

Newcomer Women's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence in Canada



What this research is about

As of 2021, Saskatchewan had the highest rate of intimate partner violence (IPV) out of all the provinces in Canada. Most victims are women and most perpetrators are men. Being a victim of IPV can add complexity for women who are also newcomers. This often involves language barriers, immigration status, and/or work permits being used to control these women by an abusive partner. This study explored the lived experiences of 15 newcomer women in Regina and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, who were victims of IPV.

What the researchers did

The researchers interviewed 15 newcomer women living in Regina and Saskatoon. Participants were women who immigrated from 12 different countries and had been in Canada for less than 10 years. Nine arrived with their partners and five came alone. At the time of the interviews, all women had ended the abusive relationship.

Intersectionality was used as a framework to analyze and interpret the data. This framework examines the interconnectedness of social categories, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, in shaping people's experiences. Data from the interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and coded to identify themes.

What the researchers found

Two major themes were identified: newcomer women's experiences of IPV after arrival in Canada and their experiences of help-seeking. This study focused on experiences of IPV after arrival. Subthemes included physical and sexual violence; emotional and psychological abuse; patriarchal values; isolation; economic and legal abuse; and stalking and harassment. In some cases, IPV had begun before the women came to Canada.

What you need to know

Immigrating to a new country comes with its own challenges and these can add a layer of complexity for women in abusive relationships. This study examined the lived experiences of 15 newcomer women to Saskatchewan who were victims of intimate partner violence (IPV).

The researchers found that the women experienced various forms of abuse, including legal, physical, psychological, economic, and emotional violence. On top of this, they experienced manipulative and threatening behaviour related to their immigration status/work permit, limited English language, and lack of knowledge of Canadian laws and available resources. These women were kept isolated from social circles and community so that their partners could maintain control over them.

The participants' status as newcomers added complexity to their experiences. Factors such as immigration status and language barriers could be used against them by an abusive partner.

Their experiences of IPV included being forced to sign documents that they did not understand; being threatened with deportation or being blocked from seeking Canadian citizenship; and being unable to access supports due to language barriers and lack of knowledge of available services. Language barriers and their partners' control and threats of violence also limited social and community access for these women, further isolating them in an unfamiliar country. Sometimes their partners used surveillance tactics or harassment to ensure they stayed isolated and were not able to create new social relationships.

Their partners usually had control over finances as the participants had limited understanding of Canadian banking practices. If their partners allowed or coerced them to work, these women often had to hand over their earnings. Some women described not being able to buy clothing for their children or other necessities, or not having enough money for bills.

The participants' partners also used physical and reproductive violence as a method of control. Some women reported being hit or strangled (choked), while others had been threatened with a weapon. Due to cultural and religious norms, some of the women believed that they could not refuse sex from their partner. Some women were impregnated when they did not want more children, as a means of keeping them tied to the household, while others were forced to abort.

Emotional and psychological tactics were used to manipulate the participants. Gaslighting, shaming, and guilt tripping were common. Patriarchal values shared by the men and their family members, as well as other members of the participants' cultures, ensured that they were seen as subordinate to their husband and his family. The women reported having no say in decisions about their family's lifestyle, where they lived, or even about their children's care.

How you can use this research

Communications about the unacceptableness of IPV, as well as information about services and supports, could be distributed through different outlets accessible to immigrants. This could include governmental pre- and post-arrival information. Information about IPV and what legal provisions victims may be entitled to could be made available through service providers in various languages. Training programs such as financial literacy and other forms of newcomer education could be made more available through immigration agencies.

About the researchers

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Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

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