

Research Brief: Holtmann, C., Tastsoglou, E., Dawson, M., & Wilkinson, L. (2023). "Surviving Gender-Based Violence: A Social Ecological Approach to Migrant and Refugee Women's Resilience." *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 55(3), 57-77.

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Canada is home to a large immigrant population, many of whom have endured significant challenges. Among them, many migrant and refugee women (MRW) face the harsh reality of gender-based violence (GBV). The recent article *Surviving Gender-Based Violence* (Holtmann et al., 2023) explores the experiences of professionals working to support MRW survivors of GBV, highlighting the remarkable resilience of survivors and the networks that support their recovery. The research draws on interviews with 43 professionals who provide essential services to MRW and implement public policies aimed at supporting them.

In the study, gender-based violence encompasses physical, psychological, financial, and sexual abuse. It also includes threats related to gender identity and sexual orientation. Rather than adopting an individualistic approach that views resilience as a personal trait, the study employs a social-ecological framework. This perspective defines resilience as a process that unfolds over time, involving interactions between individuals, agents, and institutions, thus creating a reflexive space for recovery. Diverse cultural backgrounds and community ties shape distinct pathways to resilience.

This comprehensive understanding aligns with international standards set by organizations such as the United Nations. For MRW, GBV is often exacerbated by systemic barriers, including language difficulties, economic disadvantages, and cultural misunderstandings. Research indicates that nearly 30 percent of immigrant and refugee women have experienced some form of intimate partner violence, underscoring the urgent need to address these issues.

The study presents a novel perspective on resilience, rejecting the notion that it is solely a personal attribute. Instead, it is conceptualized as a dynamic process shaped by interactions among individuals, communities, and institutional systems. Cultural background, social connections, services and service accessibility significantly influence how MRW confront challenges and build strength.

Professionals interviewed for the study emphasized the personal strength of MRW. These women rebuild their lives by overcoming trauma, pursuing education, and acquiring skills to meet their needs. They quickly form new social connections and adapt to their circumstances with notable resourcefulness. Although many professionals downplayed their own roles, they highlighted the agency and determination of the women they supported.

Safe spaces are a crucial component of resilience. These environments allow MRW to connect with others who share similar experiences, fostering trust and mutual understanding. However, many survivors do not view public service agencies as safe due to fears of retaliation within

their communities and do not trust that authorities will adequately respond to incidents of violence.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role by offering services such as language training, job readiness programs, and counseling. These services help MRW achieve financial independence and social support so that they are not completely dependent on an abusive partner. Language barriers often hinder access to resources and the ability to express needs, making the support of NGOs particularly critical. Public policies also play a key role in promoting resilience by protecting MRW affected by gender-based violence—another crucial factor in fostering recovery. For example, providing protection orders or not deporting MRW survivors who have become non-status can be important factors in promoting resilience.

The study identifies resilience as a multi-layered process operating at individual, relational, community, and societal levels. Individually, MRW demonstrate strength and adaptability. Relationally, resilience is nurtured through support networks of family, friends, and peers. At the community level, partnerships between NGOs and public institutions provide comprehensive care. Finally, at the societal level, intersectional and inclusive protective policies - that are MRW-sensitive and MRW-informed - create the structural conditions necessary for survivors to heal and thrive.

Resilience cannot be achieved in isolation. It requires a supportive environment in which individuals feel safe, become aware of their circumstances, learn about available resources, and access both public and private supports. The stories of MRW in Canada, as they emerge through the experiences and observations of professionals working with them, reflect their courage and determination and serve as a call to action. By implementing inclusive and compassionate systems, professionals providing public anti-violence services to migrant and refugee women GBV survivors and the broader society can ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to rebuild their lives and flourish.

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