



Families and violence in Punjabi and Tamil communities in Toronto

By Vappu Tyyskä & Farishta Dinshaw

The Study in Brief

Issue

Family Violence in Immigrant communities: A barrier to integration with implications for a family-centred approach

Overview

The purpose of this project was to assess the extent to which family violence in Toronto's Punjabi and Tamil immigrant communities is a pre-existing condition associated with cultural practices, or due to structural/institutional stresses resulting from immigration and settlement.

Key Observations

1) Cultural norms, such as patriarchy, contribute to family violence.

- 2) Situational factors, including the stress of settlement contribute to domestic violence.
- 3) In-laws were cited as initiating abuse, both directly and indirectly.
- 4) Victims/survivors were reluctant to speak out about domestic abuse.
- 5) Isolation, dependence, lack of information, and mistrust prevent victims from accessing support services.

Approach

A literature review on child abuse, elder abuse, and wife abuse in immigrant communities was first conducted. Interviews were then held with key informants, who subsequently helped recruit individual survivors/victims of domestic violence from the two communities. Interviews with them were then conducted over a year.

Policy Implications

A family-centred approach is a more fruitful course of action in addressing the issues of both survivors and perpetrators of family violence.

Effective treatment programs should consider both cultural backgrounds and settlement issues.

Further studies of immigration-related stress and its impact on society and families are needed.

Further research is needed to find out why some abuse is terminated upon immigration and escalates in other instances.

Author Contact:

Vappu Tyyskä, Associate Professor, Sociology/Director MA Program in Immigration and

Settlement Studies, Ryerson University
vtyska@ryerson.ca

Farishta Dinshaw, COSTI Immigrant Services

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The Study in Detail

Introduction

This project researched family violence (including wife abuse, child abuse, sibling abuse, elder abuse, and abuse by other family members) in the Punjabi and Tamil immigrant communities in Toronto. Our purpose was to identify the extent to which family violence is a pre-existing condition associated with cultural practices, or due to structural/institutional factors related to immigration and settlement.

Whatever the reasons, family violence leads to loss of health (and death in extreme cases), dignity and self-esteem, potential and actual human capital (through opportunity costs), and family and community support. It adds to

individual, familial and societal health care and legal costs. Understanding reasons for family violence among immigrants will help develop appropriate community and governmental responses, to both victims and perpetrators of violence.

“The people who are most vulnerable often don’t go to settlement agencies. They’re more isolated.”

(1 CERA)

Domestic violence can take many forms. Children, for example, are often the silent victims in cases of wife abuse. Abused children are statistically more likely to grow into adults who act violently toward their partners, parents and/or their children (DeKeseredy 2001).

Domestic abuse includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional / psychological, and financial abuse. It involves a variety of family relationships, including marital or cohabiting partners (*spousal abuse*), parents and children (*child abuse*), siblings (*sibling abuse*), and adults and their aging parents (*elder abuse*).

Two theoretical lens were used in this study to examine familial violence among immigrants. The ‘cultural model’ portrays

particular immigrant communities as inherently more violent than White Canadians, due to the formers’ presumed oppressive patriarchal cultural practices (Menjivar & Salcido 2002; MacLeod and Shin 1993; Maiter, Trocme and George 2003; Dinshaw 2005). In contrast, the ‘situational / structural model’ suggests that violence in immigrant families is – at least in part – a reaction to the multiple challenges of immigration and settlement, including language barriers, unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, isolation, and racism (Smith 2004, Jiwani 2001, MacLeod and Shin 1993, Wiebe 1991). According to this model, families undergo significant shifts in their internal roles and power relations upon immigration. For example, the comparatively easier entry of women and teen children than men in the labour market may cause shifts in pre-existing gender and age hierarchies, leading to family conflict and violence.

Research also shows that pre-existing tendencies towards violence may escalate upon immigration (Martin & Mosher 1995).

Methodology

In partnership with COSTI Immigrant Services ten (10) semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants in settlement service to learn more about the prevalence of and causes for family violence.

As anticipated, recruiting participants who were victims or perpetrators of abuse was more difficult, particularly where siblings were involved. However, 20 Punjabis (10 men and 10 women), and 16 Tamil (3 men and 13 women) were eventually interviewed.

Highlights

Key Informant Interviews

We have to say this kind of behaviour is not acceptable. Human beings are always going to be abusive, but it’s how do we tolerate it [that is different]. Are extra-marital affairs abusive? In some communities, it’s okay.

(3 Mt Sinai)

Many of the key informants expressed reservations about attributing family violence to cultural factors to avoid stigmatizing particular groups. However, they also held specific patriarchal norms and practices responsible for family violence (particularly against women).

The respondents had differing opinions on situational and cultural reasons for abuse. Some identified changes in family structure that take place upon immigration, including shifts in gender roles, as a major reason for family conflicts. Young peoples’ desire to

assimilate into the dominant society was also given as a major reason for conflicts.

One Key Informant suggested Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was an additional factor in immigration related stress. Others drew attention to stress due to increased isolation (see Abraham, 2000), role extension and role reversal, financial concerns, and precarious immigration status as other important factor in family abuse. They also spoke of the contribution of these factors to poor mental health and substance abuse, both of which are associated with family violence.

According to the key informants, immigrants also faced language and other barriers that prevented them from accessing help when they needed it. They may lack information about sources of help. Some may be fearful of seeking help because of their precarious legal status. They may also be reluctant to approach their own community agencies because they don't want their compatriots to know about their family situation.

Most of the respondents focused primarily on wife abuse. However, in-law abuse also emerged as a major issue in

both communities. The categories of abuse were therefore expanded to include in-law abuse.

Results from the Punjabi community

All but one of the Punjabi women reported that violence had to do with the low status of women in their community, and that abuse had escalated upon immigration. Two of them blamed in-law interference for it and one claimed she was abused because she lacked extended familial support in Canada.

Although no society is exempt from violence against women, specific expectations, such as those related to dowry, and the role of women in serving their husbands and parents-in-law, led to violence against women in this community.

Three of the elders (two men and one woman) identified daughters-in-law as the abuser. They also identified financial difficulties, being ignored or neglected, and treated disrespectfully as abuse.

In all five cases of abuse by other family members, the abuse continued or escalated upon immigration from India to Canada. The linking theme seems to be isolation and lack of access to other family who could protect the victim.

Several reasons for abuse were identified by the respondents, ranging from individual issues (mental health) to cultural beliefs and practices, patriarchy, and parents' work pressures (including underemployment, multiple jobs, and poverty).

“In India, it [physical abuse] was a little less. I feel that my parents are under a lot more stress here so that’s why...Also, now my parents have to take care of a family of five all on their own, whereas in India, we had extended family living nearby. Our relatives used to watch us and we’d share earnings and food openly. Here, it’s every man for himself and every family for itself.”

--(C3)

Results from the Tamil community

Respondents in this group also spoke of acceptance of violence in their cultural communities. Data from this group show that there are culturally based patriarchal norms and practices which underlie wife abuse in general, and that some of these

may be heightened through the stress of immigration.

Three of the five Tamil women said that violence had started upon their marriage in Canada, and one said her husband began abusing her after the couple immigrated.

Abrupt changes in life-styles seemed to contribute to family violence. One woman spoke of the new lifestyle her husband had adopted after immigration as a reason for his violent behavior.

“Overall, the results add up to a complex pattern of self-identified types of family violence, calling into question that fixed scales of measurement can adequately capture the full range of family violence overall, let alone in cases involving immigrant groups with their unique norms and codes of behaviour.”

--The authors

In the case of child abuse, all of the respondents reported that child abuse pre-dated immigration. However, following immigration, violence continued for some while it stopped for others. Both the Punjabi and Tamil child abuse

survivors reported that physical discipline is normative in their families and communities overall.

Policy Implications

Given the range of cultural and structural factors that contribute to family violence, a family-centred approach should be taken to address the issues of both survivors and perpetrators of family violence.

Effective treatment programs should not assume that the same model fits all immigrant groups. Instead, they should try to involve those who have deep cultural knowledge of the communities they serve in the treatment programs.

A more carefully examination of the stressors of settlement on families and its long-term costs to families as well as to the receiving society is warranted.

Further research should be conducted to better understand the reasons why some abuse is terminated upon immigration and escalates in other instances.

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For Further Information on Policy Matters Please Contact: Editor

Dr. Mehruunisa Ali, CERIS Director, Ryerson University and Academic Editor & Lead on the Policy Matters Initiative
maali@ryerson.ca

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For More Information

CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre

246 Bloor Street West, 7th Floor
Toronto, ON Canada
M5S 1V4

Tel: 416-946-3110

Fax: 416-971-3094

<http://ceris.metropolis.net>

Authors

Dr. Vappu Tyyskä is an Associate Professor of Sociology and the Director of the MA in Immigration and Settlement Studies at Ryerson University.

Farishta Dinshaw works for COSTI Immigrant Services.

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