



# Building Supports Project Phase 1 Final Report

Housing access for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence

May 2015

# Building Supports

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Building Supports project is a collaborative three-year community-based project co-led by BC Non-Profit Housing Association, BC Society of Transition Houses, and The FREDA Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children (School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University). The purpose of the project is to understand the barriers in accessing short- and long-term housing for immigrant and refugee women (IRW) leaving violent relationships, and to identify practices and policies that can facilitate the removal of barriers to safe, secure and affordable housing. This report summarizes the findings from the first phase of the project. The objective of the first phase of the three-year project was to understand the experiences of immigrant and refugee women attempting to secure safe, affordable and culturally appropriate housing after leaving domestic violence.

The project team recruited two Advisory Committees for the Building Supports project – the first comprised of local and provincial anti-violence agencies, multicultural services, housing providers, and provincial and federal ministries, and the second comprised of immigrant and refugee women with lived experiences.<sup>1</sup> In the first phase of the project, the Advisory Committees participated in the identification of research communities, advised the team on the research methodology and instruments, provided critical feedback on emerging research findings, and assisted with the direction of Phase 2 of the project.

The project is funded by Vancouver Foundation and the Representative for Children and Youth.

## BACKGROUND

Housing is a core human right and a critical resource to facilitate women’s ability to leave domestic violence and to re-establish health and wellbeing (Baker, Niolon & Oliphant, 2009; Paglione, 2006; Paterson, 2009; Rollins et al., 2012). Yet, immigrant and refugee women identify housing as one of the under-provided services required to leave an abusive relationship. Studies in Canada and other developed nations show that women face many barriers to accessing safe, affordable and culturally appropriate housing after leaving violence (Allagia et al., 2009; Baker et al., 2009; Barata & Stewart, 2010; Champion et al., 2009). Research reveals that immigrant and refugee women are especially vulnerable after leaving violent relationships due to a range of social factors, including poverty and racism. Sponsorship agreements, exploitation by landlords, the threat of child apprehension and the lack of culturally-specific services are additional layers that these women must negotiate in their attempts to access services while escaping violence.

It is important to note, from the outset, that violence against women does not occur more frequently in immigrant communities; however, “the experiences of immigrant women in domestic violence situations are often exacerbated by their specific position as immigrants, such as limited host-language skills, isolation from and contact with family and community, lack of access to dignified jobs, uncertain legal

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<sup>1</sup> The women with lived experiences who participated in the Advisory Committee unanimously chose to have a separate Advisory Committee at the project’s outset.

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statuses, and experiences with authorities in their origin countries” (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002, p. 898). Furthermore, violence experienced by immigrant women is often invisible or silenced (Hancock, 2007; Hyman et al, 2006). Cultural context and attitudes and legal status play an important role in immigrant women’s increased vulnerability to violence, experience of domestic violence, and access to supports and services, including housing (Abu-Ras, 2007; Galano, 2013; Keller & Brennan, 2007; Kim-Goa & Baello, 2008; Raj & Silverman, 2002; Thurston, 2013).

This review of the literature suggests that housing for immigrant women fleeing violence is significantly under-researched. However, despite the lack of research focused on the issue of housing for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence, there is an abundance of research on violence against immigrant women and services for immigrant women fleeing violence. Within this larger body of research, housing is often mentioned as a key factor in women’s ability to leave a violent relationship and one of the most under-provided services. Housing problems affect 25-50% of all women who have separated from abusive partners, and domestic violence is a significant risk factor for housing instability and homelessness at a time when women’s risk of violence is heightened (Baker, Cook & Norris, 2003; Baker, Niolon & Oliphant, 2009; Botein & Hetling, 2010; Pavao et al., 2007; Ponc & Jategaonkar, 2010). In part, this is due to the assumption that women should leave abusive partners and, therefore, leave their homes (Baker et al., 2003). Although temporary housing options exist, it may take several months or years for women to secure affordable housing. Limited short- and long-term housing options lead many women to consider staying with, or returning to, abusive partners (Galano et al., 2013; Melbin, Sullivan & Cain, 2003; Ponc et al., 2011).

Women leaving violence may access informal (e.g., family, friends) and/or formal (e.g., transitional housing, subsidized housing) housing supports (Baker, Niolon & Oliphant, 2009). Immigrant and refugee women often lack support networks that might be able to provide informal housing supports (Thurston et al., 2013). Transitional housing in BC includes *transition houses*, which provide temporary short- to long-term shelter (1-3 months) for women and children leaving violence; *second stage houses*, which offer affordable temporary housing (3-12 months) with built-in support and programming; *third stage houses*, which provide independent long-term housing (2-4 years) for women after leaving violence; and, *safe houses*, which are private homes that offer short-stay placements for women and their children fleeing violence in small rural communities. Currently, there are more than 100 transition houses, second stage and third stage houses, and safe homes in BC. Transition housing services are critical to women’s safety after leaving violence, yet the demand for these services exceeds the supply, and women are regularly turned away from transition and second stage housing services (Baker, Niolon & Oliphant, 2009; BC Society of Transition Houses, 2013). However, women from immigrant communities are underrepresented in transition houses, and the reasons are unclear. The findings from the Building Supports study help to shine a light on some of the factors that contribute to the low number of immigrant and refugee women who access transition houses; these factors will be explored in the *Key Themes* section of this report.

Social (i.e., subsidized/public) and market rental housing provide the bulk of housing options for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence. However, women face a multitude of barriers when accessing long-term housing. In particular, women face housing discrimination after leaving violence, with landlords admitting they would be hesitant about renting to women leaving domestic violence due to

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assumptions that the women would have difficulty paying rent or that their ex-partners would bring violence to the unit (Barata & Stewart, 2006; Ponice et al., 2011). Research has also revealed that women living in social housing experience high levels of violence and harassment (including harassment by former abusive partners), and a heightened fear of crime, which compounds the stress associated with leaving violence and living in poverty (Alvi, Schwartz, DeKeseredy, & Maume, 2001; DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, & Perry, 1999; Ponice & Jategaonkar, 2010). For immigrant and refugee women, research further suggests that gender and racial discrimination shape their experiences of seeking housing after leaving domestic violence, and that racial discrimination and harassment in social housing may serve to compromise immigrant women's safety (Anitha, 2011; Baker et al., 2010; Bowes, Dar & Sim, 2000). Paglione (2006) reminds us that "the universally accepted human right to housing specifically includes the right to live free from domestic violence; therefore, this right is blatantly violated when domestic violence occurs. The prevention and eradication of domestic violence should consequently start with the protection of women's right to adequate housing" (p. 120).

Access to short- and long-term housing is critical to the safety of immigrant and refugee women leaving relationship violence. Yet, accessing housing may be more difficult without the support of anti-violence and immigrant settlement services. For instance, Thurston and colleagues (2013) found that most of the immigrant and refugee women in their study secured housing over a 6-month period but "the majority found their housing through direct advocacy by service providers from women's shelters and immigrant-serving agencies" (p. 291). Advocacy included, in particular, guiding women through the process of searching for housing, writing letters of support for housing or income assistance, and accompanying women to appointments to view housing (Thurston et al., 2013). The authors noted that cultural competency, and working relationships with housing providers, greatly improved the success of anti-violence service providers in advocating for housing for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence.

It is important that services for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence be culturally relevant and women-centered (Hancock, 2006; Kasturirangan et al, 2004; Latta & Goodman, 2005; Tummala-Narra, 2007). Researchers and service providers must also recognize that immigrant and refugee groups are heterogeneous and that their needs are likely to vary widely based on multiple intersecting factors. In developing culturally relevant services, it is important to recognize the differences between *cultural awareness*, or the acknowledgement of cultural differences; *cultural sensitivity*, or respecting these differences; *cultural competency*, or working effectively with women from different cultures; and, *cultural safety*, or supporting cultural identity based on the needs of the individual and addressing power imbalances in the relationship between service providers and women seeking services (Baba, 2013). In the context of housing for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence, cultural safety requires an acknowledgment that housing access is not equitable.

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## METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The guiding question for Phase 1 of the Building Supports project was: What are the experiences of immigrant and refugee women in attempting to secure housing that is safe, affordable and culturally appropriate after leaving domestic violence?

Multiple methods were employed to answer the research question, including an online survey with transition house and multi-agency service providers, individual interviews with housing managers, and individual interviews and focus groups with immigrant and refugee women with lived experiences of violence. The findings are synthesized and presented in the *Key Themes* section of this report.

### SURVEY OF TRANSITION HOUSE AND MULTI-SERVICE AGENCIES

The survey of transition house and multi-service agencies was completed first so that survey findings could be used to inform the development of the individual interview and focus group interview guides.

The research team developed two online surveys – one for transition house agencies and one for immigrant-serving/multi-service agencies, at the suggestion of the Advisory Committee. The purpose of these surveys was to identify social and structural barriers to short- and long-term housing for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence. The online surveys were distributed through project partner networks and partner agencies to approximately 100 transition houses and 50 immigrant-serving/multi-service agencies across BC. In total, 89 individuals participated in the online surveys. Seventy-five individuals completed the Transition House agency (TH) survey, including staff from transition houses (more than 3/4 of respondents), second stage houses and safe houses. Fourteen individuals completed the Multi-Service agency (MS) survey, including staff from multi-service agencies, housing services, employment services, law reform/public legal education/litigation, multicultural Stopping the Violence Outreach programs and family violence services. The differing response rate between the two surveys is a limitation of the research and should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. The agencies of a majority of the respondents were located in the Lower Mainland, with notable representation from the North, the Interior and Vancouver Island for the TH survey. The regional distribution of responses for the TH survey reflects the distribution of transition houses in the province.

The research team carried out statistical and thematic analyses of the survey data. Findings from the survey analyses were summarized in an Interim Report that was shared with the Building Supports Advisory Committees, and visually represented in an infographic<sup>2</sup>, which has been shared publicly on the project partners' websites ([www.bcnpha.ca](http://www.bcnpha.ca), [www.bcsth.ca](http://www.bcsth.ca), [www.fredacentre.com](http://www.fredacentre.com)).

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<sup>2</sup> The infographic summarizing survey findings can be found at <http://www.bcsth.ca/content/building-supports>

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### INTERVIEWS WITH HOUSING MANAGERS

Individual interviews (n=15) with non-profit housing managers (n=9) and transition house managers (n=6) were conducted to understand tenant selection processes and housing managers' perspectives on the social and structural barriers to short- and long-term housing for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence. The research team was also interested in identifying ways that housing programs are reducing some of the barriers, such as policies and practices that support immigrant and refugee women to access safe, secure, and affordable housing.

Housing managers were invited to participate in interviews for the research through project partner networks and partnerships, with the aim to have representation from both rural and urban communities from the 5 regions of BC. Individual interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically to uncover overarching themes and key findings. Three project team members independently coded a subset of interviews and developed a detailed codebook to ensure inter-coder reliability.

### FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN WITH LIVED EXPERIENCES

Six focus groups were held with immigrant and refugee women with experiences of violence (n=39) in 4 communities across BC (Vancouver, Abbotsford, Penticton and Nanaimo). Three focus groups were conducted in English and, through the assistance of interpreters, focus groups were conducted in Mandarin, Arabic and Punjabi.

Five individual interviews (n=5) were conducted with women with lived experiences – four in English and one in Cambodian, with the assistance of an interpreter. Participants for both the focus groups and the interviews were recruited through project partner networks, as well as through engagement with multi-service agencies around the province. Focus groups were either naturally occurring (e.g. an existing women's group at a multi-cultural organization) or constructed with women who agreed to participate in a focus group at a particular day and time. Food was provided at the focus groups and women were offered a \$50 honorarium for their participation in both the focus groups and individual interviews.

Similar to the housing manager interviews, the project team hoped to have representation from all 5 regions of BC for the focus groups and individual interviews with immigrant and refugee women. However, despite extensive attempts, the researchers were unsuccessful in organizing a focus group or interview in northern BC. This was due primarily to staff at partner agencies in the North feeling under-resourced and unable to assist with participant engagement. In one community, researchers encountered the belief among service providers that violence against immigrant and refugee women was not an issue of concern in their community.

Audio recordings from the focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed. Translators were used to transcribe and translate the audio recordings in Punjabi, Mandarin, Arabic and Cambodian. All qualitative data, including transcripts from the focus groups and individual interviews, was coded inductively and subjected to a thematic analysis to uncover key themes. Similar to the housing manager interviews, three project team members independently coded a sample of the data and developed a



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detailed codebook to ensure inter-coder reliability. Participants were asked to complete a brief demographic survey prior to the focus group and/or interview. The quantitative data from the demographic surveys was subjected to statistical analysis. Demographic information from the survey was used to describe the sample and identify the characteristics of the participants. All research findings were shared with the Building Supports Advisory Committees for comments and feedback to ensure that the project team was accurately interpreting the findings.

### WORKSHOP

On February 17, 2015, key stakeholders were brought together in Vancouver for a one-day workshop and networking session where the Building Supports team provided an overview of the project activities to date and shared findings from the year one research phase. The project team was joined by 16 workshop participants, including members of the project Advisory Committees, and interested stakeholders representing local and provincial anti-violence agencies, multicultural services and housing providers, and provincial and federal ministries. Participants had an opportunity to ask questions and comment on the information presented. In the afternoon, participants were invited to provide input into the promising practice approaches and objectives for Phase 2 of the project through roundtable discussions. Their input has been incorporated into the *Solutions and Key Recommendations* section of this report.

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## DESCRIPTION OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Of the 44 women with lived experiences who participated in interviews and focus groups, 42 returned a completed demographic survey to the interviewer. Participants who completed the survey originated from 22 different countries, spoke 25 different languages, and had been in Canada for 1.5 to 36 years, with the average length of time in Canada being 11 years. As illustrated in the chart below, 36% of the participants were Canadian citizens, 43% were permanent residents, and 17% were government-assisted refugees. Ninety percent of the women participating in the research had children (average 2.2), ranging in age from 11 months to 50 years old. Seventy-four percent of the women had their children living with them. In terms of their housing status, 50% of the participants lived in market housing, 38% lived in social housing, 4% lived with family or friends, 4% lived with their partner or ex-partner, 2% lived in second stage housing, and 2% identified their living situation as “other”.

Description Of Sample		n	%
<b>Immigration Status</b>	Canadian citizen	15	36
	Permanent resident	18	43
	Government-assisted refugee	7	17
	Other/Unknown	2	4
<b>Parental Status</b>	Children (average of 2.2)	38	90
	Average age = 15 years (range = 11 months – 50 years)	31	74
	Children living with woman		
<b>Housing Status</b>	Second stage housing	1	2
	Social housing	16	38
	Market housing	21	50
	Family/friends	2	4
	Partner/Ex-partner	2	4
	Other	1	2

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## KEY THEMES

The research findings fell into five broad theme areas, each with several sub-themes. The key themes included: (1) barriers to safety, including the unique barriers immigrant and refugee women face in leaving violence; (2) barriers to housing – both transition and longer-term social and market housing – where discrimination featured prominently in the narratives; (3) policy barriers within transition and social housing, and more broadly at the provincial and federal level; (4) impacts, which included the health impacts of violence and insecure housing, and outcomes such as returning to abusers; and (5) solutions, where participants described what they considered to be best and promising practices, as well as gaps in funding, training, and policy that sustain the identified barriers to housing and safety for immigrant and refugee women.

BARRIERS TO SAFETY	BARRIERS TO HOUSING	POLICY BARRIERS	IMPACTS	SOLUTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Language and cultural barriers</li><li>• Shame and fear of disclosure</li><li>• Lack of familial support, financial security, and knowledge about available services</li><li>• Limited housing options and information</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discrimination</li><li>• Misconceptions about THs</li><li>• Communal living</li><li>• Waitlists &amp; size</li><li>• Tenant selection</li><li>• Inadequate income assistance</li><li>• Lack of support &amp; affordable housing</li><li>• Landlords</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Time limits in transition housing</li><li>• Income assistance policies</li><li>• Legal / immigration status</li><li>• Legal aid</li><li>• BC Housing policies</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Health &amp; wellbeing</li><li>• Risk of homelessness</li><li>• Return to abuser</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information, support, outreach, and accompaniment</li><li>• Staff diversity and training</li><li>• Organizational culture shift</li><li>• Review of policies &amp; practices</li><li>• Collaboration</li><li>• More funding and housing</li></ul>

## BARRIERS TO SAFETY

Focus group participants and housing managers identified a number of barriers to immigrant and refugee women achieving safety, including language and cultural barriers, shame and fear of disclosing experiences of violence, a lack of familial and community support, lack of knowledge about available services (including transition houses), lack of financial security, and limited housing options, which increased women's risk of homelessness after leaving violence.

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### [Language and cultural barriers]

Focus group participants and housing managers described how language barriers, compounded by the stress of being in an abusive relationship, impacted women's ability to find and access services and support, which in turn affected their ability to find safety for themselves and their children. *"With that kind of information, if it's only in English or if it's only in the computer or when you're fleeing domestic violence, you know, your head, you're in a flight fight-like response most of the time and it's hard to access all that kind of information."* (HM)<sup>3</sup>

One focus group participant reinforced this, highlighting that the quality of the interaction a woman has with a service provider plays a role in what a woman's trajectory will be.

*"If they come to you [service provider] and you don't guide them right they are out of luck, they don't know anything. Transportation, they don't drive, they can't communicate, housing, finance and then what happens to those children? Women are victimized and children become victimized."* (LE)

Housing managers noted the language barrier as something that can create challenges for both themselves and the women in search of housing, but indicated that language barriers would not impact on their decision to provide housing to an immigrant or refugee woman and her family.

While 62% of TH survey respondents said they provide written materials in languages other than English, listing French, Punjabi, Chinese, Mandarin, Japanese, Spanish, Tagalog, and Farsi as the languages in which written materials are most often available. Of note is the limited written translated information related to housing, with only 32.5% of TH survey respondents indicating that their agency provides such material. A majority of TH survey respondents' agencies provide or facilitate cultural competency training for their staff (typically in house), yet 66% noted that their agencies do not offer culture-specific programs. Survey respondents also noted that translating written materials is not enough to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee women accessing transition houses. Having staff that speak multiple languages, or working in partnership with translators who can be utilized when needed, were suggested as ways to better meet immigrant and refugee women's communication needs.

Immigrant and refugee women spoke about being isolated by their abusive partners, and how they lacked the English language skills to identify and access services and supports and also obtain employment that would provide them with the financial security to be able to leave their abusive partners. As one focus group participant noted:

*"But mostly people think, they think about like what are we going to do. Right, I know a lady she get beaten every time, she has two children, she doesn't leave her husband because she thinks*

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<sup>3</sup> Each quote is identified with an LE, signifying a quote from an immigrant or refugee woman with lived experience who participated in a focus group or individual interview; or HM, signifying a quote from a housing manager who participated in an individual interview.

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*she can't work outside, she doesn't know English. She don't know how to survive, so she can't take care of her children by herself." (LE)*

It is important to note that these language and cultural barriers flow through all of the barriers to housing that are discussed in this report and compound the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee women trying to leave abusive relationships.

### **[Shame and fear of disclosure]**

Shame and fear of disclosing experiences of violence, which are tied to cultural norms and expectations, were noted as significant barriers to safety and leaving. As one woman noted *"in my culture, like they're old thinking, you have to live with your husband no matter what."* (LE) Women described being isolated which contributed to not being aware of what supports and services were available to them or what they would encounter if they reached out for help.

*"No papers. [...] you don't have family, you don't have nothing. And the people that you go through with, the people that's supposed to help you is... you are afraid to tell people what's going on because you don't know that will be safe for you, so I wait for a long time." (LE)*

Women also described being concerned about what their family and community would think if they reached out for support, how disclosing their experiences of abuse would affect their own reputation or that of their family.

*"They think what will people will say that I did this, they're worried about what the community will say. If they leave and they going to say like, she's a bad woman..." (LE)*

Focus group participants also discussed feeling afraid to report to the authorities, in part because their families and friends may stop talking to them, *"When we call police, our relatives, our friends all stop talking to us; that all this happened to me."* (LE) Some women also did not trust those in positions of power, including police, even when they were promised confidentiality, because of their experiences in their home countries where they were lied to or persecuted by the authorities.

*"It is my own personal experience because I have lots of bad time and I never called the police because I am so scared, so everybody is asking, it is not good that you have called the police on your own husband." (LE)*

### **[Lack of familial and community support]**

The experiences and situations of the immigrant and refugee women who participated in the focus groups varied greatly. However, a majority of them described having a lack of family support in Canada or that the family they did have was not supportive of her leaving. As stated previously, women described cultural

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expectations that women stay with their husbands no matter what and that, because of this expectation, they are “*worried that their family is not going to support them*”(LE) if they make the decision to leave.

One woman noted that a lack of familial support meant having nowhere to go when attempting to leave the abusive relationship. She expressed feeling like a burden staying at someone’s house, though she pointed out that the transition house was somewhere where she didn’t feel like a burden.

*“They say why are you doing that, nobody would come to your help; stay where you are. But when I realized I didn’t have a place to stay – because there wouldn’t be even a relative who would take me in. And they would think that she would be a burden after coming to live in their house, and after listening to them talking I would stay where I was, right? And even if I went to somebody’s home I felt as if I were a burden on them, and I would come back to my house again. But when I went to the transition house I didn’t feel that I was a burden on somebody.” (LE)*

This lack of familial and community support can compound immigrant and refugee women’s isolation and feelings of being completely alone, without any help or anyone to advocate for them. Focus group participants discussed how this creates a great deal of stress and internal conflict, which affects their emotional wellbeing, particularly when weighing the implications of staying in the abusive relationship versus leaving.

### **[Lack of knowledge about available services]**

Immigrant and refugee women described not knowing about services and supports that may be available in their community, and if they did, that they may not have accessed those supports due to cultural norms and community expectations.

*“I was in a relationship waiting and living [in] hell because I didn’t know that we have all this kind of supports.” (LE)*

As previously stated, the majority of the women who participated in the focus groups had been quite isolated by their husbands and families and, as a result, they were unfamiliar with local systems and supports. Despite their education and capacity they felt in their home countries, women described feeling that “*As soon as you got out from the airport that’s it, you’re lost... you don’t know nothing.*”(LE) Women described the local systems as so different from those in their home countries, that one woman likened Canada to a different planet, “*When I came first time in Canada, I don’t know nobody. Different language. Different lawyer. Everything different. It’s the same as different planet for me.*” (LE)

Survey findings illustrated that half (50%) of the MS agency respondents said that the majority of the women who have accessed their agency for help are immigrant/refugee women experiencing violence. Yet, the majority (92%) of TH agency respondents said that less than one quarter of the women accessing transition houses are immigrant or refugee women. These findings suggest that although immigrant and refugee women are experiencing – and disclosing – relationship violence, few immigrant and refugee women are accessing transition houses, confirming what is already known.

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Housing managers spoke about the challenges in reaching immigrant and refugee women and the need for more outreach and linkages within cultural communities, and making information accessible in different languages and in various places (e.g. written, online, radio).

*“Some of the community based programs, immigrant women are more apt to access those just because it’s a little less frightening. In some cultures, coming out of your house and being away from your husband is just not appropriate, right? So there are reasons why our residential programs aren’t being accessed, certainly. I believe that to be true. But I don’t—I wouldn’t know how to combat it unless we actually get someone from those communities, you know, in the community working in the community making those referrals. And making it okay in their communities for people to access these programs.” (HM)*

### **[Lack of financial security]**

A lack of financial security was identified as a significant barrier to leaving violence for immigrant and refugee women. Women linked this lack of financial security to the experience of starting from scratch in a new country as well as starting out on their own after leaving the abusive relationship.

*“I live at my ex’s place, but it’s not because I like living there. It’s just because of financial reasons. Yeah, because, trust me it’s not easy to start life here from scratch. When I came, my expectations were quite different from reality. I thought I was coming to a land of milk and honey, but things turned out differently. Yeah, my husband was abusive and it wasn’t good.” (LE)*

There are multiple financial challenges that women face when leaving their abusive partners. Focus group participants discussed how language barriers and a lack of recognition of foreign credentials made securing a job very difficult and the frustration of having to take low level, minimum wage jobs despite being university professors, CEOs and doctors in their home countries.

*“You are nobody and nothing here, so what can I do? I can’t go to work to a McDonald’s? What kind of salary is that? How can... I don’t pay the... taxes, proper taxes, to benefit the government. So help us in a different way! Give us the skills we are coming with – she’s a doctor, I’m an engineer, I don’t know what are you... I am the CEO of my company in my country.” (LE)*

In addition to language barriers and lack of knowledge about available services and supports, immigrant and refugee women, particularly those sponsored by their partners and without permanent residency, face additional challenges in accessing income assistance.

One woman describes the outcome for many women when faced with financial hardship after leaving the abuse:

*“I went back to him because we are so helpless we go back to the husbands, we have no help, we have no choice, because we have no one to support us. So you take the children and this is the barriers that we have. They have access to the money, they have control and we have nothing.”*

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*So guess what? We succumb to that and we take our children and they become victims. So the effect is also on the children too.” (LE)*

### [Limited housing options]

The supply of affordable housing is limited in BC, which leaves immigrant and refugee women struggling to find housing, especially when they have children. One housing manager describes what she sees as the challenges for immigrant and refugee women to secure affordable and safe housing.

*“There is no low-cost housing, rents have gone up, income assistance has gone down. If you have a woman with children, she needs two bedrooms, she needs a three bedroom. We had a family here recently that had five children. We’re never going to find her somewhere to live. We worked like—my whole team was on it. So, you know, it’s just really difficult. There’s not a lot to go around and what is out there is terrible. Like it’s just, you know, slums— And frankly, in the middle of, you know a difficult part of town. You’re kind of putting them right back into the lion’s den in terms of the areas that they have to live in, which is very, very difficult, right? And there’s no incentive to get off of income assistance. You never make enough money to even sort of think about changing the situation because you’re always—constantly in survival mode, right?” (HM)*

Focus group participants talked about the risk of homelessness after leaving violence, and the poor conditions of the housing that is affordable. One woman describes the option that she had available to her and her children in her recent search for housing:

*“Yeah, so I don’t have a lot of options. I checked some [basement suites] out, like you said, but... It’s not in good condition. I have to suck it up. Yeah. Living in somebody’s basement, no good ventilation system. Black mold. It’s \$500, so what you are going to expect? What you’re gonna get is what you’re gonna get with the black mold. It’s like living in a jail room.” (LE)*

As such, all of the above factors, language and cultural barriers, shame and fear of disclosure, lack of familial and community support, lack of knowledge about available services, and lack of financial security, compound and contribute to a woman’s challenges in securing safe and affordable housing and ultimately in achieving safety and wellbeing for herself (and her children). Without the stability of safe, affordable, long-term housing women are constantly in survival mode, making it nearly impossible for them to find safety and move forward in their lives. The challenges that immigrant and refugee women face in securing housing will be discussed in greater detail in the *Barriers to Housing* section below.

### BARRIERS TO HOUSING

Participants identified a number of barriers to housing, including barriers specific to transition housing, social housing, and market housing. Barriers to each type of housing are discussed in detail below. These



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barriers were often compounded by discrimination on a number of grounds, which had a significant impact on women's ability to obtain housing, particularly more long-term market housing.

### [Discrimination]

Many immigrant and refugee women participants reported experiencing discrimination in their search for housing. They described racial and gender discrimination, particularly when interacting with landlords, and discrimination on the basis of poverty, particularly if they were unemployed and/or receiving income assistance. Women with children faced additional barriers to housing and were sometimes judged based on their children's behaviour when meeting with housing providers. Knowledge that a woman was leaving an abusive relationship could also impact her access to housing if housing managers feared that her abusive (ex-)partner may create a safety risk for them or other residents.

Half of the multi-service agency survey respondents reported that discrimination by landlords (e.g., related to race, gender, violence, having children) was a barrier to housing for immigrant and refugee women after leaving violence. Sixty-three percent of transition house staff identified discrimination as a barrier to housing after immigrant and refugee women moved on from transition housing, though only 14% identified discrimination as a barrier for immigrant and refugee women in accessing transition housing.

Housing managers described how various forms of discrimination intersect in the lives of immigrant and refugee women leaving violence and impact their access to long-term housing in significant ways:

*"Discrimination leaving an abusive relationship to begin with and now if you add on that she's an immigrant woman, a lot of landlords have a lot of stereotypes about immigrant women. A lot of landlords don't want to deal with somebody who doesn't speak English as a first language. A lot of landlords have judgments about different ways of parenting, about stereotypes about food smells, or—it's awful." (HM)*

*"There's definitely a barrier 'cause racism exists everywhere so it's an added challenge. So it—a) it's a challenge for all of our women because they typically are on income assistance, they are fleeing violence so there may be a violent person that everyone [thinks] is going to show up and do something terrible. And then you have on top of that, when you have immigrant women you're also dealing—you're dealing with, you know, the violence and the fact that they're poor—the poverty issue and the violence and then on top of that you're dealing with racism and prejudice and stereotypes, so yes." (HM)*

A woman with lived experience similarly described how discrimination related to race and poverty intersected in her interactions with landlords and impacted her access to market housing:

*"And I get discrimination a lot. It's true. Plenty discrimination. You phone them up, you want place... they have advertising for rent. 'Hello' and they want student, and when they have accent,*

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*they want somebody who working or student. They want cash. If they hear you're on welfare, they don't want you. And if you have an accent, they don't want you... A lot of racism.” (LE)*

Immigrant and refugee women may not have a rental history in Canada or be able to provide references to prospective landlords, particularly if they have lived with their abusive partners since arriving in Canada and their names are not included on housing documents. This creates further barriers to housing, a problem identified by several housing managers who participated in interviews:

*“If you don't come with a reference [...] it's really hard to get into even low-cost housing.” (HM)*

One housing manager described a program in Victoria, BC that provides education to prepare individuals to rent and obtain suitable housing, and noted that successful completion of such a program would improve an applicant's chances of being selected or approved for housing:

*“So there's different programs out, like the Ready to Rent program, and I know when somebody has no references, that's something we look for, that they've taken the Ready to Rent program, which goes over kind of what's expected from tenants, what landlords expect, how to be a good tenant, kind of your rights as a tenant, etc.” (HM)*

However, these programs are not widely available and it is unclear whether they are offered in multiple languages.

Further, some landlords do not want to rent to single mothers. One woman described her experience:

*“She told me, because she was with the children, then a lot of people refused to rent to children. When you are with children, many people cannot accept such tenants. When you have kids, they think you make a lot of noise, or, like single, single mom, many people said they won't accept.” (LE)*

The vast majority of immigrant and refugee women participants had children, and three quarters of the women had children living with them. As such, housing providers' and landlords' negative attitudes towards children, and concerns about noise and conflict with other residents, were significant issues.

One housing manager noted that concerns about children impacted tenant selection in social housing:

*“You've got children going up and down the stairs and banging and thumping, and banging and thumping, you know, it creates two unhappy neighbours. You know, and conflict can be involved, and that can be violent at times, and we've experienced that, so that's why we try to take the time at the front end to be really considerate of the fit and ask those questions [...] to determine, okay, you know, where are they gonna fit best.” (HM)*

In addition to concerns about children and families, housing managers expressed concerns about providing housing to women leaving abusive relationships because they feared that (ex-)partners may show up and cause problems for the women, other residents, or the housing managers themselves.

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*“[Agencies are] afraid of housing women who’ve experienced [violence] because they think the violent partner is gonna show up and burn their housing down or whatever they fear that person’s going to do.” (HM)*

*“Like say, you know, maybe someone is coming out of a domestic violence situation, but she goes back to the abusive relationship and how that will affect the other tenants possibly — so that’s, I think, in the minds of housing providers when they’re making selections possibly.” (HM)*

Information from housing managers and women with lived experiences illustrates how, despite immigrant and refugee women’s best efforts to obtain housing, they often face significant discrimination due to race, gender, and poverty; a lack of employment, rental history, references or relevant financial documents; or the fact that they have children or are leaving abusive relationships.

The research highlights the tension between housing providers’ role in creating community within housing developments, and understanding that community is not static. For housing providers, there is work to be done in continuously facilitating relationships between residents as new community members enter and others leave.

### **[Barriers to transition housing]**

Before beginning the project, the research team knew that immigrant and refugee women were not accessing transition housing in large numbers; however, the reasons for this were not well known. Findings from the online surveys, interviews, and focus groups shed light on the reasons immigrant and refugee women may not access transition houses after leaving violence. These reasons included a lack of awareness about transition housing, perceptions about the transition house environment, concerns about other women who access transition houses, and cultural differences in communal living.

Sixty-four percent of survey respondents from immigrant-serving/multi-service agencies reported that the immigrant and refugee women they serve have difficulty accessing transition housing in their communities. The reasons most often cited were cultural/religious barriers (100%), women not feeling comfortable (86%), language barriers (71%), and lack of cultural competency among transition house workers (71%).

Yet, findings from the interviews and focus groups revealed that immigrant and refugee women lack awareness about transition housing and other women-centered anti-violence support services in general. One woman explained that her lack of knowledge about available supports made leaving more difficult:

*“I had never been to a women’s centre. I was staying in a shelter. When the time was up, I rented a place outside. But they never told me that I could have accessed a women’s centre. So I was miserable when I fled, really.” (LE)*

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Immigrant and refugee women may come across information about transition housing services, by chance, but one woman reported that she did not learn about these services for several years.

*“For most of the new immigrants or immigrants, many people are not aware of this organization. I myself didn’t know at the beginning either. ‘Cause by accident, I came across the New Immigrants Handbook. There was an emergency shelter listed in there. Then I remembered it. But before, in the three years prior, during the previous three years, I wasn’t aware that there was such a place.” (LE)*

A lack of knowledge about transition house services is a significant barrier to women’s safety and, without information about transition housing options and support services, immigrant and refugee women may remain in abusive relationships.

Immigrant and refugee women who were aware of transition housing and had accessed these services reported positive experiences overall. They spoke about emotional support and counselling they had received, and the important role transition house staff played in building their confidence, interpreting when there were language barriers, ensuring they had access to clothing and culturally appropriate food, helping them navigate multiple systems (e.g., criminal justice, immigration, income assistance), and accompanying them to appointments. However, other participants who were aware of transition housing had differing perceptions about what transition houses were like, which added to their fears.

*“I think first thing is the language issue. Second is they don’t know how to access. Third they don’t know how the... like what is it like? They have no idea what’s transition house for? They don’t know we can get help from transition house. And they... we kind of scared, we don’t know what’s going on in there, what kind of like... how’s the life in there like? It’s like prison? It’s like black box. We don’t know what’s in there, so we kind of like terrified.” (LE)*

The physical environment of transition houses is an unknown for many immigrant and refugee women, and participants expressed concern that they would be sharing rooms with multiple individuals and families, for example:

*“As far as I’m concerned, I felt that when I first went there, since I didn’t know what the environment there was like before, I was worried that many people would be living in a room and it would cause a lot of inconveniences. I also didn’t know what the environment was like in there because, after all, for a new, that is, in a new environment, you need an adjustment, a period of adjustment; so I felt that I was very worried the first time because I didn’t know what kind of people were there; would they be complicated or what. Then I went, arrived. I felt that the people [there] were very warm.” (LE)*

Another concern that was often raised in the interviews and focus groups related to other women who accessed transition housing. Many participants were worried about living in a house with women who had mental health and substance use issues, a concern that was often expressed in terms of their children’s safety. One housing manager spoke about the difficulty in addressing these kinds of misconceptions in immigrant and refugee communities:

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*“She relayed to us that she’d heard in the community that the transition house was full of women who did drugs and women that were crazy and it wasn’t a safe place to bring your kids [...] so I don’t know how you counteract that kind of rumour thing, but I think that’s part of it.”*  
(HM)

This perception and concern is a challenge, particularly as transition houses in BC are now acknowledging the links between women’s experiences of violence and their mental health and/or use of substances, and as such reducing the barriers for women who may be using substances or have mental health impacts to access transition houses.

One immigrant woman expressed concerns about cleanliness, food, and other residents, and chose not to access transition housing because her children did not want to go there after hearing these rumours:

*“My daughter she got bad experience with her friend. Her friend, she’s Canadian, her mom last year went to transition house but she said bed bugs, the food it’s not enough, all people are weird there. So she said that to my daughter. So when I got on my case this year my daughter got frustrated, she got depressed she screamed ‘no way, I’m gonna kill myself if you take me there’. So I said ‘ok ok we sit here. No problem. We are not gonna move’.”* (LE)

Housing managers spoke about some of the challenges for immigrant and refugee women within transition houses, which operate under a communal living model. One housing manager spoke to these barriers, highlighting food and language, the latter of which was identified above as a barrier to safety.

*“If they’re coming from not the dominant culture but a different ethnic culture, there’s additional barriers in that when they’re looking at communal living in a transition house, whether that’s food, whether that’s communication, language, there’s a number of additional barriers that immigrant and refugee women would be facing.”* (HM)

Housing managers acknowledged that they had to be aware of potential conflicts among transition house residents due to cultural and other differences:

*“Immigrant women experience all kinds of prejudice that we need to be aware of and work on when they’re living in communal housing situations so complaints about the smell of food, or, body odour or clothes that they’re wearing, cultural practices that are foreign to other women staying in the house, so that’s something that we need to be constantly, sort of paying attention to. Educating around and running interference when it, becomes conflict, or differences—cultural differences in parenting styles that, offend or irritate or whatever, other women in the house.”*  
(HM)

This need to be aware of cultural differences speaks to the need for cultural competency among transition house workers - one of the reasons identified by survey respondents for why immigrant and refugee women have difficulty accessing transition housing, and one of the solutions identified by participants to improve access to transition housing for immigrant and refugee women.

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### [Barriers to social housing]

Survey respondents from transition house and multi-service agencies agreed that lack of social housing was a significant barrier for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence and that, in their experience, it was more difficult for these women to access social housing than market housing. Housing managers and women with lived experiences identified a number of barriers to social housing that focused on waitlists, unit size, the tension between community and individual safety, the tenant selection processes, and potential for conflict among tenants due to differences.

Waitlists for social housing were reported to be long – in some cases several years, leaving women in limbo and without housing security. Both housing managers and women with lived experiences identified long waitlists as an important barrier to housing for immigrant and refugee women:

*“The waitlists are extensive. Most people who need to find low-cost housing in our community have to leave.” (HM)*

*“Well, we need more BC Housing because you apply and you are in a waiting list for how many years. I was waiting for four years.” (LE)*

Unit size was another problem, particularly for women with large families. Policies regarding how many children are allowed per bedroom, based on CMHC’s National Occupancy Standard, mean that women with several children may be waiting even longer for an appropriately sized unit to become available.

One housing manager similarly described these restrictions and the implications of these rules for women’s safety:

*“BC Housing and other non-profits tend to have really restrictive rules around how many children per bedroom, and how many, right? Which, given that they don’t build big enough units also is a huge barrier for women.” (HM)*

A woman with lived experience expressed frustration with these restrictive rules, and the financial implications of them:

*“And you’re right about housing. When you have three children, they don’t allow you to have two bedrooms. You have to be in a three bedroom, and how much is that? It’s \$1,300!” (LE)*

Some immigrant and refugee women reported that they would like to be able to have smaller units, which they felt could still accommodate their families, without leading to further financial hardship.

Long waitlists and unit size were significant barriers that created frustration for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence. A lack of transparency in the tenant selection process created further frustration. Housing managers spoke about the need to consider how the woman (and her children) would ‘fit’ with the existing community in the social housing complex. This was sometimes, though not always, balanced with consideration of the woman’s need for housing and support:

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*“The people that we end up with, we look at a variety of factors: their need, the community they’re going into, the kind of support they may require, and will they fit within that community?” (HM)*

One woman with lived experience perceived the process as unclear, as she watched other families being housed while she continued to wait, which added to her frustration:

*“I was hoping they [BC Housing] would help me...because I saw a family who came [immigrated] after me and now... they are a husband and wife and they gave them BC Housing. A house and they are settled. Those people came after me, a month after me. This is the problem. BC Housing are not fair. When I went to check he said don’t come, if you come I will close up your file. A better situation, man and woman, both are working but low income with one or two kids, small kids, and they give them years ago BC Housing. For my situation, I’m separate with three kids. I’m stuck I can’t do anything, no... line up. How come? You know my name in their files and when I call they said ‘yeah they have hard situation but some people have harder situation’. So I have to stay in a shelter so that they would give me a house... this is not a solution.” (LE)*

Unlike transition houses, where women are typically leaving violence, social housing accommodates a wide range of people in need. Thus social housing managers spoke to the concerns about housing women leaving violence, particularly if the housing managers had had negative experiences with abusive (ex-)partners in the past that had negatively impacted the safety of other residents and the community as a whole:

*“I have to worry about the rest of my community, so now are they compromised because he’s going to show up one day? And you know, you never know what it’s going to be like, you know we’ve experienced the violence, and it can be a single female parent, it can be a single male parent. We’ve experienced both. We’ve experienced the violence, the smashing of doors, breaking windows, police involvement, people lying bleeding on the ground, and children all witnessed that.” (HM)*

*“And I can tell you that our first concern is always for the greater community. The community and the needs, and the safety and security of the community will always win out over the needs and security of one person.” (HM)*

Similar to transition housing, social housing managers also expressed concern about the potential for conflict among tenants, due to cultural differences or different parenting styles:

*“And different cultures living together. The smoking and the marijuana, the whatever. And different parenting styles. Then there’s just that misunderstanding between tenants and then—first thing often they’re not they don’t feel comfortable working out those differences themselves.” (HM)*

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Immigrant and refugee women also discussed the challenges of living in social housing with a wide range of people, and the limited options they may have if the housing provided does not feel safe or suitable for them. One woman spoke about some of the challenges she faced in social housing:

*“Like, BC Housing townhouses are available but our people don’t go there either; people smoke there. One or two girls tried to go there, but they say the atmosphere is no good there... We have to keep in mind that what type of house we would get, whether our children will be safe there, what type of people will be there. Sometimes, we move in and we did not have any idea about the nature of the landlord who we are dealing with; then it becomes hard to move out. We face many problems while living there.” (LE)*

### [Barriers to market housing]

Participants identified several barriers to market housing, including the lack of affordable market housing, especially market housing in safe and convenient locations, inadequate income assistance rates, lack of support to find housing, and difficulties with landlords.

The high cost of market housing was identified as a significant barrier by both housing managers and women with lived experiences. As a result of financial insecurity, immigrant and refugee women are forced to search for the cheapest housing available. Unfortunately, affordable market housing is often unsafe, inconveniently located, and in poor condition. Several housing managers discussed these issues:

*“I think my concern is that when people are looking for affordable and it’s in the market sector, they’re obviously going to go with the cheaper—the cheapest they can find. But then what happens is that you end up with a slum landlord and whatever, like beds full of cockroaches and all those issues that come with it.” (HM)*

*“Anything low around like that would be considered low-cost housing is just kind of sad, unfortunately. And frankly, in the middle of, you know a difficult part of town.” (HM)*

Women with lived experiences reported a lack of support in finding housing. Not only were they often unfamiliar with the area and local systems (e.g., transportation), but they also lacked knowledge about where to look for market housing, which added to the stress they were already feeling:

*“We do it on our own. We do everything on our own. I’m looking on my own. We have nobody to help us. So without people, nobody help you. Yeah, no family. No family. Nobody to help you. Everything I do, you do it on your own. You have to go to court on your own too. You have to talk on your own. You have no advocate. It’s very stressful, you won’t believe. I feel like you went to a country, like the middle of nowhere, and you been dropped off, and you’re all alone. That’s true. That’s how I feel.” (LE)*

*“She didn’t know where to live. Also, she didn’t know where to find places with cheaper rent and also easy to rent.” (LE)*



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*“At every transition house, what they do, they give you a list. That’s the help. That’s not enough! Now the co-op doesn’t help you because they give you give the list for the co-op, and you walk there, you apply to there, and you never getting into, and you pay for application to pay for this, you pay for, and you never get in. So how we supposed to help you and... is no help.” (LE)*

Immigrant and refugee women were especially concerned about high rent, particularly given low income assistance rates, which left them struggling financially after leaving violence. This struggle was further compounded by the lack of employment opportunities and affordable childcare:

*“The rent is pretty high. If you are in a welfare, the limit of the welfare it is \$660. How come? In Vancouver, if you have kids, how come you gonna find a place, with two bedrooms, with the limit \$660. Not only in Vancouver. Anywhere. Now, your debt is increased, and you need to pay what the rest of the rent, and it’s just increasing, increasing, increasing. It’s not enough housing.” (LE)*

*“Yes, financially, because now in general, renting, renting a place is very expensive in Vancouver. A somewhat decent place costs close to a grand. Nine hundred plus for a two-bedroom place on the ground level, hydro not included, not, not including utilities, but can you afford it? Bringing up two kids and without a job.” (LE)*

Negative experiences with landlords further compounded the negative experiences immigrant and refugee women had with market housing. Women reported landlords requiring them to pay more money with fewer amenities:

*“Even when we look for houses, basements, the basement owners ask, what happened, why happened? Then they say, so you’re gong to live on welfare, you give us more rent because you’re not going to pay it from your own pocket; they don’t provide us with Internet and... you face so many problems.” (LE)*

A number of participants also shared stories of landlords not fulfilling their obligations when things broke down in the rental relationship or again requiring that women pay additional fees in order to get things fixed. As one woman explained, *“He is greedy. He’s so greedy. Nothing fix inside but for rent oh you have to give money. He never come to fix it. He doesn’t want to pay properly to fix it.” (LE)*

### POLICY BARRIERS

There were a number of policy barriers identified by focus group participants, housing managers and survey respondents that affect immigrant and refugee women’s ability to leave abuse and secure short- and long-term housing. The primary policies that arose out of the conversations are outlined below, including transition house policies concerning length of stay, income assistance, immigration and sponsorship, and BC Housing policies. As explained below, participants’ understanding of current polices

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was not always accurate, which speaks to the need for better communication and transparency about systems, policies and processes.

### [Transition housing policies]

Immigrant and refugee women discussed the high level of stress they experienced when staying in a transition house because of the 30-day-stay time limit. They also spoke about what seemed like an inconsistency in the implementation of this policy where they witnessed some women having their stays in the transition house extended where others would not. Focus group participants, such as this woman, spoke about the difficulty in finding and securing housing, particularly when there were language barriers and no friends or family to support her, compounded by the additional stress incurred from the 30-day transition house stay time limit:

*“If you say one month, then it should be one month for everyone. Someone like me who, first of all, have a language barrier and, at the same time, have just come to Vancouver. I don’t have any friends. I mean, if I could have a friend who could share her experience in finding housing with me, then I could find Chinese-owned houses that are cheaper. Without giving you anything, they wanted you to leave, leave. I was pressed everyday, there were only 10 days left. I really thought I was going to end up sleeping on the road.” (LE)*

Given that there is flexibility with the 30-day-stay time limit and extensions can occur when transition house staff see the need, yet also confusion among women staying in the transition house about how that decision is made, transparency about the extension process and who is eligible is needed and could benefit both transition house staff and the women accessing services.

### [Income assistance policies]

As stated earlier, immigrant and refugee women leaving violence face significant financial insecurity and poverty. Focus group participants shared that some of the income assistance policies created additional barriers to women achieving financial stability and being able to move forward in their lives. For instance, women discussed policies that deducted dollar for dollar any additional earnings from a woman’s monthly benefits. One woman describes the frustration and implications of such a policy,

*“Even if we get a small income or we get an income tax refund, the welfare people deduct that much amount; because we got the money from somewhere else. They don’t care that we are living on a small amount of money, if we get a bit of extra money we can buy something for our kids or we can buy some clothes for ourselves; they don’t think anything like that.” (LE)*

It is important to note that as of 2012 this policy of deducting dollar for dollar any additional earnings changed and earnings exemptions were restored, meaning that individuals and families receiving social assistance are allowed to earn a little money and keep it on top of their monthly benefits. The amount that individuals are allowed to earn varies depending on the category they fit in. For women in the

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“expected to work” category they are allowed to earn an additional \$200/month. However, equally important to note is that women were unclear as to the income assistance policies surrounding this and in 2014 the researchers were still hearing stories from women about the frustration and impacts of not being able to keep their additional earnings.

Focus group participants also discussed the demanding work-search and employment regulations that were additionally challenging for women with young children and in need of childcare, often with no access to affordable or free childcare. One woman shares,

*“But you have to, have to look for work or attend whatever workshop they arrange. You have to attend. But where do you put your children? If you have someone to look after them, you will have to pay them. So you have to pay extra. You haven’t received your pay and they still ask you to look for work. So there are many, many issues. So I am thinking what, what to do.”* (LE)

Many of the immigrant and refugee women who participated in the study also expressed frustration with being required to look for work, and because of their language barriers, take jobs that paid minimum wage and did not have the potential for growth. *“They keep asking you to find a job, find a job. So, am I supposed to learn the language or to find a job? If I look for a job, maybe it’ll be a temporary job. You can get fire at any time.”* (LE)

Women consistently requested being able to get both English language and career development education to provide them with skills to increase their employment opportunities and thus their potential for moving forward in their lives.

### **[Immigration and sponsorship policies]**

Throughout the focus groups and individual interviews with immigrant and refugee women, women who had been sponsored by their abusive partners expressed their confusion and fear surrounding the revoking of their status upon leaving the abuser. There was general agreement among participants that immigrant women who are sponsored and have not yet been granted their Permanent Residency (PR) status or have not lived with the sponsor for two years post sponsorship are reluctant to leave the abuser. As one woman shared, *“so I hear things like ‘If you come, he sponsors you, you have to stay in there or your PR status will be revoked’.”* (LE)

This was echoed by some of the housing managers, who also pointed to the significant fear that women have that they will be deported and their children will remain in Canada with the abusive partner:

*“Someone will tell you well she might be deported and her kids won’t be or, what are the sponsorships issues, can she get on income assistance or welfare, given her status? Her fear of deportation which, often legitimate, and often based on manipulation or abuse by their partner or the partner’s family that if she does do something she will be deported or they have the power to have her deported, so there’s always those. And—and there isn’t really anywhere you can*

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*really go to—right now to get where all that staff is trained to be working with women who have the experience.” (HM)*

Women who have conditional permanent residency and are being abused by their sponsor can apply for an exception to the conditional permanent resident measure by calling CIC. However, as illustrated by the above quotes, the process around asking for an exception is unclear not only to women but also to professionals working with immigrant and refugee women. Furthermore, the understanding is that women will have to prove the abuse in order to be granted an exception - an obvious deterrent and perhaps an impossible and overwhelming task for many women. This, coupled with the fact that there is no guarantee that the exception will be granted after coming forward, and that she may in fact be deported, may further discourage women to report abuse. As the conditional permanent residence for sponsored spouses or partners is a relatively new measure, related data collection is in its early stages and there is currently no reliable data on the number of women who requested an exception or the outcomes of those requests.

### [BC Housing policies]

Similar to the above-mentioned policies, immigrant and refugee women shared frustration and confusion over some of the existing BC Housing policies. For example, one woman described the compounding financial effects of what felt like a punitive interplay when different provincial policies intersect, such as income assistance, child benefits and BC Housing policies when her son turned eighteen.

*“Because I am living in the BC Housing, my son turned eighteen, and like, he is in his nineteenth year. And BC Housing has increased the rent, saying that because your son is now more than eighteen years, you pay more rent. He is looking for a job, I told them as long he is not able to find a job I am not going to pay the increased rent. Because it is very hard for me as a single person. First, the child benefit cheque was cut off, secondly, the social assistance people cut off the assistance, and on top of it BC Housing are asking more rent money...” (LE)*

Many focus group and individual interview participants expressed confusion over the tenant selection process for BC Housing and non-profit housing providers, stressing that there seemed to be inconsistencies and a lack of transparency in its implementation. Women also expressed frustration with the differing rental rates between tenants who are receiving income assistance and tenants who are working, *“In welfare, renting a BC Housing is 61% on your income. So you have 39% to survive. If you work, you pay 30%, so I don't think that is very fair. So I pay double of rent.” (LE)* BC Housing uses flat rates and applies the flat rent table<sup>4</sup> when determining how much a tenant receiving income assistance pays, while if someone is employed rent calculation is 30% of their income. As the woman above shares, the rental rates seem inequitable and result in individuals and families who are receiving income assistance having less money to live off after paying their shelter costs.

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<sup>4</sup> BC Housing flat rent table:

[http://www.bchousing.org/resources/Partner\\_Resources/Form\\_Templates/Rent\\_Calculation/Rent\\_Calculation\\_Guide.pdf#page=56](http://www.bchousing.org/resources/Partner_Resources/Form_Templates/Rent_Calculation/Rent_Calculation_Guide.pdf#page=56)

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### IMPACTS

Participants spoke a great deal about the impacts not only of violence, but also of insecure housing and the stress brought on by searching for safe, secure, and affordable housing. The physical and mental health impacts of woman abuse have been well documented in the literature, and leaving violence may be a particularly stressful time given the evidence of increased risk of violence during this period. Women leaving violence are often in crisis, and the stress of searching for housing, long waitlists, rejections, and frequent moves may have a significant impact on their health and well-being, and the health of their children.

One woman with lived experiences described the stress of trying to find a place to rent in a short period of time, and the impact it had on her physical and mental health:

*“It’s very stressful, yeah. So bloody stressful. I get in depression, I get very hard problems with my health. And, you know, believe me, I take medication to sleep [...]. I was a lot of issue in that period. I was taking like five or six months trying to find a place to rent, and nobody wants you rent. Yeah. It’s stressful.” (LE)*

The stress associated with searching for housing, and an unmet need for shelter, may mean that other needs related to recovering from violence and abuse can not be met. However, one woman explained that once safe housing has been secured, women may be in a better position to address those other needs:

*“Cause I think once you have safe housing, you can kind of take a deep breath, and start maybe working on counseling and those kind of things, but when your basic needs aren’t being met... it’s hard to get other help.” (HM)*

Barriers to housing, including multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, mean that women who have left violence risk becoming homeless or returning to their abusers.

*“Well, it’s so many things... If they don’t give us more BC Housing, at least [change] the rules... they don’t rent [to] you because you have children. They don’t rent [to] you because you are on welfare. They don’t rent [to] you because you are in... in... you don’t work or whatever the situation. Their rules need to change because you don’t have, and finally, you need to get [back] with your husband, because you don’t have the resources to get by yourself.” (LE)*

One woman participant spoke passionately about the risks of homelessness for women leaving violence, lack of awareness about transition housing, and how these concerns keep women in abusive relationships where they may be at risk of escalating violence or homicide.

*“The government have to wake up! Too much homelessness! People have children too! They’re sleeping in motor home. And most woman stay in violence, they get killed, because they don’t want to leave their man. Because they’re worried ‘what’s the shelter going to be like.’” (LE)*

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Another woman described her risk of homelessness and what she contemplated as her and her children's options due to a lack of support and awareness about available services in her community:

*“Because I was living in a rather cold region, right. I mean, family violence at that time led me to take the children and roam around the mountainous village. There was a big tube; it should have been planted underground but it was left on the ground, probably waiting for some work to be done. So I was with my children. I said, “why don’t we sleep here”, a cylindrical tube. I think, I mean, if there hadn’t been this kind of organization, I probably might not have lived to this day.”*  
(LE)

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## SOLUTIONS AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PHASE 1 FINDINGS OF THE BUILDING SUPPORTS PROJECT

In addition to discussing the barriers and challenges faced by immigrant and refugee women leaving violence, women with lived experience, housing managers and transition house and multi-service agency staff who participated in the study and also workshop participants, offered a number of solutions that could increase accessibility and relevance of the services and supports available and help to mitigate some of the harms immigrant and refugee women face. The dominant solutions and key recommendations are presented below. Phases 2 and 3 of the Building Supports project will build on these findings and recommendations and explore potential solutions.

### [Housing]

1. *Improve access to affordable housing in safe, accessible locations.*

*“Then just like more housing. Like more affordable housing. Like every day I probably get like two applications a day and people calling me and telling me their situations and then what do I say to them?” (HM)*

First and foremost what arose out of the research was that there is not enough affordable and safe market or social housing, or second stage housing, particularly units that would accommodate large families. Additionally, this housing needs to be in convenient neighbourhoods where women can easily access essential services. Government assistance through rental subsidies or programs that assist women with down payments or offer lower mortgage rates would enable women to enter the housing market and gain some stability from which to move forward in their lives.

2. *Create and disseminate clear messaging about housing availability and access.*

*“I think you should promoting more that those people know what is a [transition house] like, what... why they are there kind of thing. And some women, like for me, I didn’t know I was experiencing violent relationship. I don’t know, maybe different culture, but I didn’t know until I talked to someone that it was not healthy relationship. Yeah, I think most parts you should promote more. Let other people know.” (LE)*

Provide accessible information in multiple languages about what market and social housing is available and how to access it. Use a variety of methods of information sharing, including through community newspapers, brochures, DVDs, posters on transit, ethnic TV and radio programs in multiple languages and information sessions in ESL classes. The findings also suggested the need for a marketing campaign for transition houses where the assumptions and perceptions about transition houses are clarified by providing information such as what they look like inside, who is eligible and what happens when you get there. Having this information widely available would help to increase awareness of transition houses as well as challenge existing assumptions about

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them and hopefully increase immigrant and refugee women's comfort in accessing them. Some suggestions of where information about violence against women and transition house services would be well positioned to reach women who are isolated included in grocery stores, on grocery receipts, on coffee sleeves, in women's bathrooms, health care offices, libraries, schools, including ESL classes, as well as in the Newcomers' Guide. It was also suggested that a 1-800 (24/7) telephone hotline with general information about transition houses and vacancies for all transition houses in BC be created, or that this information is provided through other existing crisis line services.

### [Support]

1. *Provide information about violence against women and supports in multiple languages in various media both prior to and upon a woman's arrival in Canada.*

Immigrant and refugee women need to be able to learn about the supports available to them in BC in regards to violence against women and housing in their own language. The importance of this cannot be understated. Having information accessible in multiple languages and in multiple media will help increase immigrant and refugee women's awareness of supports available to them and how to access them. The first place this information sharing can start is with pre-settlement services in a woman's home country prior to immigrating. Additionally, the initial interview women have with an immigration officer upon their arrival in Canada, and Community Airport Newcomers Network (CANN), are two opportunities for women to be informed of their rights, particularly in relation to violence, their sponsorship and their children as well as services and supports and where to access them before even leaving the airport. Furthermore, anti-violence, multi-service and housing organizations are encouraged to hire staff that reflect the diversity of the women they serve, as well as build cross-sectoral relationships with multi-lingual services that they can call on when needed.

2. *Assist women to help them navigate Canadian systems and find affordable housing.*

*"So a lot of it is just, you know, helping her kind of settle into Canadian society and bringing in outside resources as well and that speak the language that can kind of walk her through the system and help her understand that it's okay, yes things are different, but we're all here to help you." (HM)*

The findings highlight that the need for outreach and accompaniment is significant for immigrant and refugee women experiencing violence. Given the isolation and language and cultural barriers immigrant and refugee women face, coupled with their lack of information about local systems and services, the importance of outreach in women's ability to access support and secure housing cannot be understated. The level of overwhelm shared by immigrant and refugee women in this study was considerable. Having someone to "walk with them," support them in all aspects of leaving, and ultimately assist them to secure affordable safe housing, would go a long way to support women not returning to their abusers. It would also help to reduce women's feelings of



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having to do it all on their own. This assistance should be ongoing and provide women with a continuum of care even once they have left the abuser and secured housing, so that they are able to access ongoing support, particularly counseling to begin to cope with the impacts of abuse.

3. *Recognize the importance of ESL classes and opportunities for training and education for immigrant and refugee women.*

English as a Second Language classes were the place where many women who participated in this study received their first support and referrals related to their experiences of violence. These classes are a key opportunity for outreach and information sharing about violence and housing with both the women attending classes and the teachers and staff who support them. In addition to the importance of learning English, many of the study participants discussed the importance of being able to access higher education in order to increase their employment opportunities, achieve financial stability and have the ability to move forward in their lives.

4. *Provide cultural competency training and education about the dynamics and impacts of abuse to housing managers, landlords and other service providers supporting immigrant and refugee women.*

*"...so going back to the how to deal with maybe some of the barriers, would be more training for managers. Like the cultural competency. Like BC Housing does offer webinars and stuff but I haven't seen anything on that type of training through their webinars which would be great like through BCNPHA or BC Housing." (HM)*

Throughout the conversations with study participants, it became apparent that there is a need for both cultural competency training and education about the dynamics and impacts of abuse for housing managers, landlords and other service providers supporting immigrant and refugee women. Providing housing managers with more information and accurate information would help to reduce their concerns about renting to women leaving abuse and encourage them to find a way to balance their concerns about community safety and offering women leaving violence safe affordable housing.

5. *Enhance cross-sector support and collaboration.*

*"You have to be creative, but you have to build these relationships with these external agencies about how are we going to deal with these issues." (HM)*

Cross-sector partnerships and collaboration can greatly improve the success of individual providers or agencies in assisting and advocating for housing for immigrant and refugee women leaving violence. Collaboration and coordination among various services and supports will enhance the capacities of agencies to better serve immigrant and refugee women and to provide follow-care and long-term supports.

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### [Policy]

1. *Ensure that flexible and responsive policies and regular policy review are an important part of organizational culture.*

*“Getting folks together and talking about and naming the issue ‘cause there may be many agencies [that] simply aren’t aware there’s even an issue. Or aren’t aware how their policies or their practices impact immigrant women and children.” (HM)*

Given the impacts of the policies discussed previously in this report on immigrant and refugee women’s ability to leave violence and secure safe affordable housing, the importance of organizations and government ministries having mechanisms in place that allow staff to bring issues forward when policies are creating barriers to offering relevant services was evident. In addition, regular policy review processes that enable organizations and ministries to adapt to the needs of individuals accessing services was also highlighted. Having policies clearly defined and accessible, including transparency about eligibility and processes would be of great benefit to immigrant and refugee women in understanding and navigating local systems.

2. *Review income assistance rates and policies.*

The study findings highlight the obvious need for income assistance rates to increase to a livable income. The current rates make it nearly impossible for women to secure safe housing that meets their needs. Additionally, immigrant and refugee women in the “expected to work” category, particularly those who do not have a working knowledge of English, are expected to address competing priorities – dual pressure to find employment and to improve their English language skills. It became clear that policy changes are required to provide opportunities for women to improve their language skills and increase their opportunities for employment that can actually support them and their children and allow them the prospect of moving forward in their lives.

3. *Review BC Housing policies.*

*“I know these conversations have happened with BC Housing about relaxing their restrictions on you know, what age children and different sexes can share bedrooms and—and how many children can share bedrooms and that kind of stuff.” (HM)*

Until more affordable housing is built, amend current housing regulations and allow flexibility in policies so that they better reflect the realities of immigrant and refugee women leaving violence. In particular, given there is a dearth of larger units that can accommodate large families, there is an apparent need to adjust CMHC’s National Occupancy Standard and allow for some balance between safe, secure and adequate housing and overcrowding. This will help to provide some flexibility about the number of children who can stay in a room, thus enabling larger families to access housing.

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4. *Review sponsorship laws and processes in cases where a woman is being abused by her sponsor.*

*“For women who are attached to their husbands’ status, their immigration status and if they leave then they’re without status. So if they’re leaving, then you’re supposed to go back to your country. So, I think one of the big changes being discussed or was, [is] that when the family comes in that they each get their own status, and it’s not attached to the primary person, ....the kids have their own status and yeah they’re not all linked to him.” (HM)*

There is an evident need to increase awareness for both women and service providers of a woman’s rights and legal processes when there is sponsorship breakdown due to an abusive sponsor. There need to be more apparent mechanisms in place so that women can get support when sponsorship is withdrawn without fear of deportation, particularly when there are children involved. Clear and accessible messaging about how women can apply for an exception to the conditional permanent resident measure and what they can expect to happen once they apply would be beneficial. In order for women to feel comfortable to come forward when they are experiencing abuse from their sponsors, women need a guarantee that they will not be deported.

## NEXT STEPS

The research findings from Phase 1 of the Building Supports project will inform Phase 2 of the project, which focuses on the development, piloting and evaluation of promising practices for transition house workers to improve their capacity to support immigrant and refugee women in accessing longer-term safe, secure, and affordable housing. Information gathered through the surveys, interviews, and focus groups suggests that there is a need for better information and training not only for transition house workers, but also for non-profit housing managers. As such, training will be created and offered to non-profit housing managers about how to better serve immigrant and refugee women leaving violence. Further, there is a clear need for information and awareness about housing options among immigrant communities, including clear messaging about transition houses directed at immigrant and refugee women. The project team is currently seeking funding to develop a public awareness campaign of transition house services in BC. Phase 3 of the project will be focused on provincial and federal policy solutions to reduce or eliminate the barriers that exist for immigrant and refugee women in accessing long-term housing.

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