



MANSO Brief to House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Violence against Young Women and Girls in Canada

Background:

Gender-based violence and its links to individual and societal problems for women around the world have been widely documented. Here we aim to make recommendations to address violence against newcomer young women and girls in Manitoba.

Our knowledge is the result of local academic and community-based studies, and program evaluation, as well as of the experiences of service providers working with newcomer (recent immigrant and refugee) women, girls and their families.

Research on newcomer women and domestic violence has found that they are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence, especially those from developing countries (Brownridge & Halli, 2002; Kulwicki, Answad, Carmona, & Ballout, 2010). Over the years, we have learned that gender-based violence for newcomers settling in Winnipeg is the result of – or exacerbated by – many socio-cultural and individual factors, including gender inequality, experiences of violence pre-migration, adaptation stresses, sudden role changes in families, perception of changes in gender status and privilege (i.e., women “taking advantage” of women’s rights, and protection by the law) and actual changes in gender status (i.e., men being negatively affected by downward socio-economic mobility, including job status loss and/or under-employment) (Bramadat 2015; Migliardi, Blum and Heinonen, 2004; Simbandumwe, Baily, Denetto, Migliardi, Bacon and Nighswander, 2008). Some of these issues affect women across the lifespan.

Impacted women face barriers including a lack of access to or knowledge of services and support, especially culturally appropriate services, a cultural disinclination to seek help, an attitude of tolerance towards spousal abuse, intolerance and discrimination in the larger culture and in services, language and literacy barriers, and a lack of transportation or affordable transportation (Kulwicki, Answad, Carmona & Ballout, 2010).

The issues faced by *young* newcomer women and girls are less visible and poorly understood. Young women experience gendered violence as result of gender inequality, which intersects with ethnicity and processes of racialization. For instance, anti-terrorist discourses are having a great impact on young Muslim women, who, because of being identifiably Muslim, are being harassed in the streets of Winnipeg. This limits their mobility and access to public spaces or conversely, leads to a normalization of violence in their lives (SERC 2016). Many newcomer young women and girls are also affected by non-intimate family violence (eg: violence from a sibling or other relative) because of the expectations of how young women should behave for families remain “respectable” or “honourable” in the eyes of their communities (Blum, Braiden, Heinonen & Madariaga-Vignudo, accepted for publication; Madariaga-Vignudo 2014).

Newcomer families come from very diverse socio-cultural environments with different childrearing practices. This may include physical and emotional discipline not acceptable within the Canadian context (Cabigting 2002, Ly 2015), which may lead to children being taken into care.

Further, youth in-care coming from abusive families had experienced neglect, physical, emotional and sexual abuse (PHAC 2008), with short and long term consequences (Osgood & Chambers, 2000). Experiences of abuse or violence places individuals at higher risk for revictimization and abusive behaviour in adolescence. For example, men who witnessed violence in their homes are three times more likely to behave abusively with their partners than men who did not witness violence in their homes (Kulwicki, et al., 2010).

Community-based research in Winnipeg provides ample evidence that communities are experiencing and calling for change. Innovative local work on Female Genital Cutting (FGC) also demonstrates the gendered expectations of women and young women and the challenges circumcised young women face in dating; but also shows that young men were seeking spaces to discuss the expectations of marrying circumcised women (Migliardi & Denetto 2014). Immigrant men participating in a project on family violence advised on the need to access more information on family violence prevention with an emphasis on culturally relevant models of prevention (Simbandwmwe et al. 2008; Blum 2003).

Areas of specific concern:

- Lack of culturally appropriate family violence/counselling services
- For some women, perception of violence as normalized
- Fear of community backlash on reporting or speaking publically about violence
- Increased incidence of street harassment of Muslim women and women of colour
- Hesitance to disclose or seek help for violence due to being afraid to shame the family or get the perpetrator in trouble with the law
- An increase in use of technology in exerting power and control over women and girls (eg: women being tracked via cell phones)

The diversity of our examples show that gendered violence towards newcomer young women and girls is pervasive within and outside of immigrant and refugee communities. In our work, we have learned that it is only through meaningful community engagement that we are able to address sensitive issues while avoiding stigmatizing and racializing entire immigrant communities.

Recommendations:

- Support for engaging in community development initiatives - with women and girls at the centre - to foster healthy intimate partner relationships and understanding consent in ways that are meaningful to diverse communities.
- Robust support for settlement services to support families during periods of adaptation and integration
- Support for improved partnerships between ethnocultural and/or faith organizations and mainstream service providers to address violence.
- A priority on support for shelters, counselling, outreach and educational programs and services that consider the needs of newcomer women, including:
 - Programs and initiatives that use plain language, or multiple languages to reach those who are not fluent in English / French
 - Programs that employ diverse staff to reflect the diversity of their clients
 - Programs and initiatives that acknowledges multiple cultural perspectives while reinforcing a rights based approach
 - Programs that take into consideration diverse religious/spiritual healing practices of participants
 - Programs that address the disproportionate impact of street harassment on racialized communities and the intersecting identities of queer/lesbian/bi/trans immigrant women, religious identity, socioeconomic status/class, (dis)ability, migration status, and so forth

- Ensure that immigration policies do not unintentionally keep women in abusive relationships, for example, through the threat of having a conditional permanent residence status revoked if the relationship breaks down.
- Research into experiences of use and impact of digital technologies among newcomer youth

Principles:

- Gender-based violence affects women and girls in all communities – while working with diverse communities it is critical to avoid stigmatizing women and girls in immigrant and refugee communities by linking violence against women with their cultural or faith community
- Community leadership and ownership of prevention initiatives is key, so community groups should be involved in the design and evaluation of initiatives. (Funding for specific initiatives should consider this principle).
- Inclusive approaches across gender and generations, with an emphasis on dialogue, and strong support of youth participation in program planning, implementation and evaluation, as well as in policy development.

Description of MANSO:

The Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO) is an umbrella organization for immigrant and refugee service providers in the province of Manitoba. MANSO's approximately 60 member organizations provide diverse services including settlement services, language classes, employment programs and specialized services. This brief was developed with the participation of:

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