



Literature Review

# Caught in The Webs of Culture: The Implication of a Dual Cultural Setting for Self-definition of Immigrant Women in IPV Relationships in Canada

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## Abstract

**Background:** Violence against women continues to be a concerning phenomenon across cultures. According to the World Health Organization (2021), one in three women globally has experienced intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual assault (NPSA). However, some of the practicing cultures of immigrant and refugee families and that of their host countries continue to contribute to the perpetuation of their oppression and how they perceive themselves. This qualitative study explored the impacts of culture on the self-perception of immigrant and refugee women in abusive relationships in Canada. **Methods:** Twenty-seven participants from the Middle East, Europe, The Caribbean, Africa, and Asia were recruited for the study through social media, community-based organizations, flyers, and a snowball approach. Interviews were conducted in English and Arabic languages to understand how their cultures and those of their host country impact their self-perception and settlement in Canada. Data was analyzed with African feminism, critical cultural theoretical frameworks, and thematic analysis. **Result:** The study unveiled the impacts of culture on the IPV experiences of immigrant and refugee women pre- and post-migration, and how the changes in their cultural settings influence their self-perception and self-efficacy. Despite their experiences of racism in their interactions with some Canadian service providers, participants described their improved self-esteem and selfhood in Canada due to the recognition of women's rights within the Canadian culture. The role of cultural practices at both the personal and systemic levels contribute to immigrant and refugee women's holistic wellness.

**Keywords:** Culture; Migration; Intimate partner violence; Immigrant and refugee women; Self-definition

## Introduction

Examining intimate partner violence without considering the influence of culture will be inadequate. Culture determines how individuals, family, community, and society perceive their powers, limitations, and privileges [1-4]. Whereas previous studies have shown the role of culture in intimate partner violence, few of these studies highlighted the lived experiences of immigrant and refugee women while noting the impact of both their own culture and the dominant culture on the victims' IPV experiences, self-perception, and decision-making. The terms, immigrant women and immigrant and refugee women are interchangeably used in this paper.

The pandemical nature of intimate partner violence requires critical exploration. Despite years of research and intervention to stop intimate partner violence, one out of three women continues to experience intimate partner violence globally [5]. Statistics showed a twenty-six percent increase in femicide in Canada between 2019 and 2021 [6]. A global analysis of 161 countries indicated that twenty-seven percent of women aged 15 and 49 years have experienced physical and sexual violence in their intimate relationships [5]. A study on IPV in the United States of America showed approximately twenty people are abused by their partners

every minute while almost fifty percent of women experience rape in their intimate relationships (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [7]. In 2018, approximately 6.2 million women (about twice the population of Oklahoma) aged 15 and above self-reported experiences of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse in their intimate relationships in Canada [8].

In 2019, the national statistics report on IPV indicated that seventy-nine percent of 107,810 IPV in Canada involved women aged 15 years and over, with 3.5 more reported by women in rural areas [9]. Notwithstanding the types of abuse experienced in intimate relationships, it is pivotal to understand that IPV has short- and long-term effects on its victims [1,10,11]. Contributing factors to the effects of IPV are the victims' love, compassion, commitment, and the "heart-within-heart" which is often overlooked during interventions ([1], p. 23). The concept of "heart- within-heart" indicates sharing one's heart with one's partner. This unique dynamic in intimate partner violence contributes to the victims' strong emotional connections to their partners and their denial of victimization [1,12,13] from abusive partners and sometimes contributes to blaming and shaming IPV victims. This lack of contextual consideration contributes to ineffective intervention when working with victims of intimate partner violence.

Culture and the cultural context are crucial to both individual and collective understanding of IPV and the services provided to victims. Culture in certain contexts prevents the acknowledgment of violence against women and girls due to the collective perspectives of females [14]. Whereas factors such as poverty, age, gender, and migration contribute to the vulnerability of immigrant and refugee women to intimate partner violence, the role of culture in the perpetration of violence against immigrant and refugee women in their new homeland, cannot be unheeded [15]. According to Hofstede [16], culture is a collective mind programming that distinguishes one group from another. Culture engages the use of religion, ideology, art, language, and symbols to legitimize violence in human interactions [15]. While people have collective cultures that define them as a group, collective cultures also contribute to individuals' self-definition, based on the intrinsic interpretations of such cultures by the group members [3]. In consequence of this, self-definition contributes to individuals' acceptance of culturally imposed identities and cultural norms, which may perpetuate oppression. Collective cultures create a sense of belonging which may contribute to the oppression of the IPV victims from the expected support or safety network if the victims' behaviors contradict the values of the groups [1]. Such "anti-cultural behaviors" may lead to the victims' ostracization.

Whereas the family subculture theorists postulate that violence only occurs within specific cultures [17], masculine hegemony in some cultures establishes the existence of violence against women across national and cultural contexts [18,19]. The cultural conception of gender, beliefs, and expectations contribute to women's vulnerability to intimate partner violence across the globe [19-22]. Given this, culture has often been used as a yardstick for determining the existence of violence against women. For instance, in some culture, intimate partner violence is not recognized as a crime against women, since the term does not even exist due to women's objectification as their male partners' property [1,14,23].

The impacts of colonization across the globe cannot be over emphasized owing to the creation of power and class in relation to race, gender, and culture. The colonial superior/inferior cultural assimilation has led to the entrenchment of some of these cultural notions, which contributes to women's treatment as men's private properties, and has led to some women's premature deaths in their intimate relationships [1,24-26]. The colonial superior/inferior mentality emerged from slavery and colonization that created hierarchy, power, and abuse among people based on race, gender, and ethnicity [27,28]. Studies have highlighted the role of power and control embedded in some cultural practices among immigrant and refugee communities in the diaspora. Immigrant women and their partners bring their cultural values and traditions with them which can then continue to define their family relationships in a new cultural context [1]. As expected of their culture and as a survival response strategy, immigrant women protect their family members including their abusers. Based on this cultural expectation of being "one's brother's keeper", immigrant women feel restrained from disclosing their abuse to the police to protect their partners and their families from exposure to the justice system [29]. In their qualitative study to understand the factors that influence abuse disclosure among twenty-six

Mexican women, Montalvo-Liendo et al. [29] emphasized the victims' responsibilities to protect their partners, children, and parents as major reasons for the refusal to report.

Additionally, in a study with 106 Vietnamese married women on the impact of cultural beliefs on their intimate partner violence experiences, the study highlighted mental health problems and maladaptive behavioral patterns of the victims toward their intimate partner violence experiences [21]. Women's hopelessness in their abusive relationships often emerged from normalizing women's inferior status and powerlessness within their cultural power structure.

Since women in many cultures are culturally perceived as men's possessions, men also control women's bodies and justify sexual abuse, deciding when to have sexual interactions, or punishing women with forceful penetration to demonstrate their power over women [30,31]. Attempts by women to refuse unconsented sexual interactions may lead to physical, psychological, and emotional abuse [32-35]. Religion as a weapon of colonization was used to suppress the colonized self-definition [36]. Since religion creates and sustains gender ranks, these notions are embedded in some cultures among immigrants. While culture dictates people's lifestyles, religion also requires specific behaviors to have a sense of belonging. Therefore, past studies also showed that immigrant women in some cultures consciously or unconsciously accept oppression as the norm as part of their allegiance to their religion and culture [37-39]. Nonetheless, some immigrant women still found religion (spirituality) as staunch support in their abusive relationships [1].

Despite the previous studies on intimate partner violence among immigrants, violence against women in intimate relationships was estimated to be higher in Saskatchewan (724 per 100,000 population) and Manitoba (607 per 100,000 population) in 2019 in comparison to other provinces, with a woman killed every six days by her partner [1,40-42]. Furthermore, between 2018 and 2019, the highest police-reported intimate partner violence or family violence occurred in Manitoba and Saskatchewan when compared to other provinces in Canada [41].

Recent homicide report indicated that forty-six percent of the overall 6920 resolved homicides between 2009 and 2022 involved women killed by their partners [43]. This alarming rate of intimate partner violence among immigrant and refugee families in Canada spurred this article. This article shows the importance of understanding the influence of dual cultures on immigrant women's intimate partner violence experiences across premigration, migration, and post-migration, their self-perceptions, and the decision-making process within the two diverse cultures.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study used two theoretical frameworks (African feminism and critical cultural lenses) to inform the data collection and analytical process as well as IPV as a form of gendered oppression. African feminism started as an anti-colonial and anti-marginalization movement of women of color that called for a positive transformation of societies so that women become full citizens in all areas of life [1,44]. African feminism endorses equal rights and treatment of men and women. As a humanistic theory, African feminism focuses on women's self-actualization, self-will, and self-

dignity, and repudiates suppressive norms and traditions [44,45].

Additionally, African feminism examines seven key issues: race, tradition, sexuality, patriarchy, love, underdevelopment, and global feminism [46]. African feminism lens enabled the understanding of the cultural practices and traditions used to imbrute immigrant and refugee women across borders. African feminism necessitated the researcher's reflexivity and allyship, by enabling the participants' visibility and vocality. African feminism created an atmosphere where racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression of the vulnerable were safely discussed ([1,46]. The critical cultural framework peruses the interconnectivity of human subjectivity and ideology and opines that systemic or individual ideology contributes to selfhood [1,4,47].

Critical cultural theory assisted in identifying how the Canadian systemic dominant culture contributed to the immigrant and refugee women's experiences of injustices, patriarchal domination, and their interpretation of oppression, safety, and insecurity, due to their social context ([48,49]. The use of critical cultural theory highlighted the intersectional oppression of immigrant and refugee women through culture, race, class, and gender [50] and self-perceptions in their familial and systemic relationships.

### Positionality

I developed an interest in this study as a member of the minority group who has worked with child and family services on domestic violence cases. My experiences working with racialized women and their children created more curiosity to learn more about the impacts of culture on the IPV experiences of immigrant and refugee women across premigration, migration, and post-migration periods.

### Methodology

A qualitative narrative approach was utilized to understand the impacts of the familial and Canadian cultures on immigrant and refugee women's intimate partner violence experience. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, purposive sampling was done through flyers, Facebook adverts, WhatsApp messages, messenger, regular text messages, snowballing, word of mouth, and community-based organizations (CBOs) and cultural groups such as Safe Housing and Direct Empowerment Inc. (SHADE), NEEDS Centre Inc. (Newcomers Employment and Education Development Services), Norwest Coop, West Central Women's Resource Center, ACOMI (African Communities of Manitoba Inc.), NAMI (Nigerian Association of Manitoba Inc.), Council of South Sudanese of Manitoba Inc, Family Dynamics, and Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (for peer recruitment). Eligibility criteria included; 1) women born outside Canada, 2) 18 years or older, 3) recognized as migrants or refugees, 4) married, single, divorced, separated, 5) in abusive relationships, and 6) able to participate in an interview in English. Twenty-seven women from sixteen countries were recruited for the study. This study was approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board and funded by the Faculty of Social Work Endowment Fund.

Informed consent was described to all participants before they participated in the interviews. All participants responded

to one research question - "To what extent has your culture influenced your experience in your relationship and settlement in Canada?" To capture the participants' stories, individual in-depth semi-structured interviews of forty-five minutes to two and a half hours were conducted online through Zoom, WhatsApp video, and telephone in English. Even though all the participants could speak minimal English language, some participants requested to speak the Arabic language to enable them to narrate what is most crucial to them in their first language. Thus, Arabic interpreters were recruited to interpret the participants' stories. All interpreters also signed an oath of confidentiality form. Interviews were audio recorded and participants received \$50.00 (Canadian dollars) as compensation.

### Data Analysis

Although the thematic analysis does not necessarily need to follow a pre-existing theoretical framework [51], African feminism and critical cultural lenses were used to identify the constructed realities of the participants within their dual cultural settings. Declaration of these theoretical frameworks indicated the researcher's transparency about the nature and representation of the participants' realities [1,51]. Data collection and analysis were done synchronously as the preliminary analysis continued during data collection. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts and field notes were uploaded to the MAXQDA software for the analytical process.

Thematic analysis began with line-by-line coding. This analytical process helped to focus on how the participants constructed their realities through their stories [1,52]. The common themes were identified across the participants' narratives. As a member of the minority group, the researcher used member checking to bracket personal biases and to ensure that participants' realities were represented in the study. Five major themes emerged from the participants' narratives – wives as slaves, financial terrorism, and joint account, reverberated oppression, women's independence and protection services as catalysts for IPV, and participants' self-perception and self-actualization in Canada. The study shows that immigrant women's oppression in their intimate relationships was complicated by both the action and inaction of family members and service providers.

### Findings and Discussions

Twenty-seven immigrant and refugee women from sixteen countries participated in the study. Participants were aged 18 to 69 years. Three participants were 18 to 29 years old, twenty-two were 32 to 49 years old, and two were 50 to 69 years. Two participants were from Europe, one from the Caribbean, ten from Asia, and nine from Africa. Participants also included three Middle Easterners and two South Americans. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for the confidentiality and privacy of their stories. Two groups of twelve of these participants were Canadian citizens and permanent residents, while the remaining three women were one non-status, one refugee, and one international student. All participants were educated – five participants had post-graduate degrees, eight participants with high school diplomas, and two with post-secondary and undergraduate certificates. Five emerging themes are discussed and

supported with participants' verbatim quotations. Eleven participants have lived in Canada for over ten years, twelve have lived between one and five years, three have lived between five and ten years, and one has been in Canada for almost a year.

### **Wives as Slaves**

Studies have established the impacts of culture on self-perception [53,54]. From the perspectives of the participants, being a female in their culture automatically deprives them of their human right to be treated with dignity [1,55,56]. Participants revealed slavery-related experiences in their intimate relationships due to their cultural expectations, such as keeping up with domestic responsibilities and demonstrating total obedience to instructions [1,57-59]. The concept of slavery encapsulates a superior-inferior relationship that includes the whipping, maiming, raping, humiliation, and financial exploitation of the enslaved individual [60]. The master-slave relationship perceives resistance from the enslaved individuals as obnoxious. Participants' stories showed that attempts to demonstrate their rights to speech and decision-making incited violence toward them. Participants reported they were subjected to terrible scrutiny when they spoke with other men because their partners often accused them of infidelity even when they had no extramarital affairs [61]. In consonance with previous studies, participants also reported threats of being killed by their partners while one participant reported losing her sister to intimate partner violence [62-65]. According to the participants, women and children are placed on the same level and treated as individuals with no human rights. The following shows the excerpts from the participants' narratives:

*We were getting conversation, and I wasn't agreeing with him on the same opinion. So suddenly I told him, "Yes," he is that type of person. He would be shouting or screaming at me, and like says bad words to me insulting me. But this time he was getting so angry and then slapped me on my face and kicked me so hard until I fell down on the floor, and I fainted". Actually, if he killed me in the apartment like no one cares. He checked my underwear and my panty to see if I am shaving my vagina because he accused me that I made sex with other men. (Amelia, 30- 49 years).*

*Like I'm nowhere because it doesn't let me do the things, I want to do things he's always bossing me around. This is what you have to do you can't do this? You can't do that? That's not life? Enjoy doing something somebody's just gonna say don't do it, and I live my life for this many years, not even doing the things I like. That's like that's slavery. That's punishment. That's hellish... He said that he owns me that I am his now. I am his, and he can kill me, and nobody will question. (Emma, 30-49 years).*

*Yes. It was my family who brought the proposal, I guess to me. I wanted to continue my studies after grade 12, but I did not have that choice and we got married so I was forced to marry him. I, tried to run*

*away, but I couldn't. I was caught. Now I'm here. (Sarah, 18-29 years).*

*I always say, "I'm not a child. I'm not one of the children for me to be treated like one of the children in the house. (Tiffany, 30-49 years).*

Despite being different national backgrounds and cultural contexts, the theme of "wives as slaves" was the dominant theme that capsulated all the participants' violent experiences in their intimate relationships across borders. The twenty-seven participants narrated the experience of being voiceless, invisible, powerless, and punished for demonstrating their rights because of their feminine gender [58,66,67]. Just as slaves who solicit freedom may be at risk of aggravated violence or death [63,64,68], immigrant women reported heightened psychological, physical, financial, sexual, and spiritual abuse in their relationships [18,69-72]. The treatment of immigrant women as slaves in their relationships reiterated the continuous power and control within IPV relationships and how patriarchy is enabled through cultural practices [1,73,74]. In congruity with previous studies, immigrant women advised of death threats from their partners when expressing their opinions, feelings, or attempted separation, as this is also considered a rebellion against the family headship and authority [33,57,75,76].

Considering that leaving the abusive relationships might relieve the abusers of their power and control over immigrant women, immigrant women were subjected to incessant stalking and breaching of restriction orders [77-80], false accusations of infidelity, and threats to harm their children after separation [81,82]. Notwithstanding the slavery experiences of immigrant women in their intimate relationships, immigrant women considered their lack of consent in their marital choices also complicated their violent experiences in their relationships. Participants felt that parental gender disparity treatment and parental cultural "ultimate power" over their children precipitated their forced and arranged marriages as well as their voicelessness in their relationships [67,83-85].

### **Financial Terrorism and Joint Account**

Previous studies have shown that women were empowered by credit programs [68,86]. Notwithstanding, since men are perceived as the heads of the family, it is assumed that they should control all the family resources. In contrast to previous studies that established the financial dependency of immigrant women on their partners as one of the catalysts to IPV, this study revealed that some immigrant women's work and financial provision also triggered violence against immigrant women in their intimate relationships in their new homeland [1,58,87].

Terrorism is used to describe various strategies adopted by immigrant women's partners to control their financial power and freedom [1]. Immigrant women were open to discussing how they were pressured to open joint accounts that only gave their partners access to their financial sources. Whereas the participants were pressured to work as soon as they arrived in Canada, this study showed that their partners still controlled their finances to perpetually keep them in their abusive relationships [88,89].

All the participants in this study reported that their partners controlled their financial resources (child tax benefits inclusive) and sometimes impersonated them to take money from the Canadian system. Participants' narratives also revealed that immigrant men threatened divorce to get money from their in-laws who lived in their countries of origin since divorce could be used as a weapon of shame in their culture. As indicated in the study, when women are divorced, they bring shame to their parents. To avoid being shamefaced, the victims' parents often yielded to the request of their sons-in-law by sending the requested amount to them in Canada. Below are some of the excerpts from the participants' narratives on their financial terrorism and joint account experiences. In relating her joint-account financial abuse, Amelia said.....

*When I came here, he insisted on opening a joint account...I didn't read any laws about Canada. He put me under stress, find job, find job. But he doesn't want to pay any penny. I am paying all the expenses and I can't find any money like you know you have your daily expenses like you want to buy water buy something. And even I'm scared to ask him. But like I told him leave for me some money. He told me "No, you don't need money. You use money wrongly. (Amelia, 30-49 years).*

For Allia, her parents had to send the requested money to her partner in Canada to protect their family image. Narrating her financial terrorism experience, she said.....

*He called my parents and asked for money, otherwise, he said, "If your parents will not give the money, I will give you the divorce (Allia, 30-49 years).*

For Becky, her partner impersonated her to access the child tax benefits. Telling her story of impersonation and physical abuse for challenging her husband, she stated that...

*First thing that happened after we moved here was, he applied for child benefits. He filled out the form and he actually did fraud, because he did my signature without my permission. When he came home, and I asked him, "You shouldn't have copied my signature", he physically abused me. He pushed my head into the wall and choked me...turned to his son and threw the son against the wall. (Becky, 30-49 years).*

### **Reverberated Oppression**

Reverberated oppression is defined as the oppression received by IPV victims from their conjectured support and safety network. This presumed safety network includes parents, friends, uncles, aunts, siblings, in-laws, and cultural and religious groups [1]. In this context, these presumed supports reinforced the victims' oppression in their intimate relationships through their actions and inactions. Studies have highlighted the concept of blaming the victims as concerning in intimate relationships since victims are blamed for either staying in their abusive relationships or responsible for inciting aggression ([1,90-93].

Whereas the concept of blaming the victims in the IPV context could be done by anyone including service providers,

this study distinguished reverberated oppression from blaming the victims, given that this involves direct participation of the presumed support network in the abuse process. The study showed that immigrant women experienced physical, emotional, and psychological abuse from friends, parents, religious group members, and cultural groups.

Even though mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law were also victims of cultural abuse, they also played the roles of abusers since their positions empowered them to bully their daughters-in-law. As shown in the study, some mothers-in-law, brothers-in-law, and sisters-in-law directly participated in the physical, psychological, and financial abuse of immigrant women in Canada.

Despite their knowledge of the cultural implications of divorce, mothers-in-law still encouraged their sons to divorce their partners to humiliate them and their families. According to the participants, in some situations, their mothers-in-law demonstrated total support for their sons by denying their abusive behaviours towards their partners. Therefore, the female in-laws' empowerment in intimate relationships could not be isolated from the masculine cultural-induced power [19,31,94]. Given that some immigrant women in intimate partner violence relationships live with their big in-law family members, isolation from the community resources may keep them in perpetual violent relationships. Whereas parental disapproval of divorce has contributed to the mortality of immigrant women in violent relationships, participants reported that their parents encouraged forever marital relationships to avoid family shame and humiliation [1,62,95]. This was another common experience by all the twenty- seven participants. Relating to this theme are some of the participants' stories shown below:

*His mother was always with him even when he was wrong. She even taught him bad things—like ways to treat me or bad things to do to me. She never stood by me. In any chance that she got, she would tell him, "Divorce her", "send her back to her family, to her parents". She played the biggest role in creating problems...when it comes to my culture; I did not get any support. All I got was negative energy and talking that affected my well-being. People didn't talk to me, they didn't talk to my family. They were blaming me for what I did. He's a man, I shouldn't put him in prison or report him Even my friends, my very close friends, blocked me. (Sarah, 18-29 years).*

*When they started within their relationship, she will report and my mom will tell her. She will run away and come to our place they will send her back. They would say no, no, it's your husband. You married for better and for worse. So all those things made my sister ended up being killed. (Samantha, 50-69 years).*

### **Women's Independence and Protection Services as Catalysts for IPV**

All the participants' narratives showed the lack of protective services for immigrant women in their countries of origin. In as much as patriarchal culture is embedded in the available protective services, immigrant women are obligated to honor their partners. Migrating to Canada has changed the

context of safety and independence for immigrant women in their abusive relationships. Notwithstanding, protecting victims from their partners who have culturally been the final decision-makers may incite aggression toward them [1].

Referring to Canada as a “free country”, participants said that the Canadian freedom culture has helped in restoring their voices in their relationships by making personal decisions on what is best for them without consulting their parents and partners. Although immigrant women’s independence and autonomy might not be culturally accepted by their partners and parents, these contributed to their empowerment and made them feel like “human beings”. As noted in this study, Canadian culture assists in reversing the negative self-definition of immigrant women as narrated by Amelia, who said in her narrative that “I am not a human being. Whatever creature without any knowledge or dimensions or any dissension you can put me under”.

Unlike their experiences in their countries of origin, participants disclosed mixed perspectives in their engagement with the police. While some reported they were not supported due to language barriers [96,97], others found the engagement of the police supportive during physical altercations. In addition, some participants reported they were re-oppressed by Child and Family Services’ providers and legal aid lawyers because of their gender and race. The participants stated that child and family services workers and legal aid lawyers demonstrated unfair treatment towards them as they were pressured to consent to some decisions against their will in support of their abusive partners [92]. For example, Amelia reported that the school social worker insisted that her ex-partner who was emotionally abusive to her children and had just been released from prison should be allowed to see her son without her permission. In her story, she said “My ex-husband was released from jail, he went to school. and CFS call to the school and told them that the father he should see his kids, but he was fighting with them as well”.

Relative to past studies, this study also identified women’s independence and availability of protection services as remedies to intimate partner violence among immigrant families [97,98]. Nonetheless, the study also established immigrant women’s independence and protection services as catalysts for continued violence against immigrant women in Canada. The study revealed that immigrant men used the systems to exert power and control over immigrant women despite the protection services and rights to decision-making. Immigrant men’s systemic knowledge is sometimes due to their roles as the principal applicants [99]. Once their applications are approved most of them live for a few years in Canada before their partners’ arrival. Therefore, accord immigrant men the opportunity to explore the Canadian system, which may be wittily used against them. In narrating their stories of abuse in relation to their independence and interactions with protection services, some of the participants said...

*When he sees differences like I have my own place, I can work or study, and now I have my own car, it’s going to be hurtful for him. (Joan, 30-49 years).*

*At this point, the policeman told me, “Okay, we need to leave now”. Take your clothes. We are going to go to a safe place. We went to a shelter. (Ella, 30-49 years).*

*And she (legal aid lawyer) tried to do her best to make me um not asking for any rights, just only child support and make joint custody and don’t ask for money, don’t ask for anything I sit in these circles for two years...The system really is abusing me...I can’t focus on my health. I need to find a job. (Amelia, 30-49 years).*

As narrated by the participants, immigrant men manipulated Canadian service providers against immigrant women since they were familiar with the operational process of the systems.

Supplementarily, immigrant women felt that their abusive partners prevented them from benefitting from the support system to repossess or deprive them of access to financial support from the government by reporting them as people with mental health problems to the police [100]. Studies have shown the conflict among immigrant families over the child tax benefits intended to support primary caregivers (mostly mothers) in caring for their children [100-102]. However, as reported by some participants in this study, immigrant women are often reported to the child and family services by their partners for being abusive parents and therefore, fight for sole custody of their children to receive child tax benefits. On the other hand, one of the financial controlling tactics used by immigrant women’s abusive partners is demonstrated in their parenting avoidance and child support payment which may also jeopardize immigrant women’s financial independence due to parenting responsibilities [103,104].

Although the participants reported that immigrant men perceived Canada as a women’s country, they also believed this was so because immigrant women were proactive in working in any field to support their families [105]. At the same time, immigrant women stated that systemic discrimination against their partners’ expertise additionally triggered violence against them in their relationships. The Canadian systemic racism against immigrant men’s professionalism continues to lead to the downward mobility of immigrant men and transference of frustration and anger [97,106-108] toward immigrant women which conversely affects their independence and autonomy, most especially since these women still love their partners but not the violence [1].

### **Participants’ Self-Perception and Self-Actualization in Canada**

Aside from the perceived independence and autonomy of decision-making of immigrant and refugee women within the Canadian culture, the Canadian culture also enlivens the immigrant and refugee women’s self-perception and self-definition. The study revealed that the Canadian cultural context changed the participants’ self-definition and self-perception as voiceless and powerless to self-advocators and achievers. Participants advised they were motivated to maximize their potential to create their desired selfhood. The right-based Canadian society empowered immigrant women to pursue and achieve individualized goals without any influence from their partners, parents, or service providers.

The discourse of power has always been within the context of the created culture of gender and masculinity [109,110]. This, for decades has contributed to women’s-

imposed identities. However, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights [111] has recreated the context of rights that challenges women's domination and misuse of power at the familial and systemic levels to protect the vulnerable. While some countries see women's rights as impracticable due to their cultural and religious practices, Canada has been perceived as a practitioner of human rights. Whereas immigrant women reported mixed experiences in their contacts with Canadian systems, the participants still felt that the Canadian culture empowered them to achieve selfhood. Below are some of the narratives of the participants:

*...And now that I have a voice, I can say no because the rules have to be followed. (Tricia, 30-49 years).*

*I have the power that was my own power. Yes, because I refused to do the abortion. I told him no. Women are aware of our right now. That you have right to make their own decision. They have right to...I mean keep their own money and they have right to kind of have a say into decision-making within the family. It's not just like back home (Olivia, 30-49 years).*

According to Markus and Oyserman [112], self-perception precedes self-actualization. In this study, immigrant women attested to the empowering feature of the Canadian to self-redefinition and self-discovery. Immigrant women regained their voices and self-esteem in their piety to self-actualization [113,114]. Contrary to their perceptions as slaves in their familial culture, immigrant women demonstrated self-efficacy through self-discovery and achieved their educational and financial goals.

### **Implications for Social Work Education, Practice and Research, Other Service Provisions and Policy**

The study revealed the impacts of living within the dual contextual cultural settings on immigrant women's self-definition and the violence they experienced from their partners and some expected support system. The study showed that the fluidity of cultures enabled immigrant and refugee women to redefine themselves to achieve self-actualization and self-fulfillment when acculturated with new cultural norms. These empowering Canadian cultural and social norms include the legislation that accords equal rights and protects women irrespective of their race and ethnicity. This legislation includes the 1995 Employment Equity Act [115] and the Export and Import Act Permits and Criminal Codes ([116], chapter 26). Section 8 of this legislation was specifically added to protect women against gender-based violence.

While immigrant women perceived themselves as slaves within their culture, living within the Canadian culture of rights and independence created a thirst for self-actualization for immigrant women. The adoption of the two anti-colonial and anti-oppressive theoretical lenses in the data collection and analytical process facilitated the identification of the immigrant women's intersectional oppression in their familial and systemic interactions. The outcome of this study showed its relevance to the previous studies and its implications for social work education, research, practice, health systems, and service provisions.

As discovered in this study, the role of culture in the oppression of immigrant women at both the familial and systemic levels could not be circumvented. According to the participants, immigrant women felt voiceless and invisible in the decision-making process that pertained to their lives in their intimate relationships and their interactions with service providers. Therefore, it is imperative that social work education should include immigrant-related courses in their curricula. By this, the prospective practitioners would understand the continuity of immigrant women's oppression across cultures due to their gender, cultural expectations, masculine hegemony, and Canada's implicit systemic discrimination and racism. Understanding the systemic cultural roles in the oppression of immigrant women and their partners would also enable reflective practices that treat immigrant women as human beings with freedom and equal dignity and rights irrespective of their race, color, gender, or ethnicity, according to articles 1 and 2 of human rights [111]. Learning about immigrants and immigration will enhance the understanding of the service providers on the impacts of victimization on immigrant women's mental health. As highlighted above, using African feminism and critical cultural theories enabled the critiques of both the familial and systemic cultures that enhanced the oppression of immigrant women and their partners in Canada. These theories also created an allyship environment, where power was shared between the researcher and the participants. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of immigrants' oppression could only be achieved through future studies, by decolonizing immigrant-related studies, and by adopting an anti-colonial approach.

Given the re-oppression of immigrant and refugee women by child and family services, the police, and the legal aid lawyers, support services should consider the inclusion of immigrant women's perspectives in their services and avoid band-aid services for quick closure of files.

As narrated in this study, most of the service providers that attended to the participants in their abusive relationships were outside their races. This, from the perspectives of the participants, contributed to their voicelessness and invisibility in the decision-making process despite their literacy levels. For instance, two participants expressed their displeasure with the police officers. One of them, Ella, reported that she called the police to report physical abuse from her partner towards her son. However, because she could not speak English fluently, the police officer listened to her partner, who presented her as someone with mental problems. In her story, she said "He hit my child everywhere...he closed the door in order that the fingers are broken, when the police arrived, my ex-husband started to lie, one police believed me, but others don't believe because I can't speak English very well". This incident was reported to the Child and Family Services for further investigation. This lends credence to the importance of culturally sensitive service provision to the migrant population [117]. To prevent the continuity of the racist service provision, it is suggested that more minority service providers be employed, while training on cultural-sensitive service provision should be mandated for service providers. It is mostly common that training on culture is delivered by mainstream training "specialists" who are ignorant of immigrant communities' cultures. Therefore, such pieces of training should be anchored by insiders who understand immigrant people's culture.

Due to the small sample number of participants, future studies with a large sample number should explore the perspectives of immigrant women's child custody battle with legal aid lawyers. Additionally, since language barrier was highlighted as a contributing factor to the denial of abuse by immigrant men during the police intervention, it is suggested that the preferred language of communication should be required from the victim of abuse during emergency calls. This will allow the IPV victims to relate their stories to the police with no interruption or manipulation from their abusive partners. The research also revealed the irony of the immigrant women's support system in their relationships and the provocation of violence by the provision of protective services in Canada due to the contrasting perceived rights of women to be protected.

Given these circumstances, immigration officials should provide information on intimate partner violence and resource information to immigrant women at the point of entry and mandate training on these topics for newcomers. The narratives on financial terrorism and joint accounts also showed the effect of power and control over immigrant women within and outside Canada. This notion emanates from the culturally apportioned power of men as the head of the families. Despite their commitment to supporting their families in Canada, immigrant women still struggled financially since they could not access their bank accounts. It is therefore suggested that the banking system should create educational sessions for immigrant women on banking systems in Canada and support them to open individual accounts even if they still have joint accounts with their partners. Bank service providers should also be educated on immigrant and refugee issues with an emphasis on the impacts of culture on power and responsibilities, and observation of immigrant women's non-verbal cues during service provision. Participants' narratives on reverberated oppression emphasized the importance of a support system when working with immigrant women in abusive relationships. Therefore, collaboratively creating a safety and support network should be an important aspect of intervention with immigrant women. Practitioners should encourage engagement with immigrant women in abusive relationships outside their homes. This will enable the victims to discuss their abusive experiences without fear of being controlled by family members. Finally, organizing training for immigrant associations and religious organizations is imperative in mitigating violence against immigrant women since most victims feel more comfortable accessing their support services than using the mainstream services.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

Whereas the participants found the study empowering, they also found the process of telling their stories as triggers to their past trauma. Additionally, the pandemic breakout limited the participants' number because of the closure of the community organizations and no contact health policy. Some participants were also exempted from this study due to a lack of access to computers and privacy. Even though the twenty-seven participants were from sixteen countries, the findings in this study could not be generalized to represent all immigrant women in IPV relationships from these countries and other immigrant women. These findings only represent the experiences of the participants in the study.

### **Declarations**

#### **Acknowledgments**

This study was funded by the University of Manitoba Faculty of Social Work Endowment Fund I appreciate the support of Professor Michael Baffoe for his inexorable supervision of my PhD program. I also thank Dr. Maureen Flaherty, Dr. Judy Hughes, and Dr. Rusty Souleymanov for their time spent proofreading this article.

#### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

This study was approved by the University of Manitoba Human Ethics Board.

#### **Competing Interest**

There was no competing interest regarding this study.

#### **Funding**

This study was funded by the Faculty of Social Work Endowment Fund.

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- Received date:** December 29, 2023; **Accepted date:** February 27, 2024; **Published date:** February 29, 2024
- Citation:** Akinyele-Akanbi BF (2024) Caught in The Webs of Culture: The Implication of a Dual Cultural Setting for Self-definition of Immigrant Women in IPV Relationships in Canada. *J Soc Work Prac Educ* 1(1): 102.
- Copyright:** Akinyele-Akanbi BF (2024) Caught in The Webs of Culture: The Implication of a Dual Cultural Setting for Self-definition of Immigrant Women in IPV Relationships in Canada. *J Soc Work Prac Educ* 1(1): 102.