

Understanding Gender-Based Violence and Citizenship in a Migration Context

A Review Article

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How do inequalities affect immigrant women's access to state legal protection from GBV through public services? What does this suggest about citizenship as practice? A recent paper, "Gender-Based Violence and Citizenship in a Migration Context", written by Evangelia Tastsoglou and Lori Wilkinson sheds light on the challenges faced by migrant and refugee women (MRW) in Canada who experience gender-based violence (GBV). Published as a book chapter in the edited collection, *Research Handbook on Intersectionality*.ⁱ Drawing upon the experiences of 48 key-informants,ⁱⁱ the article describes how these women face systemic barriers that make it harder for them to access essential services and legal protection. This increases their vulnerability and makes it more difficult for them to feel a sense of belonging in Canadian society. This work presents an in-depth feminist intersectional analysis of how GBV affects MRW and the ways in which their status in the country contributes to their struggles. It also highlights their resilience and efforts to overcome these barriers.

The authors argue that "incomplete/diminished citizenship" intensifies the vulnerability to GBV for MRW. Citizenship, in this study, is not just about having a passport or legal status; it is about social, economic, political, and psychological participation. Unfortunately, many MRW face exclusions at all levels, making them more vulnerable to GBV and less likely to seek help. The study adopts an intersectional approach, analyzing how different factors—such as gender, immigration status, race, and class—interact to shape the experiences of MRW.

One of the key findings is that the Canadian legal and social system often fails to protect MRW adequately. Many organizations that help victims of GBV struggle with a lack of funding and resources, making it hard for them to provide adequate support to migrant and refugee women. At the same time, many women hesitate to reach out to the police or social services because they fear deportation, losing their children, or facing discrimination.

An important factor is the lack of access to necessary information to assist them in recovering from and escaping GBV. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and unfamiliarity with Canadian systems make it even harder for them to navigate available resources. Some organizations do not provide interpretation services, leaving these women without the ability to communicate their needs effectively. In many cases, they do not even know that shelters exist or that they have rights in Canada, which prevents them from taking steps to protect themselves.

Immigration status plays a significant role in determining the level of protection MRW receive. Women who are in Canada on a temporary visa, awaiting refugee status, or without legal status are at a heightened risk. Many women in abusive relationships are afraid to leave because their spouse is their sponsor and has the power to withdraw sponsorship, potentially leading to deportation. Others face legal barriers that prevent them from accessing public services, such as healthcare, financial assistance, and housing.

MRW also face prejudices from service providers, law enforcement, and society in general. The study highlights that stereotypes about race and culture influence how these women are treated when they seek help. For example, some service providers may dismiss MRW's experiences due to preconceived notions about their cultural background, assuming that GBV is a "normal" part of their community. This kind of prejudice creates deep mistrust in authorities and discourages women from reporting abuse. Additionally, the legal system often favors white, middle-class, Canadian-born women as the "ideal victim." This means that MRW may not receive the same level of protection or assistance when they report violence. Discriminatory practices within the police force and legal system make it even harder for MRW to get justice.

Another major challenge is social isolation. Many MRW have left behind their families and support networks, making them more vulnerable to GBV. Perpetrators of domestic violence often use isolation as a control tactic, preventing women from learning the language, finding employment, or building new relationships. Digital isolation is also a concern, as some abusers control access to phones and the internet, preventing MRW from seeking help or staying in touch with loved ones.

Despite these challenges, MRW demonstrate resilience and agency in overcoming obstacles. Many women form informal networks of support within their communities, offering safe spaces and sharing information about resources. Some have even established organizations to raise awareness about GBV and also advocate for better policies. The study highlights several inspiring examples of women who have escaped abusive situations, pursued education, and created support systems for others facing similar challenges.

MRW also participate in citizenship "practices," meaning they actively engage in advocating for their rights and challenging the barriers they face. This challenges traditional notions of citizenship and highlights the importance of social justice movements in expanding rights for marginalized groups.

The paper emphasizes the need for systemic changes to improve protection for MRW. It calls for increased funding for shelters and support services, better training for law enforcement and service providers on cultural sensitivity, and policy reforms that prioritize the safety of all women, regardless of immigration status.

Although the MRW experiences of GBV are only accessed indirectly here, i.e. through the interviews of 48 key informants, we believe that the key informants' voices bring valuable insight. Key Informants know their clients well, they have high levels of professionalism and ethical commitment toward the MRW, and most often they have a deep understanding of the systemic factors at work preventing full MRW protection.. This research is a crucial step toward understanding and addressing the barriers faced by MRW in Canada. By recognizing the intersection of GBV and citizenship, we can work towards creating a more inclusive society where all women have the right to safety and security.

ⁱ E. Tastsoglou and L. Wilkinson, 2023. "Gender-Based Violence and Citizenship in a Migration Context", in Mary Romero, editor, *Research Handbook on Intersectionality*. Northampton, Mass: Edward Elgar Books, pp. 292-312.

<https://www.elgaronline.com/display/book/9781800378056/9781800378056.xml?rskey=jGKW8u&result=1>

ⁱⁱ Key Informants are defined in this study as individuals who are in direct or indirect contact with MRW survivors of GBV and thus they can speak from their professional knowledge and perception of protection from, as well as experience with, GBV of MRW in Canada.