



Access Alliance
Multicultural Health and Community Services

POLICY SCAN

Canadian Policies & Initiatives on
Gender-Based Violence

NEWCOMER PERSPECTIVE

2010-2023

CONTEXT

In Canada, gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue that undermines gender equality and is a violation of human rights.

GBV encompasses violence committed against someone based on their gender, gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender.(1) This includes intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic violence (DV), sexual assault, and more.

In Canada, up to 11 million people aged 15 and over have experienced IPV at least once in their life.(2) However, majority of incidents still go unreported. In 2018, a Statistics Canada survey revealed that only 5% of the most serious incidents of sexual assault against women were disclosed or discovered by the police.(3)

Amid Canada's efforts to combat gender-based violence, the perspectives of newcomers are often overlooked.(4) In key reports proposing recommendations for Canada's National Action Plan to End GBV, newcomer inclusion was limited, with only a few mentions throughout the documents. These reports were published by reputable organizations such as the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#), [Courage to Act](#), and [Canadian Centre for Women's Empowerment](#).(5-7)

The limited inclusion of newcomer perspectives limits our understanding and advocacy efforts in GBV. Newcomers in Canada is roughly 23% of the population in Canada and increasing.(8) Therefore, it is paramount that newcomer experience are woven within discussions and narratives of GBV to provide valuable insights on the issue and possible solutions.

Who is Impacted?

GBV can affect all people, but it has a disproportionate impact on women and girls, youth, Indigenous women and girls, women living in rural and remote communities, newcomer women, Black and racialized women, women living with disabilities, and LGBTQ2+ communities and their access to support services and resources.(1) The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened and exacerbated inequality by further reducing access to services, increasing the prevalence of violence, and exacerbating inequities.(9)

This policy scan focuses on **newcomer populations** including immigrant, refugee and non-status communities. In many cases, newcomer individuals experience unique barriers including, but not limited to the following:

- Immigration status can have a significant impact on the outcomes of GBV
- Limited knowledge of Canadian policies and laws, and fear of deportation.(10)
- Increased isolation.(10)
- Language barriers and lack of culturally appropriate services.(11)
- Unresolved pre-migration trauma and post-migration strain and stigma can exacerbate distress and complicate the healing process.(10)
- Discrimination and racism within the service delivery system can further hinder the ability to seek help and support.(10)

To respond in an informative and effective way, understanding GBV experiences among newcomer communities must be addressed. The barriers mentioned above emphasize the need to include newcomer perspectives at all levels of addressing GBV. This policy scan will demonstrate how newcomer experiences have been overlooked in Canadian GBV policies and outline steps to take moving forward.

POLICY ISSUE

Research has shown that government data often fails to adequately capture the experiences of newcomer populations, resulting in their social issues, including GBV, being less visible in public and political spaces.(12)

To improve the outcome of newcomer communities, it is crucial to identify and examine Canadian policies & initiatives that address GBV with a focus on newcomers.

The objective of this policy scan is to increase awareness of the current policy landscape, reveal potential implications, and suggest recommendations to address this topic at a higher-level. By advocating for change, Canada can work towards effectively meeting the needs of newcomers.

Methodology

This policy scan was conducted at Access Alliance Research and Evaluation Department in May 2023 in collaboration with the University of Toronto's Public Good Initiative (PGI) Team of consultants between November 2022 - March 2023. This scan examines extensive secondary data from government websites, policies, legislation, community organizations, and media coverage. The Government of Canada, Government of Ontario, and City of Toronto's websites were used as a primary source of obtaining official public initiatives.

The inclusion criteria captured policies from 2010-2023 and included plans, mandates, legislation, frameworks, policies, strategies, and initiatives. These addressed newcomers or GBV in a related capacity. Exclusion criteria included campaigns, committees, programs, services, and projects. Not because they are not impactful, but to prioritize evaluating broader policy-level actions using other materials instead.

Given the positionality with Access Alliance, this scan investigates the level of newcomer inclusion, including "none", "limited" (i.e., mentioned 1-2 times or only in a statement of higher risk), and "integrated" (i.e., incorporated throughout the document or explicitly addressed) across the federal, provincial, and municipal level in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. See "Implications: Policy and Advocacy" section [click here](#)

Recommendations were drawn from this analysis of the policy landscape and supported by peer-reviewed literature, and the previously mentioned recommendation reports.

KEY POLICIES & INITIATIVES REVIEWED

Gender-based violence policy and initiatives were reviewed at a federal, provincial, and municipal level to understand and evaluate the integration of newcomer perspectives. An infographic was created for accessible visualization of this scan [click here](#).

Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth Mandate Letter (2021). This mandate letter outlines commitments to an intersectional lens and gender-based analysis of public policies and approaches, including the 10-year National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence.(13) Apart from being included as an equality-seeking group that should continue to secure government funding, there is no explicit mention of newcomers.(13)

Minister of Public Safety Mandate Letter (2021). The Canadian government enlisted several public safety priorities, including enacting Clare's Law.(14) This means that individuals who are at risk of domestic violence can request information from the police, including the RCMP, about their partner's violent history.(14) Newcomers were mentioned once within an acknowledgement that is used in multiple mandate letters to address systemic inequities faced by newcomers and other marginalized groups.(14) Further recognition of varying circumstances and barriers was not included.

Government of Canada - It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence (2017-2023). The *It's Time: Canada's Strategy* represents a government-wide approach that encompasses all federal initiatives aimed at preventing and addressing GBV.(15) The Strategy acknowledges the importance of addressing gaps in support for diverse, underserved, and often marginalized populations, including immigrant and refugee women.(15) Although there is an expressed need to fund programs for these populations, newcomers and their unique considerations and lived experiences are not explicitly mentioned or integrated throughout the pillars or Strategy.

Government of Canada - National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence (2022). The *National Action Plan*, assigned under the aforementioned mandate letter and federal strategy, provides concrete steps that can be taken as a part of a 10 year plan to end GBV in Canada.(16) This includes outlining challenges, opportunities for growth, and action items to support key GBV areas. While the plan expresses the need to address different groups of women and gender minorities, many of these experiences are grouped together with no direct integration of newcomer perspectives or their unique barriers throughout the plan.(16)

Gender-Based Violence Settlement Sector Strategy (2019). With funding from the federal department of IRCC, this strategy was created in collaboration with four organizations from the anti-violence and settlement sectors.(17) The report outlines activities and recommendations to be applied at the local level within five strategic priorities that aim to address GBV for immigrants and refugees.(17) This functions as a highly focused plan to improve cross-sectoral engagement for GBV and newcomers.

Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada 2022-23 Departmental Plan. WAGE outlined their plan to advance equitable outcomes for women, girls, and people of all genders in 2022-2023.(18) There is one mention of GBV in newcomer populations. The impacts of COVID-19 in revealing system gaps, exacerbating existing inequalities, and creating a compounded effect for underrepresented groups of women, including newcomers, are acknowledged.(18) This is addressed through continued funding that supports various projects for underrepresented women.

FEDERAL

KEY POLICIES & INITIATIVES REVIEWED

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Implementation of Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2022). The IRCC released an implementation plan for the 2017-2022 National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in which they are responsible for the support of women and girls in Canada's immigration system.(19) To demonstrate their commitment to accountability, the IRCC detailed comprehensive activities and indicators for each performance objective. This plan aims to address GBV within newcomer communities through tailored services and maintaining high priority within the Refugee Resettlement Program and Settlement Program.(19)

Gender-Based Violence Research Initiative (2022-2023). This initiative is a collaboration between Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).(20) The joint initiative funds research projects that address GBV to advance knowledge in the Canadian context.(20) Within the context section, newcomers are identified as more likely to experience gender-based violence or face increased barriers in accessing justice and services.(20) Apart from the context section, the newcomer experience was not specifically addressed or integrated.

Government of Canada - Racialized Women Pilot (2021). To support racialized newcomer women in career progression and finding meaningful work in Canada, the IRCC's *Racialized Newcomer Women Pilot* promotes tailored employment-related settlement services such as work placements, mentorships and job counselling.(21) By integrating employment and settlement services, the IRCC Minister aims to ensure gender equality across sectors including specific support for newcomers within the prevention and elimination of gender-based violence.(22)

National Framework for Collaborative Police Action on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (2016). This national framework, published in 2016 by the University of New Brunswick, was endorsed by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) and was "rolled out across Canada as a guide to police leaders and community stakeholders to better inform agency policy development".(23) The focus was on trauma-informed responses, collaborative relationships between police and community partners, and included two mentions of the newcomer population.(23) This inclusion is limited because it acknowledges the unique circumstances but does not integrate newcomers throughout the different sections or offer tailored suggestions to address these barriers.

Canadian Framework for Collaborative Police Response on Sexual Violence (2019). Although initially developed as a guide for police services in the provincial jurisdiction of Ontario, the CACP supported this as a national framework for each police service in Canada to implement and tailor to their legislative context.(24) These guidelines advocate for evidence-based trauma informed investigations and improving support for victims/survivors of sexual violence.(25) Immigrants and refugees are identified as a vulnerable population but there is no recognition of the unique circumstances or any related actions that address the barriers faced by this group.(25) There is less inclusion of the newcomer population within this more recent framework for the policy response in Canada.

KEY POLICIES & INITIATIVES REVIEWED

It's Never Okay: Ontario's Gender-Based Violence Strategy (2018). Ontario's strategy was launched in 2018 and built upon previous provincial initiatives that have been implemented to end GBV, including the 2015 It's Never Okay Action Plan.⁽²⁶⁾ The strategy provides \$242 million to support the government's commitment in improving services, early intervention, and other areas related to GBV.⁽²⁶⁾ Although the government acknowledges that certain groups are more at risk to GBV, the inclusion of newcomers is limited and does not address the unique barriers and experiences of this population.

It's Never Okay: An Action Plan to Stop Sexual Violence and Harassment (2015). Announced in 2015, Ontario's action plan detailed the government's commitment to addressing sexual violence and harassment with a wide range of actions including recommended programs, legislation, resources, reports, funding, advocacy, and more.⁽²⁷⁾ In the context of enhancing public awareness, newcomers are included in the efforts to reach out to diverse groups of Ontarians through public education.⁽²⁷⁾ However, newcomer inclusion is limited as other potential barriers, accessibility considerations, or varying experiences within sexual violence are not incorporated throughout the plan.

The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) Initiative to End Gender-Based Violence (ongoing). The OCASI initiative focuses on GBV prevention and survivor support within newcomer communities.⁽²⁸⁾ In addition to engaging in policy work, advocacy and research, the initiative offers resources, education, and guidance to the immigrant and refugee-serving sector and the wider community.⁽²⁸⁾ Partnership projects like the federal-level GBV Settlement Strategy and National Action Plan are also part of the initiative's effort to comprehensively integrate newcomers in addressing GBV.⁽²⁸⁾

Legal Aid Services Act - Legal Aid Ontario's Domestic Violence Strategy (2019). Under the *Legal Aid Services Act*, Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) is the agency mandated to administer the province's legal aid program.⁽²⁹⁾ This includes a provision to provide services to support people experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence. In alignment with this, LAO published a *Domestic Violence Strategy* that included a three-year action plan for developing and implementing services and programs.⁽²⁹⁾ The plan incorporates newcomers and acknowledges their distinct barriers and experiences throughout, integrating them into the suggested actions and recommendations.

Ontario Employment Standards Act - Domestic or Sexual Violence Leave (2017). Ontario's *Employment Standards Act* includes a policy on domestic or sexual violence leave, which offers job protection and partial paid leave of absence for specific purposes (such as accessing services, medical attention, counselling, etc.).⁽³⁰⁾ The policy outlines specific eligibility criteria, length of leave, pay entitlement, and other guidelines. It does not address the diverse experiences of GBV, including newcomer perspectives, and lacks strategies to mitigate potential barriers and challenges faced by those seeking support.

PROVINCIAL

KEY POLICIES & INITIATIVES REVIEWED

Toronto Public Health - Action on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) against Women (2016-2019). In 2016, this proposed plan from the Medical Officer of Health was endorsed by the Board of Health to be implemented municipally.(31) Developed by Toronto Public Health (TPH), this effort aims to enhance TPH capacity for prevention, early identification, and response to IPV.(32) Newcomer populations were highlighted throughout the report with strong attention to the experiences of immigrant women and integration of tailored actions across the goals and recommendations.(32)

City of Toronto - Sanctuary City Policy - "Access to City Services for Undocumented Torontonians (Access T.O.)" (2013). Created in 2013 and reaffirmed in 2017, Toronto has been deemed "Access T.O." by the City Council and was Canada's first sanctuary city.(33-35) The primary objective of the Sanctuary City Policy is to ensure equitable access to municipal and police services for all residents, regardless of their immigration status.(34) This is connected to GBV through its impact on accessing vital services, such as health care, law enforcement, and education, which are integral to addressing GBV. However, recent research, reports, and interviews, indicate that the policy has fallen short in fulfilling its commitment to access.(35-36) Various implementation barriers, inadequate funding and mandates, as well as lack of training, service integration, demographic data, community engagement, and capacity-building have contributed to these shortcomings.(36)

City of Toronto - Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence Policy (2013). This policy was created under Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act to protect employees within City of Toronto workplace.(37) This applies to all city divisions and employees and outlines responsibilities of the city, manager/supervisors, and employees in regard to confidentiality, prevention, reporting, and support for those experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence.(37) The policy provides broad, general guidelines and does not include potential barriers, accessibility considerations, varying experiences, or any diverse groups like the newcomer populations.(37)

Toronto District School Board - Gender Based Violence Policy (2010). In 2010, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) officially produced and adopted a GBV policy framework for staff, students, and families.(38) This framework demonstrates the TDSB's commitment to eliminating gender-based violence in its schools and outlines definitions, reporting policies, investigation protocols, staff training requirements, prevention strategies, student engagement, and evaluation measures.(38) However, the mandate does not mention ethnically diverse and newcomer groups, potential barriers, or specific challenges in their mandate.(38)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the information collected, the following recommendations are aimed at the provincial and federal level to increase newcomer perspectives within the landscape of gender-based violence (GBV) policies and initiatives. Supported by existing recommendation reports (REF), they represent priority areas for advocacy and policy changes to effectively address GBV among newcomers in Canada.

1 Increase integration of newcomer perspectives with greater insight and informed information within existing and prospective GBV policies.

- Include specific information on the impact of gender-based violence among newcomer individuals and communities including, but not limited to:
 1. Unique barriers newcomers encounter
 2. Spotlight lived experiences of newcomers
 3. Highlight culturally tailored support services and resources
 4. Share successful and effective responses for newcomer individuals and communities to prevent and address GBV
- Collect data to provide greater evidence to articulate the impacts of policies that are addressing or not addressing newcomers and intersectionality of identities in related to GBV.
- Implement a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the progress, outcomes, and impact of GBV policies and initiatives.
 - Include key performance indicators and data collection mechanisms that are publicly accessible and feasible for the organizations that are accessible to newcomer populations.

Timeline: The integration of greater newcomer perspectives is an ongoing process that parallels the timeline of the upcoming GBV policies. Provincially, improvements can be implemented once the current GBV plan ends in 2023.

2 Gain greater understanding of how other policies and legislation impact newcomers experiencing and/or survivors of GBV by adopting a social determinants of health lens.

- Examine the connections between immigration and GBV legislation to inform how they can compliment each other to best serve newcomers experiencing or are survivors of GBV.
 - *Refer to recommendation #11 (6)*
- Adopt a Social Determinants of Health lens as a foundational framework in the evaluation of policies that impact GBV across sectors such as healthcare, housing, employment, and law etc.
 - *Refer to recommendation #2.G (5)*
 - *Refer to recommendation #3 and #4 (7)*
 - Notable legislation include the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* and *National Housing Strategy Act* at the federal level, as well as the *Legal Aid Services Act*, *Ontario Works Act*, *Employment Standards Act*, *Residential Tenancies Act*, and *Housing Services Act* at the provincial level.
- Incorporate mechanisms for ongoing feedback and evaluation to ensure Canadian legislation that impact newcomer populations are responding to the evolving needs and concerns of the target population
 - *Refer to recommendation #4.L (5)*

Timeline: Ongoing research, involvement in working groups, policy discussions, and knowledge exchange are essential in adopting a social determinants of health lens to understand the impacts on GBV policy implications. Policies impact people, collecting knowledge at each level of society will allow for greater insight on the topic. Look out for “policy windows” to drive influence!

RECOMMENDATIONS

3 Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration to address the complex challenges faced by newcomers.

- Foster consistent and reliable inter-organizational connections between organizations that work alongside newcomers (i.e., healthcare services, settlement services, law services, etc.)
 - Establish comprehensive referral pathways
 - *Refer to recommendation #1.B (5)*
 - Promote knowledge exchange initiatives that include sectors external from settlement and domestic violence sectors
 - Leverage the diverse strengths of each organization to provide holistic support that addresses the multifaceted needs of newcomers
 - *Refer to recommendation #3.H and #3. (5)*
- Evaluate and implement organizational policies, standards and other accountability strategies for training, knowledge- and skill-building initiatives that support service providers to address gender-based violence, with a specific focus on newcomers.
 - *Refer to recommendations #1.3 & 8.2 (7)*
 - *Refer to recommendation #1.B (5)*
- Co-create solutions with newcomers who are experiencing and/or survivors of GBV to inform organizational and policy change on varying capacities.
 - *Refer to recommendation #1.B, #1.C, and #4.L (5)*

Timeline: Ongoing establishment of partnerships, collaboration, and support involves developing short and long-term goals. Deadlines are to be determined by organizational capacity and with community members.

The policy scan showcases the value and need to integrate newcomer perspectives at the municipal, provincial, and federal level within gender-based violence advocacy and policy work in Canada. Understanding newcomers unique needs will increase investment in support services and resources and policies that effectively benefit individuals and communities to prevent and address GBV.

Recommendations are suggested actions or examples that newcomer perspectives can be highlighted at a provincial and federal level. By addressing the intersectional complexity of GBV and advocating for change, Canada can better meet the needs of newcomer communities to address gender-based violence.

Question or Inquiry? Contact us:
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