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Spousal-Abuse Among Canadian Immigrant Women

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The study aimed to investigate the rates of self-reported physical and emotional spousal abuse among recent Canadian-immigrant (CI) women compared to Canadian-born (CB) women. The study conducted secondary data analyses on the General Social Survey, 1999. A sample of CB ($n = 3548$) and CI ($n = 313$) women was drawn that included women 25 to 49 years of age who were currently married or in a common-law relationship. Person weights and bootstrapping estimates were used to estimate the 95% confidence intervals. The proportion of emotional spousal abuse was higher in CI (14.7%, 95% CI: 10.7–18.8%) compared to CB women (8.7%, 95% CI: 7.8–9.6%). However, the proportion of physical spousal abuse was not statistically different between two groups. Possible explanations are discussed setting direction for future research and services for immigrant women.

KEY WORDS: spousal abuse; immigrant; women; Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Spousal abuse is increasingly recognized as a significant social and public health concern, particularly for women (1, 2) suffering from grave health consequences (3–7). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines partner or spousal abuse as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, by an intimate partner that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in physical injury, psychological harm, neglect or deprivation (8). In recent years, many national and community level studies have been conducted in North America to measure the prevalence of spousal abuse. However, little knowledge exists about the magnitude of this issue among recent immigrant women who may encounter increased vulnerability to spousal abuse at the intersection of gender, race, class, and lack of citizenship (9).

Studies report immigrants encounter barriers in settling and adjusting to their adopted country (10, 11). The magnitude of these barriers is higher for women due to their multiple care-giving responsibilities that often limit their exposure to learning the language of the host country and accessing services. Furthermore, separation from family and community leads to social isolation and the stress of uncertainty (12). This acculturative stress is further intensified when the expected gender-roles of women are challenged (13, 14). This is likely to culminate in stress and tension within immigrant families (13). Bishop and Patterson (1992) state "factors contributing to family violence include family isolation, unemployment, poverty, job dissatisfaction, crowding.... Such factors are not the primary reason for violence but may precipitate or perpetuate the abuse" (15). Unfortunately, several of these factors are found in recent immigrant families. Some studies report a trend for domestic abuse to either start or become worse after couples' immigration (16).

Despite this increased vulnerability, little is known about the magnitude of spousal abuse among immigrant women compared to women born in the host country. Not knowing an issue may itself be a barrier to provision of equitable services. It is especially salient to address this knowledge gap for

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countries with a higher proportion of immigrants. One such example is Canada where 18% of the population is first generation immigrants with much higher proportions in metropolitan areas (17). Furthermore, sources of immigration to Canada have changed greatly from European to non-European countries resulting in greater population diversity. For instance, three-quarters of the females who arrived in Canada between 1991 and 1996 were visible minorities or non-Caucasian in race (18).

This study primarily aimed to investigate the magnitude of emotional and physical spousal abuse among recent Canadian immigrant women compared to their Canadian counterparts. The study used data from the 1999 General Social Survey (Cycle 13, Victimization) for secondary analysis. Based on a premise of acculturative stress and a literature review, we hypothesized that the rates of physical and emotional abuse will be higher among immigrant women compared to Canadian born women.

In addition, the study also aimed to explore the risk markers of emotional abuse, an area of research that has been much neglected. A risk marker is any attribute of the couple, the victim, or the abuser that is associated with an increased probability of abuse. A risk marker may or may not imply causality. Although research over the last 20 years has identified risk markers associated with physical spousal abuse, it is not known whether similar risk markers increase the risk of emotional abuse though emotional and physical spousal abuse are found to be correlated. For the presented study, we gained insights about the potential risk markers for emotional abuse through studies on physical abuse. The selection of risk markers was determined by the effect sizes and citation frequency. One such example is recent systematic meta analysis conducted by Schumacher *et al.* (2001) on male-to-female partner physical abuse. The study reported that women's less education, younger age, and unemployment were moderate-to-strong effect size risk markers (19, 20). The study also reported multiple perpetrator related factors for male-to-female partner physical abuse. As the presented study included only women, the objective assessment of perpetrator factors was limited to partner's education, employment, and alcohol abuse.

METHODS

Study Design and Participants

The GSS is an annual telephone sample survey covering the non-institutionalized population aged 15 and over in all provinces of Canada. The focus in 1999 was on the nature and extent of criminal victimization, including spousal violence (21). The questionnaire was designed on the basis of the qualitative testing with diverse participants (focus group), pilot test, and interviewer debriefing. The GSS 1999 collected data using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). A total of 25,874 people were interviewed, more than double the usual sample of 10,000. Respondents were interviewed in the official language of their choice (English or French). The overall response rate was 81.3%; no proxy interviews were administered.

For this study, a sample of 3861 women was drawn from the GSS 1999 public microdata file. The extracted sample comprised of 3548 Canadian born (CB) and 313 Canadian immigrant (CI) women based on the inclusion criteria of being CB or recent CI having arrived between 1990 and 1999; currently married or in a common-law relationship; and in the age range of 25–49 years. The age criterion controlled the age differences between CB and CI groups as most recent female Canadian immigrants are younger than 50 years of age (18). The criterion of married or common law led to the selection of women in heterosexual relationships, in accordance with the legal definitions at the time of study.

Measurement

The GSS defined the spousal physical or sexual violence as experiences of physical or sexual assault that are consistent with legal definitions of these offences and that could, if reported, be acted upon by police. The GSS 1999 obtained information on spousal physical violence, during the past 5 years, through a module of 10 questions which closely followed questions used in the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) (22). In our study, positive response to at least one of the following 10 questions indicated a victim of physical spousal abuse:

> Preamble: It is important to hear from people themselves if we are to understand the serious problem of violence in the home. I am going to ask you 10 short questions and I'd like you to tell me whether, in the past 5 years, your spouse/partner had done any of the following to you. Your responses are important whether or not you have had any of these experiences. Remember that all information provided is strictly confidential.

1. Threatened to hit you with fist or anything else that could have hurt you.

2. Thrown anything at you that could have hurt you.
3. Pushed, grabbed or shoved you in a way that could have hurt you.
4. Slapped you.
5. Kicked, bit, or hit you with fist.
6. Hit you with something that could have hurt you.
7. Beaten you.
8. Choked you.
9. Used or threatened to use a gun or knife on you.
10. Forced you into any unwanted sexual activity by threatening you, holding you down, or hurting you in some way.

The GSS 1999 also gathered information on controlling or emotionally abusive behaviour by using following seven questions:

> Preamble: I am going to read a list of statements that some people have used to describe their spouse/partner. I'd like you to tell me whether or not each statement describes your spouse/partner.

1. Tries to limit contact with family or friends.
2. Puts you down or calls you names to make you feel bad.
3. Is jealous and does not want you to talk to other men or women.
4. Harms, or threatens to harm, someone close to you.
5. Demands to know who you are with and where you are at all times.
6. Damages or destroys your possessions or property.
7. Prevents you from knowing about or having access to the family income, even if you ask.

The emotional abuse items were taken from the VAWS with the exception of item 4 and 6, which were new additions (23). In our study, a positive response to any of the 7 items indicated a victim of emotional abuse. Also, item-by-item analysis was executed.

We also explored the risk markers for emotional abuse. Based on our literature review, the risk markers included women's age, education, employment, household income, partners' education, partner's employment, partner's alcohol intake, and years lived together. In the GSS 1999 public microdata file, information on the country of origin has been suppressed for respondents born outside Canada. The survey did not collect any information on the partner's country of birth.

Statistical Analyses

The Canadian GSS employs a complicated sampling method so that all participants do not have an equal probability of being selected. Therefore, we used weight variable, re-based to the sample size, to adjust for the sampling method and provide generalizable estimates. Furthermore, we used the bootstrapping technique to increase the precision of results and take into account the differences in the variability between the two samples (e.g. due to unequal sample sizes). The bootstrapping involves random re-sampling the original dataset a very large number of time (24, 25). For instance, it can re-sample the dataset 500 times for the difference in proportions of two groups creating a population of 500 actual differences and a variance for the difference in proportions. Using the generated data, the bootstrapping method calculates the p-value and the 95% confidence interval for the difference and, hence, the tests become appropriate even when groups with large discrepancy in sizes are compared.

Hence, the comparative analyses between or within CB and CI groups were carried out using inferential statistics for the difference in proportions and means. Using person weights and bootstrapping, we estimated the 95% confidence intervals for the true difference. In addition, a direct logistic regression analysis was performed (without person weights) on emotional abuse by entering predictor variables found statistically significant at the bivariate analysis. Logistic regression analysis was conducted only for the CB group, which met the requirement of 10 cases (victims of spousal abuse) per predictor variable (26).

RESULTS

The mean age for CB women was 37.5 years (*SD*: 6.8) and 35.7 years (*SD*: 6.6) for CI women. Over two-thirds of women had children (CB, 70% and CI 75.7%). During previous 12 months, 40% of CB and 21% of CI women were employed. In the CB group, 21.7% of the women had university education and in the CI group 40.6%. One percent of the CB women reported visible minority status compared to 72.8% of the CI women. The term visible minority refers to persons, other than aboriginal, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in

color. As expected, the majority of the recent immigrant women drawn in our sample were visible minorities.

Group Comparison for Physical and Emotional Spousal Abuse

The overall proportions of women who reported physical spousal abuse, on at least one of the 10 items, were not statistically different between CB (4.5%, 95% CI: 3.8–5.2%) and CI women (3.3%, 95% CI: 1.3–5.3%); see Fig. 1. In terms of spousal emotional abuse, statistically higher proportion was found for the CI women (14.7%, 95% CI: 10.7%, 18.8%) compared to CB women (8.7%, 95% CI: 7.8–9.6%). Further item-by-item analysis was executed for spousal emotional abuse (Table I). Among 7 items on emotional abuse, the CI women reported statistically higher proportion (7.7%, 95% CI: 4.7–10.7%) of 'partner demands to know whereabouts' compared to CB women (2.9%, 95% CI: 2.4–3.5%). Asking about whereabouts within the context of spousal abuse, as in GSS survey, is a measure of emotional control by partner though in other contexts it could be desirable. Moreover, the statistically significant difference in the overall emotional abuse reported by CB and CI women remained significant even after removing the item 'partner demands to know whereabouts.'

Group Specific Analyses for Risk Markers of Emotional Abuse

Within each group, emotionally abused and not-abused women were compared to identify significant risk markers of emotional abuse (Table II). Within the CB group, emotionally abused women were statistically more likely to be young and less likely to have university education, annual household income more than $40,000, and partners with university education. Also, the CB emotionally abused women reported statistically higher intake of alcohol by their partners during the last month. Within CI group, only 'partner's education less than university' was associated with women's emotional abuse status; some variables could not be analyzed due to small numbers.

For the CB group, a direct logistic regression analysis was performed on emotionally abused status as outcome and four predictors: age of respondent; annual household income; education of respondent and her partner (interaction term); and alcohol intake by partner during the last month. A test of a full model with all four predictor variables against constant-only model was statistically reliable, X^2 (4, $n = 2922$) $= 46.3$, $p \leq 0.001$, indicating that the predictors, as a set, reliably distinguished between emotionally abused and non-abused women. However, only 4% of the variance in the outcome variable

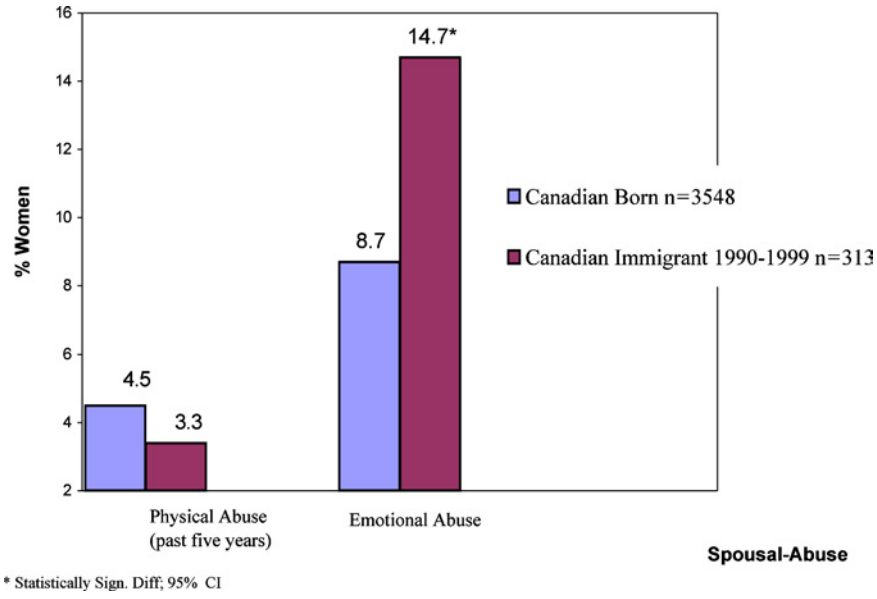

Fig. 1. Physical and emotional spousal-abuse among canadian-born vs. Canadian immigrant women.

Table I. Item-by-Item Analysis for Emotional Spousal Abuse: Canadian-Born vs. Canadian Immigrant (1990–1999) Women

Variable	% of Women	
	Canadian-Born ($n = 3548$)	Canadian Immigrant ($n = 313$)
"… Does this statement describe your spouse/partner"		
(1) tries to limit your contact with family or friends	1.7 ($n = 63$)	2.5 ($n = 10$)
(2) puts you down or calls you names to make you feel bad*	3.8 ($n = 143$)	2[a] ($n = 7$)
(3) is jealous and does not want you to talk to other men/women	4.0 ($n = 159$)	6.4[a] ($n = 19$)
(4) harms, or threatens to harm, someone close to you	—	—
(5) demands to know who you are with and where you are at all times*	2.9 ($n = 108$)	7.7[a] ($n = 22$)
(6) damages or destroys your possessions or property	1.1[a] ($n = 38$)	—
(7) prevents you from knowing about or having access to the family income, even if you ask	1[a] ($n = 35$)	—

[a]coefficient of variation lies between 16.6 and 33.3%.
*Satistically significant 95% confidence interval for difference – data not shown due to high coefficient of variation.

was associated with the set of predictors suggesting that other predictor variables need to be considered for the complex phenomenon of emotional abuse.

Table II. Risk Markers for Emotional Spousal Abuse: Within Canadian-Born and Canadian Immigrant (1990–1999) Groups

Variable	Abused	Non-Abused
Age, mean		
Canadian-born*	36.7 ($n = 326$)	37.6 ($n = 3174$)
Immigrant 1990–1999	34.3 ($n = 44$)	35.8 ($n = 255$)
Education: Had ≥ bachelors, %		
Canadian-born*	14.4 ($n = 47$)	22.5 ($n = 724$)
Immigrant 1990–1999	42.7[a] ($n = 17$)	41.3 ($n = 102$)
Employed in last 12 months, %		
Canadian-born	42.2 ($n = 44$)	39.9 ($n = 394$)
Immigrant 1990–1999	—	21.7[a] ($n = 21$)
Household Income < 40,000 annual, %		
Canadian-born*	31.4 ($n = 105$)	19.1 ($n = 669$)
Immigrant 1990–1999	43.8[a] ($n = 19$)	37.3 ($n = 99$)
Partner education: Had ≤ bachelors, %		
Canadian-born*	14.8 ($n = 47$)	23.2 ($n = 718$)
Immigrant 1990–1999*	34.0[a] ($n = 15$)	51.4 ($n = 122$)
Partner Employed in last 12 months, %		
Canadian-born	49.3[a] ($n = 18$)	34.9 ($n = 80$)
Immigrant 1990–1999	—	39.9[a] ($n = 12$)
Partner Alcohol, mean of times had ≥ 5 drinks in the last month		
Canadian-born*	1.7[a] ($n = 310$)	0.7 ($n = 3041$)
Immigrant 1990–1999	—	0.1[a] ($n = 231$)
Years lived together, mean		
Canadian-born	12.2 ($n = 324$)	13.1 ($n = 3119$)
Immigrant 1990–1999	9.3 ($n = 44$)	10.8 ($n = 244$)

[a]coefficient of variation between 16.6 and 33.3%.
*statistically significant 95% confidence interval for the difference – data not presented due to high coefficient of variation.

DISCUSSION

The study advances knowledge about physical and emotional spousal abuse among recent immigrant women compared to their Canadian counterparts. The proportion of spousal emotional abuse was significantly higher among immigrant women than Canadian-born women (14.7% vs. 8.7%). However, the proportions of spousal physical abuse, over the last 5 years, were not statistically different for women in either group. The study also identified some group differences in the risk markers for emotional abuse. Within Canadian-born women, the significant risk markers were less than university education for both women and their partners; annual household income less than 40,000, and partner's frequent alcohol intake. Although within immigrant women, emotionally abused status was significantly associated with partners' education less than university. The interpretation of study results with respect to recent immigrant women is discussed with the proposals for future research and program implications.

Unlike emotional spousal abuse and contrary to our hypothesis, the proportions of physical spousal abuse were not significantly high among immigrant women. Is it possible that immigrant women felt less comfortable reporting physical spousal abuse compared to the mainstream Canadian women? Particularly, when the GSS preamble for the physical abuse highlighted the importance and seriousness of this issue while the preamble for emotional abuse normalized the emotional abuse by referring to other people who had used similar statements to describe their partner. The nature of our study i.e. secondary

data analysis limits us from examining this possibility but our literature review indicates that immigrant women are likely to have a higher barrier level in communicating sensitive health issues (27). Abused immigrant women face several barriers to self-disclosure even in trust-based environments due to lack of knowledge, limited social resources, legal and emotional dependency on husbands, fear of police involvement and deportation (28). Future research should test various data collection methodologies to collect socially sensitive information from minority subpopulations, including immigrant women. Nevertheless, the fact that the GSS emotional abuse preamble might have actually facilitated the capturing of emotional abuse further enhances the importance of the difference found by our study in proportions of emotional abuse reported by the two groups.

Although our study identified higher emotional spousal abuse among recent immigrant women, it revealed limited information about associated risk markers, unlike Canadian born women. These findings beg the question: what makes recent immigrant women vulnerable to higher emotional spousal abuse? It is widely acknowledged and empirically documented that the process of immigration and resettlement is associated with high levels of stress also called *acculturative stress* (29–31). Until recently women were "essentially . . . left out of the theoretical thinking about migration" (32) but lately several studies brought forth the affects of immigration on the conceptualization of "gender as a social system" (33). Gender is a social construct that refers to "all duties, rights, and behaviors a culture considers appropriate for males and females" (34). In a recent study, Dion and Dion (2001) suggest that conditions associated with immigration and settlement in the receiving country may challenge expectations about gender-related roles (13). Gender role negotiations have been empirically observed among immigrant couples (14). Studies also suggest that different gender role expectations are factors that contribute to stress and tension within immigrant families (35) and even depression (36). The magnitude of such familial stress after migration is likely to be higher for women originating in traditional cultures with strong hierarchy in gender relations. This is of high significance for pluralistic countries like Canada where immigration is an ongoing policy and every year 2,00,000 immigrants are expected to arrive with increasing influx from countries with traditional values. In this study, two-third of the immigrant women were visible minorities and, hence, we may speculate stress related to traditional gender role expectations. Future longitudinal studies are needed to advance our understanding of the relationship of acculturation stress and emotional spousal abuse within immigrant families. This is especially salient to understand emotional abuse among immigrant women because the ambiguity surrounding emotional abuse may wrongly facilitate legitimization of abusive behaviors. For instance, *demand* by a partner to know whereabouts at *all times* is emotionally abusive due to intentional repetitive use of psychological force to limit or deprive the victim of her autonomy; however, some partners may justify it as a caring behavior by disregarding the context. Moreover, the emotional abuse definitions prevalent in North America, though still evolving, may not coincide with the definitions accepted in other parts of the world (10). Nevertheless, covert or overt abuse is not acceptable, regardless of culture. Furthermore, North American studies with general population report that emotional spousal abuse experienced by women is associated with chronic health consequences such as sleep problems, depression, and anxiety (21). The health and social service providers should be vigilant of the indicators of familial stress and spousal emotional abuse when serving vulnerable recent immigrant women.

Although GSS 1999 (Cycle 13, Victimization) is a national based survey with large sample size, it has certain limitations (Jiwani, 2003). The survey is limited in adequately representing various subgroups within the immigrant category because its methodology lacks oversampling techniques for minority subgroups. There is a strong need to improve the representation of immigrant subgroups to allow group specific investigations. Furthermore, this survey excluded respondents who did not speak either of the official languages. Hence, generalizibility of the presented results to *all* immigrant women warrants caution though Statistics Canada reports that in 1996 nine in 10 adult female immigrants spoke either English or French (18). However, women isolated by language could be at higher risk of spousal abuse.

In addition, the GSS did not measure the full spectrum of violence to which women are subjected unlike the Violence Against Women Survey (1993), also conducted by Statistics Canada. For instance, the GSS asked respondents about the violence they had experienced from their partners in the last 5-year and 12-month periods while the Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS, 1993) asked women about the violence they had experienced since the age of 16.

Furthermore, the overall magnitude of the difference in rates of emotional abuse found in our study might still be an underestimation because the GSS used close-ended questions from existing research primarily conducted in Western countries. These close-ended questions may miss other types of abuse experienced by non-western multicultural groups (37). Smith (1994) reported in the results of a telephone interview study conducted in metropolitan city of Toronto that the inclusion of open-ended questions about abuse influenced the overall prevalence rates (38). There is a need to enhance the cultural relevancy of questions in national surveys, including GSS, by inclusion of open-ended questions, especially when diverse populations are assessed for rates of spousal abuse. Hence, the estimates of spousal abuse based on the GSS data are probably an underestimation of women's actual experiences and only a tip of the iceberg.

CONCLUSIONS

The most notable finding of this study is the reporting of an almost two-fold rates of emotional spousal abuse by recent immigrant women compared to Canadian born women. Possible explanations are discussed generating hypotheses for future research. This study is a steppingstone for future research and programs aiming to improve services for a spectrum of abused women from diverse cultures.

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