

**Experiences of Front-line Shelter Workers in Providing Services to
Immigrant Women Impacted by Family Violence**

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ABSTRACT

Shelter service provision to immigrant women impacted by family violence is explored by presenting findings from a qualitative research study. Semi-structured interviews were employed with four front-line workers of shelters for abused women and children in the Southern Ontario region. The training and experiences of participants were explored and workers were asked for recommendations that would improve shelter service delivery to immigrant women. Findings indicated that service delivery issues continue to exist when supporting immigrant women in shelters including lack of sufficient training, language barriers, and cultural barriers. Participants discussed a wide range of recommendations for one-to-one support, shelters, and larger systems that they believed would allow for better shelter service delivery to immigrant women.

Purpose and Rationale of Study

The purpose of the research study is to explore how front-line workers of shelters for abused women and children experience providing support to immigrant women impacted by family violence. The idea for the study emerged from situations I encountered while working at a shelter for abused women and children. In conversations with colleagues, front-line shelter workers expressed difficulties in providing support to immigrant women. Working with immigrant women whose cultures, religions, and languages differed from workers' were expressed as challenges that impacted the degree to which workers were able to provide effective support. Given that the issue of service provision to immigrant women has been addressed in the literature, I became interested in exploring the challenges that workers continue to experience in their practice.

My social location influenced the direction of the research study. My role as a shelter worker led me to the decision to focus specifically on front-line workers' experiences in the context of service provision to immigrant women. While my female gender has been a critical component of my identity, being raised by a South Asian immigrant family has also impacted my values and beliefs. I have experienced racism and disadvantaged economic states related to the immigration process. I am also privileged to have learned the customs and traditions of our South Asian heritage at the same time that I was born and raised in Canada. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and citizenship issues motivated me to pursue similar issues in my social work practice.

The research study is suited to be conducted in a school of social work because the study has the capacity to further social work knowledge and practice. By exploring the experiences of front-line shelter workers, we can increase our understandings of the

challenges they encounter in providing services to immigrant women. Therefore, the study will increase the knowledge about the experiences of front-line shelter workers in the context of service provision to immigrant women. The framing of the study also allows for an exploration into how workers believe immigrant women could be better supported in shelters. The knowledge gained from the research study has been translated into practical recommendations for shelters to adopt in order to improve social work practice.

Research Issues and Questions

In order to explore shelter service provision to immigrant women, the research study examined three key issues: training of front-line shelter workers, experiences they encounter in providing services to immigrant women, and workers' recommendations for how shelter service provision could be improved to better support immigrant women.

From these issues stemmed the research study's overarching question: How do front-line shelter workers experience providing services to immigrant women who have been impacted by family violence? The three sub-questions that were addressed from this overarching question were:

1. What training have front-line shelter workers received in the area of working with immigrant women impacted by family violence? Do front-line shelter workers perceive the training they have received to be effective?
2. What factors make providing services to immigrant women impacted by family violence challenging for front-line shelter workers?
3. What changes need to occur in order for front-line shelter workers to better support immigrant women impacted by family violence?

Shelter service provision to immigrant women is being explored from the workers' perspectives. This stems partly from my social location as a front-line shelter worker and experiences I have encountered that led me to explore service provision to immigrant women impacted by family violence. Furthermore, to address a gap in the literature, this study is focusing on capturing the perspectives of front-line workers of shelters for abused women and children. Issues pertaining to workers' training and experiences, as well as their recommendations for improving service delivery can be explored by having front-line workers compose the study's sample. Although it would have been useful to also explore immigrant women's perspectives as service users, a lack of resources prevented this from occurring.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context

During the 1960's and 1970's, family violence shifted from being viewed as a private matter to a public issue (Loseke, 1992; O'Keefe, 1994; Yick, 2001). The emergence of shelters for abused women and children coincided with the rise of the feminist movement's focus on politicizing the issue of violence against women (Donnelly et al., 1999; Epstein et al., 1988; Srinivasan & Davis, 1991; Supriya, 2002). As awareness of the issue has grown, so too has the number of shelters (Donnelly et al., 1999). Therefore, the 1970's saw the emergence of family violence as a social issue and shelters as a public response.

Shelters now serve as one of the primary resources available for women and children escaping situations of violence (Davis, 1988). The efforts of local groups of women, many of whom were of Western European heritage and high economic stature,

were often credited with the establishment of the first North American shelters, (Donnelly et al., 1999). This historical development is important in understanding shelter service provision as it applies to immigrant women.

Norms based on the experiences of White middle-class women have become inherent in the structure of shelters for abused women and children (Bonilla-Santiago, 1996; Donnelly et al., 1999; Klein et al., 1997; MacLeod & Shin, 1993; Supriya, 2002). This has resulted in the assumption that all women residing in shelters share the same needs. Normalizing practices based on North American food, language, dress, and child-rearing practices have created a 'typical' type of shelter user (Supriya, 2002) constructing the immigrant woman as the 'other' type of resident (Campbell et al., 1997; Donnelly et al., 1999; Supriya, 2002). Women responsible for the formation of the shelter movement were trained in feminist approaches to practice which has impacted the way services have been provided to immigrant women as will be discussed later (Supriya, 2002).

Challenges and Barriers in Utilizing Social Services

It is now widely reported in the literature that immigrant women who have been abused experience difficulties utilizing community and social services (Bonilla-Santiago, 1996; Huisman, 1996; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; MacLeod & Shin, 1993; Paredes, 1992; Preisser, 1999; Rafiq, 1991; Raj & Silverman, 2002; Sharma, 2001; Supriya, 2002). The majority of the literature emerged during the 1990's which specifically explored social service provision to immigrant women impacted by family violence. The literature clearly illustrated that immigrant women who used social services did not receive support that reflected their needs, values, and worldviews.

Issues surrounding language were identified as a key barrier to utilizing social services for many immigrant women (Rafiq, 1991). A study by MacLeod and Shin (1993) showed that language barriers affect all aspects of immigrant women's lives. Language discrimination was reported as affecting some women more profoundly than racism. Sixty-four immigrant women who spoke neither English nor French composed the study's sample. Women expressed that they commonly found mainstream agencies not to have material in languages other than English or French. Furthermore, women also said that it was common for mainstream agencies not to have a staff that was fluent in multiple languages. These were two key reasons why women did not often use the services offered by mainstream social services. With a lack of proficiency in one of Canada's official languages, women stated feeling frustrated and invisible.

Aside from clear language differences, Western styles of communication were seen as conflicting with communication patterns of many immigrant women (Huisman, 1996; Preisser, 1999). Legault (1996) describes a 'culture shock' that can be present in practice relationships between workers and members of immigrant communities. Each searches the foreignness of the other which can lead to misunderstandings and ultimately inappropriate support. Legault (1996) describes the primary cultural difference to be the 'we' that prevails in non-Western societies as opposed to the 'I' inherent in the Western world. This individual focus in counselling decontextualizes the role of cultural, social, and economic factors in immigrant women's lives (Wiebe, 1985). As a result, Wiebe (1985) argues that Western forms of individual counselling may be expecting women to conform to unfamiliar norms and standards.

Children were commonly reported to be used as interpreters for women which was found to be problematic (Wiebe, 1985; Rafiq, 1991). A research study conducted by McLeod and Shin (1993) revealed that many immigrant women felt embarrassment and shame from using their children as interpreters. This caused women to become dependent on their children and forced a critical role reversal which negatively affected the self esteem of both women and children (Wiebe, 1985). Furthermore, when formal translation services exist, immigrant women reported them as being ineffective because of a lack of cultural sensitivity to women's experiences and realities (MacLeod & Shin, 1993). Cultural insensitivity appears to still exist in social service delivery to immigrant women. Service providers still fail to contextualize immigrant women's culture when trying to understand their experiences (Preisser, 1999).

In a Canadian needs assessment of service delivery to immigrant women, cultural interpreters identified several concerns they have when working with abused immigrant women (Parades, 1992). Many reported difficulties working effectively with mainstream services because they felt they were providing support beyond their defined roles. They stated feeling as if they were a mediator between the immigrant women and a system which misunderstands her needs.

Lack of staff diversity representing multilingual and multicultural women was another critique of social services reported in the Canadian literature. A lack of such diversity was attributed to staff lacking cultural sensitivity to immigrant women's experiences (MacLeod & Shin, 1990). Furthermore, the absence of a diverse staff was found to lead to a distrust of workers on the part of immigrant women utilizing services (Sharma, 2001). The commonality of languages, customs, and traditions can help ease

the difficulties immigrant women may experience when using mainstream services. However, the hiring of a representative staff does not necessarily mean that an organization is more accessible for immigrant women (Paredes, 1992). In order to provide effective services, organizational structures and policies must also change.

The literature provided recommendations which emphasized the need for service providers to learn more about the specific realities of immigrant women (Donnelly et al., 1999; Lee, 2000; Legault, 1996; Paredes, 1992; Rafiq, 1991; Sharma, 2001; Wiebe, 1985). These included a need for anti-racist education amongst mainstream agencies supporting women, training for staff on how to work more effectively with interpreters, and secure funding so support services can ensure ongoing and appropriate services to immigrant women (Donnelly et al., 1999; Paredes, 1992).

While the literature in the 1990's made the issue of service provision to abused immigrant women visible, challenges in service provision continue to exist. More recent literature reports that social service delivery continues to be incongruent with the needs of immigrant women (Sharma, 2001; Supriya, 2002; Yick, 2001).

Challenges and Barriers Utilizing Shelter Services

Although several attempts have been made to research immigrant women's experiences in accessing and utilizing community services, shelters for abused women and children have not been the focus of the study. However, critiques of services still emerged from immigrant women who had utilized shelters through various studies assessing social service provision to immigrant women. The literature has demonstrated that shelters pose specific challenges for immigrant women.

Many immigrant women may be unfamiliar with the structure and services of shelters as the facilities may not have existed or were not discussed in their countries of origin (Acevedo, 2000; Lee, 2000; Rafiq, 1991). Even if immigrant women are familiar with the existence of shelters, many may view them as culturally inappropriate or unacceptable (Raj & Silverman, 2002). This is partly because of the stigma many immigrant women who leave relationships will face from their families and communities.

Literature states that family counselling may be one useful way of responding to family violence amongst families of various cultures (Lee, 2000; MacLeod & Shin, 1994; Paredes, 1992; Rafiq, 1991; Wiebe, 1985). However, feminist principles assert that before this can occur, individual interventions must occur to ensure that family interventions are safe for the women and children involved (Lee, 2000; Rafiq, 1992).

Shelters operate from the premise of providing a safe haven for women to begin living lives independent from their abusers. It is this aspect of shelters which is viewed as empowering to women and children who have been impacted by family violence (Loseke, 1992). Feminist ideology places importance on women's safety and individual needs (Sharma, 2001) which is reflected in shelters' focus on encouraging women to live independently from their abusers. This model of empowerment rests on feminist perspectives to social service delivery (Yick, 2001). Leaving abuse is a mainstream conceptualization of intervention with abused women that may not necessarily be empowering for all (Lee, 2000).

The individualistic focus of shelters on encouraging women to live independently from their abusers may not be congruent with immigrant women's needs (Lee, 2000; MacLeod & Shin, 1993; Rafiq, 1991). Many immigrant women may see their identities

and happiness as linked to their families and communities. A lack of family-based supports in shelters was viewed as a critical gap in services (MacLeod & Shin, 1993). Other sources have also stated that the familial system is often ignored in service delivery to women who have been abused (Acevedo, 2000; Sharma, 2001; Supriya, 2002).

This issue can be further examined by exploring the influence of language. Language used to describe violence against women in personal relationships varies and is influenced by theoretical perspectives. Feminist theory and approaches reject terms including family violence and conjugal violence because it is argued that they mask the gendered nature of abuse (Yick, 2001). Terms such as wife abuse are used because they highlight the gender inequality present in domestic violence. However, status inconsistency theory embraces the use of family violence, spouse abuse, and marital violence, because it views the family as a power system which must be at the center of focus when understanding violence against women.

These two competing views have implications for the way violence is conceptualized amongst immigrant communities. A criticism made of feminist theory is that it ignores the reality that many immigrant women are abused not only by their partners, but also by members of their nuclear and extended families (Preisser, 1999; Raj & Silverman, 2002; Sharma, 2001). Therefore, abusers may be male or female, and terms such as wife abuse exclude the reality of many immigrant women. Abusers can be of either gender or any familial position; however, those that are abused are primarily women. The challenge remains on forming language to reflect this reality.

The use of language reveals that feminist perspectives place gender inequalities and the system of patriarchy at the center of their analysis of family violence (Sharma,

2001; Supriya, 2002; Yick, 2001). The strength to this perspective is it treats violence against women as a social issue; women are validated as accountability shifts from women to abusers (Sharma, 2001). This could benefit many immigrant women who continue to believe they are to blame for the abuse (Raj & Silverman, 2002). There are limitations to the feminist approaches however. The focus on gender provides a limited contextualization of women's experiences because it does not allow other parts of their identity such as ethnicity and immigration status to be of importance (Supriya, 2002).

Feminist theory and perspectives tend to guide social service provision to immigrant women impacted by issues of violence (Loseke, 1992; Paredes, 1992; Preisser, 1998; Sharma, 2001; Yick, 2001). At the same time, the literature reveals that services do not meet the needs of many immigrant women experiencing family violence (Bonilla-Santiago, 1996; Donnelly et al., 1999; Huisman, 1996; MacLeod & Shin, 1993; Paredes, 1992; Preisser, 1997; Sharma, 2001; Supriya, 2002; Yick, 2001).

Feminist approaches tend to focus on empowerment models to social service delivery which provide women with the opportunity to explore and utilize their strengths and capacities (Sharma, 2001). However, immigrant women have reported that services tend to take away their strengths rather than promote them (MacLeod & Shin, 1993; Paredes, 1992). The focus of empowerment models is on an individual woman and improving her immediate circumstances without necessarily factoring in the importance she may place on her family. In fact, many immigrant women view their well-being as connected to their family and community (Huisman, 1996; Yick, 2001). The foundation of social relations is seen as being built from these connections and thus shape's women's identities.

Cultural awareness and cultural competency have emerged as models of social service delivery to immigrant populations (Legault, 1996; MacLeod & Shin, 1994; Paredes, 1992; Preston, 2001). The diversity inherent in Ontario means that the culture between workers and women will likely differ (Rafiq, 1991). Cross-cultural approaches to practice recognize that working with people from cultures other than one's own creates the need for certain knowledge. In a handbook for service providers working with immigrant families, it is stated that, "The more you know about and understand diverse communities, the more effective you will be as a service provider" (Preston, 2001, 8). The key to a cross-cultural approach is not to remove differences, but rather to understand differences in order to enhance communication in social service delivery (Rafiq, 1991).

Paredes (1992) critiques this approach as objectifying and profiling the values and behaviours of immigrant communities. Cultures are treated as static entities which can be learned about. It is argued that practice informed by cultural awareness and sensitivity has not included a focus on colonialism, racism, and workers' biases. Furthermore, these approaches have not incorporated the needs and worldviews of diverse communities into practice. While culture may affect the way family violence is understood, culture is not just one's race or ethnicity as has often been assumed (Warrier et al., 2002). It involves one's age, sexual orientation, gender, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, and other important factors.

Racism continues to exist in shelters for abused women and children (MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Sharma, 2001). Through informal interviews with service providers, MacLeod and Shin (1990) found that some residents did not tolerate immigrant women

cooking food from their home countries or practicing religious customs. Cultural insensitivity was also named as another barrier inherent in shelter services to women (Raj & Silverman, 2002). The staff, food and facilities of shelters do not tend to reflect the cultures and realities of many immigrant women.

Issues of racism in shelters were raised in OAITH, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses during the 1990's (Meyer & Estable, 2001). OAITH is a member-based organization, composed primarily of first stage Ontario shelter for abused women and children. Addressing the issues of racism in shelters was met with resistance by some OAITH members (Meyer & Estable, 2001). The OAITH Board of Directors spent approximately four years discussing these issues and hired an anti-racism coordinator to assist in addressing the issues.

In a telephone conversation with OAITH's lobby coordinator, Eileen Morrow, I learned that the anti-racist coordinator was hired on a three-year project. Both the anti-racism coordinator and OAITH's president of the Board toured the North West region of their membership area. Racist and oppressive incidents were reported as occurring in some shelters within the region.

For a period of approximately one year, OAITH made attempts at education and mediation with shelters. The entire OAITH membership was informed by the Board of Directors and various members became involved in the process. All but one shelter in the North West region of OAITH revoked their membership, claiming they were being accused of racism. Some shelters outside of the North West region also revoked their membership, arguing that OAITH was losing its focus by centering efforts on racism and oppression.

Membership with OAITH requires shelters to sign on the membership form that they practice from anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspectives. The manuals for membership focusing on creating inclusive spaces for women in shelters allude to the concepts of anti-racism and anti-oppressive policies. Training conducted by OAITH's Anti-Racism/Oppression Committee builds on these manuals so that shelters have a better understanding of the perspectives. Some members argued that OAITH should not be enforcing anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspectives in shelters. These experiences illustrate some of the difficulties addressing shelter service delivery issues.

The need for professional development of shelter staff was identified as an important need in the literature. One key area was for shelters to build better working relationships with cultural and ethno-specific agencies (Paredes, 1992; Lee, 2002; Raj & Silverman, 2002). Better relationships would facilitate ongoing networking and sharing of information and resources. Training on immigration policies was also identified as an important need (Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre, 2003; Legault, 1996). These forms of professional development would help workers provide more effective services to immigrant women (Rafiq, 1991).

It is widely agreed upon in the literature that shelters for abused women and children are ineffective in providing services to immigrant women (AAMCHC, 2003; Donnelly et al., 1999; MacLeod & Shin, 1993; Paredes, 1992; Rafiq, 1991; Supriya, 2002; Yick, 2001). This is extremely concerning since shelters are viewed as the primary resource available for women and children impacted by family violence (Donnelly et al., 1999; Loseke, 1992).

Gaps in Literature

Despite the growing number of shelters, few across North America have been evaluated (Davis, 1988; Epstein et al., 1988; Tutty et al., 1999). Research that does exist has tended to focus on the prevalence rates of abuse, severity of abuse, and characteristics of women using shelter services (O’Keefe, 1994; Tutty et al., 1999). Most research has looked at the experiences of White middle-class women, neglecting issues pertinent to immigrant women which represents a racial bias in the research (Huisman, 1996). With this gap, mainstream social services including shelters do not have research to inform changes in service delivery.

Little research has been done to explore the effectiveness of services provided by shelters. Although exploring the effectiveness of service delivery to immigrant women is a relatively new area of focus (Rafiq, 1991), the literature clearly states that shelters are a problematic area of service delivery. Given the critiques of shelters which have surfaced, it is important to explore how shelters provide services to immigrant women impacted by family violence. Research exploring issues of importance to immigrant women can allow for better provision of services (O’Keefe, 1994; Raj & Silverman, 2002).

Some studies have included front-line social service workers who provide services to immigrant communities in their research samples (Access Alliance Multicultural Community Mental Health Centre, 2003; Donnelly et al., 1999; Huisman, 1996; Lee, 2000; Legault, 1996; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Paredes, 1992; Smith, 2004). The sample and purpose of each study varied greatly.

Several studies included front-line shelter workers in their samples. Huisman (1996) and Lee (2000) both conducted studies with Asian community activists who had experience working with Asian immigrant women who have been abused. The purpose

of these studies was to explore Asian women's service delivery needs and barriers preventing effective support from mainstream agencies. In a Canadian needs assessment by Paredes (1992), social service delivery to immigrant and refugee women who have been abused and sexually assaulted was explored by interviewing service users and service providers. Along with shelter workers, settlement workers, cultural interpreters, community activists, and workers from other social service agencies were included in the study's sample.

Similarly, Smith (2004) conducted a study aimed at raising awareness of the needs of immigrant and visible minority women in Canada. The study also focussed on identifying actions which would enhance service delivery to these women. The study's sample included community workers of shelters for abused women and children, settlement organizations, criminal justice services, and a variety of other community-based services.

Shelter directors were interviewed in a study by Donnelly et al. (1999) for the purpose of exploring which groups of women were most likely to be served and excluded from shelter service delivery. MacLeod and Shin (1990) also conducted interviews with male and female service providers working with immigrant women, some of whom were front-line shelter workers. Although a study by the Access Alliance Multicultural Community Mental Health Centre included only shelter staff and immigrants and refugees who have utilized shelter services, the focus was not specially on shelters for abused women and children.

It is clear from this overview of the studies' samples that not one focussed its sample exclusively on front-line workers of shelters for abused women and children.

This has implications on the findings because challenges in service delivery for immigrant women emerged from a variety of social service settings and workers. This study is an attempt to begin exploring service delivery issues to immigrant women by speaking with front-line shelter workers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This research study explores three purposes: to assess front-line shelter workers' training in working with immigrant women, to explore participants' experiences working with immigrant women, and to elicit ideas on how workers can better support immigrant women in shelter settings. In order to capture information relating to these purposes, this study's overarching question is: How do front-line shelter workers experience providing services to immigrant women who have been impacted by family violence? The three sub-questions that were addressed from this overarching question were:

1. What training have front-line shelter workers received in the area of working with immigrant women impacted by family violence? Do front-line shelter workers perceive the training they have received to be effective?
2. What factors make providing services to immigrant women impacted by family violence challenging for front-line shelter workers?
3. What changes need to occur in order for front-line shelter workers to better support immigrant women impacted by family violence?

A combination of evaluation, action research, and feminist methodologies were used to serve the study's research purposes. In order to assess front-line shelter workers' training in providing services to immigrant women impacted by family violence,

evaluation methods were used. Services for abused women have not been sufficiently evaluated (Tutty et al., 1999). Furthermore, although shelters for abused women in North America continue to grow, few have been evaluated (Davis, 1988; Tutty et al., 1999). Although a pure evaluation approach was not used, the research study was informed by evaluation methods to assess workers' training in providing services to immigrant women and to assess shelters' responses to immigrant women by exploring challenges workers experience in their daily practice.

One purpose of evaluative research is to determine the effectiveness of an intervention or phenomenon (Clarke, 1999). A process evaluation approach would focus on the way in which a program was delivered; this study used formative evaluation methods in order to suggest improvements to shelter service provision (Patton, 1980). Formative evaluation methods were used to examine the nature and effectiveness of participants' training, however emphasis was also placed on gaining participants' feedback to guide future changes (Tripodi, 1983).

Qualitative interviewing methods were used as the method of data collection which are widely used in formative evaluation studies (Clarke, 1999). As one important stakeholder, front-line shelter workers were given the opportunity to become actively involved in the research process by providing feedback by identifying their needs and ideas. Therefore, by eliciting participants' ideas for change, evaluation methodology can incorporate elements of action research.

Action research is a form of study that involves the participation of those affected by a particular phenomenon (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Similar to a formative evaluation research approach, an action researcher collaborates with participants to find

solutions to issues. Emphasis is placed on eliciting ideas for change from participants' experiences (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

Because of limited resources, the research study did not adopt a pure form of action research. Action researchers often spend prolonged periods of time in the field, observing day-to-day activities in order to generate data to inform future change (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). While this could have been a useful technique for data collection, the time-limited nature of the research study did not make it possible to do. Although the intention of action research is to implement change, the study did not involve implementing and evaluating the actions suggested by research participants. Rather, a set of detailed recommendations will be presented to shelters that emerged from participants' experiences and ideas.

Similar to action research, feminist methodologies are also concerned with creating a collaborative dialogue between researchers and participants. Therefore, it is common for feminists to participate in action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Counseling approaches based on feminist principles provide valuable insights for feminist research. Similar to the counselor-client relationship, feminists are encouraged to question the role of power in the research process (Bryan, 2001). Rather than an objective, neutral process, a feminist researcher acknowledges power dynamics and facilitates a collaborative relationship incorporating women's strengths (Bryan, 2001).

The limitations of feminist approaches are important to note. The experiences of immigrant women have been excluded by feminism's focus on gender inequalities (Bryan, 2001; Sharma, 2001; Yick, 2001). In addition to rendering the experiences of

immigrant women invisible, research based on feminist principles has tended to generalize the experiences of White women to all women (Sharma, 2001).

Although it is illustrated in the literature that feminism has not effectively served the needs and realities of immigrant women, feminist research approaches have been used in the research study. An important strength of feminism is its ability to contextualize family violence in gender inequality and patriarchal structures (Bryan, 2001; Sharma, 2001; Yick, 2001). With this gendered analysis, feminist approaches to research criticize positive paradigms for normalizing male experiences and excluding women's realities (Dankoski, 2000).

The inclusion of feminist methodology is an acknowledgement of its strengths in approaching issues of violence against women. Rather than abandon the usefulness of feminism because of its limitations, this research study has attempted to highlight its benefits to improve service delivery for immigrant women while noting its limitations.

Key Concepts

Front-line shelter worker: Shelters are residential facilities that provide emergency housing and support to women and children impacted by family violence. A front-line worker is a woman who provides direct services to women and children in shelters.

Immigrant: For the purpose of this study, a person who is an immigrant is born outside of Canada and has moved legally from his or her country of origin with the intention of residing permanently in Canada. Although the term "immigrant" is used throughout the study, it is important to note the diversity that the term encompasses. Immigrant people are by no means a homogenous group. There are many factors which affect one's identity including gender, race, religion, country of origin, socioeconomic status, age,

sexual orientation and ability. The term is being used in a broad context however the study recognizes the complexity it represents.

Family violence: Family violence includes acts and/or threats of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, mental, financial, religious, spiritual, or ritual abuse.

Furthermore, the specificity of abuse related to immigration merits attention.

Literature illustrates an immigrant context of abuse. Immigration-related abuse includes language barriers which directly correlate to higher levels of isolation and alienation (MacLeod & Shin, 1993; Raj & Silverman, 2002; Sharma, 2001). Because the education and employment skills of many foreign-trained professionals are not recognized in Canada, immigrant families are at risk of economic insecurity related to the immigration process (Klein et al., 1997; Raj & Silverman, 2002). This is an example of how discrimination and racism are particular to the experiences of abuse for immigrant women. Women may become more financially dependent on their partners and/or families often because people experience a lower quality of life after the immigration process (Sharma, 2001). Abusers may threaten women with deportation, also a form of abuse specific to immigrant women (Raj & Silverman, 2002).

For the purpose of this study, those who experience abuse are women and those who perpetrate abuse include women's partners and members of their nuclear and extended families. Although a feminist mainstream understanding of family violence emphasizes male violence against women, abusers may be male or female when members of extended family are also seen as potential abusers (Lee, 2000).

Sampling

Participants of the research study were front-line shelter workers who provide services to immigrant women impacted by family violence. Purposive sampling was used to build a sample of participants with the ability to provide information for the study's focus (Padget, 1998). I met with the Executive Director or Program Director of four shelters in Southern Ontario which provide services to abused women and children. The research study's purpose and procedures were explained and the opportunity to ask questions was provided. All four shelter Directors indicated their agreement to participate in the research study by signing detailed consent forms (Appendix B). Executive Directors and Program Directors were asked to distribute information posters of the research study to front-line shelter workers which served as the primary means of recruiting participants (Appendix A).

Three of the four participants self-identified as immigrant women. Two participants were visible women of colour. While participants' ages were not asked, I observed ages ranging from approximately thirty to fifty. Participants held varying degrees of educational and professional experience. The range of shelter experience varied from one year to thirteen years. Two participants worked at one shelter whereas the other two participants were employed at two shelters each.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative interviews were the mode of data collection used to explore the research study's focus. This form of data collection is widely used by evaluation researchers (Clarke, 1999), action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001), and feminist research (Naples, 2003). Interviews were semi-structured and based on an interview

guide (Appendix D). I asked participants pre-determined questions that were open-ended in nature. While the general sequencing of questions remained consistent, the phrasing of questions varied between interviews and the use of spontaneous questions was employed. The use of an interview guide helped to keep conversational purpose while allowing participants' perspectives and experiences to emerge (Patton, 1980).

Data was collected by in-person, oral interviews with four front-line shelter workers. All four participants and I were able to communicate in English, therefore interpreters were not used. The length of each interview varied from forty minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes. The location of each interview also varied and was determined by both the participant and I. Two interviews were conducted in coffee shops, one interview took place in the participant's car, and one interview was completed in the participant's home. Attempts were made to conduct interviews in physical settings that were quiet and free of distractions. Interviews did not occur in shelters as doing so would jeopardize participants' anonymity.

Once written informed consent was obtained from each participant, the tape recorder was turned on and the interview began (Appendix C). In order to further dialogue and build rapport with participants, I recorded a minimal number of notes during interviews. An interview guide was used to explore the research questions through three major sections (Appendix D).

Data Analysis

I transcribed the raw data obtained from all four interviews. Every effort was made to transcribe each word verbatim. Non-verbal sounds and statements such as laughter, voice intonation, and pauses were also recorded. Transcripts were stored on a

computer-hard drive and disk to which only I had access. Print copies were filed and only accessible to me. In order to ensure participants remained anonymous, descriptors were applied upon transcription to conceal identities.

Once transcripts were completed, I drew themes from the data. This represents an inductive approach to data analysis as themes were drawn once the raw data was reviewed and analyzed (Creswell, 1998). Induction is a common approach to data analysis often used by evaluation researchers (Patton, 1980). General patterns are drawn from reviewing observations and field notes which become themes for analysis. Each line of text was read and reviewed multiple times in order to draw themes. Coding ceased once new information coincided with the emerged themes and saturation was reached (Padgett, 1998).

Attempts were made to take my interpretations of themes back to the participants for review. Because of limited time and resources, this form of member checking was completed with all four participants via telephone conversations or email communication. Feminist methodology emphasizes guarding against researcher bias and member checking is one way of ensuring rigour in qualitative research studies (Padgett, 1998).

In order to capture the depth of participants' experiences and insights, direct quotes were used in the data analysis. Lengths of quotations varied however all were inserted into the data analysis in order to convey participants' ideas without altering their words (Creswell, 1998).

Ethics

Prior to recruiting front-line shelter workers, I obtained informed written consent from the Executive Director or Program Director of each participating shelter. Because

the research study's purpose was to elicit challenges participants have experienced in providing support to immigrant women in shelters and to generate ideas for change, it was important to first obtain consent from shelter Directors. When change is related to organizations, the study's process and findings may appear as threatening to organizational norms (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). In order to maintain credibility, I needed to consider and manage potential power structures.

Once consent was obtained from shelter Directors, recruitment of front-line workers began. The shelter Director who provided consent was asked to distribute the information poster to team members. To ensure all front-line workers received a copy of the information poster, I asked the Director to place one copy in each worker's mail slot if possible and discuss the study at an upcoming team meeting.

Each participant was required to sign a written consent form. I provided each woman with the time to read it and ask questions prior to signing. I answered all questions to the best of my ability.

I made my role as a shelter worker known to all participating shelter Directors and participants. This shared characteristic helped to build rapport with participants. I benefited from understanding the organizational structure and power dynamics inherent within shelters which allowed me to work more effectively within the system to further the research study (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). However, other aspects between the participants and I varied. These differences included race, immigration status, religion, age, educational experience and professional experience. Researchers hold multiple statuses which create a 'fluidity' of identities that may put them in simultaneous positions of power and powerless in relation to participants (Naples, 2003). Feminist methodology

encourages researchers to be critical of binary oppositions in order to be aware of commonalities and differences they may have with those being researched (Ramazanoğlu, 2002).

To remain critically reflective throughout the research process, I kept a journal to document my observations and reflections. This form of reflective practice is an important dimension of action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). Journaling allowed me to process the experiences of sampling, interviewing, and interpreting data. It also allowed me to become more aware of my social location and biases which assisted in understanding my experiences.

Limitations

Findings from the research study cannot be generalized to the experiences of other front-line shelter workers. The qualitative nature of the study captured participants' experiences; however, because attempts were not made to obtain a representative sample, findings cannot be applied to all shelter workers in Southern Ontario.

There were limitations to only including shelter workers in the study's sample. The experiences of other social service providers such as settlement workers and ethno-specific practitioners were not captured. As indicated in the literature review, these workers have experience in supporting immigrant women and may have useful insights to provide. Workers offering services to women centers and community agencies may also have valuable contributions on how shelters can better support immigrant women impacted by family violence.

Furthermore, the voices of immigrant women who utilize shelter services were not included in the research study. The absence of these critical voices was due to my

lack of resources including time and access to interpreters. Their perceptions on difficulties in the practice relationship were not accounted for nor were their ideas on what changes are needed in shelters included. This is an important area of research which has not received ample attention in the literature and is therefore a critical area for future research studies.

Because of this limitation of the sample, the recommendations that emerged from interviews with front-line workers were not presented to those that use the services, immigrant women. They were not consulted for feedback on the recommendations presented by the participants.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Each of the four transcripts was first read with the purpose of obtaining overall understanding. Upon a second reading of each transcript, I jotted notes in the margins of the text. I read and reviewed each transcript to pull important themes. At this point, data began to be reduced to important categories. Once general themes were drawn from each transcript, all transcripts were compared to develop a richer and deeper analysis.

Prior to analyzing the data, three categories for analysis were predetermined based on the study's purposes: participants' training, challenges experienced by participants in providing services to immigrant women, and changes identified by participants that would allow immigrant women to be better supported. Although data was approached with predetermined categories, an inductive approach was used to explore themes within these categories. Rather than attempt to explain a phenomenon, inductive approaches to data analysis aim to discover and explore (Padgett, 1998).

Training

Participants were asked introductory questions related to their professional experience. Jan began her career as a front-line shelter worker eleven years ago. She began as a relief worker in one shelter and then became a part-time worker at the same shelter. As a part-time worker, she worked overnight and weekend shifts for four years. Her career with the shelter progressed when she was asked to help open another shelter dealing with long-term transitional housing. Her involvement in this capacity lasted for approximately four to five years. Approximately one year ago, Jan became a full-time front-line worker at a second shelter. At the same time, she remained employed as a relief worker with the shelter she was employed at for eleven years.

Jan identified her educational training in history and anthropology as being influenced by a Western perspective. She explained that educational curriculums were based on Western philosophy and Northern European patriarchal values influenced by the church. Although she was critical of the values inherent in her training, Jan stated she has found her history and anthropology training to be helpful in her shelter work. Her training in history has allowed her to look into the past and see that one's familial background is also influenced by one's cultural background. She stated that anthropology has opened her eyes to a variety of cultures which has helped when working with diverse communities in the shelter.

Tina began working as a front-line shelter worker approximately three years ago. She too began as a relief worker and then became a full-time worker. At the same time, Tina identified also working overnight shifts at a second shelter.

Tina stated that her educational training was based on a combination of feminist, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive principles. She defined the training she found as helpful

to be the lived experience gained as a self-identified immigrant woman. Tina described gaining an understanding of cross-cultural issues and sensitivity towards the issues of immigrant women through her personal experiences. Having arrived in Canada as an immigrant, she is familiar with how sexism and racism intersect to impact women's well-being.

Lee has been working at one shelter as a relief worker for approximately one year. She stated that her educational training was based on psychology.

"I think that I trained myself from psychology because from when I was twelve years old, I – I was reading psychology and philosophy on my own" (Lines 35-37).

Lee identified her psychology background to be helpful in the work she does at the shelter. In a follow-up conversation, Lee said she is able to provide more 'educated counselling' that addresses the variety of issues women may experience related to their mental well-being. She identified some of these mental health issues to include panic, anxiety, and depression. Lee also stated that her psychology background has helped her be non-judgmental when working with women in the shelter.

Helen has been employed as a front-line shelter worker in one shelter for thirteen years. She began her career in a part-time capacity and assumed a full-time position four years ago. Helen completed her Masters in Psychology and Education. In a follow-up telephone conversation, Helen stated that her educational training has assisted in her shelter work. Through many sociology courses, she stated that she learned the value and respect of humans' well-being and an appreciation for their lived experiences.

These descriptions illustrate that the participants hold varying degrees of training and experience. Despite the differences in educational and experiential training, the

participants' experience working in shelters with abused women enabled them to provide valuable insights and ideas contributing to the study's purpose.

Participants were asked questions pertaining to the training they received in working with immigrant women impacted by family violence. None of the four women identified receiving training from their shelters focussed specifically on the issues of immigrant women and family violence. In addition to not receiving training from shelters, three of the four women stated not receiving educational, workshop, or seminar training related to the issue.

Helen was the only participant to identify having received training relevant to the issues of immigrant women. The shelter which she is employed with received training from an outside agency on a few occasions that was put on by women of colour and immigrant women. These training sessions occurred approximately four years ago and were focussed on the issues of discrimination experienced by diverse groups including immigrant women and women of colour.

In a follow-up conversation, Helen stated that the training did not address the issues that immigrant women experience when abused nor did it focus on how shelter service delivery could better support immigrant women. Therefore, although Helen identified receiving some training regarding immigrant women, it was not directed specifically toward immigrant women impacted by family violence.

Jan said she has taken anti-racism courses through one shelter she works at. She assessed the courses to be heavily influenced by "Western" perspectives.

"A lot of the other stuff has been very White woman, Western-oriented stuff. Or even if it's a woman of colour or an immigrant woman who's doing a program...it's based on statistics and um, research from a very Western perspective" (Lines 63-67).

In a follow-up conversation, Jan stated that although the anti-racism education helped to raise awareness of the issues of racism, it did not address concrete skill-building. Furthermore, these anti-racism courses did not specifically address issues pertaining to immigrant women and family violence. Therefore, these comments suggest that anti-racist responses have not been adequate in helping Jan directly support immigrant women impacted by family violence.

Challenges

All four participants indicated providing support to immigrant women on a regular basis. Jan and Tina stated providing support to immigrant women almost “daily”. Lee said she provides support to immigrant women “all the time” and Helen responded by saying “quite frequently”. Therefore, these responses indicate that the participants have experience providing support to immigrant women in shelters who are impacted by family violence. Support includes providing informal counselling, crisis counseling, childcare, and advocacy. Advocacy includes assisting women with welfare, housing, financial, employment, educational, legal, and immigration issues.

Participants were asked to describe the challenges they have experienced when providing support to immigrant women in shelters. Language was raised as one area that presented some challenges to participants. Tina stated that the use of cultural interpreters was beneficial in addressing language barriers that she has sometimes experienced when working with immigrant women. Although she said it can take more time to work with a woman through the use of an interpreter, she did not experience any difficulties in using or working with interpreters. In fact, she expressed that interpreters have been very helpful.

“It takes a bit more time to sometimes rephrase questions and uh to – to make sure whether I am – whatever I am asking they heard or they understood or you know. So it takes a bit more time, otherwise it’s okay with the help of interpreters, always it’s wonderful” (Lines 219 – 223).

She described interpreters as being helpful through their patience and willingness to explain things to both the woman and worker.

Jan described a frustration she has experienced using interpreters. In the following comment, Jan is referring to the notion that a lot of cultural expression is lost when an interpreter is used.

“A lot is lost in translations when you use an interpreter. Um...you’re looking at body language which is cultural. You’re looking at intonation. Um, all sorts of non-verbal communication is lost when you use an interpreter. And as a counselor, a lot of what I use in non-verbal, right?” (Lines 164-169).

Helen also expressed her opinions about the use of interpreters.

“So they can give you the interpreter, interpreter won’t solve the problem. This is the big lack of understanding. Language is a very complex story. This is not like you open, you learn, how are you, where Spanish people go for holidays. The beginning is easy but there is a lot of barriers including the culture, including the expression” (Lines 524-530).

Helen described that a woman can present differently with an interpreter present. This may be reflected in the tone of her voice or may show in her nervousness. She also discussed how women can present differently when attempting to speak in a language other than their language of fluency. Helen provided an example where a woman misunderstood what was being asked of her in court. The misunderstandings between her and the judge heightened to the point that both became agitated and upset. This was reflected in both the judge and the woman raising their voices in frustration. Helen further explained by saying:

“But sometimes people do lose control of this thinking in another language” (Lines 518-519).

Helen also described another scenario where a front-line shelter worker misinterpreted a woman's tone of voice to be angry when speaking with her child because she was speaking in a loud tone. Helen explained to her coworker that simply because the woman's tone of voice was louder than the other women in the house did not necessarily mean she was angry. These examples reveal the complexity involved with language and misunderstandings that can ensue.

These quotes from Jan and Helen also illustrate the difficulties that can occur in the translation process. While the words expressed by women may be translated through the use of interpreters, the loss of the cultural context was expressed as a frustration by both these participants.

Helen also described frustration because the shelter she works at does not encourage staff to translate for women when they share the same language.

"I don't know what is the solution but I am saying when the person works at the shelter for years, whatever the community, and we do work together, let it go. Do trust this person because I am there for support" (Lines 575-578).

Helen identified feeling supported by previous management in that her judgment in translating was trusted. When a woman who spoke the same language as Helen was using shelter services, the previous manager trusted Helen's ability to support her because of their common language. Although Helen's role as a front-line worker did not specifically provide outreach support, her skills were often called upon when women who spoke the same language as her needed outreach and follow-up support. She stated doing a lot of interpretation with women during the beginning of her work at the shelter when she felt more supported by management.

Helen further addressed this link between common language and providing support.

“When we have someone who is the front-line worker at the shelter, and comes from an immigrant background, I would say automatically there is a link between the woman who comes to the shelter, speaks the same language...it doesn't matter what department you do – the children, the women, the outreach – there is the link. The woman wants to talk” (Lines 374-379).

From this link Helen reiterated the need to trust front-line workers' judgment.

“Trust the judgment of this person who speaks the same language, who comes from the same culture” (Lines 385-387).

As a front-line worker fluent in a language other than English, Helen stated:

“We, the people from certain communities, would see more” (Lines 402-403).

Therefore, to possess the skill of speaking a language is seen by Helen as encompassing more than an understanding of words. It also involves understanding one's expression from a cultural context.

The literature identified that children were commonly used as interpreters for immigrant women utilizing social services. Lee expressed the use of children as translators to be problematic. Because of a lack of availability of interpreters, Lee stated she witnessed children being used to translate between their mothers and staff on a few occasions.

“But uh, the resources are not there. We recently had a woman who spoke Chinese and whose English was really – it was really hard to understand her at all. And uh, communication was – was uh, practically non-existent. So we relied on the children to...household things and things like that” (Lines 96-101).

In addition to experiencing difficulties supporting this woman through informal counselling, Lee identified difficulties communicating with the woman about chores, cooking, and resident meetings. Lee described feeling extremely frustrated by having to use children as translators. She felt that she was unable to provide the woman with the same level of support she provided to women who spoke English.

Jan also stated that children are used as interpreters in one shelter she works in, both for informal and formal matters. In a follow-up conversation, she described this as occurring 'quite a bit'. Jan too has found this to be problematic because children have already witnessed or experienced abuse and should not be put in such compromising situations. Translating may cause children to relive traumatic experiences or may bring up new experiences they had no prior knowledge of.

Lee identified feeling upset that language barriers keep women who can't speak English isolated from other women in the shelter. As a result of language barriers, Lee has witnessed divisions between immigrant women and Canadian-born women in the shelter.

"She'll be more isolated and also it's more likely that the other, uh, immigrant women will uh, bond with her than women who have been Canadian. They'll tend to bond together but not with the immigrant women" (Lines 130-133).

Jan said that she did not experience cultural barriers when supporting with immigrant women because she identified herself as having the ability to place importance on women's cultures and lived realities. This ability comes not only from her educational training, but also from what she described as her instinct and insight when working with women from diverse cultural communities. In order to avoid making assumptions, Jan said she takes the time to listen to women's experiences and asks questions for clarification.

"It's like tweaking your counselling style, and that's all it is, really. And it's like, you slow down, you slow down your mouth and you slow down your ears. And if you don't understand something, you don't nod your head like a moron and say, 'Oh yeah' and the make assumptions around what she said. You ask her to repeat, you know?" (Lines 548-533).

Lee also identified experiencing cultural barriers when working with immigrant women impacted by family violence. Not understanding the cultural traditions or customs of a woman was stated as a barrier to providing effective support.

“We act strictly based on our Canadian society expectations of what counselling should be and expect them to act according to what we think is appropriate” (Lines 172-175).

This idea was also raised as key barrier to effective service delivery with immigrant women in the literature review. The literature review demonstrated that the White, middle-class norms inherent in shelters have affected the way services are delivered to immigrant women. Lee’s comment that women are expected to adopt to Canadian counselling norms highlights this issue. She explained that workers often expect immigrant women to understand how the counselling process works, without considering women’s level of understanding. The result is the worker and woman enter the counselling relationship from different expectations.

Changes

Each participant was asked what changes need to occur so that front-line workers could better support immigrant women in shelters. All four women identified and described a wide range of changes that would improve service delivery to immigrant women.

Systemic changes were identified as needed in order to better support immigrant women impacted by family violence. Jan, Tina, Lee, and Helen stated that there was a need to diversify the shelter staff.

Jan identified the need for greater visible, educational, and experiential representation amongst the shelter staff. She stated that there are no immigrant women

on the full-time team, management, or Board of Directors. The hiring of more immigrant women was seen by Jan as important.

“It would make the house more approachable” (Lines 481-482).

Jan said the atmosphere of the shelter would be more welcoming and women using the shelter services would be able to understand and relate to some members of the staff team. Tina stated that hiring more immigrant women would:

“...create an environment that we are representing multiculturalism” (Lines 665-666).

Tina believed that this sort of environment would likely make women feel more comfortable. She was careful to note however, that hiring an immigrant woman as a shelter worker does not necessarily mean that she will understand a woman’s circumstances and experiences.

The hiring of more immigrant women was also seen as a potential learning opportunity for staff. Jan stated that all shelter staff, those who are immigrant women and non-immigrant women, would be able to learn about the cultures of other women in an informal way.

“I have for instance here a person from Africa and so I have learned through her about clients who are from the same country that she came from. And I uh, have asked questions to my coworker because we’re doing it a different level and I’m learning that way as well more individually and on a needs-basis” (Lines 581-585).

Helen stated that there are currently sufficient numbers of front-line workers at the shelter she works at that represent various world cultures, however none are immigrant women of colour. In a follow-up conversation, Helen said that approximately three percent of the shelter team is composed of immigrant women. Similar to Jan and Lee, Helen stated that the hiring of more immigrant women would provide a:

“...chance to learn about cultures” (Lines 856-857).

These quotes by Jan, Lee, and Helen illustrate that not only would hiring more immigrant women create more visible representation, but immigrant women as front-line shelter workers were assumed to possess a better understanding of women's cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it was assumed that immigrant status and culture were critically linked. Furthermore, these responses identify participants' need for culture-specific knowledge.

Although Lee stated seeing the hiring of women from various backgrounds recently, she was unsure how many were immigrant women. These women were hired in part-time and relief positions. Because a woman of colour may not necessarily be an immigrant woman, she stated not knowing how many members of the staff team were immigrant women. However, Lee was clearly able to say that the full-time workers responsible for case management to women residing in the shelter do not represent a diverse mix of immigrant women. She stated that there would be linguistic benefits to hiring more immigrant women. Women would be able to fully express themselves by having staff members who speak their languages. Furthermore, as Helen previously stated, Lee agreed that knowledge of another language would also help staff have a better understanding of an immigrant woman's cultural context.

Part of the reason that participants expressed the need to diversify shelter staff was because of concerns that other front-line shelter workers experienced some challenges in supporting immigrant women.

"I've heard co-workers say they find it too stressful talking to them because they don't understand what they're saying, which I take issue with" (Lines 126-128).

"I'm not saying that people are not working well with others, but I am saying little small insensitivities" (Lines 298-299).

Tina described these insensitivities to include not taking the time necessary to explore issues affecting immigrant women. Rather than attempt to move past language barriers, she has observed workers to spend less time with immigrant women than with women fluent in English. She interpreted this lack of sufficient support to be an insensitivity in working with immigrant women.

In a follow-up conversation, Jan stated that workers often do not see the cross-cultural differences that may affect women. A woman from China may speak Vietnamese but workers will tend to make assumptions based on the country she lived in rather than her expressed needs. She has observed workers to make assumptions based on women's heritage which results in service delivery issues. Rather than ask women which language they would like to receive services in or which type of agency they would like to be referred to, workers have made these decisions without consulting the women. Jan described this as disempowering women and devaluing their worth.

All four participants raised the issue of training as a critical area where change was needed. Ideas for training that would help front-line shelter workers better support immigrant women included topics on immigration laws, legal issues, medical and health issues, impacts of family violence on immigrant women, and cross-cultural training on working with women from diverse cultures. Tina suggested that the Toronto Hostels Training Center take an active role in facilitating such workshops so that front-line workers from various shelters can network and share resources. Jan expressed the need for immigrant women to share their experiences in the form of workshops so that front-line workers can learn from their lived experiences. These findings demonstrate

that contrary to critiques of cultural awareness and competency approaches, the participants identified the need to gain culturally-specific knowledge.

Helen expressed that it would be beneficial for shelter staff to receive specific training on the immigration process and laws.

“So I think this piece is very important. You know, sometimes people do look in the passport. They just don’t know what is the category of her status” (Lines 918-920).

She described training on the immigration system to be a very concrete recommendation that should be adopted by shelters to better equip front-line staff. Helen also stated that having a workshop for women residing in the shelter on immigration policies and laws would also be helpful. She said that a lot of attention has been placed on family law but the area of immigration is often neglected. She noted that all issues affecting women are interconnected and a solid knowledge base in these areas is necessary to further service provision to women.

Lee also identified that education on an as-needed basis could be beneficial.

“Maybe there could be a session triggered by the fact that we have a person from a specific country or cultural group. That in itself would trigger a meeting in the form of an education session” (Lines 591-594).

Jan, Tina, and Lee all identified that issues pertaining to immigrant women are not often discussed amongst front-line workers at the shelters they work in. Lee’s recommendation could be one way of addressing this gap as it would generate dialogue. If information about women is presented in a sensitive and informed manner, staff could use these opportunities on an on-going basis to gain more awareness of barriers that immigrant women who are abused experience.

When participants were asked about the training they had received in providing services to immigrant women impacted by family violence, all stated not receiving any.

However, responding this way appeared to make them more aware of the gap in their training.

“I am thankful to you to you know, have me participate in this. I will, I will make, a um...I will raise my voice that we need to have this kind of training as well. There is one meeting that’s coming up and I will raise this” (Lines 156-160).

“I think by sitting here, it opens up many windows in my head” (Line 395).

These are two examples of how Tina became more aware of things she previously may not have thought of. Action research views the research process a potentially liberating process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). The need for many forms of training may have been a result of becoming more aware of the *lack* of training they have received.

Other ideas for systemic changes in shelters that would allow for more effective support to immigrant women was to create spaces in the shelter for personal learning and growth. Tina suggested that a library and space for educational materials would be beneficial.

“We have women who want to really start their life. So if we have enough computers and um, Internet connections” (Lines 594-596).

Tina said that ensuring sufficient computers are available for women’s use would increase their access to more information. Providing educational material in a library was also identified by Tina as important.

“So you made a phone call to 911. Hey, I want to flee this abusive relationship. It’s hard to maintain this sort of mind. There are so many pressures: financial, emotional, you know. So...education, education” (Lines 614-617).

Including material pertaining to issues of anti-oppression was one example of a way that educational materials could benefit women’s well-being.

Tina also recommended recreational facilities be created within shelters.

“And it will change the whole environment. Sometimes it’s so stressful. I think having this kind of facilities within shelter, it will make like more lively” (Lines 576-578).

Tina said that although the staff at one shelter she works at does provide information on recreational facilities that are available, creating in-house facilities would also be beneficial. Having such accessible services may motivate more women to keep active and physically-well.

Tina suggested the hiring of a worker to deal specifically with immigration issues. She stated that the role of the immigration worker could include working with immigrant women on legal and medical issues. The worker would be familiar with appropriate community resources and would be responsible for making referrals. Tina recommended that an immigration worker would also be responsible for providing training and seminars on immigration related issues to both women residing in the shelter and to staff.

Participants discussed ways that women could be better supported in exercising their religious and/or spiritual practices. Tina stated that one room in the shelter should be devoted to this purpose.

“I think that if we have just – just a room, saying it’s a prayer room. If somebody wants to go there for meditation or prayer or whatever they want to do. A special room, no noise there, always clean, it will be nice. Because women they are coming from abuse, you know, they need some peace of mind” (Lines 435-440).

Tina identified that such a space would promote women’s inner strength.

“We are very good to provide them housing, legal information. We are very [emphasis on the word very] good at doing this sort of work but I think we need to focus on their inner peace” (Lines 685-688).

In a follow-up conversation, Lee also suggested the idea for a ‘quiet room’. This room could serve as a prayer or meditation room. It could also be used for counselling and receiving visits from other workers or professionals. It would therefore be a multipurpose room addressing women’s religious and spiritual identities.

Jan illustrated one way the shelter she works at has tried to support women's spiritual and religious well-being.

"One woman requested wake-ups. She didn't want to use an alarm clock to wake up her roommates so she requested the overnight staff to wake her up so she could pray" (Lines 249-252).

Lee stated:

"I have asked once uh, women to try and keep the noise down because the other women were praying. I understand they were on leisure time, but uh, there's nothing wrong with being a little bit considerate to what others are doing" (Lines 214-217).

"I would say yes we do support with the praying. Sometimes people do share the room and the person wakes up in the middle of the night and the other person is scared. This person says the prayers. So this is nighttime, we have religious people so we were providing a separate room but sometimes it's difficult to detect. But this can come back to language because we cannot always know everything, but we are open to make any kind of adjustments if we know" (Lines 624-631).

Helen is not referring to a separate room to use solely for praying but rather a separate bedroom when possible. Tina and Lee's idea of devoting one room specifically for prayers, meditation, and spirituality would help address Helen's point that language can serve as a barrier to women expressing their religious and spiritual needs.

Helen presented a recommendation in the context of challenges inherent in the immigration process.

"For many people there is a crisis of identity. There is the regular counselling for everyone, there is the counselling for abused women, for survivors, a lot of counselling" (Lines 692-695).

Helen described the immigration process as being one that alters people's identity which can make people feel lost in a new country. However, Helen stated that counselling is needed that will address these issues by helping to build women's self-esteem and by instilling more confidence in newcomer women. Although women's primary needs may be shelter and food when fleeing abuse, issues related to their identities which stem from the immigration process may surface later.

Helen stated that the process of immigration can lead to loneliness, isolation, and alienation. She has observed this to be particularly evident with elderly immigrant women. She also said that the lack of counselling available in multiple languages puts immigrant women and elderly immigrant women in particular, at further risk of isolation. Partly because of the lack of language specific counselling, Helen recommends:

“Counselling, regular counselling preferably – preferably in own language of this person, this is my dream. So, example. If people do have experience in this field, they do speak different language, they have the background, I would be the one to take it. I would be the one to do it with my heart” (Lines 727-732).

This comment relates to a previous idea raised by Helen that shelters need to trust the abilities and skills of front-line shelter workers who speak languages other than English.

Because so many changes were identified as necessary, the data suggests that service gaps continue to exist for immigrant women in shelters. Approximately half of each interview was spent discussing recommendations. While the interview guide divided the interviews into three relatively equal-weighted parts, the interviews took their own course. Participants spent more time talking about what needed to change which is a tribute to the tremendous knowledge each woman brought to the interview.

In addition to presenting recommendations, participants also identified barriers that may prevent recommendations from being implemented in shelters. For example, Tina identified that in order to implement her recommendation of hiring an immigrant worker, more funding would be required.

Lee expressed frustration that providing recommendations will not necessarily result in change. Her frustrations are best expressed by the following comments:

“The unfortunate thing is that, with this shelter in particular, we can have all the creative ideas that we want to and nothing’s gonna happen because we have an obtuse mind, that’s just so pathetic, running the place” (Lines 830-833).

“We should have a very democratic way of running the place where everybody has a say because what are we telling women? We have a powerful individual who’s squeezing the shit out of us at all times! How is that different from what they had at home? Only that she doesn’t touch us physically, that’s the only difference! But dynamically, it’s not different” (Lines 944-950).

“To me, I have learned that I should have no expectations” (Line 954).

“I’m not allowed to have any ideas... Who cares what my ideas are, they’re not important” (Lines 970-972).

These comments clearly illustrate Lee’s cynicisms in the shelter’s ability to adopt changes presented by the study.

Jan also discussed an organizational issue that may affect implementing change.

When asked about anti-racism training, she responded:

“A lot of it though is just for the full-time team” (Line 430).

“And part time and relief are not included so there is a split on the team” (Lines 435-436).

These comments are important to acknowledge because they reveal that there may be organizational issues that could prevent change from occurring.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the research study are consistent with information discussed in the literature review. Language and cultural barriers continue to exist as the participants offered experiences and examples illustrating service delivery issues.

The findings of the research study raise issues about creating social services for a multicultural population. The research study illustrates that there is a need for shelters for abused women and children to make changes so that services are more accessible and appropriate for immigrant women. Participants did not identify the need to create

separate shelters specifically for immigrant women and children, but rather recommendations were presented as a way for shelters to take responsibility of ensuring appropriate support for immigrant women.

It is clear from the study's findings that service delivery issues continue to exist when supporting immigrant women in shelters for abused women and children. Because the study was informed by action research approaches, participants discussed a wide range of recommendations that could assist in improving shelter service delivery.

Although participants' recommendations were discussed in the previous section, they will be summarized here for the purpose of clarity. Recommendations will be listed under four categories: recommendations for one-to-one support, recommendations for shelters, recommendations for social services, and recommendations for larger systems.

Recommendations for One-to-One Support

- Respect women's cultural realities
- Ask questions for clarification when you do not understand what the woman has said
- Challenge yourself to learn and become educated about issues immigrant women experience
- Provide non-judgmental support if an immigrant woman returns to her abuser(s)
- Take responsibility for self-care

Recommendations for Shelters

- Ensure the staff is representative of immigrant women from various countries and cultures. This includes front-line staff, management, and Board of Directors.
- Provide the following training for all shelter staff:
 - Cross cultural training
 - Training on immigration system, policies, and laws

- Training on trauma immigrant women may have experienced in home country
 - Training on intersection of abuse and immigrant women from diverse countries and cultures
 - Education sessions amongst staff on an as needed-basis
 - Toronto Hostels Training Center could assist in facilitating of training
- Provide the following training for women residing in the shelter:
 - Introducing Canada: Its systems and norms
 - Multiculturalism
 - Provide the following training for children residing in the shelter:
 - Cross cultural training
 - Apply for funding to hire an Immigration Worker in the shelter
 - Use telephone interviews with translators
 - Use staff who speak various languages as translators
 - Trust the abilities of shelter staff who speak various languages and are familiar with various world cultures.
 - Create a room in the shelter that is specifically for prayers, meditation, spirituality
 - Create recreational space in the shelter
 - Create educational space including a library in the shelter. Include anti-oppression material for women to read.
 - Establish working environment for staff that allows for private meeting space.
 - Ensure that women residing in shelter have private space.
 - Provide children with more counselling in shelters
 - Bridge gaps that may exist between full-time workers and those working part-time or relief positions.
 - Be flexible with the length of shelter stay. Make decisions on a case-by-case basis.

Recommendations for Social Services

- More counselling in diverse languages. More counselling services will assist in reducing wait list times.
- Ensure language specific counselling related to identity issues associated with the immigration process.
- Expansion of newcomer and settlement services

Recommendations for Larger Systems

- Immigration system needs to provide women with more resources upon their entry into Canada. Women should be connected to language specific services according to her needs. Information on social services including support available for women experiencing family violence should be provided.
- Recognition of international employment and educational standards

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study has not attempted to explore the organizational structure of shelters, the findings show that organizational structure may impede on recommendations being implemented. Future research studies could explore organizational structures to assess whether shelters are being operated in a way that facilitates change to better support women. A future study could involve interviewing front-line workers to elicit their experiences in suggesting changes. Management could also be interviewed to explore their roles in the decision-making process and implementing service delivery changes. Because little evaluative research has been done with North American shelters for abused women and children, studies examining shelters' organizational structures would be important.

Implementing change can be difficult when resources are limited and organizational structures are not conducive to change. However, given that many of the recommendations could potentially benefit both immigrant and non-immigrant women, implementing changes would be of great benefit to women using shelter services.

A key limitation of this study was that the voices, experiences, and insights of immigrant women who have utilized shelter services were not included. Future research could present the findings from this study to immigrant women who have used shelter services and elicit their feedback. The current study should be looked at as one step in the process of implementing changes in shelter services to immigrant women. Including the voices of immigrant women is imperative if appropriate services are to be offered.

DISSEMINATION

The research findings have an important role to play in developing and shaping knowledge for social work practice. Having a greater understanding about the experiences these four participants have expressed when working with immigrant women impacted by family violence may help front-line workers better serve this population. In order for the information to be useful, the study will be disseminated to a variety of sources.

A completed copy of the research study will be provided to each participant and the Shelter Director who signed a consent form. The study will either be hand delivered or sent to participants and directors via surface mail.

In order to ensure those in shelters are able to access the research study, pamphlets outlining a summary of the recommendations will be provided to various shelters across the Southern Ontario region (Appendix E). These pamphlets will be for

women utilizing shelter services, front-line shelter workers, students completing practica in shelters, volunteers, management, and Board of Directors. If shelters are interested, I will attend team meetings to discuss the study and its findings.

Pamphlets will also be sent to policy and research oriented organizations. The following lists the organizations that I will contact:

- Coalition of Visible Minority Women Ontario
- Education Wife Assault
- Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children
- Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses
- Ontario Women's Directorate
- Toronto Hostels Training Centre
- Researchers and Academics of Colour for Equity/Equality
- Woman Abuse Council of Toronto
- Women Working With Immigrant Women

Due to limited resources, I will not be able to send each organization a print copy of the research study. However, I will offer to send a copy as an attachment via email to the organizations listed above and to various shelters across the Southern Ontario region.

CONCLUSION

The research study served three purposes: to explore the training of front-line shelter workers, to explore their experiences providing support to immigrant women, and to elicit recommendations for how shelter service delivery to immigrant women could be improved. While these were treated as three separate purposes, the data collected from interviews with four front-line shelter workers in Southern Ontario reveals the areas are

interconnected. Gaps in training and the experiences in providing support clearly guided the recommendations participants provided.

Shelters in the Southern Ontario region can benefit from the research study in several ways. First, this study has raised key issues which reflect shelter service delivery to immigrant women. This includes gaps in workers' training as well as language and cultural barriers affecting the support provided to immigrant women. Furthermore, the set of recommendations provides shelters with initial ideas for how service delivery can be improved to be more responsive to workers' concerns and immigrant women's possible needs.

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APPENDIX A:

URGENTLY NEEDED!

Are you a front-line shelter worker who would like to talk about your experiences in providing services to immigrant women?



If so, you may be interested in participating in this research study!

To participate or for more information, please call:

Angie Arora at 416-561-5711

A copy of the final report will be provided to you as appreciation for your participation!

Interviews will be conducted at a time and place most convenient for you during February and March 2004. All efforts will be made to keep the information you provide confidential and every measure will be taken to protect your anonymity.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time should you change your mind about participating.

About the Researcher:

Angie Arora is a Masters in Social Work student with York University

Experiences of Front-Line Shelter Workers in Providing Services to Immigrant Women Impacted by Family Violence: SHELTER CONSENT FORM

Contact Information of Principal Investigator:

Angie Arora
Graduate Student, Social Work
Kinsmen Building
Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3
angiea@yorku.ca

Contact Information of York University:

Graduate Program Office, 416-736-2100
Course Director: Saddeiq Holder, extension 70697

Manager of Research Ethics, Office of Research Administration
Ross S414, York University
416-736-5914

Note: The research study has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participant Review Subcommittee (HPRC) of York University.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how front-line shelter workers experience providing services to immigrant women impacted by family violence.

Description of Study Design

This exploratory study will use interviewing as the primary means of collecting data.

Confidentiality

In order to protect the identity of participating shelters, the name of shelters will not be used in the research report. The only person to have knowledge of shelters' identities is the undersigned researcher, and if necessary, the researcher's course director. To protect the anonymity of participants, no member of the shelter staff or management may have access to participants' identities. The only person who will have knowledge of the participants' identities will be the undersigned researcher.

Commitment of Participating Shelters

Once the participating shelter has signed this letter of permission, the supervisor or appropriate person in authority is to post the information notice for staff viewing. Copies which will be provided by the researcher are also to be placed in all front-line shelter workers' mail slots.

Benefits to Participating in the Study

The participating shelter benefits by contributing to the knowledge base generated by the study. Furthermore, each participating shelter will receive a copy of the study's final report as appreciation for participation. Recommendations for practice with immigrant women will be included in the final report which has relevance for all participating shelters.

*Signature of Shelter Supervisor or
appropriate person in authority*
(Please print name and sign on above line)

Date

Signature of Principal Investigator
(Please print name and sign on above line)

Date

Experiences of Front-Line Shelter Workers in Providing Services to Immigrant Women Impacted by Family Violence: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Contact Information of Principal Investigator:

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Contact Information of York University:

Graduate Program Office, 416-736-2100
Course Director: Saddeiq Holder, extension 70697

Manager of Research Ethics, Office of Research Administration
Ross S414, York University
416-736-5914

Note: The research study has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participant Review Subcommittee (HPRC) of York University.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how front-line shelter workers experience providing services to immigrant women impacted by family violence.

Description of Study Design

This exploratory study will use interviewing as the primary means of collecting data. The interview will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration. Interviews will be tape recorded and later transcribed by the undersigned researcher. All interview tapes will only be accessible to the undersigned researcher and above-named course director if required.

Confidentiality

To protect the anonymity of participants, no member of the shelter staff or management may have access to participants' identities. The only person to have knowledge of participants' identities will be the undersigned researcher. The participant's identity will not be revealed in the study's report. Upon transcription of data, pseudonyms will be used for which only the researcher can match to participants' identities. The only person to have access to data collected from interviews will be the undersigned researcher. Data will be stored in a locked cabinet to which only the researcher has access. Data will be disposed by the use of a shredder machine once the study is completed and approved by York University.

Time Commitment of Participants

Participants are required to partake in one interview at a time that is negotiated between participant and researcher. While not required, it is strongly encouraged that the participant be available for one follow-up interview where the researcher will present her interpretations of the data for the participant's review. The follow-up interview allows the participant to make comments on the researcher's interpretations which will enhance the richness of the findings. The follow-up interview will occur in April or May 2004 at a time convenient to both participant and researcher.

Benefits/Risks to Participating in the Study

The participant benefits by contributing to the knowledge base generated by the study. Furthermore, each participant will receive a copy of the study's final report as appreciation for participation. Recommendations for practice with immigrant women will be included in the final report which as relevance for all front-line shelter workers. There is no reason to expect adverse affects from the procedures involved in this study and there is no reason to suppose that there will be any permanent physical or psychological risks. Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time and retain the rights to refuse any question(s). Should a participant withdraw from the study, all data generated as a consequence of her participation will be destroyed.

Signature of Participant
(Please print name and sign on above line)

Date

Signature of Principal Investigator
(Please print name and sign on above line)

Date

Experiences of Front-Line Shelter Workers in Providing Services to Immigrant Women Impacted by Family Violence:

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Principal Investigator:	Angie Arora Graduate Student, Social Work Kinsmen Building Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3 angiea@yorku.ca
Date of Interview:
Time of Interview:	Start Time..... End Time.....
Participant Code (Pseudonym):
<i>Note: After written consent is obtained from the participant, the researcher will turn on the tape recorder and will use the following interview guide.</i>	

Introductory Questions

1. How long have you been working as a front-line shelter worker?
2. How often do you provide services to immigrant women?

Training of Front-Line Shelter Workers

3. What training have you received in the area of working with immigrant women who have been abused? (education, workshops, seminars, on-job learning, other)
4. How helpful has this training been?

5. What ideology or philosophy was your formal education training based on? (feminism, anti-racism, anti-oppression, sociology, psychology, other)

6. In what ways, if any, has the shelter for which you are employed provided you with support to work with immigrant women impacted by family violence?

7. Has this support been sufficient? Explain.

Institutional Constraints

8. What factors make it challenging for you to provide services to immigrant women who have been abused? (language barrier, cultural barriers, religious barriers, shortage of community services for referral, communal living structure, policies and procedures of shelter, other)

Areas for Change

9. What changes would need to occur in order for you to be able to better support immigrant women who have been abused?
(organizational changes, more translators, improvements in services, creation of services, more training, different sources of training, hiring of a more diverse staff, other)

