

# SAFE HOUSES, SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

Immigrant Women Seeking Support  
as Survivors of Domestic Violence  
in the Capital Region

Tariro Murwira  
& Florentien Verhage



Greater Victoria  
Local Immigration  
Partnership



Inter-Cultural  
Association  
of Greater Victoria



## Land Acknowledgement

This study took place on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish people. As newcomers and settlers, we are uninvited visitors on this land and we acknowledge the Songhees, Esquimalt, Tsartlip, Tseycum, Tsawout, Pauquachin, and T'Sou-ke Nations on whose territories we do our work to support immigrants and refugees. We are grateful to live, work and learn here, and we continue to honour the Nations who have always cared for these lands, waters, and air and continue to do so today.

## Research Team

This research was a project of the Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership (GVLIP) at the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA).

- Research Lead: Florentien Verhage – Manager of Immigrant Integration, Research and Planning
- Research Support: Tariro Murwira – Community Engagement Coordinator

*We are grateful to the participants in this study for trusting us with your stories and for helping us understand the strategies and needs of immigrant women survivors of domestic violence in the Capital Region.*

Special thanks to *The Cridge Transition House for Women* and to Robin McGeough for early comments on this work, thanks to Adela Gonzalez for administrative support. We gratefully acknowledge funding from the Law Foundation of British Columbia.

## Content Warning & Support Lines

This 2023 report discusses the barriers and strategies employed by immigrant women to find support as survivors of domestic violence. It does not focus on details of abuse or violence. Nonetheless, this report might be emotionally upsetting for certain readers and remind them of situations they, friends, or family members have experienced. **Please remember: if you are a survivor of gender-based violence, this is not your fault, there is nothing wrong with you, and you do not deserve to be treated this way.**

- For immediate crisis support dial 911.
- For support and information -Vancouver Island Crisis Line: 1-888-494-3888 or dial 211.
- For housing and other gender-based violence supports:
  - *The Cridge Transition House for Women*: 250-479-3963, [www.cridge.org](http://www.cridge.org)
  - *Victoria's Women's Transition House*: 250-385-6611, [www.transitionhouse.net](http://www.transitionhouse.net)
- For Legal Aid and information: 1-866-577-2525, [family.legalaid.bc.ca/abuse-family-violence](http://family.legalaid.bc.ca/abuse-family-violence)

Find these and other resources here:

[www.icavictoria.org/immigrant-welcome-centre/gender-based-violence](http://www.icavictoria.org/immigrant-welcome-centre/gender-based-violence)

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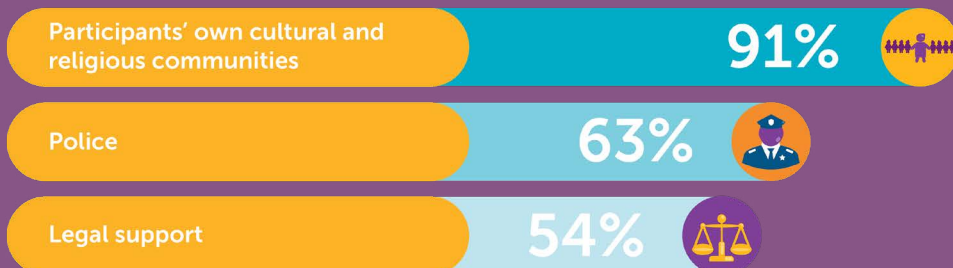
# I EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was designed to gather information from immigrant communities in the Capital region to gain deeper insight into how immigrant women survivors of domestic violence seek support.<sup>1</sup> Through several semi-structured interviews and focus groups, 11 recently arrived immigrant women shared when, where, and how they reach out for help, what they knew of existing support systems, and what recommendations they have for lowering barriers to accessing these systems and services.

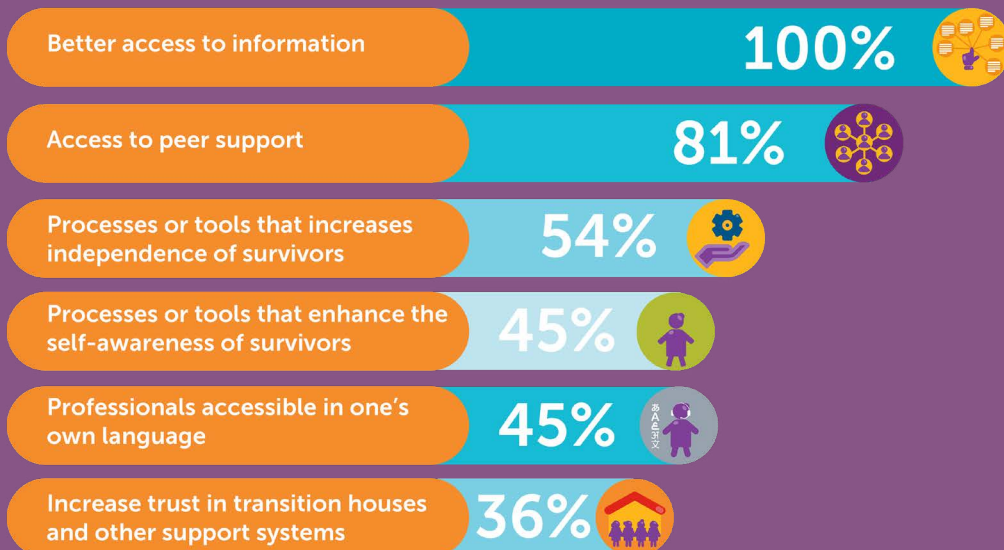
## THE FOUR MOST OFTEN MENTIONED BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP:



## THE THREE MOST COMMON PLACES PARTICIPANTS LOOKED FOR SUPPORT:



## FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:



<sup>1</sup> Please see the section "Key Terms Used in this Report" for definitions of often used terms.

## II INTRODUCTION

Two recent studies done in Vancouver Island's Capital Region reveal that most immigrants and refugees living in the area are not sure where to go when they need legal help and other community supports (Inter-Cultural Association, 2021). As well, for 90% of participants in a recent legal needs study, lack of information was the main reason that immigrants had difficulty finding support in the region; for half of them feeling isolated from community members, family, and friends made challenges much harder to face (Verhage, 2021).

Immigrant women survivors of domestic violence are specifically vulnerable when facing isolation from communities (Sieffien, Law, & Anderman, 2020; Illesinghe, 2020). For example, isolation makes it harder to gain knowledge about support systems. The legal needs study revealed that some immigrant women survivors were not aware of transition houses or were not sure what they would find there:

*"I was so scared to go anywhere and face anyone. I just wanted to just hold my baby... I didn't want to be in a setting which is new to me. I didn't know... what kind of atmosphere I would be in" (Verhage, 2021).*

To follow up on these two previous studies, this small qualitative study sought to better understand where and how recently arrived immigrant women survivors of domestic violence look for support and safety when finding themselves in a region that they might experience as isolating.

Questions that we were interested in were:

1. What do recent immigrant women in the Capital Region know about transition houses and related legal, social, and mental health resources?
2. Would they trust these local resources and services and access them when needed?
3. Would they suggest these local services to friends if needed?
4. What barriers might prevent them from accessing these services when needed?
5. What changes could be made to lower the barriers to accessing these services?
6. What are their needs and are local community services meeting them?

## Demographic Profile of Greater Victoria

This study took place in Greater Victoria, also known as the Capital region which is the largest metropolitan area on Vancouver Island and encompasses 13 separate municipalities. It includes a relatively small urban core with a larger suburban and rural margin around it. Being located on Vancouver Island, several ferry services or regional flights connect it to the mainland of British Columbia.

The Capital region is a majority white community with a population of almost 400,000 residents, 19% of which are immigrants and 22% of which are racialized or Indigenous people. Mandarin, Tagalog, Cantonese, and Punjabi are the most often spoken non-official languages in the region. The top places of birth for recent immigrants (who have arrived since 2016) are the Philippines, India, and China. Tagalog, Mandarin, and Arabic are the languages most often spoken among these recent immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2022).

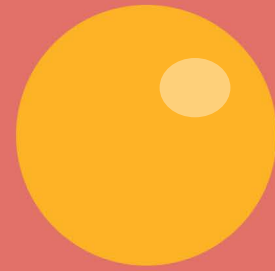
## Domestic Violence in Immigrant Populations

The World Health Organization recently called violence against women “a major public health problem and a violation of women’s rights.” They estimate that 1 in 3 women “world-wide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime” (World Health Organization, 2021).

Many of the studies that look at violence against women are large-scale and little attention has been paid to underrepresented populations such as immigrant women: “the lack of attention to the experiences of domestic violence in immigrant populations creates unique problems in a richly multicultural society such as Canada, where immigrants comprise 22% of the Canadian population” (Fonteyne, Podritske, Park, & Hegadoren, 2022). While estimates of domestic violence are not clearly higher in immigrant populations in Canada, their position as immigrants “contributes to their vulnerability and to barriers faced when accessing services and supports” (Tabibi & Baker, 2017, p.5). Recent studies show that immigrant women face several challenges when navigating through support systems including language barriers and hesitance about involving the police or court systems. Immigrant women might find themselves being financially dependent on an abuser (their sponsor) for their immigration status. While they can apply for permanent residency on humanitarian and compassionate grounds when their sponsor is abusive, many women might not know this or might lack the legal assistance and finances required to apply for such status (Fonteyne, Podritske, Park, & Hegadoren, 2022).

Living in British Columbia means living in a region that is called severely unaffordable by the Canadian Rental Housing Index (BC Non-Profit Housing Association, 2023). In such a place, finding alternative housing arrangements as a survivor of domestic violence is difficult and sometimes almost impossible. Because many immigrant women do not have established support networks that could provide or help with finding temporary accommodation, they often are in greater need of housing (Guruge, Zanchetta, & Seifi 2018), or they decide to stay in an unsafe situation because they have no place to go and no community to call on. This is made even harder by landlords who can be more hesitant to rent to an immigrant woman (Tabibi, Ahmad, & Lalonde, 2018). Immigrant women are less likely to access shelters, but, when accessing them, they might end up spending longer times there than Canadian-born women (Tabibi & Baker, 2017).

It is against a background of challenges like these that this study was carried out.





### III METHODOLOGY

A series of interviews and small focus groups were held Winter 2022-Spring 2023. Women were recruited by sharing posters at immigrant serving organizations, sending emails to immigrant clients, sharing the call for participation on social media, and by sending calls for participation to relevant organizations such as local transition houses and support groups.

Eligible for this study was anyone who identifies as a woman, is an immigrant or refugee, is older than 18 years old, lives in the Capital Region and has been in Canada for less than 5 years. Because the central question of concern was about what immigrant women know about supports for women survivors of domestic violence, it was not a requirement of participation that a woman had personal experience with domestic violence.

Participants received \$50 compensation for their time and interpretation was offered if needed.

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups were done by a team of two researchers who were immigrant women themselves. The interviews were informed by trauma and violence informed practices. Questions focused on how participants would seek help or how they would support other women rather than on details of abuse and violence. Participants were told that domestic violence is not unique to immigrant populations and that they did not have to share any experience of trauma, abuse, or violence, whether their own or someone else's. Participation was voluntary and participants were free to choose not to answer a question, to stop the interview at any time, or to withdraw their data from the study.

Women received the option to access free counselling services and they were connected with other resources if they wished.

Women were asked a few demographic questions at the end of the interviews. Because the number of women we talked to was small (11 individuals) we opted to report minimally on these demographics, to ensure their anonymity.

The results of the interviews have been anonymized. Any quote used in this report has been selected such that no personal information is included that could lead to participants' identities.



## IV FINDINGS

### 1. Participants

We reached 11 participants, the majority of whom were higher educated women who were comfortable speaking with us in English. The age of the participants ranged between 20+ to 70+. Five participants identified as South American, three as South Asian, two as East Asian, one as Mestiza. Most participants had arrived in Canada through more precarious immigration classes such as family sponsored applicants or international students. Eight participants spoke to a situation that they had personally experienced, four spoke as friends or family members. One woman requested interpretation services; the rest of the conversations were held in English.

### 2. Barriers to Supports and Services

#### THE FOUR MOST OFTEN MENTIONED BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP:



#### ***Not Knowing Where to Go***

Most participants (73%) shared that they did or would not know where to go in Greater Victoria to get support as a survivor of domestic violence. For example, they said that they were not aware of the existence of transition houses or what services were offered there. It was not just the individuals themselves who reported this, they also mentioned that their own communities were not aware of such services either and could not help them find the support they needed. In one case a participant had heard of transition houses through the recent movie "Maid" but was not aware of how to find and reach out to a transition house.

*"I did not have a safe space in my head to think."*

*“How will we even think of transition houses if we do not know something like this exists?”*

Lack of knowledge does not only show up with respect to places to go, but also when talking about the processes and consequences of going to such places. Learning about transition houses during the interview, one participant said:

*“It’s very scary, like a mental block there, because it is something you don’t know, that you don’t know the people who are going to be there, that you don’t know the consequences...the process. It’s very unsure.”*

## **Language**

A majority of participants (73%) mentioned that language was a barrier to seeking support.

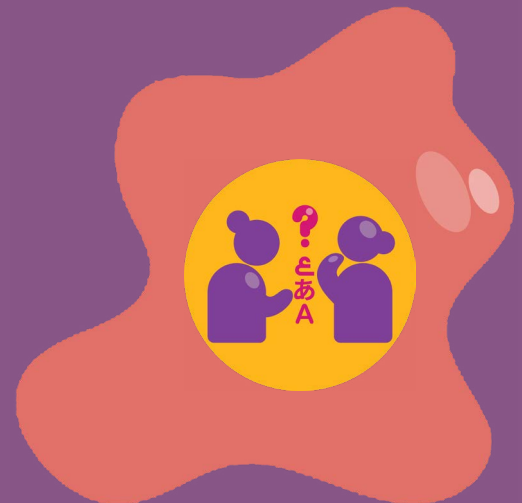
*“Even if there was police in front of me, I wouldn’t know how to share this story just because the language barrier did not allow me to do that.”*

Not speaking the majority language in the region (English) was experienced as a barrier to communication and as a barrier to finding information on-line. Two participants specifically highlighted that the need to call certain services stopped them from reaching out because speaking on the phone in English is perceived as more difficult than other ways of communicating (such as texting, chatting, writing emails, or meeting one-on-one). Even when language skills were sufficient to ask for information and help, participants mentioned that speaking about something so difficult and personal was made more complicated in a new language.

Several participants spoke about the mental burden and psychological barriers around speaking about their experiences in another language:

*“When we’re formulating what we’re going through, that’s an added mental pressure. To find the right word so that it doesn’t get lost in translation or is miscommunicated, or misrepresented.”*

*“I am always very nervous about saying something different...When I say something, for me it can be not rude but maybe if I say it to a Canadian, maybe it can be rude, so I’m always afraid of saying something improper.”*



## ***Fear, Distrust, or Uncertainty about the Police***

Many participants (63%) mentioned that fear, distrust, or uncertainty about the police would stop them from seeking help. Many were also unsure in which situations the police could help and in which not. While for several participants this initial fear of the police was overcome, participants also shared that they would not reach out to the police because they perceived that it would mean that they would lose control over what would happen next, what would happen to them, their kids, or their partner (the perpetrator) if a report was made:



*"Calling the police feels like I've started a process which now cannot be stopped midway."*

## ***Isolation***

More than half of the participants (54%) saw not having anyone (family, friends, or a community) as a reason for not being able to find help and support when experiencing domestic violence.

*"I did not know anyone here; I did not even know that my community exists here."*

Fear of isolation was expressed both as a cause for not having a safety net of people around them and as a fear of being all alone after leaving an abusive partner.

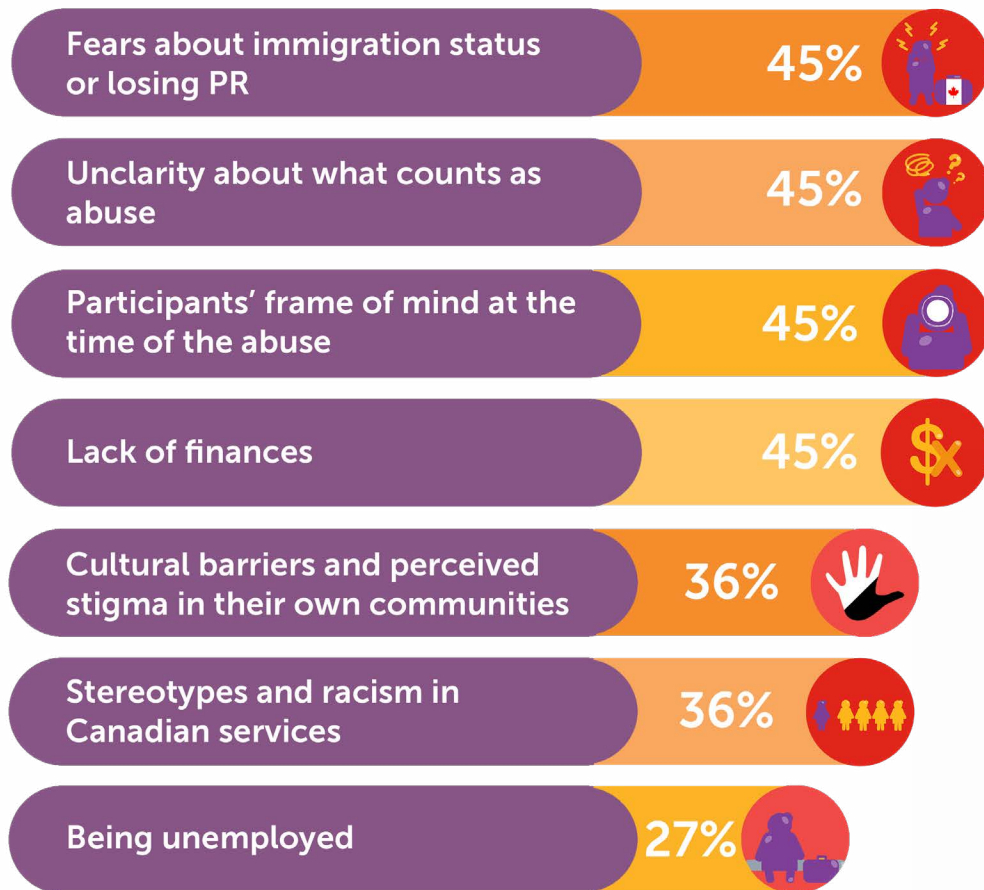


*"I do not have anywhere to go. I have no relatives here...If I leave, I have no-one. I want companionship, that is not bad, is it? I just want peace. I want both of us to live in peace."*

Trusted family and friends in their home country sometimes were able to help from afar by providing a listening ear. But women did not always feel comfortable to reach out to their communities at home because of perceived stigma, feeling shame, or because they wanted to protect their trusted loved-one from worrying about them. This way they found themselves not only isolated from their community of residence but also from people they trust in their home country.

*"Trying to expose the situation was difficult because my family is in a different country. I did not want them to feel worried about me."*

## Other Barriers to Seeking Help



- **Fears about immigration status or losing PR** (45%), especially when the abuser is their sponsor. In Canada, immigrants who are abused by their sponsor can separate from their abuser and keep their PR status on humanitarian grounds. But not all immigrant women know this.
- **Unclear about what counts as abuse** (45%). Specifically, participants mentioned wondering when it was appropriate to look for help and wondering about what counts as “violence,” especially when the abuse they were subjected to did not involve physical violence.
- **Participants' frame of mind at the time of the abuse** (45%). Thinking they have no right to ask for help, fear about being a burden on society, shame, guilt, and “not believing yourself,” were mentioned as reasons to not reach out for support.
- **Lack of finances** (45%) and **being unemployed** (27%) caused barriers to being able to separate from an abuser, afford legal help, or find other housing and jobs.
- **Cultural barriers and perceived stigma in their own communities** (36%) can mean that women will not seek help or feel that they have a duty to stay.
- **Stereotypes and racism in Canadian services** (36%) meant that women felt unheard or not believed when accessing supports. In some cases, the community support given to a white abuser send the message to the survivor that she would not be believed or could not count on that community.

### 3. Where Immigrant Women Look for Local Support and Services

#### THE THREE MOST COMMON PLACES WOMEN LOOKED FOR SUPPORT:



Two participants accessed transition houses.

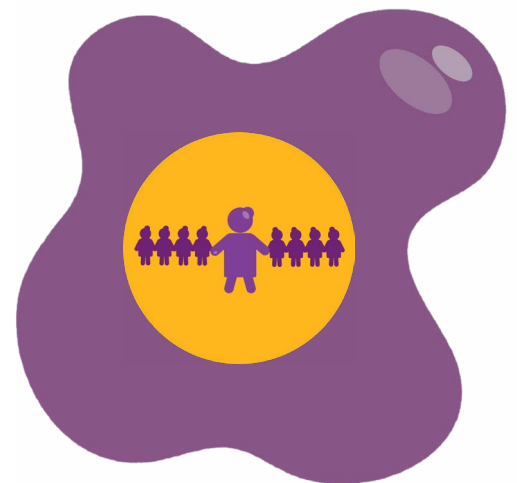
#### **Cultural and Religious Communities**

Almost all the immigrant women who participated in the study mentioned that they turned first to trusted communities of support (91%).

*"When you come from so far away, your community becomes your second house...you're on a journey to find your people, people you can count on...it sort of becomes the guiding light of being here in Canada."*

Almost all the immigrant women who participated in the study mentioned that they turned first to trusted communities of support (91%).

For some participants (36%) their religious communities, churches and the masjid, were mentioned as having been specifically helpful for providing community, offering spiritual support, hands-on help such as delivering food baskets, and for referral to the police or other services when needed.



## Police

Most women we talked to, at one point reached out to the police for help (63%). This is interesting considering that many of them also mentioned that they were (initially) hesitant about trusting the police. Those who involved the police in crisis situations said that the immediate crisis response was appropriate, that police officers believed them, that it they felt safer because of it, and that officers provided helpful referrals to other services such as transition houses.

*"I mean the services and the resources and the follow-up, and the kind of urgency they put into directions is marvelous."*



## Legal Support

A slight majority (54%) of women did at some point access legal support. This support was accessed most through Legal Aid (45% of women). One participant accessed a lawyer not connected to Legal Aid. The private lawyer was expensive, and it took months for her to find someone and save enough money to afford the support. Legal Aid support was sought for assistance with immigration such as help with obtaining permanent residence or citizenship. In most of the cases Legal Aid was seen as helpful though sometimes slow and prone to miscommunication. For one of the women the advice had been counter to her needs:

*"The lawyer told me that because financially I am still dependent on the other party...I was asked to stay put and not do too much. So, to me, I don't think the lawyer helped."*

The most successful story about accessing Legal Aid involved being able to access a Legal Aid lawyer who spoke the same language as the participant.

The women who did not access legal supports often did not do so because they feared the expense. More than a third (36%) of participants had never heard about Legal Aid.



## **Internet**

The isolation that many of the women experienced meant that they saw the internet as their only resource (36%). Internet became a replacement for their community. But as English language learners, encountering websites that were mostly written in English is difficult. Many websites were seen as confusing, providing too much information, and not helpful. Only two women reported that the internet had been a helpful tool in finding support.

*"All the time when I have some need, it will be the internet and trial and error because you don't know the systems."*

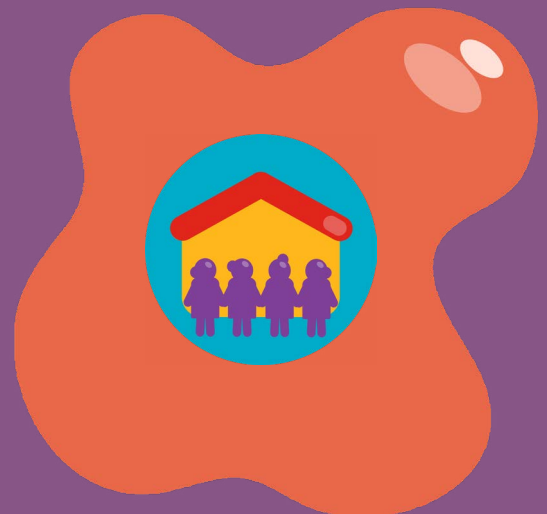
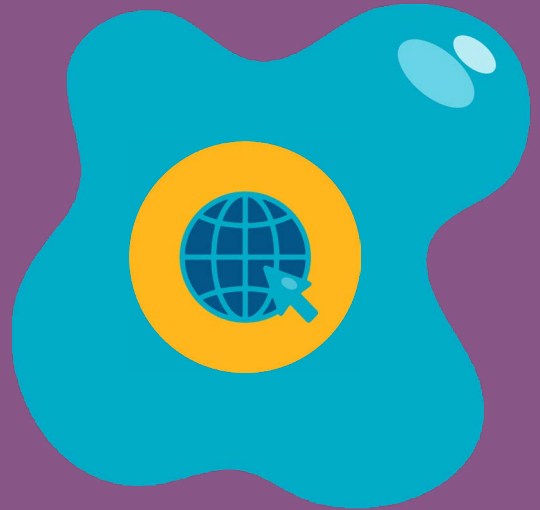
*"I was looking for someone to help in Google... but we did not find, we couldn't solve the problem yet. We looked for many things and there are many options, and we don't know what to do specifically... Here, we don't know anyone, we only have Google."*

## **Transition Houses**

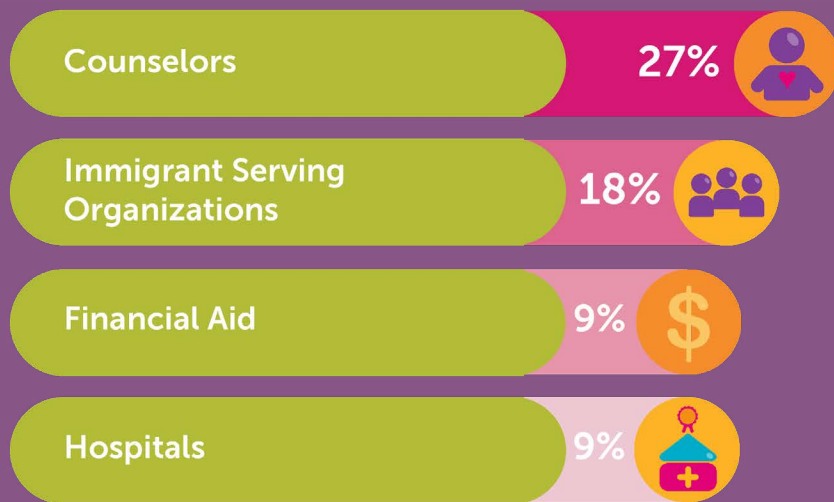
Most participants did not know about transition houses (82%). For the two participants who had accessed transition houses, the services at the transition house were seen as extremely helpful, very responsive, and an important step to a new and safe life. Women felt seen and supported throughout their time with the transition house:

*"For the time I stayed there, they were so supportive, and they were so good in their work that they made me feel positive again on my feet...so they were my community I feel."*

These positive experiences with the services of the transition house started with their websites that were seen as particularly effective because of how they shared clear and simple information and because they put the safety and agency of women seeking their help at the forefront.



## Other Supports and Services Accessed



- **Counselors** (27%): Not having counselling available in their own language was given as a reason for not seeking counselling support.
- **Immigrant Serving Organizations** (18%): These organizations were generally seen as helpful, but not many women used them to get access to Gender-Based Violence supports services.
- **Financial Aid** (9%)
- **Hospitals** (9%)

## Entry Points and Timelines for Accessing Services

For those who accessed domestic violence services and supports, the first point of contact was a family or community member (45%), referrals from crisis services such as police or hospital (27%), or referrals from other services such as immigrant serving organizations, legal aid or government services (18%). In one case, the participant found services solely through internet searches.

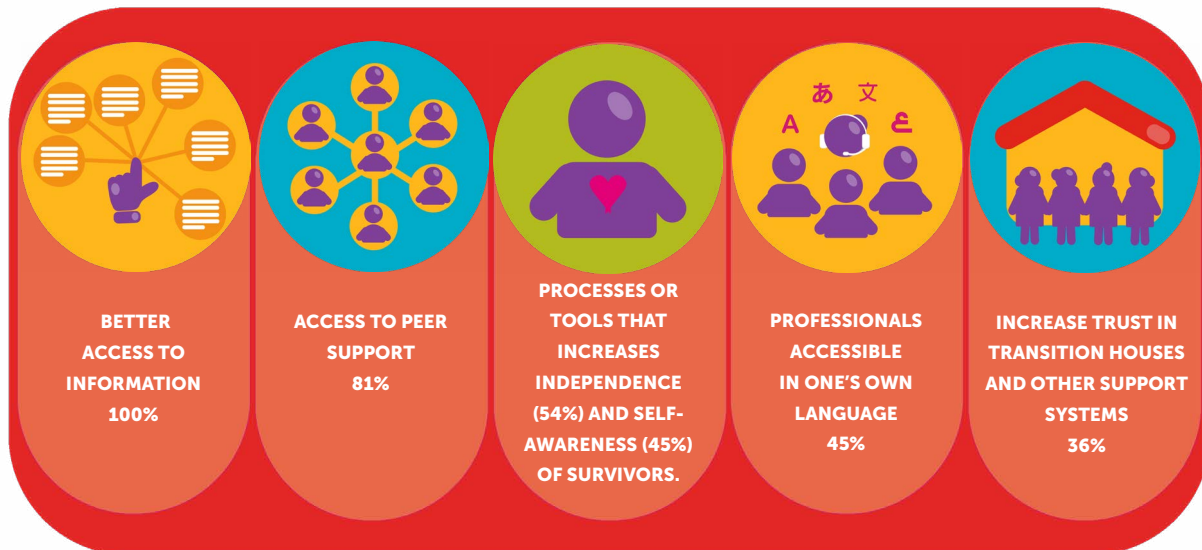
For a third of participants, services were accessed as an immediate result of a crisis; for another third of participants, reaching out for help was a result of a slow process of speaking to trusted community members, building courage and trust. The final third of participants said that they never accessed any services or only learned about available supports when help was no longer needed.

*"For the time I stayed there, they were so supportive, and they were so good in their work that they made me feel positive again on my feet...so they were my community I feel."*



## 4. Recommendations

### FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:



### Better Access to Information

All participants (100%) mentioned that immigrant women and their communities need better access to information about domestic violence in particular and gender-based violence in general.

### WHERE

#### Posters and flyers in key places:

Participants would like to see awareness posters and flyers in multiple languages at any place where immigrants might find themselves and could possibly be alone. Suggestions were made to have such information available at:

- Schools, ELL classes, libraries, workplaces, places of worship, supermarkets, buses and bus stops, universities, government and migration offices.
- Such information could also be included in welcome packages for all immigrants.

*"If there are posters, right, with some numbers and some guidance, and they could be plastered all across Victoria, in universities and places of worship or places where communities meet...it goes into your memory, that oh, I read about something and you may not need it for yourself but you may need it for somebody else."*



## WHAT

### **Essential information, simple designs, and recognizing experiences:**

Participants shared that any information should be simple and clear with basic key words and strong visual appeal. They cautioned against including too many resources because that would risk overloading a reader and not be helpful. Instead, a few central resources and services that could be used to start a support process would be preferable. Including short descriptions of what domestic violence might look like was also considered helpful and important, especially something that would help them see their own experiences reflected.

*"I could relate to things, that yes, I'm going through similar things."*

## HOW

### **Less reliance on the internet:**

Information that can be accessed and relayed by a trusted person or professional is preferred. Internet searches can be overwhelming and mystifying for many English language learners.

*"For us immigrants, the language and the structures of the sites are not easy to understand. So we go through many more pages, many information, and in the end we don't know exactly what to do."*

## HOW

### **Access services other than by phone call:**

Participants preferred text or chat access to make appointments or reach out to services. For someone learning English, making a phone call might be difficult and feel intimidating.

*"The big problem I find here for me to look at any kind of help is that it requires to call...I found it too much to call...I will be more comfortable for anything if I can just write to them, chat to them or something like that."*

## **Peer Support**

Because immigrant women turn most often to community when searching for help, a large majority mentioned that peer support in a variety of forms is important (81%).

### **Conversations with peers:**

Because immigrant women turn most often to community when searching for help, a large majority mentioned that peer support in a variety of forms is important (81%).

*"Finding support from people who speak your own language and who can keep your conversations private... I think that makes a very big difference because when we're going through a very tumultuous time, we tend to switch to the language that is closest to our heart."*

### **Cultural brokers and navigators:**

Professionals and peers who can help access services and clarify the various support systems and services available and build trust.

### **Women supporting women:**

There was interest in creating unofficial communities and networks of trust with shared spaces to meet. These spaces would enable someone to talk about their experiences without consequences while retaining all agency.

*"I think women supporting women, women trusting women, women creating unofficial communities and networks is what really can go a long way... Yes. To get space, to meet...just having those shared spaces can be so helpful because that's where we can talk about transition houses and legal aid and what not, without being preachy or without being like 'let me tell you because you need it'. No, I'm just sharing it because I heard about it, and somebody just might need it."*



Several participants highlighted the need to pay specific attention to senior immigrant women survivors of domestic violence, who might have different needs than younger women and for whom it might be more difficult to achieve financial independence through employment.

## ***Independence & Awareness Raising***

About half of the participants highlighted the importance of helping immigrant women gain independence (54%) and raising awareness about domestic violence (45%).

### **Ensuring the independence of immigrant women:**

With language being such an oft mentioned barrier to finding support, access to English language classes can help set women up for becoming more independent. When there are waitlists for such classes, giving priority to survivors of domestic violence might help them gain independence sooner. Other ways to increase the independence of immigrant survivors of domestic violence are to make sure that they have quick access to safe places to live with clear processes to gain access, that they there are employment opportunities to increase financial independence, and that they need to rely less on sponsors for immigration trajectories.

*"It is a must skill to allow women to be equipped with the language skill set and the financial capability."*

### **Raising awareness about domestic violence:**

Participants suggested teaching women when and how to say stop and how to recognize and break through manipulation by perpetrators. In addition, participants shared that it is important to lower barriers to counselling, telling women it is okay to talk and allowing them to talk without consequences or decisions being made for them. Working to lower feelings of guilt and shame, and sharing messages of empowerment and agency and were also mentioned as important messages for women to hear.

*"I really just admire my own wisdom to check the resources available."*

## ***Professionals Directly Accessible in Own Language***

Almost half (45%) of participants shared that it would be helpful to have professionals that they could access in their own language without help of an interpreter. Especially lawyers, counsellors, and social workers conversant in their language would be helpful.



## Building Awareness and Trust in Available Systems

More than a third of participants (36%) pointed out that sharing information about transition houses is not enough. If these services are unfamiliar and are perceived as not welcoming to immigrant women or places where you are no longer in control of your own decisions, communities would not refer women to their services.

*"Just sending someone who's already in not-so-great condition to a place where I don't know whether it's safe, is something I do not do because I don't have the confidence myself. I'll not go there [transition houses] and not send anyone there...In order for anyone to think of it, recommend it, or use it for themselves, they need to be aware of it and not only be aware of it, but have that psychological trust associated with that term."*

Participants called on any organizations in the region to build trust and connection between transition houses, immigrant serving organizations, and local cultural and religious communities. This can be done by making sure representatives visit communities, attend their events and collaborate with each other. If possible, organizing open days and events at service organizations and transition houses and inviting newly arrived immigrants to visit, were seen as steps in the right direction to de-mystify these services.

*"So I think just awareness, introducing it to women, showing it to women, building that trust, talking about it...so it just has to be something as simple as this, I think simple is beautiful."*

With an increase in trust between individuals, communities, and services and organizations it becomes easier to give so-called "warm referrals" to women seeking support. A "warm referral" relies on there being pre-existing connections between separate services or between communities and services. Referring someone to an organization or a service that you know, trust, and can warmly recommend makes it easier for that person to follow up and follow through with the referral.



## V EMPOWERING SAFE & SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

### 1 Empowered Individuals

The phrase “knowledge is power” resonates with much of what the participants shared with us. Considering that only two participants knew about transition houses when they needed them, and a third of them had never heard of legal aid as a resource for legal assistance, it is imperative that communities do a better job informing immigrant populations of such essential resources.

Participants in this study shared that it is crucially important that all services and supports for immigrant women survivors of domestic violence are better known and become easier accessible to them. This means that services should make information available in multiple languages, that they have more people on staff that can aid with interpretation and translation, and that they are well-informed about the intersecting challenges that immigrant women might face.

Immigrant women feel more empowered when they can reach out to communities and services on their own terms, in their own language and through their preferred medium (chat and text instead of phone calls), and giving them agency and control over the steps they would like to take. They gain independence through increasing access to language classes, settlement services, job opportunities that can cover rent and other essentials, and safe and reliable housing.

Many of these needs are closely intertwined with each other, especially against the backdrop of a housing crisis. Guruge, Zanchetta, and Seifi explain that without housing, women might find little peace of mind to tackle other major challenges: “once [they] find secure and affordable housing, they feel empowered to deal with other challenges they and their children face... such as education, employment, health, and improving the lives of their children” (2018, p. 5). At the same time, finding such housing is often reliant on having a job that pays well enough, which might depend on the level of English they have mastered. This means that it is never enough to work on just one aspect of these challenges, different sectors need to come together and collaboratively support this work and these women in our community.



## 2 Supportive Communities

“Community” was the word that continually surfaced throughout the series of conversations. Immigrant women survivors of domestic violence often rely on their communities when looking for support and information. But if these communities lack information on domestic violence resources and services, they are not always a good starting point for assistance.

*“My communities do not know where to go either.”*

*“I think the information was inaccessible in my community. No one knew exactly what to do in these situations.”*

Currently in the Capital region, important work is underway to ensure a better integration and collaboration among support services for survivors on gender-based violence. Immigrant serving organizations, counselling services, housing organizations, and the anti-violence sector are reaching out to one another to share expertise on vulnerable communities, challenges, and best practices.<sup>2</sup> For these sectors, better mutual understanding of challenges that immigrant women might face and of the ways domestic violence might manifest itself, without falling into tropes and biases about either, is important. The findings in this report strongly support these types of community collaborations and recommend that they are extended to cover other important community partners, that their work is well funded, and that suggested best practices are implemented.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly they recommend that different cultural and peer communities are centrally part of all these conversations and networks.

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2 For example, the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria is building relationships with local anti-violence organizations (such as transition houses) and the Vancouver Island Counselling Centre for Immigrants and Refugees (VICCIR). As well, the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness gathered different service providers together for a two year project “Surfacing Our Strengths: Co-Creating Strategic Solutions with Women+ At Risk of Violence and Homelessness” with reports to be found here: <https://victoriahomelessness.ca/surfacingourstrengths/>.

3 See for example the prototypes developed here: <https://victoriahomelessness.ca/surfacingourstrengths/prototypes-projects/>.

There are many ways we often use the word “support.” To support someone or something means that we strengthen them, that we build strong foundations to hold something up. “Supporting” is also used when we help, give evidence, are knowledgeable, or cheer someone on. Finally, “to support” means to care about someone. Each of these meanings are related but also importantly different: giving strength, providing foundations, helping, being knowledgeable, cheering on, and caring for another. All these meanings are included in the words of our participants throughout these conversations.

Supporting immigrant women survivors means to support them and their communities, to increase communities’ awareness of domestic violence and local services, to create new communities of support, and to build ties of trust between individuals, communities, services, and organizations. These ties of trust can build the strong foundations and informed communities and nourish the relations of care that our participants asked for.

Safe and supportive communities lift up the individual in need, are well aware and responsive to these needs, and work closely together through mutual trust, knowledge, and care.





## VI APPENDIX

### Key Terms Used in this Report

The phrase “knowledge is power” resonates with much of what the participants shared with us. Considering that only two participants knew about transition houses when they needed them, and a third of them had never heard of legal aid as a resource for legal assistance, it is imperative that communities do a better job informing immigrant populations of such essential resources.

#### Immigrant

The terms used in this report follow the conventions used by Statistics Canada and Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

- **Immigrants:** People who are, or who have ever been, landed immigrants or permanent residents. They have been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities. Immigrants who have obtained Canadian citizenship by naturalization are included in this group (Statistics Canada 2019).

This group includes people with a wide variety of immigration backgrounds (Canadian Council for Refugees 2010):

- **Refugees or protected persons:** People who are forced to flee from persecution and who are located outside of their home country. A protected person is someone who has been deemed at risk for persecution in their home country.
- **Economic immigrants:** A category of immigrants selected for their skills and ability to contribute to Canada’s economy who are granted permanent resident status on arrival.
- **Immigrant sponsored by family:** People who are sponsored by family members to come to Canada and receive permanent residence status.
- **Naturalized citizens:** Naturalization is the process through which immigrants acquire Canadian citizenship.

Other immigration categories referred to in this document are:

- **Temporary Resident:** A foreign national who is in Canada legally for a short period. Temporary residents include international students, foreign workers, and visitors, such as tourists. In this report, the term “immigrant” refers to all the above categories together unless specified otherwise.

## Domestic Violence

“*Gender-based violence*” describes any harmful act directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, abuse of power and harmful norms. There are different names for the type of gender-based violence, abuse or control discussed in this report: “*intimate partner violence*” refers to violence, abuse or control from a spouse or intimate partner, “*domestic violence*” refers to violence, abuse or control enacted on a person by someone living in someone’s home. This can be a partner, but also a parent, sibling, or other family member living in the home.

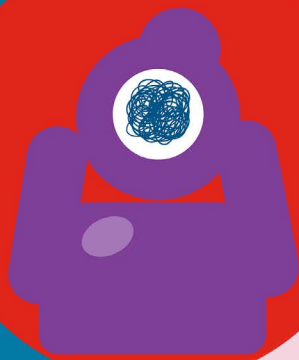
Because domestic violence is broader and because in our recruitment posters we specified that we would be talking about services and supports for women experiencing violence in their homes, “*domestic violence*” is the term used to capture the information shared in this study. Gender-based violence (including domestic violence) might include any of the below:

- Physical or sexual violence or coercion.
- Emotional, spiritual, or financial abuse, for example threats to a person or someone that person cares about, bullying, stealing, preventing access to money, forcing someone to practice religious beliefs or preventing them from practicing these beliefs.
- Any form of control such as following someone, control over where they can go, what they can do, and with whom they can create friendships. Preventing them access to children, family, friends, or even pets.

## Victim or Survivor

To describe women who have experience with domestic violence, the term “*victim*” has been widely used in the literature and is still used by police officers, lawyers, or others in the context of courtroom proceedings. “*Survivor*” is a more recent term used most often by gender-based violence service organizations to highlight a person’s empowerment and agency.

This report follows that convention and mostly uses the phrase “immigrant women survivors of domestic violence.” Sometimes the shorter term “survivors” is used as a stand in for the longer phrase.



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## Who We Are

The **Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA)** offers services for immigrant and refugee newcomers, including settlement and integration services, translation and interpretation, English classes, mentoring, job search assistance and guidance, volunteer matching, and peer support. We also provide outreach and education in the community through arts and equity programming, as well as community development workshops on anti-racism, diversity awareness, immigration, and human rights.

The **Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership (GVLIP)** is a program of ICA. The GVLIP is a coalition of newcomers, community organizations, government agencies, institutions, businesses, and business organizations focused on developing strategies for improving the participation, belonging, and inclusion of newcomers in Greater Victoria. Our goal is to ensure that Greater Victoria is a **welcoming, anti-racist, inclusive, equitable, and well-connected community** in which everybody has opportunities to thrive, learn, live, work, and play in safety.

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