



He Used My Status Against Me: Immigration-Related Abuse Tactics and Help-Seeking Barriers Among Immigrant Women Experiencing IPV in Canada

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of immigration status as a weapon in intimate partner violence (IPV) and its contribution to creating unique barriers for seeking assistance among immigrant women in Canada. Using a qualitative descriptive and trauma-informed approach, this paper analyzes the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with immigrant women who identified themselves as victims of IPV following their relocation to Canada. This research shows that immigration status is not just a factor contributing to vulnerability but is actively weaponized by perpetrators in their effort to coerce victims into compliance. Specifically, immigration status is employed as a coercive control tactic through threats of deportation, revocation of sponsorship, document seizure, and misinformation regarding legal rights. In addition, the abuse is compounded by several barriers inherent to the Canadian system, such as concerns over child welfare involvement, linguistic limitations, economic dependency, and institutional distrust. Placing the study findings in the context of coercive control theory, this paper shows how immigration-based insecurity can affect the balance of power between parties and help-seeking patterns. Structural disconnects are additionally highlighted among the three sectors violence against women, settlement, and immigration. It is through this research that policies can be improved to provide a cross-sectorial, legal approach that ensures that the link between immigration status and dependency on spouse is broken.

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Keywords

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV); Immigration Status; Coercive Control; Immigrant Women; Help-Seeking Barriers; Canada; Sponsorship; Structural Vulnerability

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1. Introduction

Paragraph 1: The IPV in Canada and Immigrant Women as a High-Risk Group.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been a long-standing and serious public health and social concern in Canada with women experiencing it in a wide range of socio-demographic groups but disproportionately affecting those who experience structural vulnerability. According to the national data, it is estimated that about 44% of the women in Canada have experienced some type of IPV in their lifetime, and the prevalence rates differ by their social location and migration status (Statistics Canada, 2022). The immigrant women, especially those who have come in the last ten years, are becoming a high-risk group because of the interconnected issues related to legal status, economic dependence and social isolation. According to recent trends in immigration, Canada has been welcoming high figures of newcomers every year, with women making up a significant percentage of the newcomers under family reunification and spousal sponsorship programs (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2023). Although immigration pathways are meant to facilitate integration and family stability, they can unintentionally generate circumstances that contribute to increased vulnerability to abuse when the legal status is conditional upon a partner. These dynamics highlight the importance of considering IPV not only as a problem of interpersonal but also one that is influenced by larger immigration and policy frameworks.

Paragraph 2: What We Know vs What We Don't Know.

The current literature has confirmed that the issue of immigration status is critical in determining vulnerability to IPV and access to support services. Research has demonstrated that immigrant women can experience restrictions in the form of language barriers, ignorance in their rights, cultural stigma, and fear of approaching formal institutions (Guruge & Humphreys, 2009; Menjivar and Salcido, 2002). Other structural drivers such as sponsorship, conditional residency (in the past) and changing immigration policies have been associated in the Canadian context to dependency dynamics, which can predispose to abuse. What is, however, not well comprehended is how the status of immigration is actively employed in abusive relationships as a form of control. Although the most recent policy debates in 2020 have focused on the safety of vulnerable migrants and violence survivors, the empirical data gathered in Canada have not yet revealed the systematic manipulations of abusers, who use immigration systems, legal knowledge, and bureaucratic procedures to abuse people day in, day out. Moreover, how these dynamics specifically contribute to help-seeking behaviors such as delays, avoidance or selective use of the services has not been fully studied in Canadian literature.

Paragraph 3: Aim of the study and Theoretical positioning.

This research fills this gap through the discussion of the role of immigration status as a source of abuse and the establishment of distinct, reinforcing obstacles to service access among immigrant women with IPV in Canada. The study based on the theory of coercive control frames the notion of abuse as a strategy of domination, which is patterned and involves legal, economic, and psychological aspects (Stark, 2007). In this context, immigration status becomes a site of important control, where abuse perpetrators utilize sponsorship systems, threaten deportation, deny or misuse documents, and manipulate legal knowledge to

uphold authority. Through foregrounding lived experiences, this study will change the analytical lens of static vulnerability to active processes of coercion by illustrating how immigration-related precarity is weaponized both structurally, and in ways that are deeply personal. The emphasis on help-seeking also enables to look into how these abuse strategies are converted into limited decision-making, risk assessments and survival strategies.

Paragraph 4: Why This Study Matters (Bridging Sectors)

This research is important because it seals some of the most critical gaps that cut across sectors that in many cases operate in silo, such as violence against women (VAW) services, settlement programs, and immigration programs. Practically, these sectors often deal with various areas of the experience of immigrant women without considering its intersection in full. An illustration of this is that VAW service can focus on safety planning without much understanding of the immigration impacts, whereas settlement service may focus on integration without much understanding of the dynamics of coercive control. Likewise, immigration procedures can be ineffective in taking into consideration the realities of abuse inherent in sponsorship ties. This disunity may lead to uneven or partial assistance, and women may have to deal with complicated systems with little to no guidance. This study aids a more integrated and cross-sectoral approach to IPV, by focusing on the voices of immigrant women and how their status as immigrants is employed to victimize them. It concludes by asserting that the success of responses should be legally informed and structurally aligned by noting that immigration status is not peripheral but central to the experience of abuse and help-seeking in this context.

This article is informed by the empirical findings and thematic analysis presented in the underlying research thesis. In particular, it draws directly on the identified themes relating to immigration-related abuse tactics and systemic barriers to help-seeking, ensuring that the discussion remains grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than purely theoretical interpretation.

2. Methods

Design

The present research used a qualitative descriptive study as it was based on a trauma-informed approach in understanding how immigration status is weaponized in intimate partner violence (IPV) and how it inflicts on help-seeking among immigrant women in Canada. To focus more on the lived experiences of the participants and produce findings that are as close to the words and meanings of the participants as possible, a qualitative descriptive methodology was chosen instead of the highly abstract theoretical interpretation. This method is especially suitable when the research is aimed at informing policy and practice because the generated findings are accessible, and can be easily applied to the context of the services. All research steps, such as recruitment, data collection, and analysis were informed by the trauma-informed framework. It included the identification of the possibility of re-traumatization, the focus on the safety of the participants and their control, and the facilitation of the interviews in the way that would not violate emotional boundaries and individual pacing. Since IPV and immigration-related precarity are sensitive issues, the research would be carried out in a manner that would cause the minimum amount of harm and allow the participants to open up about their experiences in a comfortable and ethically sound setting.

Sample

A purposive sample of 10 immigrant women living in Ontario, Canada, was included in the study. The respondents were recruited in shelters and settlement agencies, which are important access points of women who are victims of IPV. The recruitment materials were shared in association with partner organizations, and the interested were screened according to the inclusion criteria.

In order to participate, people were required to:

- (1) be 18 years of age or older,
- (2) self-identify as having been a victim of IPV,
- (3) is an immigrant to Canada, which means that he or she was born outside of the country.
- (4) are recent immigrants to Canada in the last 10 years.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for participants were carefully defined to ensure that the study captured relevant and context-specific experiences. Participants included immigrant women who had experienced any form of abuse in Canada and were willing and available to participate in the study. In addition, participants were required to have resided in Canada for more than one year, allowing for sufficient exposure to the social, legal, and institutional context within which abuse and help-seeking behaviors occur.

Furthermore, participants had accessed mainstream social work support services within their communities, ensuring that their experiences reflected interactions with formal service systems. In addition to immigrant women, social workers were also considered within the broader study context, particularly those with more than two years of experience supporting abused immigrant women. This ensured that both lived experiences and professional perspectives informed the study.

Non-immigrant women were excluded to keep the analytical focus about the dynamics related to immigration, and participants were restricted to one woman per the country of origin to have diversity of views but not to overrepresent any particular national situation.

The last sample was a representation of a wide variety of immigration routes with women who came in as spousal sponsor, family reunification and other immigration programs. This heterogeneity helped the study to gain variations in the experiences of immigration status and its exploitation in abusive relationships.

These criteria ensured that participants had relevant experiences aligned with the objectives of the study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a two-year period to collect the data. The semi-structured format facilitated consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues most relevant to their experiences. The interview questions addressed key areas such as experiences of IPV, the role of immigration status in abusive relationships, interactions with formal and informal support systems, and barriers to seeking help. Interviews were conducted in secure and private settings, either face-to-face or via secure virtual platforms, based on participants' preferences and safety considerations. Interpreters were engaged where necessary to support participants with limited English proficiency. Participants received a small honorarium in appreciation of their time and contributions. Safety protocols included pre-interview risk assessments, the use of neutral communication techniques, and ensuring that

participation did not compromise the safety of participants. Participants were also provided with information on support resources, including IPV services and legal assistance.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data in accordance with the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability in identifying patterns within qualitative data while remaining grounded in participants' accounts.

The analysis was conducted in six phases:

- (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts,
- (2) generation of initial codes capturing significant features of the data,
- (3) grouping related codes to identify potential themes,
- (4) reviewing and refining themes in relation to the dataset,
- (5) defining and naming themes, and
- (6) producing the final analysis.

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to support the coding process, enabling systematic organization and retrieval of data segments. Particular attention was given to identifying instances where immigration status functioned as a mechanism of control, either explicitly or implicitly, and how participants described its influence on their help-seeking decisions.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the rigor and credibility of the findings. These included member checking, whereby participants were invited to review and confirm key interpretations of their accounts. An audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions and coding processes, ensuring transparency throughout the study. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted with fellow researchers to critically examine emerging themes and reduce potential researcher bias. Collectively, these measures strengthened the trustworthiness of the study and ensured that the findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks, and participants' rights including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty were clearly explained.

Given the sensitive nature of the research, additional safety measures were implemented. Interviews were conducted in secure and private settings to ensure confidentiality and minimize risk. All data were anonymized during transcription, and identifying details were removed to protect participants' identities. In reporting the findings, general regional identifiers were used instead of specific countries to further safeguard anonymity. Composite quotations were employed where necessary to prevent potential identification of participants while preserving the integrity of their experiences.

3. Results

The findings of this study, as presented in the underlying thesis, are organized into two major themes: (1) Immigration Status as a Weapon and (2) Systemic Barriers to Help-Seeking. These themes emerged from the thematic analysis of participants' narratives and reflect how immigration-related precarity is actively used as a mechanism of coercive control, shaping both experiences of abuse and patterns of help-seeking among immigrant women in Canada.

Theme 1: Immigration Status as a Weapon

Participants consistently described how their partners *used their immigration status against them*, transforming legal and bureaucratic processes into tools of domination. This theme captures the ways in which immigration-related precarity was weaponized within abusive relationships.

Subtheme 1.1: Threats of Sponsorship Withdrawal and Deportation

A central tactic involved threats to withdraw sponsorship or initiate deportation, particularly among women whose status was tied to their partner. These threats created a persistent climate of fear and uncertainty, often deterring women from seeking help or leaving the relationship.

Participants described how abusers leveraged their perceived control over immigration outcomes, regardless of the actual legal realities. The threat itself rather than its feasibility was sufficient to maintain compliance and silence.

- *“He always said, ‘I brought you here, I can send you back.’ I didn’t know if it was true, but I was too scared to take the risk.”*
- *“Anytime we argued, he would mention immigration. It was like a reminder that I had no power here.”*
- *“I stayed longer than I wanted because I thought if I left, I would lose everything—even my right to be in Canada.”*

Subtheme 1.2: Control of Documents and Passports

Many participants reported that their partners exercised control over critical documents, including passports, work permits, and immigration papers. This form of control restricted mobility, limited access to services, and reinforced dependency.

Document confiscation functioned as both a practical and symbolic form of power, signaling ownership and control over the participant's legal identity.

- *“He kept all my documents. I had to ask him if I needed anything. It made me feel like I didn’t exist on my own.”*
- *“Without my passport, I couldn’t even think about leaving. I felt trapped.”*
- *“He would hide my papers when he was angry, just to show me I couldn’t do anything without him.”*

Subtheme 1.3: “If You Leave, You’ll Lose the Kids and Get Sent Back”

Threats involving children were frequently intertwined with immigration-related abuse. Participants described how abusers combined fears of deportation with threats of losing custody, creating a compounded form of coercion.

These tactics intensified emotional distress and constrained decision-making, particularly for mothers who prioritized their children's safety and stability.

- *“He told me if I left, he would make sure I never see my children again and that I would be deported.”*
- *“I didn't know the law, so I believed him when he said I would lose my kids if I reported him.”*
- *“Everything was connected—immigration, my children, my future. I felt like I had no safe choice.”*

Theme 2: Systemic Barriers to Help-Seeking

Beyond interpersonal abuse, participants identified multiple systemic barriers that limited their ability to seek help. These barriers were often interconnected with immigration status, reinforcing isolation and dependency.

Subtheme 2.1: Fear of Child Welfare Involvement

Fear of child protection services emerged as a significant deterrent to help-seeking. Participants expressed concern that disclosing abuse could lead to scrutiny of their parenting or even removal of their children.

This fear was amplified by immigration-related insecurity, as participants worried that involvement with authorities could negatively affect their legal status.

- *“I wanted help, but I was afraid they would take my children. That fear stopped me from calling anyone.”*
- *“In my situation, everything felt risky. Even asking for help could bring more problems.”*
- *“I didn't trust the system. I thought they might say I'm not a good mother because of my situation.”*

Subtheme 2.2: Language Barriers and Lack of Knowledge of Rights/Services

Limited English proficiency and lack of awareness of available services further constrained help-seeking. Participants described difficulties understanding legal processes, accessing information, and communicating with service providers.

These barriers created reliance on abusive partners for interpretation and information, which could then be manipulated.

“I didn't know where to go or who to ask. Everything was confusing.”

“He was the one explaining things to me, so I believed what he said about immigration.”

“Even when I wanted help, I didn't have the words to explain my situation.”

Subtheme 2.3: Financial Dependence Tied to Immigration Process

Financial dependence often linked to restrictions on employment or control over household resources emerged as another critical barrier. Participants described how their immigration status limited their economic autonomy, making it difficult to leave abusive situations.

In many cases, financial insecurity was directly tied to sponsorship arrangements or lack of independent work authorization.

- *“I couldn't work at that time, so I depended on him for everything.”*
- *“Leaving meant having nothing—no money, no place, no support.”*

- *“He controlled all the finances, and I had no way to survive on my own.”*

Subtheme 2.4: Distrust from Home-Country Experiences with Police

Past experiences with law enforcement in participants' countries of origin contributed to a broader distrust of authorities in Canada. This distrust was often carried over and reinforced by abusers who discouraged contact with police or formal institutions.

Participants described uncertainty about how systems function in Canada, leading to avoidance of services that could otherwise provide support.

- *“Where I come from, you don't go to the police for family issues. I didn't know it was different here.”*
- *“He told me the police would not help me and might even make things worse.”*
- *“I didn't trust anyone in authority because of my past experiences.”*

Summary of Results

Across both themes, the findings demonstrate that immigration status operates as a **central mechanism of coercive control**, shaping not only the forms of abuse experienced but also the pathways and barriers to help-seeking. The interaction between interpersonal tactics and systemic constraints creates a complex environment in which immigrant women must navigate risk, safety, and survival with limited and often unreliable information.

These findings provide the analytical foundation for the subsequent discussion, where the interaction between interpersonal abuse tactics and systemic constraints is further examined in relation to theory, practice, and policy implications.

4. Discussion

The discussion presented in this section is grounded in the empirical findings of the study, as outlined in the results section, and reflects the thematic patterns identified through the analysis of participants' lived experiences. Building directly on the identified themes, the findings illustrate how immigration status operates as a central mechanism of control within abusive relationships. Theoretically, the results are very much supportive of coercive control theory (Stark, 2007), which views IPV as a repeated cycle of domination, as opposed to single acts of violence. Immigration status in this paper becomes a very specific and context-dependent instrument in this pattern which contributes to the current knowledge of coercive control enlarging its definition to encompass legal and bureaucratic types of abuse. Although previous literature (especially in the United States) has recorded the presence of immigration-related threats in abusive relationships (e.g., Raj and Silverman, 2002), the current study provides valuable Canadian-specific empirical data, showing the similarity of dynamics in Canadian immigration contexts. Results also address the gaps that are found in the literature and show that being an immigrant not only correlates with being vulnerable but is mobilized by abusers in such a way that would influence both lived experience and decisions. An important contribution of the study is its emphasis on the help-seeking barriers as a consequence of coercive control, but not as a separate and purely structural issue. It has been revealed that the barriers include fear of child welfare involvement, language limitations, financial dependence, distrust of authorities, etc. are not experienced in isolation, instead, they are reinforced and promoted within abusive relationships. Threats of child removal, as an illustration, were frequently combined with false information on the effects of immigration, forming compounded fears that deterred women to seek services. Equally,

the language barrier and the ignorance were not only structural constraints but actively manipulated by the abusers who minded placing themselves as the only source of information. This combined knowledge overturns the analytical perspective and shifts the barriers into the dynamics of abuse itself, rather than as a barrier to it. The results also impact greatly on practice in service sectors. The discontinuity among violence against women (VAW) services, settlement agencies and immigration systems became one of the key gaps that can unwillfully reproduce vulnerability. Experiences of the participants indicate that the service providers might not be well versed with the expertise necessary to resolve the intersection of IPV and immigration status. As an example, VAW services might provide safety planning and not consider the full impact of immigration, and settlement services might prioritize integration without noting evidence of coercive control. This alienation makes the responsibility of survivors to negotiate through complicated and even conflicting systems. In this respect, cross-sectoral training and collaboration are definitely in demand, as the practitioners should be provided with both trauma-informed and legally informed practice. The inclusion of immigration skills in IPV services and vice versa may greatly enhance the utility and accessibility of support.

The findings of this study further point to structural conditions at the policy level that enable the weaponization of immigration status. The dependence of sponsorship, the lack of knowledge about the rights of survivors under the law, and other obstacles to receiving independent status all help to create a climate in which abuse is perpetuated. Although the process of policy development in Canada has increasingly recognized the vulnerability of immigrant survivors, the results indicate that further interventions should focus to a greater degree. These involve empowering channels through which individuals can acquire or retain legal status regardless of abusive partners, enhancing access to information regarding rights in a straightforward and multilingual manner and ensuring that safeguards are effectively delivered and enforced. Critically, the policies should go beyond the reactive policies and focus on the structural causes of the dependency that render the immigration status vulnerable to manipulation. There are a number of limitations to be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Although it is suitable in conduct of a qualitative study, the sample of 10 participants restricts the extrapolation of the findings. The study is also geographically limited in Ontario, which might not be the most effective to represent differences in service provision and policy execution in other provinces. Further, the subjects were recruited via shelters and settlement agencies, which implies that the experiences of women who are entirely out of reach of any formal support systems might not be reflected. These limitations notwithstanding, the research offers a rich, contextualized information that is valuable to both the field of knowledge and practice.

5. Practical Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for social work practice, service delivery, and policy development. Drawing directly from the thematic analysis, it is evident that immigration status plays a central role in shaping both the experience of abuse and the ability of immigrant women to seek help.

First, there is a need for greater integration between violence against women (VAW) services, settlement agencies, and immigration systems. The findings demonstrate that fragmented service delivery can unintentionally reinforce vulnerability, as women are required to navigate multiple systems without coordinated support. Cross-sectoral collaboration and shared training frameworks are therefore essential to ensure that practitioners can respond effectively to the intersection of IPV and immigration-related issues.

Second, service providers must adopt more legally informed and trauma-informed approaches. The findings show that misinformation and lack of awareness about legal rights are frequently exploited by abusers. As such, improving access to accurate, multilingual legal information and ensuring that frontline workers are equipped with basic immigration knowledge can significantly enhance support for survivors.

Third, policy-level interventions are necessary to reduce structural dependency. The study highlights how sponsorship arrangements and immigration-related precarity create conditions that can be weaponized in abusive relationships. Policies should therefore focus on strengthening pathways for independent status, protecting survivors from immigration-related retaliation, and ensuring that legal safeguards are accessible and effectively implemented.

Finally, culturally responsive and accessible services must be prioritised. Language barriers, distrust of institutions, and previous experiences with authority figures all shape help-seeking behaviors. Service delivery models must therefore be designed to build trust, improve accessibility, and respond to the diverse needs of immigrant communities.

Overall, these recommendations emphasize the need for a coordinated, informed, and structurally responsive approach to addressing IPV among immigrant women in Canada.

6 Conclusion

This paper shows that immigration status is not a fringe aspect but a pivotal process by which coercive control is exercised as far as IPV is concerned among immigrant women in Canada. The findings upset traditional conceptions of vulnerability and point to the necessity of more structurally sensitive responses by demonstrating how abusers leverage immigration status against the women, as an instrument of fear, dependency, and misinformation. It is also found during the study that obstacles to help-seeking are not only external limitations but deep-rooted in the dynamics of abuse, which strengthens control processes and restricts the ways of safety. To resolve these concerns, a cross-sectoral response is necessary that would eliminate gaps between VAW services and settlement support and immigration systems. The policies and practices should address the intersectional realities of the experience of immigrant women and make sure that legal protection is available, comprehensible and fully operationalized. Finally, the problem of IPV among immigrant communities in Canada requires not only the interventions at the individual level but also the reforms of the system that reinforces the position of the weaponization of immigration status. This research is important because it places the voices of survivors central, leading to a more complex and practical way to comprehend IPV, and to respond to it in a trauma-informed, structurally based, manner.

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