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# Empowerment of Immigrant and Refugee Women Who Are Victims of Violence in Their Intimate Relationships

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FINAL REPORT

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# ***Executive Summary***

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The purpose of this research was to enhance our understanding of the unique experiences of immigrant and refugee women who were victims of violence in their intimate relationships, in order to: (1) determine what service delivery factors they found to be empowering and disempowering; and (2) develop recommendations based on the findings to more effectively facilitate their empowerment. Empowering practices were defined as those responses that helped immigrant and refugee women who are victims of violence keep themselves safe and move forward in their lives.

The research question was: “What service delivery factors in the health care, social service, and justice systems are uniquely empowering and disempowering to immigrant and refugee women who are victims of violence in their relationships?”

All stages of the research, from proposal to final report, were carried out in collaboration with three community partners: Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society, the Prince George Elizabeth Fry Society, and MOSAIC.

A key aspect of the research was learning from the women themselves. The results were based on in-depth interviews with 75 women from four broad cultural groups (Asian, Filipina, Latin American, and South Asian) who had been abused by their intimate partners. The interviews were conducted in the language of their choice, including Cantonese, English, Hindi, Mandarin, Spanish, and Punjabi. The findings from the face-to-face interviews were supplemented by focus group discussions with six groups of service providers. Interviews and group discussions focused on women’s experiences using needed services. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, translated, and then analyzed. The results of the focus groups were highly consistent with the results of the interviews. Therefore, the findings reported here focused on the results of the interviews, as it was the in-depth interviews with the women themselves, consisting of a large sample cutting across several cultural groups, that made this research unique.

The women in this study had much in common with abused Canadian-born women, and the services they needed are consistent with effective anti-violence services for all women. However, these women also experienced the violence in unique ways, and had specific needs that stemmed directly from their experiences and status as immigrants.

Two primary themes emerged from their accounts. Together they provide a picture of empowering service responses for immigrant women dealing with violent male partners. Both themes contained a number of components.

The first theme is the importance of addressing the **multiplicity of needs** that the women faced. The situations of the women were complicated by issues relating specifically to their immigration and status as newcomers to Canada. To be empowering, service providers must be able to assist the women to break through language barriers, access information, address sponsorship and immigration barriers, meet material needs, and break their social isolation.

Helping women **break through language barriers** was an important component of empowering services. Language barriers were a serious impediment to accessing services and breaking their social isolation, and therefore put many women at further risk. Language can be viewed as an issue of safety, health, and justice. Services that helped women break through language barriers had a significant impact not only on their ability to leave an abusive relationship but also on their ability to keep themselves safe and healthy and to realize their rights.

Helping women **access information** was another important component of empowerment. Lack of information about Canadian laws and rights, social infrastructure, and available services, and lack of knowledge that domestic violence is a crime, significantly impeded women's access to services. Lack of familiarity with their new country was an important factor in their need for information. This lack of information was exacerbated in those women who did not have good English language skills.

**Addressing sponsorship and immigration barriers** was another crucial aspect of empowering services. Women who were sponsored by husbands or other family members were disempowered by their difficulties in accessing services such as income assistance or subsidized housing because of repercussions for sponsors. Women who were visitors could not access services such as income assistance or free health care. These women were often forced to stay with abusive spouses. Many women experienced confusion about their rights and the implications of their status, which was not always clarified by service providers.

**Meeting material needs** was a central component of empowerment. Women's economic vulnerability as immigrants, combined with other factors resulting from their immigration, exacerbated material or practical considerations for these women. Poverty or the threat of poverty and the need for affordable housing, employment, transportation, and childcare were crucial factors in women's struggle for safety and independence.

**Breaking women's social isolation**, which in many ways stemmed from their immigration experience, was also a key component of women's empowerment. Social isolation refers to separation from family and friends, as well as factors that impeded women's access to assistance, such as a lack of familiarity with services and lack of English language skills. Women's emotional needs at this time related primarily to their social isolation.

The second theme that emerged was the importance of a **comprehensive, caring service** from one key agency or one key individual. Such a comprehensive, caring service included proactive intervention; advocacy and accompaniment; broadening of traditional professional roles and mandates; and sensitivity to women's cultural and immigration realities.

A **proactive approach** included: taking proactive steps to provide women with information; anticipating their needs; coming to them rather than always expecting them to come to the services; linking them to other services; and following up to see how they were doing.

**Advocacy and accompaniment** were important components of an empowering service. Most of the women needed advocates to help them effectively utilize services because they were unfamiliar with services, had difficulty accessing services because of language barriers, or were unable to insist on their rights. Accompaniment was an important component of advocacy.

Services that adopted a **broad mandate** were most effective for the women in this study. In the face of social isolation, often cut off from family, friends, and cultural community, many of the women described how empowering it was when service providers extended themselves and their mandates beyond what may be viewed as more typical, narrow professional roles and mandates.

Many of the women in this study discussed the importance of service providers being **sensitive to their cultural and immigration realities**. Most expressed satisfaction with services and did not report experiences of racism, although a number acknowledged that they did not know what to expect and that they lacked the confidence to assert their rights and entitlements.

Recommendations reflect these predominant themes, focusing on: addressing sponsorship and immigration barriers through further research; addressing material needs through bridging, pre-employment, and retraining programs;

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addressing social isolation through provision of information, outreach, and follow-up; and addressing the multiplicity of abused immigrant women's needs through a comprehensive, caring service from a key agency that delivers services directly and brokers services from other agencies.





