement agencies as experts for the key informant interviews; and ensuring that the interview questions, discussion guides, and draft report were carefully reviewed by members of the project advisory group.

Sampling Strategy

The study was designed primarily as qualitative research, utilizing purposive sampling strategies, face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions to obtain detailed narratives about the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women. Two categories of study participants were engaged: 1) immigrant and refugee women who had current or past experience of homelessness in the context of sponsorship agreements and domestic violence; and 2) frontline shelter workers and counsellors from immigrant settlement agencies. The final sample size for the face-to-face interviews included 45 participants from Ottawa and Vancouver. There were three broad categories of interviews: 1) Interviews conducted in French in Ottawa (15 participants); 2) Interviews in Ottawa conducted in English and, upon request, in other ethnic languages using interpretation services (17 participants); and 3) Interviews in Vancouver conducted in English and, upon request, in other ethnic languages using interpretation (13 participants).

Participants were recruited and selected based on specific characteristics and criteria. Those recruited for the face-to-face interviews were immigrant and refugee women who had experienced homelessness, either absolute or relative. Among those selected, efforts were made to include equal numbers of women who had been or were “absolutely homeless” and “relatively homeless.” The recruitment process also sought homeless immigrant and refugee women who have experienced domestic violence or abuse, including particular cases within the context of sponsorship agreements.

Project partners approached immigrant and refugee women who were living in shelters for abused women, in transition homes or in homeless shelters, as well as women who had moved out of these facilities but were still facing relative homelessness. Other women known to the project partners in their capacity as service providers or known to other study participants were also contacted. No specific attempt was made to identify women from specific ethnic backgrounds.

Frontline workers from shelters for abused women, transition homes, homeless shelters, and settlement agencies were recruited to participate in the focus group discussions. Because the project partners were well-connected to the communities they served, they were well placed to play an important role in recruiting participants for the focus groups as well as helping to organize the groups. Project funding was provided to the partner organizations to assist with the recruitment of

participants and to host the interviews and focus group discussions. Three focus group discussions were conducted – one in Vancouver and two in Ottawa (one in French and one in English). Each session included eight to 10 participants.

Face-to-Face Interviews

The goal of the face-to-face interviews was to obtain information about the women's first-hand experience of homelessness. Additional information on the women's demographic, social and economic characteristics was also collected. Demographic information included the age, marital status, presence of children, immigrant status and year immigrated, ethnicity, official language proficiency, and education levels. Social and economic information collected included skills, trade/occupation, work experience, employment status, employment history, and earned income, as well as information about the women's reasons for being homeless, the length of homelessness, last residence, and their awareness of resources or support services needed to move out of homelessness. Interviewers also asked participants about the effectiveness of various programs and services to provide for their basic needs, including efforts to move out of homelessness.

In consultation with the project advisory group, a survey instrument was developed for the interviews. An open-ended format was chosen to allow participants to relate or narrate their own story. The survey instrument was field-tested in Ottawa with two participants to check its reliability and validity, to ensure that the questions were well framed to obtain relevant responses, and that the interviews could be reasonably conducted within 45 minutes to one hour. All of the English face-to-face interviews were conducted by the principal CCSD researcher, Dr. Ekuwa Smith. A francophone community researcher, Regine Cirondeye, was contracted to conduct the French interviews. The use of only two interviewers, rather than multiple interviewers, ensured consistency in the process and provided them with the opportunity to gain greater insights into the experiences of the participants.

Informed Consent

A process was implemented to ensure the free and informed consent of all interview participants. This included sharing detailed information about the purpose, content, and process of the study. The concept of voluntary informed consent was fully explained to participants and stressed throughout the interview process to allow participants to stop the interview at any time. Informed consent was obtained in writing, and where written consent was not possible, other procedures were used to seek free and informed oral consent. To protect and promote the women's dignity, participants were also given the option of not responding to any questions which made them uncomfortable.

As part of the interview process, volunteer counsellors were made available for any participant who needed or wanted counselling support or referrals during or after the interviews. About 10 participants obtained such help from counsellors following the interviews. Most of the immigrant and refugee women who were interviewed were eager to share their life experiences and as a result, they agreed to have the interviews taped. This enabled the interviewers to focus on the conversation and discussions, rather than having to take notes at the same time. A few of the women chose not to have their interviews taped because it made them feel uncomfortable. Others refused to be taped due to fears that the information might be shared with other agencies, such as immigration or justice officials. No names or any other identifiers of the study participants have been used in this report.

A small honorarium was given to participants in the face-to-face interviews.

Multi-lingual Needs

Provisions were also made to have interpreters present for those participants who preferred to have the interview conducted in a language other than English or French. In Vancouver, interpreters for Farsi, Vietnamese and Mandarin languages were used; in Ottawa, Punjabi, Spanish and Russian interpreters were used. Partner organizations engaged in this study arranged the interpretation services for the interviews.

Focus Groups

A list of open-ended questions, developed in consultation with the project advisory group, was used as a guide for the focus group discussions with frontline workers. These discussions dealt with trends in the homeless sub-population of immigrant and refugee women, their characteristics, the causes of domestic violence and abuse, and the role of sponsorship agreements in contributing to an increased risk of homelessness. Other issues discussed included the unique needs of this population, culturally appropriate services, the relevance and effectiveness of current programs and services, the frontline workers' ability to provide for the basic needs of this population, as well as their efforts to assist women to move out of homelessness. A small honorarium was also provided to participants in the focus groups.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis methodologies were used to analyze the results of the face-to-face interviews and the focus group discussions. The SPSS data analysis program was used to create a database to analyze demographic data from the interviews. This included the development of tables and a write-up of the demographic characteristics of the study participants.

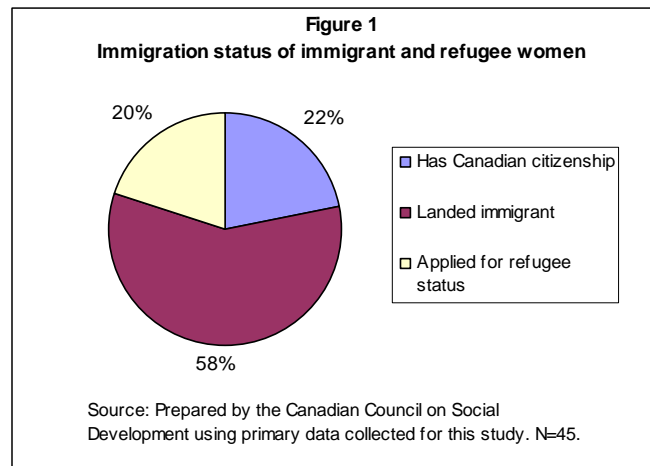
Text data obtained from the face-to-face interviews and transcripts from the focus group discussions were analyzed using qualitative data analysis methodologies. This included the identification and sorting of meaning units (meaningful phrases) from the text data, coding of the meaning units into themes, and further classification of the themes into categories. Examples of some of the themes identified included sponsorship effects, domestic violence and abuse, affordable housing, social housing, social assistance, social support, labour market experience of immigrant women, and the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women. These themes were further classified into categories such as labour market (income and unemployment), housing (affordable housing, homelessness, social housing and social assistance), domestic violence, and immigration (immigrant class and social support, sponsorship, and sponsorship effect), programs and services. These interpretations are discussed as part of the findings in this report and in response to the research questions proposed in the study. Emerging themes related to other issues – such as the social and economic marginalization of immigrants and refugees – are also interpreted and discussed in the study's findings.

Due to the qualitative nature of much of the data obtained through this study, the findings here reflect the experiences and perceptions of the study participants. This report also seeks to include the language and voices of the immigrant and refugee women themselves as they have experienced homelessness or the increased risk of homelessness.

A Demographic Profile of the Sample

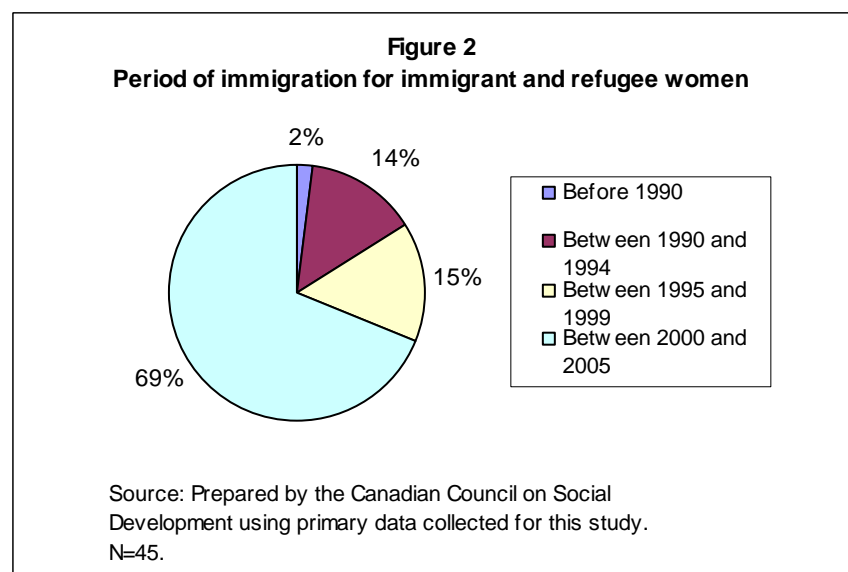
Immigration Status

A majority of the women in the sample (58%) were landed immigrants. About 22% had Canadian citizenship, while 20% had applied for refugee status in Canada at some time in their lives. While about half of the women who had applied for refugee status had been successful and become permanent residents, the others had not been approved at the time of the study interview and therefore did not have status.



Period of Immigration:

Seven in 10 women (69%) were new immigrants to Canada, having arrived within the last five years. In addition, 15% had immigrated 10 to 15 years earlier, with only one participant having immigrated before 1990.



Countries of Origin:

Women interviewed for this study had immigrated to Canada from many different parts of the world, including Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. A total of 25 countries were reported as participants' country of origin.

Table 1: Country of origin of immigrant and refugee women

Country of Origin	Number of cases	%
Iran	4	9
Rwanda	4	9
Burundi	3	7
China	3	7
India	3	7
Iraq	3	7
Brazil, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Somalia and Vietnam	2**	-
Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Congo, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Philippines, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia	1*	-

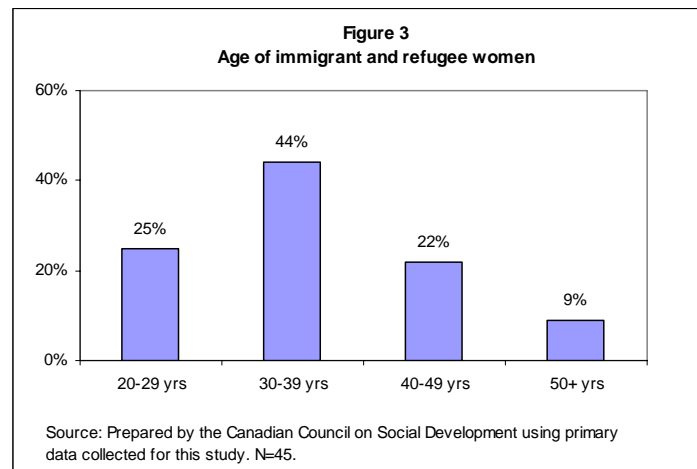
Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development using primary data collected for this study.

** indicates that there were two immigrants from each of those countries.

* indicates that there was one immigrant from each of those countries.

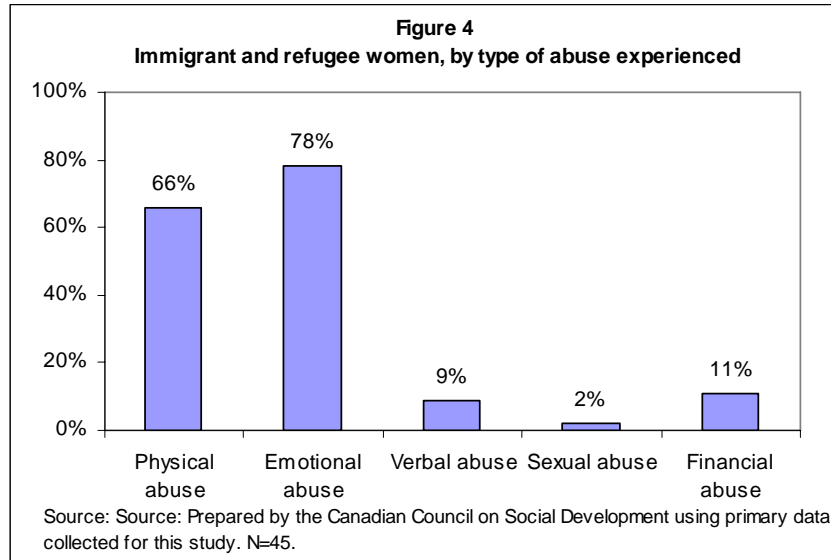
Age:

A majority of the women interviewed (44%) were between the ages of 30 and 39 years. About 25% of the participants were aged 20 to 29, 22% were aged 40 to 49, and 9% were aged 50 or older.



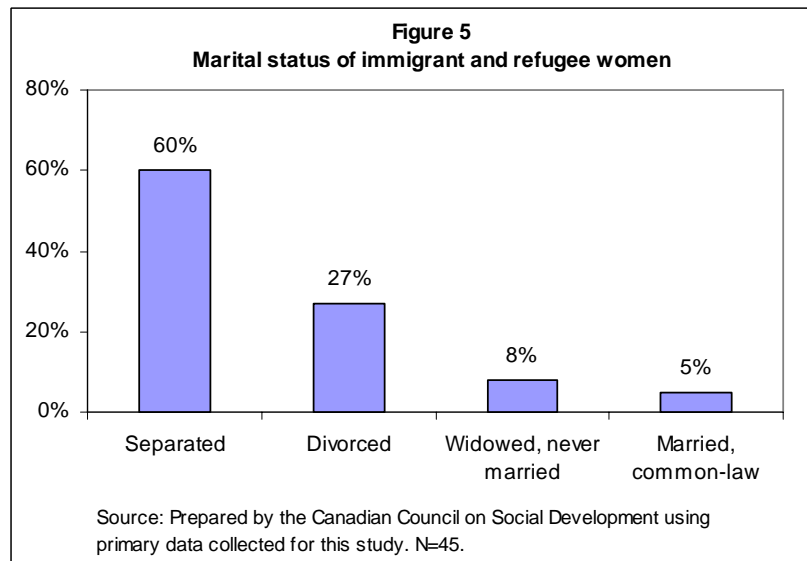
Types of Abuse:

Two types of partner abuse were the most commonly reported by study participants – physical abuse and emotional abuse. A majority of the immigrant and refugee women interviewed (78%) said they had experienced emotional abuse, and 66% said they had experienced physical violence at the hands of their spouse or partner. Other types of abuse by their partners included financial abuse (11%), verbal abuse (9%), and sexual abuse (2%). All the abuse reported occurred within the context of a marriage or common-law relationship.



Marital Status:

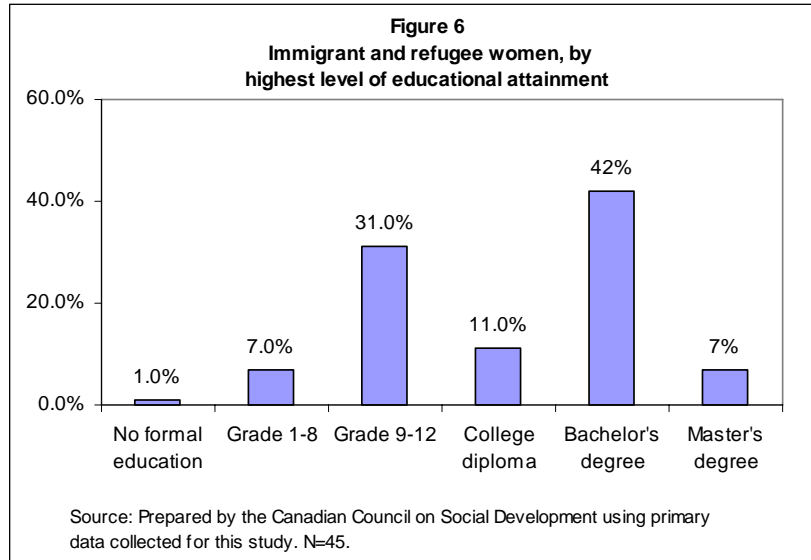
The majority of women interviewed were separated from their spouses or partners (60%). About 27% were divorced, 8% were widowed or never married, and 5% reported being currently married.



Most of the women had children (71%), but only 60% lived with their children. Thus, about 10% of the women were separated from their children who, at the time of the interview, were living with their fathers or grandparents.

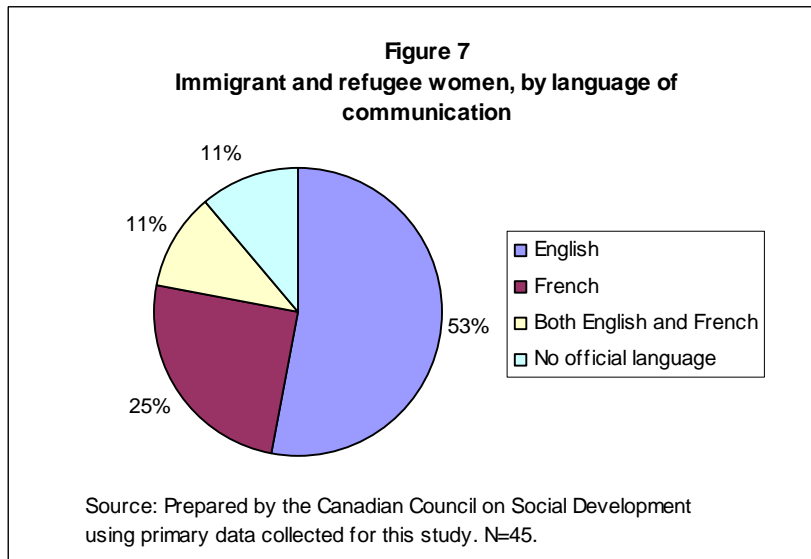
Education:

Most of the women (60%) had obtained a college degree or higher, and most degrees were from foreign universities. Three had completed their Masters degree. Others had completed high school (31%) or had some elementary education. One woman reported that she had no formal education.



Language Proficiency:

A majority of the women interviewed were able to communicate in English, French, or both. Others, however, were unable to communicate in either official language. Among all the women interviewed, a total of 21 languages were represented.



Employment Status:

Most of the women interviewed were unemployed (76%). A few (18%) worked full-time or part-time, and three were enrolled in school.

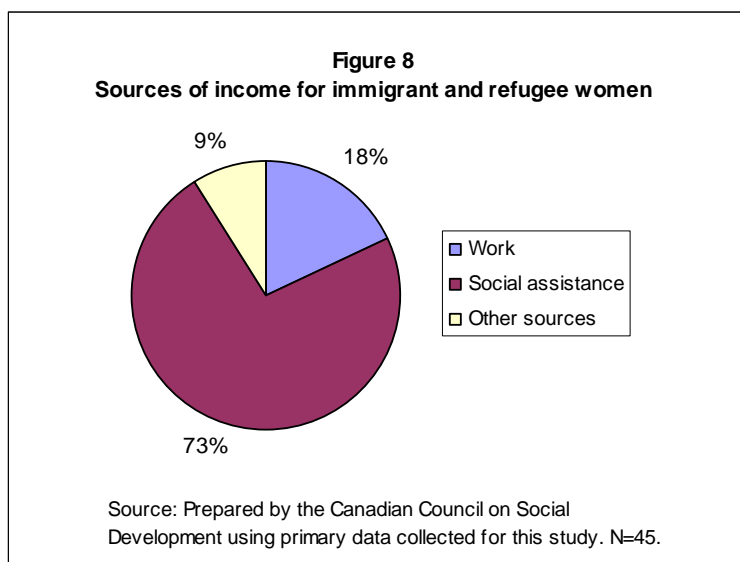
Table 2: Employment status of immigrant and refugee women experiencing homelessness

	Number of cases	%
Full-time employment	3	7
Part-time employment	5	11
Unemployed	34	75
Student	3	7

Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development using primary data collected for this study.

Sources of Income:

A majority of the women (73%) relied on social assistance as their source of income. Others received income from employment (18%), and 9% received income from other sources such as child support or income from religious institutions.



Monthly Earnings:

A majority of the women interviewed (53%) lived on \$501 to \$1,000 per month. About 22% lived on monthly incomes of \$1,000 to \$1,500, while 11% had monthly incomes of \$250 to \$500, and 9% lived on less than \$250 per month. Only two of the women interviewed had a monthly income of more than \$1,500.

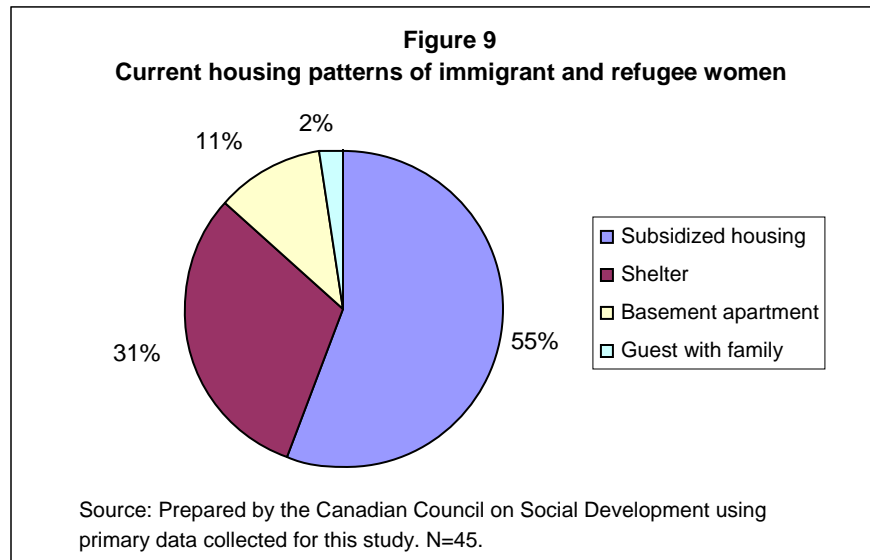
Table 3: Monthly Income of immigrant and refugee women experiencing homelessness

	Number of cases	%
Less than \$250 per month	4	9
\$250 - \$500 per month	5	11
\$501-\$1,000 per month	24	53
More than \$1,000 per month	12	27

Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development using primary data collected for this study.

Housing Patterns:

At the time of this study, the majority of immigrant and refugee women interviewed (55.5%) were living in subsidized housing units. About 31% were shelter residents. Some women (11%) were residing in basement rental units in private homes. Only one woman was living as a guest in her cousin's house at the time of the interview.



One Woman's Story

"I have lived in my current housing since 1998. It is subsidized housing and I'm not too happy with the neighbourhood. There are drugs and gangs in this neighbourhood. I'm always concerned when my children go out to play. The building is in need of several repairs. I have submitted an application to move, but have received no response. I am well-educated, with a university degree in financing, and I've lived and worked in five countries throughout the Middle East.

My husband immigrated to Canada in 1995, then he sponsored me and our two children to join him here in 1997. When I first came to Canada, I gave him some gold and money from my savings. Now I don't have anything and I need help from social assistance to care for myself and three children. I was married to my husband for 17 years. I separated from him in 1999 and obtained a traditional Moslem divorce in 2003.

My husband abused me and cheated on me. When I was pregnant with our third child, he kicked me. He injured my hip, and I still have to go for physiotherapy for the injury. I was taken to a shelter where I stayed for four months. I didn't like the conditions at the shelter, so I moved back to the house, but I saw no change in my husband. He was not interested in being responsible for our children. There were times when they could not go to school because there was no food in the house.

When I first arrived in Canada, my husband threatened to take the kids and send me back to my home country. He blamed me for all of his problems. Once, he abandoned us for three days without any food. I didn't even know how to use the bus. During the period I lived with him in Canada, I was not allowed to go to school, not allowed to have friends, or learn to drive. I could not look for work because my English skills were not good, and I was not allowed to leave the house without my husband accompanying me.

When he kicked me, I filed charges against him but he never showed up in court. He also choked me but I denied that to the police and the court. I received no help from my ethnic community. They blamed me for all the problems between my husband and me.

At first, I blamed myself for all our problems, but I finally got the courage to kick him out of the house and my life. This has been very good for me and my self-esteem – and for the children as well. I have been empowered by the support from my brother and the rest of my family back in my home country.”

Findings

What it means to be a Homeless Immigrant or Refugee Woman

Most immigrant and refugee women who experience homelessness live under very difficult conditions in shelters and transition homes. Even when they move from shelters into subsidized housing, some face problems with unsafe neighbourhoods and poorly maintained units. The following excerpts from immigrant and refugee women who participated in this study help illustrate their difficult situations.

“I don't like where I have to live. I cannot do community childcare as my choice of employment, and I cannot sponsor my daughter because I am unemployed. I feel very isolated, frustrated and depressed. I hate my housing, so most of the time I do not sleep here.”

“In this shelter, they really treat us like homeless people. We are put on different floors, sorted between abused women, families and men. We end up at the same children's playground and we hear them arguing, which reminds us of our situation.”

“My security is invisible here. Women break down and cry and console each other.”

“We had to ask another woman for money to buy diapers, and there was a situation of discrimination.”

“I don't have a routine with my children anymore; I have to go with the routine of this shelter. My kids are even starting to learn bad words. I am very sad and very frustrated.”

“When I got to the shelter, I needed rest and a chance to think. I needed security and calm, and I found that.”

“I found the security I was looking for in the shelter.”

Perceptions about the difficult living conditions that can be found at shelters prevent some immigrant and refugee women from reaching out for help, even when they find themselves at increased risk of homelessness.

The Road to Homelessness

For a majority of the immigrant and refugee women who participated in this study, the experience of homelessness was shocking to them. Even the concepts of homelessness and shelters were strange. And while the circumstances that lead them to the risk of homelessness were complex, key elements included their immigrant status, ethnic and cultural practices, partner abuse, poverty, unemployment, lack of proficiency in English or French, and a breakdown of sponsorship arrangements.

“I never thought I would be homeless here in Canada!”

This phrase was repeated by all of the women who participated in the face-to-face interviews. As was evident in “One Woman’s Story” (above), most of the women interviewed had led productive lives in their countries of origin, lives characterized by employment and high levels of education before they immigrated. Some had experienced partner abuse, which continued after they immigrated; for others, the abuse began after they arrived in Canada. A majority of the women had endured abuse for a number of years before they reached out for help. When they did seek help, they wanted the abuse to stop, but they did not want their partners to get into trouble with the law.

A common concern among the immigrant and refugee women interviewed was that the immigration procedures, including their sponsorship, were controlled by their partners. The women had played a passive role in the process, leaving them ill-informed about their status, rights, and eligibility for any benefits. And the lack of recognition for their foreign credentials increased the likelihood that they would face unemployment, underemployment, and high dependency on their partners.

Another comment frequently expressed was “I did not even know there were places called shelters.” For the majority of women interviewed, reaching out for help happened almost by accident and out of desperation. Very few had been aware of any social support services in their communities, and those that did know of the availability of social supports did not think these structures could help them.

For immigrant and refugee women, the road to homelessness involved their status as immigrants, their sponsorship arrangement, the presence of partner abuse, unemployment, and poverty, a lack of proficiency with Canada’s official languages, and a lack of awareness about support services available.

Sponsorship and Immigrant Status

“Sponsorship procedures imprison women.”

There are several different categories for immigrants or refugees, and different stages within those categories. In this study, the immigrant and refugee women interviewed included landed immigrants, refugee claimants, and visitors.

A majority of the study participants had immigrated under the sponsorship program as dependants of their husbands. The women had little knowledge of Canada's immigration system, enabling their partners to use the process against them.

The concept of sponsorship and the process used to implement it puts extraordinary powers in the hands of the sponsors/husbands. Study participants expressed strong feelings about the impact of the sponsorship process on their lives:

“Men use the papers to get power.”

“It is a weapon of violence for men.”

“He said I owed this paradise to him.”

“I had no idea about what my status was. All I knew was that my status depended on him.”

“I didn't even know that I was a permanent resident.”

“He kept saying that bringing me over had cost \$10,000 that I had to re-pay before I left him.”

Women who arrived as visitors or refugees were in even more precarious situations. As a “visitor” to Canada, their status was temporary. For refugees, their status was also temporary, and they could be deported until their application for landed immigrant status was accepted.

“He threatened to tell immigration to send me back. He was holding my life in his hands.”

“I thought I had status, only to find out that he had never filed the sponsorship papers.”

“I never saw the papers.”

“He always said that he had brought me over, that he had lifted me out of a hole. The shelter helped me with the process of normalizing my status here because I had lost my diplomatic status.”

“He would disappear for a weekend or longer, and I couldn't say anything about it because I didn't have any resident status.”

Sponsorship arrangements also affect how the husbands/partners are viewed by extended family members. He is “Mr Good” for facilitating the sponsorship, so the immigrant woman is often blamed if the relationship does not work out. In cases of arranged marriages, women may have little support if the marriage breaks down. In some cases, the husband will speak poorly about his wife and inform their extended family in the country of origin that the wife has become “too independent” or “too Canadian.” Extended family members will then advise the woman to be more submissive and to behave in the way her husband expects. If a woman insists on leaving her husband, she runs the risk of being isolated from her immigrant or ethnic community. She may even face rejection from her immediate family by leaving her husband.

A woman's immigration status – whether through a sponsorship arrangement, a refugee application, or a visitor's visa – influences their vulnerability to partner abuse, and thus, their risk of homelessness. A loss of status can bring an immediate risk of deportation, and it has a direct impact on an immigrant woman's ability to continue living and working in Canada. Since immigrant women are more likely to depend on their partners for their entire livelihood, a breakdown of the sponsorship arrangement can result in sudden poverty and homelessness.

Ethnic and Cultural Practices

Cultural and religious norms have enormous influence on the homelessness trend among immigrant and refugee women. Some ethnic and religious communities exert pressure on the women to stay in their abusive relationships, and some emphasize staying with family or friends, rather than going to a shelter. In some communities, shelters are stigmatized as places for drug addicts and alcoholics, with no access to religious or ethnic foods or customs.

Recent immigrants to Canada come predominantly from developing countries where the cultural beliefs and practices can have profound implications on women's socialization and integration in Canada. Key aspects include gender roles, views about women in the labour market, and extended family relations.

“He always said that he would send me back if I kept refusing his orders to stay at home, to prepare for children, and to wait on him in the way of our country.”

“Every time I asked him to do some share of the housework, like cooking, washing dishes, or taking care of the children, he said I was changing, that I was not the same woman, that I was becoming Canadian and listening to bad people. He cut off my communications, my outings, and my contacts.”

A majority of the study participants had been told by their husbands/partners to stay at home, engage in housekeeping, and care for the children. Women who tried to go against these instructions were often punished. After staying home for two years, one study participant said she began to look for work and was determined to go ahead with it. “He beat me up just as I was going out the door to start this work. My face was so swollen that I had to go back inside the house. I gave it up.” Other women were instructed to stay at home because if they went out to work, the family would be perceived to be poor, or it would imply that the husband could not take care of his family.

Cultural beliefs about the role of women, separation and divorce also contributed to some women being further victimized when they tried to seek help and therefore, increased their risk of homelessness.

“Women in my culture believe it is a shame to be alone.”

“I received no help from my ethnic community.”

“My ethnic community blamed me.”

In some ethnic communities, women were counselled to stay married to their abusive partners or risk being blamed for the abuse and the separation. For some women, leaving an abusive partner also meant separating from their ethnic community or extended family. As a result, some of the study participants used various means to hide their separation from family and friends.

“Family members back home do not know about my separation. They would be very angry and cast me out of the family.”

“My family saw us leave the country less than a year ago, so I do not want them to know.”

Partner Abuse

Most of the women in this study reported that their husbands/partners had taken advantage of the sponsorship arrangement, using it as a weapon to exert control over the women's lives. In most cases, they were subjected to all forms of abuse including financial, physical, sexual, religious, and emotional abuse.

A majority of the study participants had experienced emotional abuse from their husbands/partners. This was expressed in the form of threats about cancelling the sponsorship and having the woman deported, being abandoned with the children, threats about adultery, and providing incorrect or little information about aspects of their life in Canada.

“He had already prepared airline tickets to send us back to my country. He told me he had cancelled his sponsorship.”

“My husband stayed out a lot, leaving me alone to care for our children.”

“His girlfriends would come to the house and he would tell me they were relatives.”

“He scared me, saying that Canada is not a good place.”

“I felt like I was in prison.”

In one case, a woman who was 8-months pregnant and spoke neither English nor French was abandoned by her husband for three months while he travelled to their home country. She had been living in the Canada for only one year, and he had left her with \$100 to care for their four children (aged 10 to 17).

Many immigrant and refugee women reported that they were totally dependent on their husbands and partners for financial resources, making them very vulnerable to financial abuse. Even when women had access to some earned income, they were expected to give all their earnings to their husbands/partners.

“He had money, I didn't.”

“I had no money and I could not speak English.”

“Once I started working, he wanted my whole salary in his account.”

“He received all the money from our sponsor and the child tax benefit.”

“I could not even buy milk for my children.”

“There were times when my children couldn't go to school because there was no food in the house.”

“We were literally going hungry at home, so I started going to food banks.”

Many of the immigrant and refugee women interviewed were subjected to rules and regulations set out by their husbands/partners. These dictates allowed the men to control all aspects of the women's lives.

“He said he was everything to me. I simply had to follow his plan.”

“When I lived with him, I was not allowed to go to school, or to have friends, and I could not learn to drive.”

“I was not allowed to call my family back home.”

One woman reported that whenever she tried to say something, he would silence her saying, “This is my house and I can throw you out. You have to do everything according to my way, my wishes, and you need my permission to do everything.”

For some immigrant and refugee women, the emotional and verbal abuse escalates to physical abuse. This included beatings, death threats, sexual assault, and rape.

“My husband choked me but I denied this to the police and in court.”

“My husband abused me and cheated on me with other women.”

“He threatened to kill me.”

The concepts and vocabulary around partner violence and abuse were initially foreign to some of the women and they often made excuses for the abusive behaviour of their husbands/partners. “I only realized that I was being abused about six weeks before leaving my marriage.”

Frontline participants in the study’s focus groups reported that physical abuse is often unreported by immigrant and refugee women due to pressures from extended family, religious leaders, and the ethnic communities. There was consensus that the women generally endured beatings for a long time before finally reaching out for help. Several factors were cited, including the women’s lack of knowledge and trust in the Canadian system, concerns about perceptions from their ethnic community, reliance on the abuser for financial and social support, and a lack of knowledge about their rights and support services available in the community. In one case, a woman had been beaten 15 times over a four-year period. She knew of “9-1-1” telephone service but had not called until the 15th time she was beaten. When she did call, 10 policemen showed up at her door; her husband was arrested and sent to jail.

Unemployment and Poverty

For most of the immigrant and refugee women who participated in this study, unemployment and poverty were significant factors in their lives, with a majority living on social assistance. Unemployment and poverty also played significant roles in increasing the women’s risk of and vulnerability to homelessness. Many were unemployed because their husband’s controlling behaviour prevented them from seeking work outside the home. And as homemakers, they had limited access to other resources or to information about their rights and any social support services available in their communities.

Many of the homeless immigrant and refugee women who participated in this study reported that their educational credentials, skills and work experiences were not recognised by the Canadian labour market. Some women also reported being denied jobs due to discriminatory practices by prospective employers, such as having the quality of their foreign education questioned or facing a requirement for Canadian work experience.

“I was poor before coming to the shelter. Now I have nothing. I am starting at zero.”

“He stopped buying anything for the house and I wasn’t on welfare because he was working. I had to go to food banks. They would ask me for proof of my income, which I didn’t have.”

“Degrees from other countries continue to be a problem.”

“A lot of my friends cannot get a job. Educated people are working with moving companies.”

“I have tried to look for work but so far, unsuccessful. How can I get work experience if someone does not give me a chance?”

Some of the women said that their husbands’ frustrations about their own unemployment contributed to his abusive behaviour.

“Stress from job was a source of mental instability for my husband. Even though he worked hard and had a PhD, he relied on a temporary contract and was searching for a job for a long time.”

“My husband was afraid of his inability to care for me and my daughter, so he abandoned us.”

One woman said she knew a 35-year-old man from South East Asia who had completed two Masters’ degrees in engineering and had eight years work experience in Saudi Arabia, but he could not get employment in Canada.

Official Language Proficiency

Proficiency in one of Canada’s official languages is critical to the survival and successful integration of immigrant and refugee women into Canadian society. Even though a majority of the study participants were able to communicate generally in English or French, they were not proficient enough to enable them to obtain employment. Eight of the women interviewed needed translation services to facilitate their participation.

“I have to rely on someone else to tell my story, to speak on my behalf, to ask for help.”

“I could only work in my brother-in-law’s business where I could use my native language.”

Lack of proficiency in English or French also made the women more reliant on their husbands and partners, and increased their vulnerability to social isolation and partner abuse. Such women were less likely to be aware of available support services. Immigrant and refugee women who were proficient in one of the official languages were more likely to be employed or enrolled in school, and they were able to use the existing services to move out of homelessness within a shorter period of time than those who did not have such language proficiency.

Other Factors Contributing to Homelessness

Focus group participants expressed concerns that the problem of homelessness among immigrant and refugee women was getting worse. Many reported that as recently as five years ago, service providers had few immigrant or refugee women using their services; currently, however, more of these women were coming to their agencies for help. As a result, frontline workers and their agencies are searching for strategies to better serve the needs of these women. Focus group participants identified a number of factors which they felt were contributing to this rising trend, including long waiting lists for social housing, higher poverty rates among immigrant and refugee families, partner violence, the breakdown of sponsorship arrangements, and discriminatory attitudes of landlords. Other factors identified included a lack of affordable housing and increased awareness among immigrant women about their Canadian rights.

Long waiting lists for social or subsidized housing and the designation of priority lists were identified as particularly key factors influencing this trend towards homelessness among immigrant

and refugee women. Current criteria for priority lists include the person's need for security, leaving an aggressive relationship, medical conditions that are exacerbated by their housing situation, and being homeless. In the past, the criteria also included factors such as youth, newcomers, low income, and large family size. While this worked in favour of new immigrants and specifically, immigrant and refugee women, these factors are no longer part of the criteria used for assessing housing eligibility or priority. As a result, these women's chances of obtaining affordable housing have been jeopardized and their risk of homelessness increased.

Other factors identified by focus group participants as contributing to the rising trend of homelessness among immigrant and refugee women include discrimination they face based on race, ethnicity, lone-parenthood, and large family sizes. Participants reported growing concerns about the discriminatory attitudes of some landlords, including requests for exorbitant deposit charges and the refusal of some rental applications. It was also reported that some landlords have refused to rent their units to women who were fleeing abuse. All these factors disproportionately affect immigrant and refugee women and reduce their access to affordable housing.

Service Supports

The homeless immigrant and refugee women who participated in this study reported that in seeking help, they had contacted the police, shelters, community social service agencies, and neighbours. Support services they received can be grouped into two main categories: support services provided by governments and those provided by not-for-profit agencies. Government support services included services in the areas of education and training, housing, income and welfare, health, and counselling. Those provided by non-profit agencies included immigrant settlement services, social welfare and community health services, housing and eviction prevention services, emergency and temporary shelter, services from ethnic community centres, and support from agencies for victims of domestic violence. Both government and non-profit agencies providing support services complement and supplement each other through several channels, including the police, shelters, crisis hotlines, social assistance, community health centres, and services for abuse women.

A majority of the immigrant and refugee women interviewed for this study reported that they had reached out for help only when the situation reached a desperate level during an incident of abuse. In most cases, they contacted the police through the 9-1-1 emergency system. They reported that when the police showed up, they were usually very effective, sending the abuser to jail or the victim to a shelter or hospital.

“That day, he beat me. The neighbours called the police. I couldn't help it. I left the house and the police put me in a shelter for abused women.”

“My husband beat me up and I called police. They came right away and wanted to send me to a transition house but I asked to be sent to my friend's house, so I went there.”

“He started to abuse me after my youngest son was born. He hit, punched and whipped me with a belt. He told me that he had work and money so no one would listen to me. I was beaten 15 times before I finally called the police for the first time. When I called 9-1-1, 10 policemen showed up and took my husband to jail. I didn't have any contact with him for a month. When

he was released from jail, he came back home drunk so I left with my children to find a safe place in a shelter.”

“I was dependent on him and I couldn’t even buy milk for my children. I was always at home. He insulted me, injured me. One day, he beat me and I ran down the hallway toward a neighbour’s place. She told me to call the police but I couldn’t.”

“I was making good money. He was very violent; he beat me and cheated on me. He threatened to kill me. I abandoned everything and fled with my children into a shelter.”

The women interviewed reported that the police would open up a case, engaging both victim services and the prosecution. They would also provide referrals to community agencies and support services for victims of abuse. In some cases, the police laid criminal charges against the abuser, with or without the support of the immigrant and refugee women who were victims of the abuse.

Some of the immigrant and refugee women who experienced homelessness contacted a shelter themselves. These contacts were mainly made through phone calls to crisis hotlines associated with shelters or through community-based social service agencies. For other women, calls to a crisis hotline were made on their behalf by neighbours or friends.

“I called a friend I had met in college to tell her what had happened to me. She told me about shelters for women in difficulty. She called a shelter but they had no place for me, so I decided to go stay with my cousin in Ottawa. For now, I am staying there with my two children, but she made it clear that we can’t stay there too long. I am still calling shelters.”

“The staff worked hard to calm me down from my panic. They found lawyers for me, and I got a restraining order that would not allow him to contact me.”

“My only network is the shelter for abused women where I stayed.”

“They helped me through the immigration process and helped me find a lawyer. I got social assistance. They gave me clothes because I didn’t have any with me.”

“I turned my back on my own community out of fear that I might meet him.”

“They helped me get subsidized housing and my self-respect.”

Shelters provide several different kinds of services including temporary shelter, psychological counselling, and employment support, as well as helping to advocate on the women’s behalf for social assistance, legal aid, and subsidized housing.

In Ontario, social assistance is called “Ontario Works” and in British Columbia it is managed through the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance (MEIA). These programs were another source of support for immigrant and refugee women who experienced partner violence. Through these government agencies, the women obtained financial assistance, legal aid, and employment support. The agencies also provided financial support for language training and job training.

Community-based health centres also provided support to immigrant and refugee women reaching out for help. Because some of the women were already receiving health services from these agencies, the centres were more familiar to them and served as the first point of contact for some women. The women were provided with psychological counselling as well as referrals to shelters and government agencies providing social assistance. Some centres also had support workers who helped the women with eviction prevention services and facilitated access to subsidized housing.

Support services specifically designed for women who are experiencing partner violence also played key roles in providing support for the immigrant and refugee women experiencing homelessness. Since a majority of these women were homeless due to partner abuse, these kinds of agencies were often the first point of contact. These agencies provided counselling services and helped advocate on behalf of the women for services from other agencies, including from the police, courts, housing agencies, and social assistance departments.

For some of the immigrant and refugee women interviewed for this study, support services provided by both government and non-profit agencies were quite positive:

“The system saved my life.”

“I am okay now. Thanks to the support from the system, the future is now bright.”

“My children are happy now. Canada is a good place to live with children.”

“I am very happy about life in Canada now.”

“The workers helped me to understand my situation.”

“I lost myselfI had no self esteem and now I found myself again.”

However, a majority of the women interviewed were not satisfied with the support they received:

“People often say ‘call the police,’ but you have to live through violence to understand that they don’t really help you. They even make you feel like you don’t matter at all.”

“Help is temporary and soon you are on your own.”

Many felt that the support services were provided in a piecemeal fashion, taking care of some of their needs but not others, which did not enable them to move out of homelessness. Fewer shelters provided services for francophone women, so many women were in shelters without access to services in their language of choice.

Many of the immigrant and refugee women reported that there were inadequate support services related to housing, language training, employment, and psychological counselling. In particular, counselling was seen as critical to their survival and their ability to move out of homelessness, yet counselling supports for these women was deemed to be inadequate. In one case, a participant said she had only seen a counsellor once in three months, leaving her confused and feeling rejected. In other cases, the women said the lack of counselling support had caused them to return to their abusive partners.

For a majority of the immigrant and refugee women interviewed, partner abuse was the driving force behind their homelessness, so they sought support through the legal system to handle issues of separation, divorce, and child custody. In many cases, the support provided was felt to be insufficient. Legal aid provided very limited time with a lawyer and as a result, some women went

through the court proceedings without sufficient understanding of the process. Others reported that they did not have good representation. In one case, despite previous charges of abuse and kidnapping having been laid against the husband, he was still given access to his son. The husband continued to try to “brainwash” the son against his mother, resulting in the child telling lies about his mother and the involvement of the Children’s Aid Society. In other cases, husbands were allowed to sell off joint property and keep all the proceeds, leaving the women without any money. Some husbands were even able to pack up and leave Canada in the middle of the legal proceedings on the abuse charges.

Frontline workers in the focus group discussions echoed the women’s unsatisfactory reviews of the service support systems:

“Our system is slow to adapt to the unique needs of immigrant and refugee women.”

“It is difficult to categorize issues of immigrant and refugee women.”

“Support services are always in a crisis mode, responding to crises and not enough focus on prevention.”

“Our system is unfriendly.”

“Our system takes clients around in a wheel.”

“The vocabulary used in the system is difficult for many immigrant and refugee women to follow.”

The focus group discussions also emphasized that some immigrant and refugee women continued to stay in abusive situations because there were no vacancies in the emergency shelters. The problems of having too few shelters and a lack of affordable housing were identified as problems in both Ottawa and Vancouver. Workers said the current shelter systems are also plagued with high staff turnover due to limited economic resources to adequately run the places.

Focus group participants also reported that the shelter systems set up to support homeless women can be rather oppressive to immigrant and refugee women who are experiencing homelessness. The workers identified discrimination against immigrant and refugee women based on ethnicity, language proficiency, immigrant status, marital status, and family size. They also reported that during housing interviews, women who were not able to communicate in English or French were kept on waiting lists for longer periods, without provision for interpretation services. And in some low-income rental units, women with large families (more than two children) and those fleeing abusive situations were more likely to have their applications rejected.

The issues identified by homeless immigrant and refugee women in face-to-face interviews and by frontline workers in focus group discussions indicate that the homelessness experience and access to support services were similar for women in both Ottawa and Vancouver. For francophone women in Ottawa, access to services in French were seen as being particularly inadequate. In some cases, francophone women were forced to stay in shelters where services were only provided in English, and in one case, a woman had to wait for days to talk to a support worker in French.

Discussion

“Immigrant and refugee women leave their home country for a gain, for a dream, for an improvement, whether it is an improvement in work or to be in a peaceful country, and this dream is destroyed when they find themselves homeless.”

Findings from this study suggest that homelessness among immigrant and refugee women is increasing and as a result, changing the face of Canada’s homeless population. These women are in a unique situation, and their experience of homelessness is complicated by their immigrant status, ethnicity, and length of time in Canada.

Immigrant and refugee women identified partner abuse as a major force pushing them into homelessness. It was also identified by frontline workers as a key factor for immigrant and refugee women seeking help from their agencies. In addition to the problem of homelessness caused by abuse, conditions unique to this population of women – including unemployment, underemployment, poverty, sponsorship arrangements, and a lack of proficiency in English or French – further complicate their situations.

Husbands and partners of immigrant and refugee women were said to exhibit a sense of entitlement and ownership of the women, and often enforced total control over all aspects of the women’s lives. Different ethnic marriage rites, including arranged marriages, can also project a message that the woman is being “given away” and therefore “owned” by her husband. Sponsorship arrangements can reinforce this message of ownership and entitlement, as the men control the sponsorship process. As result, a major part of partner abuse among immigrant and refugee women involves control of resources and financial abuse.

When abuse occurs in a sponsorship arrangement, separation can further jeopardize a woman’s status. Since “sponsorship ties their very existence in Canada to that of their husband’s,” a breakdown in the relationship destabilizes the women’s lives and leaves them with few alternatives and at a greater risk of homelessness.

Emotional and verbal abuse were reported to be common among immigrant and refugee families. Husbands/partners often dictate what the women could and could not do, including obtaining employment or going to school, visiting friends, making phone calls, and even talking to neighbours. In some cases, the women said they were required to ask their husband’s permission in order to turn on the radio or television. The women were regularly told that they were not “good enough” and would not survive in Canada without their husbands. Not surprisingly, this put enormous emotional strains on the women and they often became confused about life in Canada.

Many of the immigrant and refugee women interviewed said they lived in a chronically vulnerable state. Violence by their husband/partner became the “final straw” and lead them into homelessness. A lack of proficiency in English or French compounded the likelihood of unemployment, poverty, and social isolation, and increased their dependence on their husbands/partners. Lack of official language proficiency also inhibited their ability to reach out for help and it affected the quality of the help they received.

In both Ottawa and Vancouver, support systems and services are available to assist immigrant and refugee women who are experiencing homelessness. However, a majority of the women interviewed were unaware of these programs; they said they had discovered them almost by accident. For those who did reach out for support services, many of the existing services were felt to be inadequate to their unique needs.

Sponsorship Used as a Weapon

In most cases of sponsorship, the husband/male partner is the sponsor and the wife/female partner is sponsored. This arrangement often places the women in a difficult position. Frontline workers in the focus group discussions reported that the threat of deportation is often used by sponsors to control and abuse their wives. “If you do not listen to me, I will send you back” was commonly heard. Some of the women were even required to repay the immigration fees and airline tickets provided by their husbands/partners as part of their sponsorship agreements.

Sponsorship arrangements also directly impact how the social service system responds to immigrant and refugee women who experience homelessness. The nature of the agreement determines a woman’s status, including her eligibility for financial assistance, housing, and other kinds of support. For example, women without landed immigrant status are ineligible for subsidized housing, and there are eligibility requirements for legal aid. Frontline workers have observed husbands deliberately withhold information from their wives or give them inaccurate information about their sponsorship and their rights in Canada.

A Unique Situation

Immigrant and refugee women who experience homelessness as a result of partner abuse are in a precarious situation. They often face a lack of support from their extended family, and their situation is compounded by poverty, unemployment, lack of official language proficiency, lack of knowledge about their Canadian rights, and a lack of awareness of available support services.

The process of immigration separates immigrants from their extended family. Rebuilding new family ties and new friendships in the host country takes time. Thus, when immigrants find themselves homeless, they may not have friends or extended family that they can count on for help. If the immigrant community is well established, other members of the community may be drawn upon to help. By contrast, refugee communities tend to be less well established and therefore less likely to be able to provide community support.

New immigrants to Canada are primarily coming from developing countries, thus increasing the likelihood that they will be unable to communicate in one of Canada’s official languages. Women immigrants are less likely to be proficient in English or French, so in some communities, they stay home as homemakers. This limits their opportunities to learn the language and reduces their chances to practice their language skills through interactions with others outside the home.

Language skills and ability to communicate are critical for immigrant and refugee women. Participants in these interviews reported that language proficiency had direct links with employment, poverty, and the ability to reach out for help when needed. The lack of proficiency also increased the vulnerability of immigrant and refugee women to abuse by making them even more dependent on

their husbands/partners for all aspects of their livelihood. In such cases, the women were also less likely to be aware of their rights and any support services available.

Support Services do not Meet the Needs

Immigrant and refugee women who experience homelessness require a range of housing supports to provide a holistic approach to their well-being. For such women, their homelessness requires more than just housing because of the increased likelihood of links to partner violence, the breakdown of sponsorship arrangements, unemployment, poverty, a lack of official language proficiency, and social isolation. Once the women reached out for help, they found several different kinds of help available, however for many, the services were reported to be inadequate and insensitive to their unique needs.

Recommendations

In order to develop more effective strategies to support and empower immigrant and refugee women who are at risk of domestic violence and homelessness, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. The current sponsorship application process should more actively engage immigrant women, rather than putting them in a passive role. Immigrant women need to be the principal applicants for sponsorship based on their marriage or relationship to the partner. Translation services for those who may not be proficient in Canada's official languages are critical in this area.
2. In order to support the integration of immigrant families into Canadian society, the settlement process should focus special attention on immigrant and refugee women. Here again, language training is crucial to their success, and customized settlement counselling would aid their integration.
3. As noted above, language training should be a central part of the settlement process for immigrant and refugee women. The process should provide mandatory language assessments, as well as opportunities for training in English or French, including free language classes and provisions for transportation and childcare.
4. Immigrant and refugee women need particular spaces in which to interact with others from their community and with volunteer counsellors. Such spaces would provide a forum in which they could socialize with other women, learn about Canada, and obtain information about their rights, responsibilities, and the benefits available in their new society.
5. Education programs should be developed in conjunction with faith leaders from the community. Information provided would focus on Canadian laws, women's rights, and issues around partner violence, parenting, and other topics relevant to the successful integration of new immigrants to Canada.

6. Support services for immigrant and refugee women and their families who are homeless should incorporate cultural competency as part of their core delivery principles. For example, services should respect and reflect the beliefs, attitudes, languages, and actions of the population being served. Support services should also take into account the woman's immigration and socio-economic status, her knowledge of and access to the criminal justice system, her proficiency in English or French, as well as possible vulnerability to racism, discrimination, and ostracism from her own ethnic community.
7. The lack of affordable housing is a problem that can only be addressed by action at all levels of government. More emergency shelters for the homeless, transitional housing, and shelters for abused women are urgently needed.
8. A monitoring system to ensure fairness in the provision of social and low-income housing is needed. Such a system would help prevent racism and discrimination in the allocation of social housing.
9. Public education programs are needed, focussed on anti-racism and anti-discrimination in order to enhance the creation of a more inclusive Canadian society.

Conclusion

Sponsorship arrangements create a power imbalance for many immigrant and refugee women. When this power imbalance is combined with a lack of proficiency in one of Canada's official languages, it creates fertile ground in which partner abuse can occur. This abuse, in turn, has a strong impact on the risk of homelessness for immigrant and refugee women. The presence of domestic violence, the breakdown of sponsorship agreements, and a lack of official language proficiency all play major roles in leading immigrant and refugee women into homelessness.

The recommendations made in this report require urgent and immediate action. Through this research project, partnerships have been created among service agencies and frontline workers who advocate on behalf of immigrant and refugee women experiencing homelessness, and these partnerships can be utilized to help effect change. The increasing trend of homelessness among immigrant and refugee women has dire consequences, not only for the women themselves, but also for their families and society generally. This report therefore calls for effective policies and actions to protect and secure the future of an important segment of women in Canadian society.

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Appendix A: Definition of Terms

Domestic violence: Domestic violence refers to a pattern of coercive control that one person exercises over another in a family, common home or a household. This pattern is characterized by physical or sexual violence, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, emotional insults, financial deprivation and spiritual abuse. Other terms used in describing domestic violence include domestic abuse, family violence, spousal violence and partner abuse.

Absolutely Homeless: The “absolutely homeless” refers to individuals who live outdoors, in abandoned buildings, in shelters and in hostels (CMHC, 2001).

Relatively Homeless: The relatively homeless (also known as “invisible homeless”) are those who live in unsafe, inadequate or insecure housing, pay too much of their income for rent, rent hotel or motel rooms by the month, or temporarily stay with friends or relatives (CMHC, 2001).

Sponsorship Agreement: A sponsorship agreement is an agreement between a Canadian sponsor and a foreign national that outlines their mutual commitments to each other. The sponsorship agreement applies where the person to be sponsored is at least 22 years of age, or is less than 22 years of age but is the sponsor’s spouse, common-law partner, or conjugal partner. The agreement includes:

- A statement by the sponsor (and co-sponsor) that he or she will provide for the basic requirements of the foreign national and their accompanying family members during the period of the undertaking;
- A declaration by the sponsor (and co-sponsor) that their financial obligations do not prevent them from honouring their agreement with the foreign national and their undertaking with the government; and
- A statement by the foreign national that he or she will make every reasonable effort to provide for his or her own basic requirements as well as those of accompanying family members.

For purposes of this study, the focus is on immigrant and refugee women who are sponsored by their spouses, common-law partners and conjugal partners and the required length of sponsorship for these groups is three years. The sponsorship undertaking also states that the sponsor must reimburse all social assistance benefits received by the sponsored person.

Sponsorship Breakdown: This occurs in a situation where a sponsor cannot or will not provide for some or all the basic needs of the sponsored individual. For an immigrant or refugee woman sponsored by her spouse, a sponsorship breakdown occurs when her spouse abandons her and provides no means of support; or refuses to support her after she leaves a marriage or common-law relationship. Sponsorship breakdown is also said to occur in cases where a sponsor is physically or sexually abusive, issues threats or makes unreasonable demands on sponsored individuals.

Sponsorship Regime: This refers to the various laws, regulations and guidelines from the federal and provincial governments that define sponsorship, the obligations of sponsored persons as well as the obligations of the sponsors.

Immigrant/New immigrant: An immigrant is an individual who has acquired legal status to reside in Canada, including permanent residents, students and visitors. Some are recent immigrants, also known as new immigrants (that is immigrated to Canada in the last 10 years) while others have resided in Canada for a longer period of time (more than 10 years).

Refugee: Refugees refer to persons who have fled their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

Appendix B: Flyer for Interview Participants

If you are an Immigrant or Refugee Woman

who is homeless in Ottawa

or at risk of being homeless,

we would like your help!

The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) is conducting a research project on the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women, and we would appreciate your help and participation in this important study.

If you are willing to share your story, we will be conducting **personal interviews** at women's shelters, community centres, or **at a time and place of your choice**. The interviews will last about one hour, and each participant will receive a \$50 honorarium and payment for their childcare and transportation costs.

We would also like to speak with immigrant and refugee women at risk of homelessness who were sponsored by their partners or have experienced partner violence.

We hope to conduct the interviews throughout October and November 2005.

To set up a personal interview – which can be conducted in French or English, with translation available in other ethnic languages – please contact Ekuwa Smith at the CCSD, Tel: (613) 236-8977, ext. 231, or by e-mail at esmith@ccsd.ca.

Canadian Council on Social Development

309 Cooper Street, 5th Floor

Ottawa, ON K2P 0G5



The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) is conducting this research in partnership with Immigrant Women Services Ottawa, the Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society, and Regine Cirondeye, a francophone community researcher in Ottawa. Funding support is being provided by the National Homelessness Secretariat.

Appendix C: Flyer for Frontline Workers and Organizations

Calling all Workers at the Frontlines of Housing in Ottawa, Vancouver, and Toronto:

We need your expertise

The Canadian Council on Social Development is conducting a research project on the **homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women**, and we would appreciate your help and participation in this important study.

As part of this project, we will interview immigrant and refugee women who are currently homeless or have experienced homelessness. We will also hold animated discussion groups with frontline workers from immigrant-serving agencies, community service organizations, shelters, and other housing support services.

By doing so, we want to learn more about the risk factors associated with homelessness among immigrant and refugee women, and how those risk factors affect the women's health and well-being. Ultimately, we hope this research will help support the development of policies and programs in this area and help community-based agencies better assess and respond to the needs identified.

Here's how you can help:

- ✓ If you do frontline work with immigrant and refugee women in relation to eviction prevention or housing support services, we'd like you to participate in the discussion groups.
- ✓ We'd also appreciate your help in identifying immigrant and refugee women experiencing homelessness who may be willing to share their stories.
- ✓ If you know of other individuals with relevant expertise, we'd appreciate your suggestions.
- ✓ If you have any written materials that are relevant to this research, we'd love to get copies.

We hope to conduct the interviews and group discussions throughout October and November 2005. To participate in the focus group discussions – which will be conducted in French and English – please contact Ekuwa Smith at the CCSD, Tel: (613) 236-8977, ext. 231, or by e-mail at esmith@ccsd.ca. Written materials can be sent by fax to (613) 236-2750, or mailed to:

Canadian Council on Social Development
309 Cooper Street, 5th Floor
Ottawa, ON K2P 0G5

The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) is conducting this research in partnership with Immigrant Women Services Ottawa, the Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society and Regine Cirondéye, a francophone community researcher in Ottawa. Funding support is being provided by the National Secretariat on Homelessness and the Wellesley Central Health Foundation.

Appendix D: Informed Consent

In October and November 2005, the Canadian Council on Social Development will be conducting a study on the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women in Ottawa and Vancouver. The study will examine the impacts of domestic violence and sponsorship agreements on the risk of homelessness for immigrant and refugee women, and recommend effective ways of dealing with these issues. Findings from this project will help provide information for more effective programs and support services.

As part of the study, we are conducting **personal interviews with immigrant and refugee women** about their experience of homelessness and their risk of homelessness.

If you agree to be interviewed for this study, we want you to be assured that your participation is voluntary. The interviews can be held at a community centre, a women's shelter, or other place of your choice. Each interview will last about one hour and you are free to stop the interview at any time.

We will not share your information with any other agency or person. It will only be used for this study, and all information in the final report will be summarized so that no one person can be identified.

Your participation is very important. In appreciation for being part of this study and telling us your story, we will give you a \$50 honorarium and pay your childcare and transportation costs for the interview.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research study, please sign two copies of this form. Keep one copy for yourself and return the second copy to us at the address below.

Thank you.

Name: _____

Date: _____

To set up your interview for a time and place that is convenient for you, please contact **Ekuwa Smith**, by phone at (613) 236-8977 ext. 231, or by e-mail at esmith@ccsd.ca.

Canadian Council on Social Development

Attention: Ekuwa Smith
309 Cooper Street, 5th Floor
Ottawa, ON K2P 0G5

The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) is conducting this research in partnership with Immigrant Women Services Ottawa, the Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society, and Regine Cirondeye, a francophone community researcher in Ottawa. Funding support is being provided by the National Homelessness Secretariat.

Appendix E: Key Informant Interview Guide

1. In the last year, about how many immigrant and refugee women have you seen come to your agency for help?

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2. Is this normal for your agency or there has been an increase or decrease?

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3. Are these women (immigrants and refugees) in a unique situation, compared to Canadian-born women? How so? Describe their situation.

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4. What are the top factors causing their homelessness, abuse?

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5. What kinds of support systems and programs do you have in place for these women? Are these supports adequate?

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6. What additional supports are needed?

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7. What needs to happen in order to get these additional supports in place?

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8. Are there additional observations or comments that you would like to share?

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Appendix F: Interview Guide: Face-to-face Interviews

Present informed consent: Explain study and obtain participation agreement.

Begin interview:

1. Tell me how you came to be in this shelter or /Tell me how you ended up in this housing situation.
2. From your point of view, what would you say are the major events that caused you to be in this situation?
3. Follow-up to Q1&2 (when necessary): how did the sponsorship agreement and or domestic violence influence your living conditions to bring you to this shelter/housing situation?
4. What kinds of help have you received since being in this situation /shelter?
5. Are there any other people who have helped you?
6. What other kinds of help would you like to see?

Demographic information:

Are you a Canadian citizen?
Yes/No

Are you a landed immigrant?
Yes/No

Are you a refugee claimant?
Yes/No

What year did you immigrate to Canada?
.....

What is your country of origin?
.....

Are you currently married? a) married b) Divorced c) common law d) widowed
e) separated f) never married

Do you have any children? Yes/No

How many children do you have?
.....

Are your children living with you? Yes/No

How old are you? a) less than 20 b) 20-29 years c) 30-39
d) 40-49 e) 50 or older

What is your highest level of education?

Are you fluent in English / French? a) Both French and English b) French
c) English

Are you currently working? a) full-time b) part-time c) unemployed
d) other (describe)

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What challenges have you experienced in your efforts to obtain employment (full-time)?

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From what source do you obtain money to support yourself?

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About how much money do you receive in a month? a) less than \$250.00 b) \$250-\$500
c) \$500-\$750.00 d) \$750-1000 e) \$1000-\$1250 f) \$1250-\$1500
g) \$1500 or higher

Appendix G: Focus Group Guide

Frontline workers have a rich experience and deep awareness of the complex and sensitive issues around homelessness through daily interaction with the study participants. The purpose of the focus group discussions is to corroborate the experiences and perspectives obtained through the face-to-face interviews, and to provide a much broader perspective about the causal factors, intersections between these factors and their effects on the homelessness experience of immigrant and refugee women.

1. What have you observed about the trend in homelessness as it relates to immigrant and refugee women (that is, increasing or decreasing trend? Are they reaching out more or less for help?).
2. Where are they reaching out for help? Shelters? Etc.
3. Can you describe the needs, fears and other emotions of women who come to you for help with the problem of homelessness?
4. What factors do you believe place immigrant, refugee women at risk of homelessness? List causal factors; describe where you see intersections of these factors.
5. How unique is this sub-population from other homeless sub-populations?
6. To what extent do you see the impact of their status as immigrant/refugee on the risk or state of homelessness? Are women in sponsored relationships (involving sponsorship agreements) at any greater risk? How so?
7. In the case of immigrant and refugee women, how does domestic violence affect their increased risk or state of homelessness? Is this one of the key factors causing homelessness?
8. How do you see the intersection of sponsorship agreements and domestic violence and the impact of this intersection on women's risk of homelessness?
9. Are there elements of structural oppression (discrimination) experienced by immigrant, refugee women who experience homelessness?
10. What kinds of support do women receive from your agencies?
11. What are the major problems you face in trying to help these women? What resources do you need to address these problems?
12. What can be done to promote services that are responsive to the needs of immigrant and refugee women who experience homelessness? As well, do you have any suggestions for proactive policies and practices aimed at preventing homelessness for this sub-population?
13. Are there any other related issues you would like to address?

Appendix H: List of Project Partners

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Immigrant Women Services of Ottawa
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Vancouver Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services
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Appendix I: List of Advisory Committee Members and Terms of Reference

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