

**Immigrant Women, Family Violence, and Pathways Out of Homelessness
Policy Workshop Summary
Halifax, June 21, 2006**

Organizations Represented (17 individuals)

- Department of Community Services
- Transition House Association of Nova Scotia (2)
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada – Halifax Office (2)
- Nova Scotia Office of Immigration
- Feminists for Just and Equitable Public Policy (FemJEPP)
- Women’s Employment Outreach ((WEO) (2)
- Children’s Aid Society of Halifax(2)
- Immigrant Language Services
- Metro Immigrant Settlement Services (MISA)
- YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs
- Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women (NSACSW)
- African Women’s Empowerment and Development Association in Nova Scotia (AWEDANS)
- Capital District Health Authority

The session started with a brief introduction to the project and an overview of the key findings. Participants were then divided into two groups to discuss their experiences and make recommendations.

Questions we wanted to answer:

1. How do these research findings fit with your experiences?

The participants felt the findings resonated with their experiences, especially the following points:

- Difficult to address family violence in immigrant groups due to cultural differences; lack of knowledge around existing laws on family violence
- Shelters are a difficult concept for women in this group
- Shelters do not have the staff/resources to address the needs of these women (language, cultural)
- Asking for help seen as a sign of weakness, “like begging”
- Social assistance rates are “shameful”, inability to find adequate housing is one consequence

- Credentials not recognized, unable to find work in their field, can't go back to school because of lack of financial resources
- Isolation is a big issue, can be cut off from their own communities if these women leave their families
- Children play a major role in decisions made by these women. Do they stay/leave/where do they go? Fear of losing their children to Children's Aid.
- Racism/sexism hinders these women in making changes
- Abusive men use the immigration status of their wives as a form of control
- Immigrant women do not know their rights, very little information available to them or their male partners on family violence and child abuse laws in Canada
- "Cultural jump" from moving to Canada adds stress to the family life

2. What current initiatives exist to address issues faced by immigrant women experiencing family violence and housing insecurity?

(The initiatives discussed were more broadly based, rather than focusing solely on the researched group)

- NS Advisory Council publication – Making Changes: For women in abusive relationships
- NS Advisory Council has held two roundtables for immigrant Women, the second session identified systemic factors very similar to the research findings
- Healthy people – Healthy communities: Through diversity and inclusion; Capital Health strategy for clients, workplace, research and advocacy education
- Bridging the Gap – Partnership to bring together people, agencies, organizations, that work with immigrants
- Women at Risk program: For refugee women
- Outreach program through English as a Second Language training centre, titled Literacy for Wellness
- NS Department of Health passed guidelines on diversity; what the health system needs; for example, education of staff, cultural competencies

3. Recommendations

- Education was the overarching comment and included:
 - For both immigrant men and women on a broad range of topics such as individual rights and responsibilities, family violence, child abuse, expense of obtaining Canadian credentials,
 - Start education in the country of origin, continue when the family arrives in Canada
 - Pay immigrants to attend such workshops, cover transportation and care costs
 - Talks about family violence in schools by service providers such as shelter staff
 - “Need to get the information to them, not expect them to find it”
 - “There is a gap in what people need versus what they get. We need to bridge that gap.”
 - Also include education for service providers in the system to inform them on how family violence can lead to homelessness and housing insecurity for immigrant women

- More transition services, for example, visiting new immigrants in their homes
- Housing that is supportive and affordable
- Menu of services that are co-ordinated and integrated, review programs for immigrants and non-immigrants
- Need to look at diversity and inclusion as the framework from which to move forward
- Credential standardization across the country
- Work with policy makers to create change, community based voices
- Family violence screening tool to be used by clinicians
- Create working group to address possible changes
- Include immigrant women in any proposed working group, “nothing should happen about me, without me”
- Working group should be as diverse as possible, include religious and cultural community members
- Work with existing women’s centres/regional development agencies to include rural women

Other Comments

- Not enough resources, monetary or human, to make required changes
- Review delivery of current services to re-allocate existing resources, create an inventory of existing services and relationships between them
- Immigration status is a challenge for women leaving their sponsors. It can take a year or more to obtain refugee status, and this is not always possible depending on country of origin.
- Federal and provincial drive to accept immigrants, but difficult for immigrants once they arrive
- Distribute report to all key policy makers to put these issues on “their radar”
- Broad systemic issues such as racism, sexism, ageism; cannot overlook the focus in this project on family violence, pick one issue to make recommendations to public policy people
- Need to educate immigrant women who leave abusive situations in how the legal/court system works
- “work in silos”, need more collaborative approaches
- Require professional language interpreters to avoid using family members/friends
- Address mental health issues for this group of women
- Use the recommendations suggested by the women in the project as a starting point for future direction