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# Domestic Violence in Ethno-Cultural Communities: Risk and Protective Factors

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence was initiated by the Brenda Stafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence, in the Faculty of Social Work, at the University of Calgary. Shift is aimed at significantly reducing domestic violence in Alberta using a primary prevention approach to stop first-time victimization and perpetration. In short, primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and prevent problems before they occur.

The purpose of Shift is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers and the community at large, to significantly reduce the rates of domestic violence in Alberta. We are committed to making our research accessible and working collaboratively with a diverse range of stakeholders, to inform and influence current and future domestic violence prevention efforts, through the perspective of primary prevention.

This document is a report of the protective and risk factors for domestic violence against women in ethno-cultural communities in Canada.

## 2.0 Overview

Domestic violence has major consequences at the personal and public realms in Canada today. The loss of human security, personal safety, and the risk of serious harm or death is met with the costs absorbed by public sectors such as health, justice, education and social services. In the 2009 Statistics Canada Victimization Survey, 1.2 million people in Canada who had a current or former spouse (6.2%) reported being victimized physically or sexually by their partner or spouse. This is a proportion similar to previous victimization surveys conducted in 2004 (6.6%) and 1999 (7.4%) (Statistics Canada, 2010). Although men and women reported similar rates of domestic violence (6.0% of men, and 6.4% of women), women reported more serious forms of violence such as sexual assault, beatings, choking and being threatened with a gun or a knife by their partners (Statistics Canada, 2010). Thirty percent (30%) of domestic violence victims had been injured during the commission of the offence, and women were more than twice as likely as men to be injured (Statistics Canada, 2010; Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2011).

The effects of domestic violence are broad. Impacts to the individual can be experienced as a loss of personal well-being, low social participation, absenteeism from the workplace, deleterious health outcomes, and substance abuse. The impact on children who witness domestic violence is also concerning – every year up to 360,000 children are exposed to domestic violence, thus thrusting them into emotional trauma, depression, injury and other physical, emotional and behavioural problems (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2011). To the public sphere, domestic violence has major impact on social spending and services. It has been estimated that physical and sexual abuse costs Canada over \$4 billion each year (factoring into account social services, criminal justice, lost employment days and health care interventions) (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2011).

While the issue of domestic violence in Canada is felt across racial, cultural, gender, class, disability and immigrant status lines, this literature review will focus particularly on IPV (intimate partner violence) and “ethno-cultural communities” in Canada. As reported in the 2004 General Social Survey on victimization, visible minority women report lower five-year rates of spousal violence than non-visible minority women. Moreover, self-reported rates of spousal violence declined for visible minority women between 1999-2004, whereas they remained stable for other women (Statistics Canada, 2010). It should be noted, however, that these lower rates can be attributed to the fact that the General Social Survey is conducted in English and French, which may in fact under-represent the actual rates of domestic violence in communities where women cannot participate due to language barriers (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008). Brownridge and Halli (2002) reported the following incidences of IPV; immigrant women from developing countries had the highest prevalence of IPV in Canada, followed by Canadian born women, and

thirdly, immigrant women from developed countries exhibited the lowest rates of domestic violence.

In the United States, population-based, epidemiological research also suggests that immigrant women in particular have lower rates of domestic violence incidence than their US-born counterparts, however “smaller, community-based investigations have consistently documented high partner victimization rates among immigrant women” (Gupta et al., 2009, p.462; see also Yoshihama, 2009). Evidently, it is difficult to gauge in existing literature the actual extent and prevalence of domestic violence in ethno-cultural communities. However, beyond an accurate report of the rates of domestic violence that occurs in ethno-cultural communities, addressing the issue within these communities acknowledges the fact that immigrants, refugees and visible minority communities are a growing segment of the Canadian population (Smith, 2004).

This review will be broken into three sections. Considering the purpose for this literature review is to focus on identifying the protective and risk factors for domestic violence against women in ethno-cultural communities in Canada, the first section will define these domains, as well as the parameters of this literature search. The second section will review the accumulated scholarship, with mention of the methodological and theoretical concerns in such a review. This section will be broken into thematic subheadings, giving the reader an overview of the literature. Lastly, the third section will offer implications and recommendations for future research.

### 3.0 Definitions and Parameters of the Literature Review

#### 3.1 Ethno-Cultural, Visible Minority, Immigrant and Refugee Communities

The extent of diversity in the Canadian population warrants the attention of any social research initiative. This is evident in the following projections of the diversity of the Canadian population by Statistics Canada by 2031:

- Between 25% (9.8 million) and 28% (12.5 million) of the population could be foreign-born. In particular, nearly one-half (46%) of Canadians aged 15 and over would be foreign-born, or would have at least one foreign-born parent, up from 39% in 2006.
- Between 29% and 32% of the population could belong to a visible minority group, as defined in the *Employment Equity Act*. This would be nearly double the proportion reported by the 2006 Census. The rest of the population, in contrast, is projected to increase by less than 12%.
- 47% of second-generation Canadians would belong to a visible minority group, nearly double the proportion of 24% in 2006. Second generation refers to those who are Canadian-born and have at least one parent born outside Canada.
- The fastest growing visible minority communities (due to immigration and births) are South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab and West Asian. (Statistics Canada, 2010)

For the purpose of this review, “ethno-cultural communities” will be used interchangeably with “visible minority communities” as defined by the *Employment Equity Act* (1995). Visible minorities are “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (p. 2). Unfortunately, social science research tends to “lump” together or aggregate broad ‘racial’ categories, regardless of ethnicity, immigration status, or country of origin (Yoshihama, 2009).

Other population categories important to this review are immigration and citizenship status, considering the implications that status has on the acculturation and settlement experiences of individuals. Recent research claims that being foreign-born or ‘native’-born (intersected by belonging to a visible minority community) has a significant impact not only on acculturation, but on the experiences of domestic violence in host countries (Ahmad, Driver, McNally, & Stewart, 2009; Grewal, Bottorff, & Hilton, 2005; Gupta et al., 2009; Guruge, Khanlou, & Gastaldo, 2010; Kasturirangan, 2008; Sharma, 2001).

Therefore, when available, particular research specifically related to immigrants and refugees will be included in the review. By definition, an immigrant is an individual who has acquired legal status to reside in Canada, including permanent residents, visitors and students (Smith, 2004). A refugee is also a legal resident in Canada, however has specifically come to Canada because of a fear of persecution in their home country. Refugees likely become permanent residents and full citizens in Canada (Smith, 2004).

### **3.2 Intimate Partner Violence Terminology**

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of domestic violence (IPV) by the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) will be used:

...refers to controlling or abusive behaviour by a partner or spouse. It can take many forms, including physical violence as well as verbal, psychological, emotional, financial and spiritual abuse, or sexual violence and abuse. Women are most often the recipients or victims of partner violence. It can also be referred to as family violence, wife battering or assault, and domestic violence. (Smith, 2004, p. 6)

### **3.3 Risk, Protective Factors and the Positive Deviance Approach**

In general, literature around the prevention of domestic violence is centered on two main foci – risk and protective factors, where the majority of scholarship falls under the former. Risk factors are primarily associated with detecting early warning factors that may contribute to domestic violence such as depression, substance abuse, low socioeconomic status, power and domination, etc. In Canada, macro- and meso-level social campaigns and prevention programming tend to transmit these types of messages to the larger population, in an attempt to prevent domestic violence, or at least to equip citizens to detect and act on it at an early stage (Godenzi & De Puy, 2001). These types of prevention programming also target individuals in certain public settings like police officers, medical professionals, teachers and social service workers in order to build their skills and awareness around the warning signs of domestic violence when they come across individuals in their workplace setting. As well, risk factors are found in prevention type programming in school settings where students are taught to identify violent and abusive behaviours, and to denounce, react and seek help when they witness or experience such forms of violence.

On the other hand, protective factors aim to prevent domestic violence by focusing on interpersonal and quality of life domains by facilitating the learning of healthy relationship skills, personal development and respect. Moreover, prevention programming focusing on protective factors may also attempt to prevent other social problems that lead to violence such as drug abuse, poverty and employment. As Godenzi & Du Puy (2001) state, this programming is based on protective factors:



...stems partly from ecological theories that see non-violence as a secondary effect of a healthy environment, which controls risk situations such as isolation, marginalization, and stress. This approach connects the prevention of violence to improvements on the macrosocial level, such as the struggle against poverty and inequality. From a more individual perspective, these approaches follow from theories of social learning. According to these theories, the spreading of solutions to day-to-day problems counteracts the use of violence, prevents drug abuse, and in a general way helps to approach life more constructively. (p. 463)

Of particular interest to this review, the positive deviance approach furthers the paradigm above. Although not found in domestic violence literature as a contributing factor to prevention programming, it is primarily found in social and participatory development, child nutrition, safe sexual practices and educational outcomes. It is an approach that offers an alternative to needs-based approaches for development and inquiry that can fail because it is possible that what is identified as a need in order to succeed may not be obtained or maintained by those who need it. It shifts the focus from what an individual or community needs to what they already have. The positive deviance approach (PD) can also guide formative research through what has been termed as positive deviance inquiry (PDI). This form of inquiry into any social issue would identify why some people exhibit good outcomes “against the odds.” Positive deviance inquiry is “the observation that in most settings a few at risk individuals follow uncommon, beneficial practices and consequently experience better outcomes than their neighbours who share similar risks” (Marsh et al., 2004, p. 329).

## **4.0 Themes in Domestic Violence and Ethno-Cultural Communities’ Literature Review**

The search engine that was used for this literature review is Scholars Portal (an interdisciplinary search engine tool that includes research from social work, sociology, gender studies, violence journals, etc.). Grey literature was found on the internet, and pulled primarily from government and non-governmental organization publications. The terms used were 1) intimate partner violence, domestic violence, woman abuse, wife abuse; 2) risk factors, protective factors, positive deviance; 3) ethno-cultural communities, visible minorities, immigrants and refugees. An effort was made to focus on local and national research in the first scan of the literature; however, we found that it was sparse. A wider scope from the United States and Western Europe (other industrialized countries with high newcomer and visible minority populations), was implemented in the scan. Consequently, we have found that there is a propensity for domestic violence research that focuses primarily on domestic violence risk factors, and less on protective factors.

### **4.1 Demographic Characteristics**

As identified in a literature review about domestic violence and immigrant and refugee communities in the United States by Yoshihama (2009), the author notes that many studies about risk and protective factors of domestic violence use non-probability samples and correlational analyses, thus denying any inferred causality between variables. She notes that certain demographical risk factors such as divorce, low income, substance abuse, etc., may actually be a consequence of domestic violence. These studies thus confirm that there is a correlation between certain risk factors and domestic violence, but that in fact, we cannot distinguish which leads to the other (or may imply a circular pattern). It is worth noting some of the demographic risk and protective factors found in Yoshihama’s (2009) study:

- Findings vary depending on whether the outcome variable is based on lifetime or past-year experience of domestic violence. For example, while young age is frequently found as a risk factor in studies of past-year domestic violence, older age is found to be associated with increased risk of lifetime domestic violence.
- With respect to socioeconomic status, while some studies have found low income or financial strain to be associated with a higher risk of domestic violence, others have not found a significant association between domestic violence risk and socioeconomic status. Other risk factors identified include being separated or divorced and urban residence.
- Frequently, partners’ use of substances, especially heavy alcohol consumption, has been identified as a risk factor for domestic violence.

- Relatively fewer protective factors have been identified; several studies have found the availability of social support to be a protective factor (p. 44).

It is interesting to compare these demographic risks and protective factors with the findings from the Canadian Council on Social Development in their *Nowhere to Turn* report on immigrant and visible minority women and violence. Using the General Social Survey, the following demographic characteristics were found:

- 54% were aged 25 to 44; 32% were aged 45 to 64; 5% were between the ages of 15 and 24; and 9% were aged 65 or older.
- Most of the women in this group were married. Only 4% reported being in common law unions, 14% were divorced, and 9% said they were separated from their spouse/partner.
- Large households were common among these immigrant and visible minority women: 19% lived in households with four members, and 16% lived in households of five or more members; 32% lived in households with only two members, and 11% lived by themselves.
- The majority of women in this sample were born outside of Canada (63%). Of that group, only 7% had been in Canada for less than 10 years; 23% had lived here for 10 to 23 years; 20% had lived here for 24 to 38 years; and about 13% had lived in Canada for 39 years or more.
- 88% lived in urban areas and 12% lived in rural areas.
- The majority (62%) of immigrant and visible minority women who had experienced partner violence were working. About 17% were engaged in household work and child care as their main activities. Others were enrolled in school (5%), retired (11%), or looking for work (2%).
- Employment was the main source of income for a majority of the women (66%). About 20% earned less than \$20,000 a year; 45% reported annual incomes of \$20,000 to \$59,000. A significant proportion (19%) did not state their income.
- 28% had completed a diploma, college or technical training; 24% had completed a university degree; 15% reported having some post-secondary education; and 16% had obtained a high school diploma (Smith, 2004, pp. 12-13).

## **4.2 Experiences Coming to or Being in Canada as an Immigrant and/or Visible Minority**

Although many of the fears and concerns of immigrant women and visible minority women experiencing domestic violence are similar to women experiencing domestic violence in the mainstream (Sharma, 2001), an interesting theme emerged in the literature around the particular experiences of women who are visible minorities and/or immigrants. The consequences and implications of engaging in the immigration process are important when considering the risk and protective factors of domestic violence (Jolly & Reeves, 2005; Tutty, Giurgiu, Traya, Weaver-Dunlop, & Christensen, 2010). Moreover, the experiences of visible minorities in Canada, as it relates to exposure to discriminatory practices, racism, employment and housing marginalization, settlement and acculturation, can also impact domestic violence as either a cause or effect. Some authors argue that there must be a consideration of the migration experiences and migrant status of women, and that all “women of colour” should not be lumped into one category. Recent immigrants and refugees, although possibly also members of visible minority groups, face particular contextual circumstances that may pose as risk and protective factors for domestic violence.

Many authors report that new immigrant women have significant health and well-being risk implications (Choudhry, 2001; Meadows, Thurston, & Melton, 2001) due to the social status relegated to them as immigrant, low wage and visible minority women. For example, new immigrant women often carry dual roles as homemaker and paid worker, usually working long hours at low rates and are marginalized within the workplace (Grewal et al., 2005; Choudhry, 2001; Jolly & Reeves, 2005). Immigrant women also face social isolation because of these consistent demands of work and home, the complexities and stresses associated with adapting to a new country, and a loss of the social support network they may have depended on in their home countries (Grewal et al., 2005; Sharma, 2001; Smith, 2004). Moreover, it is likely that for many immigrant women, the relocation to a new country may translate into a new financial dependence on their husbands if they are not able to find work in their field, either sending them into unemployment or low paying jobs (Ahmad et al., 2009; Grewal et al., 2005; Guruge et al., 2010). Lastly, these women also live linguistic and cultural isolation, and possibly hold strong religious and cultural norms that differ from mainstream society (Grewal, 2005; Tutty et al., 2010 ).

Immigration status plays an important role in the experiences of women. Immigration status may impact a woman’s risk for domestic violence if she’s dependent on a partner for permanent residency (thus yielding a unique form of power over), the threat of deportation if she accuses her partner of domestic violence and in general, a lack of clear and accurate information in Canada about their rights (Macleod & Shin, 1990; Sharma, 2001; Smith, 2004). Finally, the linguistic and cultural isolation that may be felt by

immigrant women has detrimental effects to their ability to reach out and access services and information “because a lack of multilingual and multicultural resources prevents the immigrant or refugee woman from discussing domestic violence and the options available to her” (Sharma, 2001, p. 1414; see also Smith, 2004). This lack of language skills coupled with social isolation may also make it easier for husbands to take control and authority in the household, as they may become the only connection to society outside of the family unit (Guruge et al., 2010). The combination of these risk factors place immigrant women in vulnerable positions that may lead to deleterious health outcomes, including domestic violence.

It is important to note that the immigration process has a significant impact on immigrant men as well. For example, preliminary research shows that refugee men who flee their homelands after witnessing torture, war, political imprisonment, and other forms of violence may exhibit violent behaviours as a means of solving problems, dealing with their own trauma and stress and expressing their feelings of disempowerment and loss of control (Gupta et al., 2009; Guruge et al., 2010). A particular study by Gupta et al. (2009), reports that men reporting pre-migration political violence exposure were over twice as likely to report any past-year partner violence perpetration.

Visible minority women (who may or may not be foreign born) are also contending with being delegated the label of cultural “Other” in Canada. In other words, in the context of domestic violence and visible minority women, a nuanced analysis about how the experiences of these women are defined by their status as racialized and nationalized others. For example, this sort of analysis would encourage us to think about how the cultural values of women in ethno-cultural communities may be at odds with North America society and culture, such as the importance of the family preservation over individualism and the desire for independence (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Sharma, 2001). Thus, prevention efforts that espouse a particularly feminist and/or self-empowerment (as defined by a dominant ethno-centric paradigm) directed toward ethno-cultural communities may be lost in translation (Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004; Kasturirangan, 2008). As stated by Sharma (2001):

[feminist battered women’s movements]... leads to conflict between fulfilling one’s own needs and satisfying the needs of others. Although this struggle is also experienced by White battered women, it is more intense for immigrant and racially visible battered women because of their strong connections to their racial and ethnic heritages. (p. 1412)

This understanding would also shed light on why immigrant and visible minority women hesitate to report abuse and/or leave abusive situations. Disclosing domestic violence can lead to a rejection of that woman from the community that provides her social support by

other means, thrusting her into a “mainstream” culture that does not accept her “otherness” (Kasturirangan, 2004; Sharma, 2001; Smith, 2004).

An understanding of the family structures, including extended family, and of immigrant and/or visible minority women may also shed more insight on the factors leading to and preventing domestic violence (Tutty et al., 2010). Social networks in immigrant and ethno-cultural communities can be key to protecting the family from a variety of social ills, including domestic violence. “Such networks often provided instrumental, informational, emotional and psychological support” (Guruge et al., 2010, p. 108; see also Kasturirangan et al., 2004; Sharma, 2001). However, many women leave these forms of social networks in their home country and face smaller, sometimes non-existent social supports, which propel them into domestic violence vulnerability. Tamil participants in a study conducted by Guruge et al. (2010) note that “even if there are family members in Canada, the values that governed the expected/perceived/given support have changed since coming to a more individualistic society” (p. 108). Interestingly, in the same study, women who had their own family members in Canada felt more protected from violence in the household. However, when they did not have their own family members nearby but were close in proximity to the husbands’ family members, there was an increase in the husbands’ power over their wife and abuse from the extended family. This phenomenon is also found in studies conducted by Grewal (2005).

Several studies (Guruge et al., 2010; Jolly & Reeves, 2005; Kasturirangan et al., 2004; Smith, 2004) report that many women find it stressful to the family unit when their husbands and other men from their community experience racism and discrimination in the workplace and in mainstream society, usually in the form of under-employment and/or a lack of accreditation of their foreign credentials. Regardless if driven by patriarchal ideological values, this downward financial and professional mobility, with a perception that it is out of their control, leads to a loss of social status at home and in the community. Guruge et al. (2010) state:

Our findings, along with those of a number of previous studies, show that post-migration factors operating at the macro-level of society, including economic insecurity resulting from non-recognition of professional/educational credentials, workplace deskilling and racial/ethnic discrimination – added to the patriarchal pressure for men to meet family and social responsibilities – pushed men to self- and family destructive behaviours. (p. 110)

Finally, immigrant and visible minority women worry about coming forth about their experiences with domestic violence because they feel that have to take on a caretaker role for the reputation of their families and communities by way of shielding them from

shame and stereotypes that ethno-cultural communities are already susceptible to (Kasturirangan, 2008; Nash, 2005).

## **5.0 Conclusion**

### **5.1 Recommendations for Future Research**

#### *5.1.1 Local Community Investigations May Yield More Reliable Incidence Rates and Protective Factors*

It is evident that national rates of domestic violence and visible minority/immigrant do not give us a clear picture of what's happening here in Calgary. It would be prudent, as argued by Yoshihama (2009), that local incidence studies be implemented to get a clear idea of the extent of domestic violence in our ethno-cultural communities. Ideally, this would be implemented in both quantitative and qualitative methods – the first providing a clear idea of the rates, and the latter giving us a more nuanced, cultural specific and appropriate understanding of how domestic violence is affecting particular communities. Designing and implementing a community-specific inquiry will help to avoid “lumping” all ethno-cultural, visible minority and immigrant communities together into one monolithic category.

#### *5.1.2 Using Culturally-Specific Paradigms and Frameworks to Construct Knowledge*

It was argued in section two of this study that visible minority and immigrant women face cultural contexts that are layered into their experiences of domestic violence. Therefore, we must move forward with the commitment that any further inquiry about domestic violence and visible minority/immigrant women needs to construct knowledge from their perspective. Many authors argue that in order to avoid simplifying the issue to any uni-factoral explanation, such as patriarchy or race, we must make the connection between the social inequities and their impact on ethno-cultural individuals and families (Guruge et al., 2010; Saroca, 2002). In other words, nuanced inquiry would allow us to see how other identity markers such as gender, class, race, nationality, ability, sexual orientation, migration experience, status, etc. intersect to create conflicts in the family.

Kasturirangan et al. (2004) offer some key ideas for implications for further research in this area.

*Collaboration:* in order to deepen the understanding of domestic violence as it is felt by a wide variety of communities, enlisting key informants can aid in constructing knowledge that is nuanced, culturally appropriate and relevant to the current sociopolitical climate. Data collection and analysis may be implemented by cultural insiders who would be able to understand the slight nuances that can make a big difference in creating prevention or intervention programs. Action research, for example, would require that one of the main

purposes of the research would make it social justice oriented, and that it benefit the community and created by community members.

*Acknowledge oppression:* immigrant women face double oppression (sometimes more) because of the discrimination based on race in the larger society, and sexism both within and outside their communities. “Researchers should acknowledge that minority women must deal with the multiplicative forces of racism and sexism as they respond to domestic violence” (Kasturirangan et al., 2004, p. 327). It is also important to consider whether the research process is further marginalization or stigmatizing these women.

*Acknowledging complexities:* prevention or intervention programming should not pressure woman into making specific decisions that they did not have a hand in creating. As such, any research that helps to build culturally relevant programming should aim to understand the complexities these women live, and thus create the messages and programs that make sense for them. Cultural values and norms will be important to take into account and should be viewed as protective factors.

#### *5.1.3. Building Future Scholarship in a Positive Deviance Inquiry Framework*

Currently, there is no research that looks at domestic violence through a positive deviance approach. However, it has been included in this literature review because of the potential that it has to deliver unique and cutting-edge inquiry around domestic violence for future reference. For the purposes of this paper, protective factors of domestic violence were foregrounded in an effort to set the stage for such research in the future. If the protective factors of domestic violence (healthy relationship skills, personal development and growth, access to employment and housing, strengthened social supports, etc.) can be identified at the individual level where risk factors for domestic violence (alcohol abuse, low socioeconomic status, power and domination, anger management, etc.) exist, then in theory, the next step in domestic violence research can be guided by an PDI approach that builds upon the identified protective factors.



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**SHIFT TO STOP  
VIOLENCE  
BEFORE IT STARTS**



Initiated by The Brenda Stafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence