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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that this work took place in Unceded Algonquin Territory.

We also acknowledge that the prevalence and ways gender-based violence manifests in our communities are a reflection that the place we live and work in was shaped by settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. The Canadian colonial and imperial project can be seen through the ongoing displacement, extermination, and extraction of both the lands and people, here and globally. This violence is continued towards the air we breathe, the water we drink, and flora and fauna we rely on for healthy biodiversity.

Conversations on precarious immigration status are conversations on how states can determine belonging in ways that do not reflect what it means to be in community. Indigenous Peoples have continued to lead in demanding reciprocal relationships with both human and non-human kin.

Efforts to end gender-based violence is ultimately the work of remaking the world to no longer be one where power is inequitably distributed. There are no shortcuts to this transformative work and Indigenous sovereignty and

liberation must be at the heart of these actions.

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This work builds on the decades of resistance from Black, Indigenous, racialized, migrant, disabled, and queer radical feminists. Their analysis, theories, and organizing have shaped conversations on gender-based violence and made it possible to envision how to end violence.

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Executive Summary

In Ottawa, survivors, frontline workers, and advocates have been raising the urgent need for transformative action to address gender-based violence (*Kimiya Project Lab Inc., 2023*). At a municipal level, the City of Ottawa's Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Plan identifies a need for an alternative non-police reporting tool for gender-based violence (GBV). At a provincial level, the Government of Ontario declared intimate partner violence to be an endemic public safety concern in November 2025 (*Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2025*). Despite the noted concerns by governments and the recognition that alternatives to policing is both wanted and needed, the policy conversations on GBV remains saturated with a reliance on police, courts, and prisons as the primary means through which to prevent violence.

This research was conducted in direct response to the growing calls for alternatives to legal and police-based reporting tools and responses. The goal was to understand how systemic and institutional responses fail survivors and identify what transformative responses require to ensure that they do not replicate the same shortcomings we see from mainstream legal and police-based responses. Temporary and precarious forms of citizenship introduce vulnerability to violence in people's lives by limiting the resources and power they can access. To understand precarity in relation to GBV, this focused on racialized, immigrant, refugees, and non-status survivors' experiences of GBV in Ottawa. The research engaged directly with community members with lived experience of precarious immigration, frontline workers, and advocates through interviews and focus groups.

Key Findings

The role of immigration status: The main findings of this research project re-affirm what previous studies have demonstrated on how precarious immigration status shapes an individual's entire life. People who are seeking more permanent forms of citizenship filter their decision-making around its perceived impact on their immigration claim, including when navigating situations of GBV. When reflecting on GBV in their lives and communities, research participants shared that immigration precarity introduced vulnerability in their lives that exposed them to male violence in their

intimate relationships, in the workplace, and in everyday interactions with people in the community. Immigration precarity also limited their options for seeking help safely, with many noting the continuum of violence introduced by other power imbalances that oppressed them based on their identities.

Barriers to seeking help: Barriers to seeking help navigating violence were varied and ranged from information gaps and not knowing where or how to access support, to concerns that any record of them seeking and requiring help may ultimately reflect negatively on an immigration claim. Participants further described striving to continuously present as an ideal immigration candidate and felt that experiencing violence in Canada could be interpreted as them being an unsuitable candidate for citizenship or jeopardize their ability to sponsor additional family members.

Legal responses to GBV: The resources and supports that exist for GBV, especially intimate partner and sexual violence, are heavily integrated within the police and legal systems. For many Black, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, and immigrant survivors, involving police and courts is the only option to receive help and validation of their experiences. Often, it is not a safe option to access. The experiences of individuals who have never found safety within the legal system reveal the need to move beyond a reliance on predominantly legal responses to meet their safety needs. Sustained investment in the capacity of community-based alternatives is essential, not as a peripheral “add-on” to the current system, but as fully realized, standalone solutions.

Reliance on community-based supports: Ultimately, many newcomers and immigrant survivors were more likely to access support from within their community due to language and cultural barriers, restricted mobility and access, and lack of information among other barriers. Participants’ experiences with informal responses were mixed, with some people sharing experiences of life-saving support and others describing coercion and exploitation as a result of reaching out for help while in a vulnerable social position.

Providing community based-supports: Informal peer responses and organized community-based responses differed because of the value framework that underpins how support is offered. Conversations with people who offered those community-based responses revealed an incredible depth of knowledge

on how to navigate challenging situations from culturally-safe and consent-based frameworks. However, too few people were in a position to offer the sustained support that people in crisis often require, particularly without dedicated resources and competing responsibilities in their lives.

Ways Forward – Recommendations and Next Steps

Feminist research on the root causes of violence highlight that violence is endemic to a hierarchical social order that discriminates based on gender, race, sexuality, ability, and citizenship. Ending violence is possible, but it requires us to examine the power structures and systemic conditions at play that create the space for violence to happen, as well as the so-called responses that only work to continue the cycles of violence.

The following recommendations build off and reiterate past and current demands put forward by advocates, frontline workers, and sector experts that all levels of government have failed to act on. This list of recommendations is multi-sectoral but not comprehensive and is intended primarily to reflect the main findings from this research.

Municipal:

- Provide stable, multi-year municipal funding for peer-led mutual aid and mentorship networks that offer navigation and practical supports.
- Fund accompaniment-based service navigation programs so residents are actively supported between services, not only provided referrals.
- Fund the development of community-led non-police violence interruption and conflict resolution options as part of the municipality's community safety response.
- Prioritize the expansion of city-run childcare spaces with inclusive hours to accommodate parents who work non-traditional hours, are enrolled in school, and navigating diverse responsibilities.
- Recognize that safety is built through access to resources and the equalization of power dynamics, and de-center the Ottawa Police Service in discussions of GBV to reflect a holistic understanding of violence, safety, and prevention.

Provincial:

- Expand eligibility criteria for provincial income benefits to ensure that accessing supports does not require proof of residence or immigration status.
- Reduce barriers for survivors leaving violence and lower the risk of gendered victimization associated with hidden homelessness by investing across the full spectrum of housing options to increase the availability of non-profit and public housing.
- Invest in primary care and publicly funded community health clinics that do not limit access to service to insured patients or require identification to access healthcare and mental health care.
- Provide sustained core funding to organizations that are working toward GBV prevention and responses. This supports the provision of long-term and stable supports for community members.
- Expand legal-aid supports for survivors navigating the legal system to include family law, criminal law, immigration law as well as appeals to judicial decisions
- Provide trauma-informed legal interpretation supports across all legal services to ensure survivors understand their rights and the legal processes and can meaningfully exercise those rights.
- Amend education curricula to include consent education for children and youth in grades from kindergarten to Grade 12, as well as for students in adult education programs and post-secondary institutions.
- Establish and provide long-term funding for community-based healing spaces that are independent from the criminal legal system and not embedded within diversion, court-mandated, or correctional programs.

Federal:

- Reform existing regularization programs to ensure policies are comprehensive and inclusive (see Alliance for Gender Justice in Migration for more comprehensive policy positions statements on immigration reform):
- Ensure access to short-term regularization programs to reduce vulnerability to GBV and all forms of abuse and exploitation
- Ensure that pathways to permanent resident status and citizenship are embedded into all immigration policies.

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Introduction

People have always come together as communities to dream of, fight for, and work towards violence-free futures. The ability to remember that societies have not always been structured as we know them today—and that they can change—is a difficult but vital skill to have in order to move us toward liberatory futures. These lessons are rooted in the Black Radical Tradition and Indigenous political resurgence and resistance and offer valuable insights into how we can transform our current circumstances (*Betasamosake Simpson, 2020; Kelley, 2003*).

Despite continuous struggle to better our collective futures, many people, if not most, continue to live at the intersection of multiple axes of violence. In order to better understand how we can move from being a city where gender-based violence is rampant to a city free from violence, we narrowed our scope to focus on the community-level and on lived trends and needs. With an increase of gendered violence and even lethality in Ottawa—with seven femicides since the start of 2024—experts, advocates and frontline service providers the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW), the Canadian Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD), and Interval House of Ottawa (IHO) came together to build on collective research and action on gender-based violence (GBV).

Gender-based violence is violence that is inflicted on a person or a group of people based on their gender (*Whynacht, 2021*). It encompasses a massive spectrum of violence in all of its forms, physical, sexual, spiritual, and political, that can be carried out by a multitude of actors, including the state and state institutions, strangers, family members, and employers. Intimate partner and familial violence are pervasive forms of GBV that are generally

understood to take place primarily between current or ex-intimate partners, and parents or caregivers. Increasingly, experts, advocates, and service

providers are hearing and experiencing first-hand the limitations and even observing harm of having access to primarily mainstream approaches to violence prevention, response, and interruption tools



—as well as mainstream pathways to healing and justice like policing and the legal system.

We see the continuous practice of community-based and transformative responses to GBV at a communal level daily—a friend helping a friend leave an abusive relationship, a neighbour knocking on their neighbour’s door when they hear shouting, a colleague intervening when their co-worker is being harassed—yet mainstream and institutional responses to these same crises remain dominated by legal and enforcement-based responses. The existing responses have consequently been largely inadequate, and even harmful, for many marginalized communities who cannot rely on or trust these systems. Since mainstream responses continue to dominate the supports available to people experiencing GBV, a meaningful discussion on alternatives to the current criminal-legal responses has been missing from the mainstream anti-violence discourse and in our community. This disconnect has led to many calls for change and the need to discuss building capacity for alternative and transformative responses to gender-based violence.

In our research, we focus on the communities most likely to experience gender-based violence who are also the least likely to want to or be able to rely on institutional responses. Racialized immigrant, refugee and non-status women and gender-diverse people are vulnerable to violence in Canada due to the material conditions they are likely to experience, and the limited pathways available to access support (*Chan, 2020*). For example, in a context where someone is dependent on an abuser for income or housing, ending that abuse can be particularly challenging if the survivor is not legally allowed to work due to their immigration status. Similarly, a person may be even more reluctant to seek help if they think the recording of a violent experience, even one where they have been victimized, could negatively impact their immigration process. In addition, many migrants have experiences of gender-based violence prior to their arrival in Canada which also shapes their experiences in Canada.

The past few years have been marked by a persistent interest and commitment from residents and the City of Ottawa and city services to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (*Kimiya Project Lab Inc., 2023*). The City of Ottawa’s Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Plan includes GBV as one of seven key priority areas, with alternative, non-police

reporting tools as one of the goals identified by residents. A key strategy to achieve this goal is strengthening capacity for community accountability mechanisms in the city. To support this work, a three-year GBV action plan is being developed by OCTEVAW in collaboration with the CSWB GBV Advisory Group and sector partners. A significant portion of the plan's investment ask focuses on community-led prevention, including grassroots initiatives that build non-legal responses to GBV. This approach is rooted in violence prevention and enhancing community and individual wellbeing through collaboration with community members and municipal partners. In order to support and continue these efforts, we hope to build on the finding that impacted communities are seeking alternative responses to policing as a way to prevent, respond to, and interrupt GBV by diving into what that means for targeted communities. In our project, we examine the ways gender-based violence (GBV) interacts with state violence to understand how these forms of harm feed and reinforce one another. We focus on the GBV and state interaction in order to understand how the state's actions (e.g., migration policies and enforcement practices) as well as inactions (e.g., insufficient supports and lack of investment in to safety and well-being of all) may create conditions that increase vulnerability to GBV, worsen instances of GBV, and in some cases even reproduce gendered violence. We aim to identify how transformative responses to GBV must therefore address both individual and structural dimensions of violence.

Our broader community-based research goals are to:

- 1. Explore Non-Carceral Alternatives:** Identify and understand the non-legal and anti-carceral responses to GBV being practiced or sought by non-status, immigrant, refugee, and racialized communities in Ottawa.
- 2. Understand Systems and Services Coordination:** Examine how individuals and communities navigate their reliance on legal and criminal-legal (carceral) systems when seeking support for GBV, with particular attention to how these systems influence trust, access, safety, and well-being outcomes.

- 3. Amplify Survivor and Community Voices:** Center the lived experiences of survivors, community members, and service providers to co-create knowledge and community-driven solutions.
- 4. Address Institutional Reliance:** Highlight the systemic dependence of various institutions on carceral systems, and how this dependence shapes the development of community-based interventions. This dependence constrains the care available to survivors and perpetuates punitive approaches to GBV that target individuals rather than the conditions that enable violence.

We begin by presenting the literature that outlines the current context in which supports for GBV are provided, including the limitations of existing approaches, particularly for those whose intersecting identities and experiences heighten their precarity and vulnerability. This is followed by a brief description of transformative justice frameworks. We then outline the methodological approach used to ground this project, before presenting the findings from our discussions with experts: community members, advocates, and frontline support workers—many of whom bring lived expertise. The report concludes with a discussion section that integrates these findings and reflects on their implications for transformative, community-based responses to GBV. The research team advanced this research project with the guidance and feedback of a community-based Advisory Committee (AC). The AC includes frontline workers, advocates, and community members who are actively involved in the work of responding to and shaping discussions around the prevention of gender-based violence. Their contributions have allowed the research to remain grounded in the practical realities of people navigating the issues discussed in this research.

Literature Review

Many critical scholars have worked to document and explain the relationship between intimate partner and familial violence, and the state. Scholars have argued that the state creates and perpetuates the conditions that create state violence (*Acheson, 2022; Spearman et al., 2023*). Others have pointed out that the state uses similar tactics of violence, coercion, surveillance, and control as abusers do in order to maintain control over a person (*Whynacht, 2021*). The acknowledgement that the state sets the conditions for violence and that it carries it out in its own right has led to many calling on the removal of the state in domestic violence responses, as it is proven to exacerbate instances of harm and fails to create safety for survivors (*Davis et al., 2022; Goodmark, 2023; Richie, 2012; Thuma, 2024*). Research shows that the harmful effects of legal responses to GBV are intensified for marginalized victims, and that expanding reliance on the legal system to address such violence will disproportionately harm Black and Indigenous people (*Mosher et al., 2025*).

The Continuum of Violence is a theory that highlights that GBV is experienced personally and systemically, and is ubiquitous across countries, cultures, and time (*Kelly, 1987*). This recognition is important, as it highlights how the normalized, daily experiences of GBV intersect with more acute experiences. This creates violence in both the private and public spheres of women's lives. While the original theory on the continuum of violence focused heavily on white women who had survived intimate partner violence, it has since been expanded to include gender diverse people and women of different ethnicities, abilities, and other identities. Research on the continuum of violence that migrant women in Canada face before, during, and after migration highlights the role of the state and immigration policies as a normalized and pervasive form of violence (*Sisic et al., 2024*).

Building on the Continuum of Violence as a way to understand how GBV takes shape on the day-to-day, the Violence Matrix is a theoretical model developed by Beth E. Richie that aims to account for the complexity of gender violence in marginalized communities, drawing on her analysis Black women's experiences in the United States (*Richie, 2022*). The basis of the theoretical model designed to understand how state-sanctioned violence and systemic

oppression contribute to the experience and impact of domestic violence. Richie (2022) aims to break down the siloing of issues, effectively linking what is perceived as “everyday injustices” with intimate partner violence. Together, these frameworks underscore that gender-based violence is both personal and structural, requiring responses that address its full social and systemic dimensions.

Figure 1: The Violence Matrix, Beth E. Richie

The Violence Matrix	Physical Assault	Sexual Assault	Social Disenfranchisement
Intimate Households	1. Direct physical assaults by intimate partners or household members, victim retaliation	2. Sexual aggression by intimate partners or household members	3. Emotional abuse and manipulation by intimate partners or household members, forced use of drugs and alcohol, isolation, economic abuse
Community	4. Assault by neighbors, lack of bystander intervention, availability of weapons	5. Sexual harassment, acquaintance rape, gang rape, trafficking into the sex industry	6. Degrading comments, hostile neighborhood conditions, hostile or unresponsive school and work environments, residential segregation, lack of social capital, threat of violence
Social Sphere	7. Stranger assault, state violence (such as police), lack of gun control policies	8. Stranger rape, coerced sterilization, unwanted exposure to pornography	9. Negative media images, denial of significance of victimization, degrading encounters with religious institutions and public agencies, victim blaming, lack of affordable housing, lack of employment and health care, mistrust of public agencies, poverty

Source: Richie, 2022

The Feminist Anti-Violence Movement

Dating back to the 1970s, the feminist movement in the West sought to end GBV through a deeply politicized movement that explicitly named patriarchal violence as a root cause of violence (Kim, 2020a). Feminists were able to effectively shift the perception of domestic violence as exclusively a private issue towards a public and social issue (Gruber, 2021). The neoliberal economic agenda gaining widespread popularity across North America meant the state was moving out of welfare provision. Therefore gaining state support and funding to run shelters and provide resources for women impacted by domestic violence was an uphill battle (Sweet, 2021a).

As public support for programming was rapidly falling, securing resources meant working within frameworks that were palatable to the state. The anti-violence movement was largely depoliticized, and leaned heavily on white victimhood tropes (Gruber, 2021; Sweet, 2021a). This process is sometimes referred to as the “*carceral creep*” where social movements collaborate with the carceral state, and in doing so embody and sustain the racist, classist, and gendered narratives that uphold the state and harm marginalized people (Kim, 2020a).

This dynamic shows how the carceral state can actively reproduce harm, shaping who is deemed a “*worthy*” victim and who remains vulnerable. The criminalization of survivors of gender-based violence refers to when people who experience violence are themselves punished when seeking help and are arrested, incarcerated or otherwise punished (Goodmark, 2023). Goodmark (2023) theorized in depth how the carceral system is especially punitive towards what she calls “imperfect” victims—victims who do not fit the societal view of victim, norms which are generally ubiquitous with white middle-class womanhood. This leaves racialized, poor, migrant women outside of the protective apparatus and instead on the receiving end of violence of the carceral state (Hlavka & Mulla, 2021; Richie, 2012; Sweet, 2021a).

Although many have sought reforms to address how survivors are criminalized, these efforts still assume that the carceral system itself is necessary (Goodmark, 2023). Survival actions, ranging from self-defence to participating in illegal activities to avoid violence, are criminalized (Beck &

Estes, 2025; Duhaney, 2021). In some cases, the survivor is sometimes directly held responsible for the actions of the abuser, particularly in cases where children are involved and the parent being abused is perceived as not having done enough to protect their children (*Spearman et al., 2023; Stoevers, 2019*).

The Tensions between Reform and Abolition

The limits of punitive approaches are evident in Canada's push to criminalize coercive control, which illustrates how legal reforms often absorb anti-violence demands without addressing the underlying causes of gender-based violence (*Mosher et al., 2025*). Mosher (2009) describes the state as being complicit with the individuals who perpetrate gender-based violence, in part through the ways they make women less safe and secure despite being assumed to be an ally to abused women through their ability to punish individual men. Elizabeth Bernstein coined the term carceral feminism in 2007 to describe feminist demands that expand and legitimize state-led punitive responses to gendered violence and to highlight the fracture in what feminists even include within the umbrella of violence against women (*Bernstein, 2007*). Since then, critiques of carceral feminism have expanded significantly and encompass both explicitly pro-criminalization demands (e.g. harsher sentencing, expanded scope of criminalized behaviours) and reformist demands (e.g. better training for police officers) (*Stoevers, 2019*).

In response to carceral feminism, a push towards abolition feminism is raising awareness and developing new ways of addressing gendered violence, rooted in the recognition that punishment and control are ineffective responses (*Battle & Powell, 2024; Davis et al., 2022*). Abolition feminism engages critically with gendered violence and situates it within a continuum of violence that both produces and reinforces state violence (*Davis, 2003; Parkes, 2022*). Because of the interplay between state and interpersonal violence, the state is not understood as an ally to women experiencing violence and consequently, abolitionist feminist responses look towards social transformation as the only means to producing safer outcomes (*Davis et al., 2022; Kaba, 2021; Meiners & Levine, 2021*).

Abolition feminism does not exist without its criticism, either, including that it can foster binary thinking where feminists are assigned the label of either carceral or abolitionist (*Terwiel, 2019*). Terwiel (2019) puts forward a

“*spectrum of decarceration*” along which policies and experiments can be measured. This nuance is important because the logic that underpins carceral responses are deeply integrated in every social institution, including non-state institutions, and highlights the grey areas where even grassroots efforts can be susceptible to carceral elements (*Calavita, 2015*).

Migration and Experiences of Violence

Precarious immigration status is an umbrella term that includes multiple state-defined legal status categories for people who do not have citizenship (*Dennler, 2019*). The precarity that non-citizens experience is rooted in the shared reality that their right to be present in Canada is conditional, meaning that the precarity and vulnerability produced by immigration status are institutionally produced (*Goldring & Landolt, 2012*). This can include both people with authorized forms of non-citizenship, like temporary foreign workers, international students, refugees, and asylum seekers, and people with unauthorized non-citizenship (commonly referred to as people without status or undocumented people) (*Mosher, 2023*).

‘Non-citizenship’ is a deeply heterogeneous category and many people experience periods with and without status (*Goldring & Landolt, 2012*). The precarity migrants experience is typically built into the immigration programs and pathways themselves, creating the conditions for gendered structural violence by infringing on migrants’ human rights and access to safety and dignity (*Robillard et al., 2018*). The experience of precarity as a result of immigration policy has been described as violence in and of itself, where the policies themselves create feelings of fear, pain, and harm (*Dennler, 2019*).

The Complicity of the State in GBV

Integrating an analysis of the state in conversations on domestic violence intentionally seeks to highlight how social institutions, structures, and ideologies enable GBV. This nuance is lost if our focus is restricted to the individuals who perpetrate intimate violence (*Mosher, 2009*). There is a recognition within the literature that migrants experience unique challenges when navigating gender-based violence after their arrival in Canada (*Chan, 2020*). Furthermore, peoples’ experiences of GBV after arriving in Canada do not exist in a vacuum, but rather compound previous traumatic experiences.

For example, people with precarious immigration status are at a higher risk of entering into or staying in a violent and abusive relationship, and familial violence can result in the loss of status for an individual (*Chan, 2020; Mosher, 2023*). This literature is significant to our research as domestic violence is the most common form of gender-based violence that people base their refugee claim on, demonstrating the likelihood that experiences of violence do not begin with the immigration process in Canada, nor does arriving in Canada mark an end to experiences of violence (*Chan, 2020; Shelley, 2018*).

It is well documented that systems, like the immigration system and income assistance systems “give to abusive men powerful tools that they employ to further their abuse of their intimate partners. While clearly the state did not design these regimes with this in mind, it is nevertheless complicit in the violence they enable” (*Mosher, 2009, p. 62*). This is critical as most mainstream literature recognizes that immigration-related factors can pose a barrier to seeking help, but fewer recognize that those factors can also be weaponized to contribute to the abuse. The threat of deportation that immigrants with precarious status are subjected to is a powerful mechanism of control that can be weaponized both by the state and its institutions, and by abusive men (*Alsinai et al., 2023; Mosher, 2009*). Similar to how an abusive partner can threaten deportation, abusive employers can utilize those same tools to coerce and control migrant workers (*Hung et al., 2024; Robillard et al., 2018*). The parallel between how abusive employers and partners can use the same vulnerability created by immigration status demonstrates the extent to which the problem cannot be understood through the lens of problematic or violent individuals.

GBV Responses for Migrants

Despite the high number of immigrant women experiencing domestic violence in Canada, policies that are developed to prevent or address this violence rarely consider the specific challenges and barriers that someone who is not a Canadian citizen might encounter. Reports that have followed intimate partner homicides have included recommendations, some of which aim to address the challenges that immigrant women experiencing domestic violence face. Still, they have not grappled with addressing barriers that immigration status poses (*Turpel-Lafond, 2009*).

Migrants experiencing intimate partner violence face similar barriers to seeking support as non-immigrants, in addition to unique barriers. These unique barriers include language proficiencies, limited knowledge of rights and services available, and distrust in police and other institutions (*Chan, 2020*). Most tangibly, when survivors with temporary or precarious immigration status are criminalized, it can lead to deportation—especially if they lose a sponsor, have their claim denied, or face other immigration-related consequences. (*Chan, 2020*). People that do not have status and that are experiencing domestic violence frequently report fear of deportation, loss of sponsorship, and being reported to authorities as factors exacerbating and limiting access to support (*Mosher, 2009; Vasil, 2024*). These challenges co-exist with challenges that are shared broadly by non-immigrants experiencing domestic violence, such as losing access to housing or having too little income to support themselves and their dependents.

Abolitionist feminists have diligently exposed the ways in which carceral responses create disproportionately negative impacts for Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized women (*Richie, 2012*). As the laws prohibiting gender-based violence and intimate partner violence have been made stricter and expanded in scope, a growing number of victims and survivors of violence have been criminalized alongside and in place of those perpetrating the violence (*Goodmark, 2023*). Intimate partner violence experienced by immigrant women with precarious status is even more likely to go unreported if the person fears that they, their children, partner or other family members might be deported (*Richie, 2012*). In those cases, the primary response mechanism to violence becomes unavailable, leaving victims and survivors with very few recourses.

Transformative Justice Responses

Given the limitations of punitive and carceral approaches, scholars and activists are increasingly exploring transformative justice as an alternative framework that centers survivors, communities, and systemic change. Transformative justice is a movement rooted in Black women and marginalized peoples' knowledge, and one that is living and therefore continuously shifting and evolving as new collective experiments take place (*Davis et al., 2022*). Transformative justice solutions to intimate

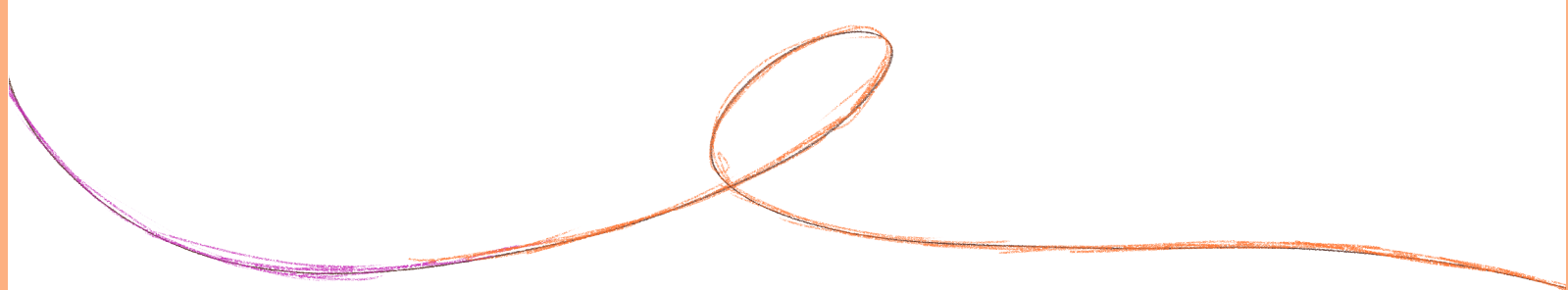
partner violence are community-based approaches which intend to repair harm between the survivor and the person who caused harm, while also transforming the social conditions under which violence continues to occur (*Sharpless et al., 2024*). Research centred on Black survivors of intimate partner violence found that many Black women had experienced police responses to intimate partner violence that made them regret seeking help, including the loss of their children following child protective services' investigations, or harm to their partners. Ultimately, survivors stressed the importance of a collective response and ensuring that supports were available for themselves, their children, and their abusers (*Sharpless et al., 2024*). Women shared housing supports as a recurring concern, as assurance that their housing would not be jeopardized by reporting meant feeling safer taking steps to end the abuse (*Sharpless et al., 2024*).

In order to move away from carceral responses to intimate partner violence, it is necessary to shift the lens through which intervention, safety, and healing are understood (*Kim, 2021*). While it is becoming clear that a demand for alternatives is present, there remains a significant gap in moving from punitive responses towards transformative ones. Social networks and community-based organizations are critical participants in transformative responses, which deviates from the current approach views institutional anti-violence services as the ideal responders (*Kim, 2021*). Important research on the barriers to implementing community-based alternatives found that many organizations struggled with the flexibility that these approaches require—unlike common service delivery models, community interventions are heavily tailored to unique needs and experiences: they are location-specific and cannot be easily replicated in different jurisdictions or for different population groups. Organizations have highlighted lacking capacity and struggling to see how transformative responses could be incorporated into their otherwise rigid organizational structures, feeling like those alternative responses may be better suited entirely to community spaces (*Kim, 2021*). In cases where organizations worked with survivors who faced a high level of danger, organizations feared that shifting their approach away from mainstream responses and toward community-based ones would be seen as a betrayal due to the potential of having survivors engage with their abusers. The fear originates from the misconception that all community-based interventions

require the person who has caused harm and the person they've harmed to work together, despite this being untrue (*Virani, 2023; Whynacht, 2021*).

It is critical to examine where alternative approaches to justice, such as transformative and restorative justice, intersect with the criminal legal system. This helps ensure that new feminist frameworks are not co-opted by the carceral state (*Terwiel, 2019*). For example, restorative justice—which has roots in Indigenous practices in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand—has often been co-opted in name by Western legal systems as a mechanism for crime diversion or alternative punishment (*Kim, 2020b*). This adaptation creates the appearance of restorative justice while allowing the existing carceral infrastructure to remain intact, effectively working with police, prisons, and courts (*Kim, 2020b*). Transformative justice, in contrast to alternatives that have already been co-opted by mainstream responses, offers potential avenues for responses beyond the state (*Virani, 2023*). Current understandings emphasize that it is fundamentally at odds with the carceral system, though past lessons from feminist anti-violence organizing caution that vigilance is needed to prevent further co-optation.

In Canada, some non-profits that serve survivors of intimate partner violence have started to opt for transformative justice practices, a development from work previously done by marginalized communities outside of formalized institutions. This development can make transformative justice responses more accessible and widespread, but also run the risk of being depoliticized and co-opted by the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). NPIC refers to a system in which organizational practices are shaped more by funding structures, regulatory requirements, and state priorities than by the needs of the communities they intend to serve (*Baird, 2023*).



Lines of Inquiry

The literature highlights the limits of carceral responses to gender-based violence (GBV) and the growing need for and interest in community-based alternatives. However, there is limited research exploring how these dynamics unfold among non-status, immigrant, refugee, and racialized communities in Ottawa. To address these gaps, the following lines of inquiry were co-developed through ongoing dialogue with the Advisory Committee (AC) to ensure the research reflects the priorities and lived experiences of impacted communities.

- 1.** What is a carceral approach, and how are non-carceral responses different?
- 2.** How do existing systems and their policies and practices (for example, in healthcare, immigration, education, social work, policing, prisons, and housing) perpetuate carceral approaches to GBV and other forms of violence?
 - o What does the entanglement with carceral systems look like for non-status individuals and newcomers, particularly for those who avoid state involvement due to fear or mistrust?
- 3.** How does policing (whether through social workers, caseworkers, or other institutional actors) shape how survivors and communities seek support?
- 4.** How can institutional dependence be identified and interrupted to create pathways for non-carceral responses?
- 5.** How are alternatives to carceral responses being practiced, and what support structures are currently missing?

Methodology

The Weaving Threads of Change project is a response to community calls and community-identified needs for ways to seek support for, respond to and prevent gender-based violence without the need to rely on policing and legal responses. Our methodological approach is grounded in elements of the experience-based co-design method, which was initially created to help improve the quality of healthcare interventions (*Fucile et al., 2017*). This approach uses a participatory design so that the people accessing and providing the interventions play a role in informing and designing improvements. This project stemmed from the frustration of community-based service providers and advocates toward increasing incidents of GBV and the recognition that police and legal responses are inadequate when it comes to preventing and eradicating violence. This project also originated from a community call for social change. This was reflected in the City of Ottawa CSWB plan, which called for an alternative to police when it came to a gender-based violence reporting tool, as well as a recognition that the policing system can be detrimental and harmful to communities (*City of Ottawa, 2025*). Therefore, this community-based research was developed to go deeper into transformative solutions to gender-based violence without the need to rely on the legal system and police. Given the central role of community, it was important for us to take the approach of Participatory Action Research (PAR). This allowed us to align the academic interests of the research with community needs and calls for social change (*Chevalier & Buckles, 2019*).

Research Paradigm

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is aligned with our overall theoretical approach to the project, which is grounded in an abolitionist feminist framework. This means that we centered our research on abolitionist feminist principles that work to interrogate the current system and state responses to gender-based violence – particularly those responses that are grounded in punishment, incarceration, and control/ This helps us to understand their role in creating and perpetuating gendered violence. Furthermore, our goals were to understand the various experiences of people who were both

navigating supports for gender-based violence, and various care systems to help inform what a move away from legal responses would need to look like. This meant that it was crucial to have the communities impacted play a key role in informing our research questions, and what the parameters of the conversations needed to be. This is why incorporating elements of the Experience Based Co-Design (EBCD) approach, as well as PAR were appropriate choices. PAR works to understand a situation with the goals of improving it or changing something (*Elliot, as cited in Chevalier & Buckles, 2019*), which has been a key goal that informed the very inception of the research project and design.

Advisory Committee and Research Team Collaboration

When we began, the first step was to establish an Advisory Committee (AC) consisting of community members and frontline workers in the gender-based violence field in Ottawa. This was done to ensure that the project's development occurred through collaboration and co-creation with people who were directly involved in offering supports to those impacted by gender-based violence, as well as the people who were navigating accessing supports for gender-based violence in the community. This included people who were navigating various institutions, such as the immigration system, the legal system, the healthcare system, and the housing system.

The AC was separate from our core Research Team (RT), which met weekly. The core research team consisted of the advisory from the Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD), two researchers from Vivic Research, as well as the project coordinator and Executive Director from the organization leading the project, OCTEVAW. The weekly meetings ensured that the research project stayed on track and allowed the team to work through the different phases of the research process collectively. The monthly meetings with the AC provided an opportunity for the RT to share project updates and receive feedback, direction, and guidance from the AC. This included support in refining the research goals and lines of inquiry, addressing ethical considerations for the project, providing feedback on the interview questions and our research protocols, and supporting the research team with outreach and engagement once the data collection phase began. They also informed the RT about the types of supports, changes and resources they

would want to see come out of the research project that would be helpful for the community members impacted by the issues this project aimed to amplify. The AC played a critical role in shaping this project and ensuring the research remained aligned with community realities, calls, and needs.

Throughout this process, there were moments when the RT reworked the interview questions or adjusted our approach to data collection in collaboration with the AC. However, there were no instances of conflicting approaches within the group. That said, we did encounter some limitations. Our ethics approval included strict parameters on how interviews and engagement could take place. These parameters were established to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, which meant that interviews were limited to individual sessions with the Vivic researchers.

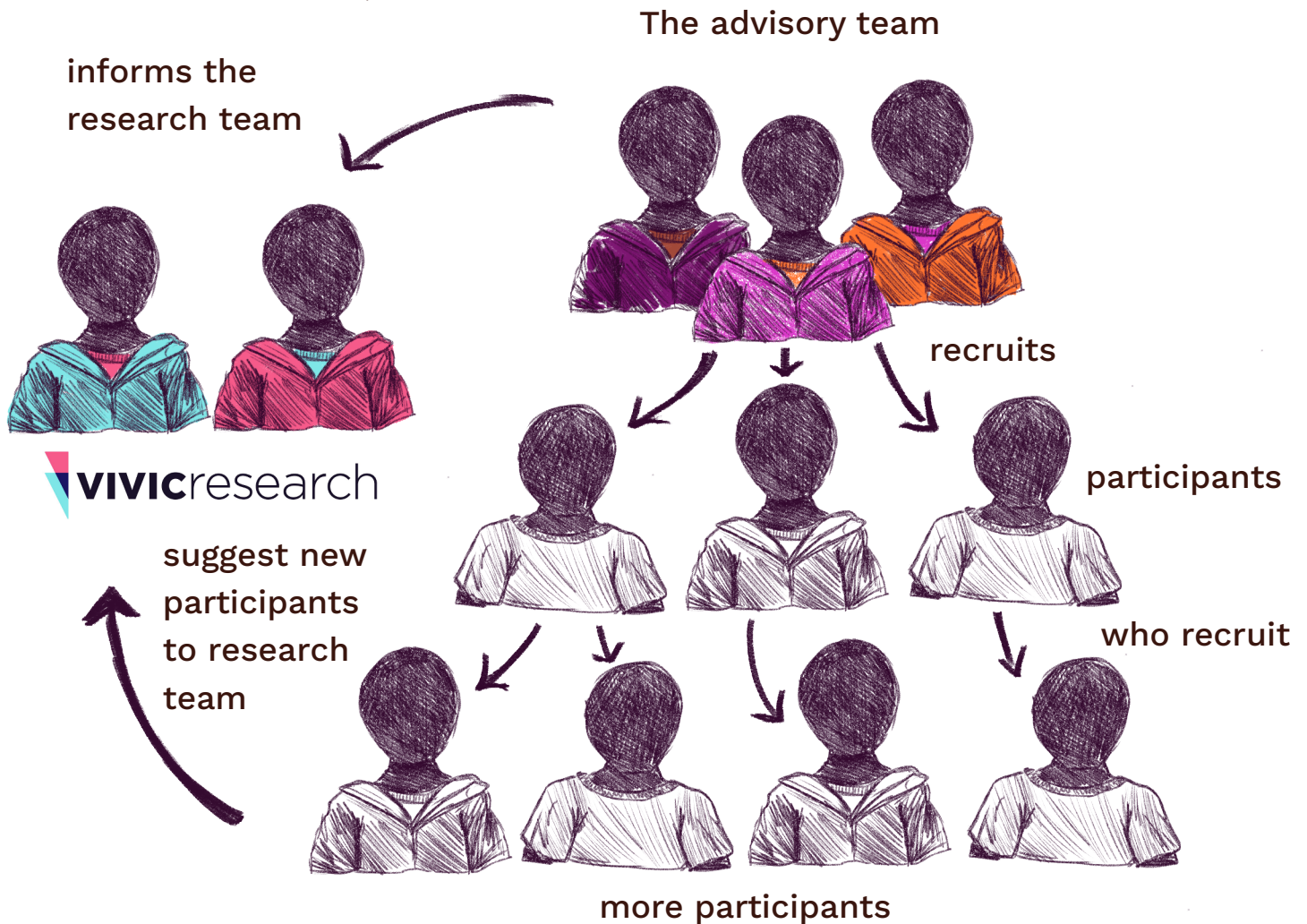
We received feedback from several members of the Advisory Committee who noted that some community members, particularly those who may not fully trust institutions or researchers, often feel safer and more comfortable sharing their experiences in a group setting. Unfortunately, due to these ethical constraints, as well as limited capacity to facilitate larger group discussions and ensure equitable access to honorariums and mental health supports, we were unable to adopt this approach. This represented a limitation in our ability to engage in ways that may have been more accessible and comfortable for the community members whose experiences we aimed to amplify.

Snowball Sampling and Recruitment

We used a snowball sampling approach to recruit participants for our one-on-one interviews. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which existing participants recruit future participants. Essentially, it is a referral process through word of mouth that draws on personal networks. We chose this method because leveraging personal connections increases the likelihood of honest, trusted conversations with participants. We also determined that trusted referral sources could increase participants' sense of safety, which is critical. The AC played a critical role in the recruitment process, as they were the ones who initiated the “*snowball*” by reaching out to people within their networks as service providers, community members, and advocates to see if they were interested in speaking with us for the project (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Illustration of Snowball Sampling Approach

Source: Vivic Research, 2025



We anticipated three target groups for the project: frontline service providers, activists and advocates, and community members with lived experience. Each group brought a unique perspective, allowing us to gain insight from different experiences and service access points at the same time. We chose participants for each target group based on the inclusion criteria outlined in **Figure 3**. Although we were unable to reach all of our planned interview targets due to the condensed recruitment and data collection period, we still spoke with a substantial number of participants and gathered valuable insights.

Figure 3: Participant Eligibility Criteria and Interviews Conducted

Target Group	Eligibility Criteria	Planned Interviews	Interviews Conducted
Frontline support/ service providers	• ≥18 years old at time of participation • Reside in Ottawa or surrounding areas • Lived experience providing support to individuals impacted by gender-based violence (formal or informal, e.g., advocacy, emotional support, housing, legal aid) • Priority: Those who identify as or support non-status, immigrant, refugee, or racialized individuals	8	6
Community members with experiences related to GBV (prioritizing the communities of focus for the project)	• ≥18 years old at time of participation • Reside in Ottawa or surrounding areas • Experience with or knowledge about gender-based violence (personal, professional, or community involvement) • Interested and comfortable contributing perspectives on GBV • Priority: Individuals from marginalized communities (non-status, immigrant, refugee, newcomer, racialized), including those involved in community work	14	9
Community Advocates/Activists	• ≥18 years old at time of participation • Reside in Ottawa or surrounding areas • Focus their advocacy around calls for community-based solutions (e.g., local activism, organizing, or supporting efforts addressing harm and promoting healing/justice outside legal/punitive systems)	10	8

Source: Vivic Research, 2025

Data collection

We received ethics approval from the Community Research and Ethics Office (CREO) at the end of March 2025 and began preparing for data collection throughout April and May 2025. This preparation included developing an engagement plan and refining our questions and interview approach in consultation with the Advisory Committee.

The individual interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, with two Vivic researchers present for each participant. Participants were recruited through direct introductions to the research team or through Advisory Committee (AC) members, who identified interested and eligible candidates and connected them with the research team. Interested participants were provided with the information letter, consent form, and project poster prior to participation. Participants could schedule their interview using a provided self-scheduling link. We chose a virtual platform to maximize accessibility and comfort, allowing participants to remain anonymous on screen, turn off their cameras, or alter their display names if desired. As previously mentioned, this was a limitation as when we moved forward through the project, there were a few people who expressed being more comfortable in person with a trusted support person. Four of the interviews were conducted in French at the request of the participants.

At the outset of each interview, we reviewed the consent form and information letter with participants, ensuring understanding and emphasizing that consent was ongoing. Participants were informed they could withdraw from the study or revoke their consent at any point, including up until just before reporting, even after sharing information. Although all contributions were confidential and anonymized, this approach ensured participants had control over whether their stories and comments were included in the project.

Participants were offered honorariums in recognition of the time and effort required to share their experiences. This was particularly important to the research team (RT) and Advisory Committee (AC), recognizing that research processes can often feel extractive for participants and communities. While we could not guarantee changes or the provision of larger supports participants might have needed, the honorarium was a small way to

acknowledge their courage and willingness to share their experiences and stories. Receiving the honorarium was not contingent on a participant completing the interview; however, all participants did complete their interviews.

We ensured mental health supports were available to participants following the interviews. In collaboration with staff from one of the project's partner organizations, the Centre for Resilience and Social Development, we compiled a list of four practitioners who were informed about the project and prepared to provide emergency support if discussions became overwhelming. All practitioners work from a trauma-informed approach and have extensive experience supporting migrant and racialized communities, providing care that is culturally responsive and attuned to participants' needs. All participants were offered one hour of mental health support and could choose a practitioner from the provided list or, if they had their own mental health provider, the honorarium could be used to pay for that session.

Data management practices

We obtained consent to audio—or video—record some participants to ensure the accuracy of our notes. Recordings were uploaded to a password-protected Dropbox, with access restricted to the two researchers. Participants were informed that all recordings would be deleted one year after the project's completion, in March 2026. All notes, transcriptions, and the honorarium tracker were created using anonymous participant codes rather than names. This approach ensured that, in the event of a data breach, participants could not be identified.

Data validation

We completed data collection (interviews) at the end of September 2025 to allow time to prepare for data validation (focus groups) in mid-October. Participants were able to withdraw consent from the project up until the focus groups; after that point, we began consolidating the findings. In preparation for the focus groups, the research team analyzed feedback from participants across four engagement groups, identifying five key themes. One of the engagement groups was held in French. We then prepared a presentation of these themes using a Miro Board and sent invitations to

all participants who had consented to being re-engaged for focus group validation. Miro is a virtual collaboration tool that functions as a digital canvas for sharing and co-creating ideas. We selected this platform to allow participants to provide direct, anonymous feedback on the findings. Participants were able to choose the focus group session that best fit their schedules and attended accordingly.

Alignment with EBCD and PAR

The Weaving Threads of Change project was designed to actively center the voices and expertise of people directly impacted by gender-based violence, as well as those providing support in the community. This approach reflects the principles of Experience-Based Co-Design (EBCD), which emphasizes collaboration between service users and providers in identifying priorities, designing solutions, and improving systems (*Fucile et al., 2017*). By engaging participants in one-on-one interviews, followed by thematic validation through focus groups, we ensured that the research process was not solely extractive, but participatory, iterative, and responsive to community-identified needs.

Additionally, our methodology was grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR), which seeks to align academic inquiry with community-driven goals for social change (*Chevalier & Buckles, 2019*). Through ongoing consultation with the Advisory Committee and responsiveness to participant feedback, the research team co-created the research questions and refined our methods to adapt to this feedback. It is important for us that the research process remains accountable to the communities it hopes to serve and that the research process itself contributes to empowerment and capacity-building.

As a final step in this participatory process, the thematic findings presented in this report will be reviewed with the Advisory Committee. Together, the research team and the Advisory Committee will co-create actionable recommendations and identify next steps that will inform the project's knowledge mobilization efforts. This collaborative phase ensures that the insights generated through interviews and focus groups are translated into practical strategies, resources, and policy guidance that reflect the lived experiences and priorities of community members, activists, and service providers alike.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

As paid researchers engaging in this project, we recognize the power dynamics inherent in shaping the spaces where discussions took place. To obtain ethical approval, we were required to design the research in a way that minimized risks and ensured participant consent, specifying the details around the data collection. While this process strengthened planning around participant protections, compensation, and engagement, it also imposed certain limitations on how flexible we could be in our approach.

For instance, our approved ethics application only had included a plan for virtual interviews, which prevented us from accommodating participants who preferred larger group discussions or in-person sessions. Resource constraints also limited our ability to provide mental health support or ensure full confidentiality in group settings. This resulted in a data collection approach that was limited to individual discussion, followed with focus groups to validate the data. Project timelines also restricted our flexibility in scheduling, meaning some potential participants were unable to engage.

We used snowball sampling through our Advisory Committee to recruit participants with relevant experiences and to foster trust, helping to mitigate some power imbalances. Despite these efforts, we acknowledge that some individuals may not have participated due to limited access to recruitment networks or discomfort with sharing their experiences in this setting, which may affect the range of perspectives represented in the findings.

Positionality Statement of Researchers

The research components of this project were co-led by two researchers, each of us bringing distinct experiences, identities, and values to how we approached this work. Below, we each offer a brief reflection, written in the first person, on our positionality and how it shaped our engagement with the research.

As one of the researchers, I reflected on my own immigration experience to Canada at a young age with a sibling and a single parent. Prior to arriving, we had already been granted immigration status, which provided certain systemic protections. While that experience was not easy, it was far less precarious than that of the many participants in this research, such as

those seeking asylum or refuge. Those experiences solidified the importance of community and social supports for newcomers, particularly for those who are separated from their support systems, unfamiliar with navigating new systems, and/or overcoming language barriers. In addition to these experiences, my background in critical criminology informs my understanding of the limitations of current safety and well-being frameworks. This, along with community calls for change, motivated my desire contribute to a project that explored non-legal alternatives to gender-based violence.

As the second researcher on this project, I recognize that as a second-generation Canadian, I do not share the same first-hand experience of immigration as many of the participants did. My experiences as a queer woman allowed me to understand and resonate with some of the experiences shared in these conversations, despite not sharing other experiences. I am currently a M.A student pursuing an interdisciplinary degree in economics, sociology and city planning which has highlighted for me the importance of critically examining the structures that produce and reproduce unequal resource distribution, particularly at a local level. In my own community work to end violence, I have seen the way people's needs go unmet when trying to access support navigating violence and am motivated to transform the conditions that make that a reality for many.

We recognize that as paid researchers, we hold considerable privilege and power in relation to the participants we engaged with, including control over project design, structure, as well as decisions about whose voices are included and how findings are interpreted and disseminated. From the earliest stages, we sought to mitigate these power imbalances through intentional strategies, such as on-going engagement with the AC, as well as ensuring interview participants had a chance to validate the findings and analysis of what they shared with us. These mechanisms were designed to interrupt power imbalances and ensure participant perspectives shaped the research, while maintaining ongoing reflection on these power dynamics throughout the project.

We sought to create multiple avenues for community members to collaborate in the process, to ensure they were compensated for their contributions, and to provide resources to help navigate any potential mental health repercussions. While the scope of available funding and supports was limited,

these steps were a small effort to reduce the extractive nature of research and foster a more equitable, reciprocal process. It was also important that we collaborated on the different ways to mobilize the knowledge and findings generated from the discussions around this research, in ways that supported the needs and priorities of the people who took the time and courage to share their experiences with us.

Findings

The findings from the interview we held were illuminating and deeply reflective of the existing literature on immigration, gender-based violence, and legal responses. Five major themes emerged:

Theme 1: The Impact of Precarious Immigration Status on Gender-Based Violence

“As a refugee you do not want any additional reason to deal with courts. Once you’ve gone through the courts in your immigration hearing and its terrible, you cannot deal with the legal system again. You just have to let it go and try to ignore [the violence], however hard it is, but you do not want to start another process that won’t work out”

- Research participant, community member

Participants shared extensively the ways in which their immigration status impacted their lives everyday, in every area of their lives. A number of the participants we spoke with were asylum seekers who were still in the middle of navigating their immigration cases. They shared that their every decision was filtered through the fear of having that decision negatively impact their immigration process. This included decisions made around accessing services, leaving unsafe

housing or relationships, asserting their rights in the workplace, and more. One important insight shared was that participants felt acutely aware of how precarious their status was, even in instances where they were uncertain and unclear on immigration laws and processes. Participants reported that people often reminded them of their vulnerability and precarity and did so in order

to leverage power over them. This finding was equally reported by frontline workers and organizers, who highlighted that in their experience, people may fear deportation in instances where deportation is not a possible outcome, and they have been intentionally misled about their immigration status as a tactic of abuse.

In instances where participants reported their immigration status acting as a barrier to accessing resources, they shared having to rely on informal supports provided by community members. These informal supports could be at times life-saving but could also be sources of abuse and exploitation. Many participants shared that gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence, was prevalent and occurred as a result of the inherent power dynamics between someone who has status and someone who doesn't. Instances of violence were not discussed as discrete instances or always named as such but instead were presented as recurring, daily experiences that were "*part of the [immigration] process*". This included both the negative emotional and psychological outcomes of the extended immigration process as well as the interpersonal violence that they experienced while juggling precarious housing, loss of autonomy, and needs for generalized consistent support. The weight of this continuous violence was often described as intensely exhausting and overwhelming, with the sense that it would drag on indefinitely.

Overall, participants struggled between wanting to draw attention to gender-based violence throughout the immigration experience and in immigrant communities, but feared reinforcing racist and xenophobic sentiments that wrongfully conflate newcomers and violence. Participants were explicit in linking gender-based violence with power imbalances and patriarchal values that undermine women's agency. In particular, the lengthy and uncertain immigration process was highlighted as a key factor contributing to migrant women's vulnerability.

Theme 2: Access to Resources

Multiple participants raised that both newcomers arriving to Canada and people leaving abusive relationships lacked resources to prevent and to end violence. Participants raised that language barriers were a particular concern, including for people who spoke French but not English. Participants also

“What needs to be understood is that you are in a state of complete overwhelm. People are trying to help and giving you information on where to go and what to do, but really what you need is someone to go through the motions with you when you are frozen in place”

–Research participant, community member

shared that very few services in Ottawa were culturally safe for Black, Indigenous, and racialized people, further restricting the number of services available. Concerns around language access and cultural safety overlapped, with a number of participants highlighting concerns around the cultural fluency of translation services available.

Multiple participants shared that familial separation was one of the hardest challenges they were currently facing, and did not have access to resources to help. Some participants described lengthy and uncertain wait times before hopefully reuniting with children, parents, and partners. Others described relationships becoming strained due to the distance and the inability to be fully transparent about the challenges they were facing. The stress associated with parenting through the immigration process was shared by parents who were both separated from their children and those who were with their children. Parents expressed concerns about the long-term mental health and educational impacts for their children.

Access to safe housing and legal services were two of the most frequently discussed supports needed. When discussing access to legal services, participants shared that it was especially challenging when navigating simultaneous legal challenges or legal systems in multiple countries. Access to legal information to support decision-making was equally scarce or inaccessible.

Participants shared there was insufficient access to educational resources on consent, relationships, abuse, boundaries, and violence. They shared that education was needed starting from a young age, and available to people of all ages including newcomers to Canada who migrated as adults. Participants shared that many people only gain access to this information after having experienced violence. This also extends to education needed for people who respond to violence, particularly when occupying roles in which they might not be formally trained to respond.

Many participants felt they were having to navigate accessing services alone. They also shared that they felt dismissed or judged when they presented as emotional. Participants shared that accessing resources could also feel like abuse – where the same dynamics of distrust, suspicion, coercion, surveillance are recreated by service providers or institutional practices. In addition, participants reported that difficulties navigating services was not restricted to newcomers, and that individuals leaving extended periods of isolation felt similar feelings of overwhelm.

Theme 3: Navigating Systemic Dependence

Participants raised that information sharing across different institutions can have unintended and devastating consequences. Disclosing information, intentionally or accidentally, to a worker in one system could result in that person experiencing a loss of control over their own story, being opened up to an investigation and surveillance, or even experiencing criminalization or institutionalization.

“Once it’s in the hands of the police, it becomes complicated. Suddenly you are also navigating a child custody battle and trying to advocate for a woman who has been abused to fight for her rights. It’s not just time consuming, it’s impossible”

*–Research participant,
community organizer*

Participants noted that most people, including survivors and frontline workers, do not fully understand how immigration, legal, or other social service systems work, especially when systems intersect in unpredictable ways. This lack of transparency makes survivors more vulnerable to punitive outcomes simply because they don’t know their rights or the risks of disclosure.

Participants shared that this process could be triggered through mandatory reporting requirements

which could pressure service providers to escalate situations, even when reporting could have adverse impacts for that person’s safety or go against their wishes. Concerns around risk were also expressed, as individual workers regulated through a college or from an organizational perspective are bound

by legal and liability responsibilities.

Once a case has been opened, participants shared that people were left without options to disengage from the system, even as survivors. For example, once police had pressed charges or a Children's Aid Society (CAS) investigation was underway, people needed to comply with whatever the system needed from them until the process was complete. If survivors felt a miscarriage of justice occurred, they would find themselves in a position where they needed to reengage with the same system. Some participants reflected on the broader shift in the social services landscape, where frontline roles that were once survivor-driven and community-led are now increasingly professionalized and require professional credentials. This has also meant that an increasing share of resources are funneled to supporting and maintaining organizations and their structures rather than directly reaching survivors.

Theme 4: Experience with Police and Courts

Participants shared that often, calling the police was often seen as the only available option in urgent or dangerous situations, particularly in cases of imminent physical violence. Several respondents recognized that in acute, high-risk situations, police intervention is sometimes necessary and life-

“You can do all of the right things. You can do all the things that are asked of you. You can even play in the system. As a win or a lose, you could even win. And then, in the end, actually. [...] it can still go against what the system is trying to achieve, which is some type of actual consequence”

—Research participant, community member

saving. However, participants were just as likely to share that even in cases of imminent risk of violence, police could worsen a situation. In addition to participants sharing that many survivors were harmed and felt betrayed by the police response, participants also shared that many survivors initially feared involving police out of fear of the racist violence that could be inflicted against their racialized partner. This tension between needing someone able to stop

violence and the absence of alternatives to reliance on police was a source of frustration for many participants.

Survivors shared how abusers strategically weaponize custody agreements, immigration status, and other legal processes to maintain coercive control, even after separation. Participants highlighted that structural power imbalances were easily exploited by others and in those instances, there is no institutional response they felt could support them. Participants shared that survivors became trapped between the system and their abuser(s). Threats initially presented by the state, even passively, such as deportation or child removal, could be made explicit by an abuser who ultimately could act as a trigger for state violence.

Participants shared that the legal process that unfolded following charges for gender-based violence replicated patriarchal power imbalances, and felt dismissive and adversarial. Participants shared a number of traumatic experiences that survivors encounter in the court system, including having to defend themselves in front of a judge, including times where their abuser was present.

Several participants described the limitations of the legal system and the criminal justice system, especially when it came to providing holistic support or meaningful accountability. One participant shared that they went through the full legal process and the person who had harmed them received a “*guilty*” verdict, yet still found no space for healing, closure, or real accountability. Other participants shared about their own experiences being criminalized after surviving years of abuse. Participants described navigating multiple legal challenges, often with little understanding of the legal processes they were involved in.

Theme 5: Community-led Safety and Accountability

Participants shared that they felt safest in spaces where there were strong community relationships rooted in care and mutual responsibility. Those community connects acted as power foundations to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. The protective aspects of community connection were directly tied to values, particularly autonomy and self-determination, which shaped how community responses were delivered.

Many participants felt it was only possible to provide holistic support and healing in community-led initiatives, as people who had experienced a criminal legal process shared that they were unable to access those outcomes through the system. Par, and that it wouldn't be possible for people external to those communities to effectively replicate.

“In order to actually meet people's needs, you need to remain something that is fluid and dynamic and isn't the same response to everyone who reports abuse.

One of the main problems with the current system is that it treats everyone the same and doesn't recognize the variety of needs. That would need to be foundational to any alternative, you will never have a one size fits all approach to ending gender-based violence”

-Research participant,
community organizer

Participants identified the gap in non-police alternatives in crisis situations, and shared a desire to see increased community capacity to safely intervene in situations, including instances where physical violence was occurring. Participants highlighted a desire to see non-police violence interruption options made available to deescalate situations.

One of the primary drawbacks of community-based supports raised by participants was the lack of sustained capacity and resources. Participants emphasized that effective responses to gender-based violence needed to be

sustained over prolonged periods of time, both while a person might be in an unsafe situation and after leaving a violent relationship. Consequently, participants expressed that community-based supports could only support small numbers of people, nowhere near being able to meet the demand for supports that currently exists.

Participants expressed concerns around co-optation of community-led responses as one of the potential risks to formalizing these community roles. Participants highlighted that the work *“is currently being done”*, meaning that neighbours, family members, faith-based communities, and small grassroots collectives are already supporting one another through gender-based violence, despite not being easily identifiable or formally defined as an existing non-police alternative. If those existing networks were to be

formalized, participants felt they could benefit from additional resources and funding, but might be removed from the contexts in which they work best.

Analysis

By unpacking the findings of the consultations through an abolitionist feminist lens, we are able to understand where gaps in service delivery create opportunities for violence, and think critically about how to respond in transformative ways. The need and urgency for strengthened and expanded community responses was made clear in the interviews, where most participants shared that calling the police to respond to violence simply wasn't an option available to them. In light of that finding, it becomes critical to analyze why that occurs and to develop new responses to ensure that everyone in situations of violence has access life-saving support.

Precarity as a Form of Violence

Centering the structural and systemic context in analyses of gender-based violence among migrants allows for a deeper understanding of how vulnerability is produced and the resulting outcomes (*Dennler, 2019*). The administrative burden combined with the “*extended temporariness*” people experience while navigating the immigration system have been described as a form of “*bureaucratic violence*” (*Schmidt et al., 2023*). Evidence demonstrates that the threat of deportation intensifies feelings of uncontrollability, compounding migrant’s inability to plan for the future when wait times for citizenship are lengthy and indeterminate (*Hung et al., 2024*). Even in instances where deportation is not being actively threatened, the reality of temporary permits is that there is an ever-present deportation risk. A number of frontline workers and organizers we spoke with highlighted that often people have more rights than they might be aware of, yet despite those rights existing on paper, it was clear that few people felt they were able to actualize them safely.

It is amidst those feelings of fear and overwhelm that a person experiencing gender-based violence has to navigate the complex web of social services to access support (*Dennler, 2019*). Participants generally expressed that they felt any police intervention, even in an instance where they were the victim, would

reflect negatively on their immigration process. They felt it was necessary to present themselves as hard-working, grateful, and capable individuals and feared that being perceived as a victim would undermine the image they were hoping to portray. This sentiment is supported by research that finds that even while navigating impossibly exhausting, overwhelming and traumatic situations, people strive to remain legible to the state as ideal immigration candidates (*El-Kurd, 2025; Schmidt et al., 2023*). When these realities are held and analyzed together, it can be determined that precarious legal status both increases a person's vulnerability to violence, while restricting their access to institutional responses (*Chan, 2020; Mosher, 2023*).

In order to avoid complications to the permanent residency process, research has shown that migrants are willing to endure violence and abuse from acquaintances, intimate partners, and in the workplace rather than risk jeopardizing their applications (*Lash et al., 2022*). For many participants in this project, transnational family separation was a lived reality, as such separation is institutionalized and codified in the policies and visas that grant entry (*Schmidt et al., 2022; Walia, 2021*). This circumstance can intensify their willingness to endure violence, since family reunification is not permitted without permanent residency (*Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023; Lash et al., 2022*).

Legal Responses and the Exacerbation of Violence

The literature on criminalized survivors corroborates what was shared during the consultations, that even when a police response occurs, it can have devastating and direct negative consequences on survivors (*Goodmark, 2023; Richie, 2012*). The legal branches of the state (i.e. police and courts) are deeply entangled into the non-legal social responses to gender-based violence, meaning a police response could be triggered without someone ever intending to involve legal responses (*Poor, 2023*). This reality poses a challenge even for informal and grassroots responses if they attempt to help a person seek other essential services, like healthcare or childcare, while trying to avoid interacting with legal responses. Frontline workers and community members offering support alike could identify times where survivors were coerced into interacting with the legal branches of the state in order to access resources. Notably, if a person's status was dependant on their abusive partner, then

leaving abuse will require them to involve the state by applying for new immigration pathways designed for survivors of intimate partner and familial violence (*Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025*).

Many participants reported that the support they were looking for when experiencing violence was beyond the scope of what can be feasibly offered through legal responses. Even the desire for violence interruption, commonly understood to be one of the core functions of police, felt unachievable through existing responses. Rather, participants understood that at best, police could only displace violence, and more often than not, at worst, would actively reinforce and intensify the violence they were experiencing from their abuser (*Kaba, 2020*). Similarly, court experiences were equally reported as traumatic with the adversarial nature of the courts being seen as contradictory with survivors' personal objectives of healing, accountability, and justice (*Hlavka & Mulla, 2021*).

When legal responses were set in motion, migrants find themselves of having multiple legal processes simultaneously (*Chan, 2020*). Court outcomes depend heavily on the legibility of the people before the courts, effectively incentivizing victims and survivors to portray themselves according to previously established racialized and gendered tropes and scripts (*Hlavka & Mulla, 2021*). The tropes differ in each court and individuals must negotiate how they are perceived in complex and contradictory ways (*Chan, 2020*). Taking the example of a woman with children: she would first need to render herself legible as a victim to establish abuse has occurred, then as a survivor to demonstrate her capacity to continue caring for her children, and ultimately as independent, capable and compliant to be legible as a good candidate for citizenship (*Dennler, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2023; Sweet, 2021b*). Participants described feeling those tensions of navigating legibility and illegible particularly emphasizing the ways in which they felt being perceived as “*overly emotional*” made them illegible to service providers, lawyers, and even peers.

Violence Interruption as a Collective Endeavour

Grassroots responses were seen by participants as able to avoid some of the most negative (and common) outcomes of legal responses to gender-based violence, particularly that of criminalized survivors. Grassroots responses

were also understood as ways to prevent the criminalization of the person causing harm, whose incarceration could otherwise result in a loss of income for the survivor, of housing, and even of status, or bring harm to that person which was not something many survivors reported seeking.

Participants' views that non-legal alternatives to address gender-based violence already exist are supported by extensive research showing that most people in crisis turn first to informal supports before seeking professional services. (*Davies et al., 2023; Goodman et al., 2023; Schucan Bird et al., 2024*). Even in moments of acute danger, survivors have stated that what they wanted in terms of outside help was someone to listen to them and help them navigate their options, without being judgmental (*Goodman et al., 2023*).

Many participants reported that informal support networks lacked the capacity to offer sustained help to a person navigating gender-based violence, frequently because those offering support themselves were struggling to meet their own needs amidst experiences of chronic poverty and precarity in their own lives. That lack of capacity is found to be something survivors can recognize and acts as a barrier to seeking help in order to avoid being perceived as a burden by people who are navigating their own trauma and circumstances (*Goodman et al., 2023; Schucan Bird et al., 2024*).

Barriers to seeking help through informal networks included beliefs that other's might take advantage of their vulnerability, a sentiment that was shared by participants in our research (*Goodman et al., 2023*). Survivors have often experienced failed community responses, either due to capacity limitations in their networks, or as a result of networks being desensitized to violence because of their own experiences (*Goodman et al., 2023*). Taking these barriers seriously is essential to ensuring that individuals experiencing acute danger while heavily isolated are not overlooked by grassroots responses. When scaling up grassroots responses, including through mentorship and community programs to train informal networks of support, it is crucial to insist upon shared values of providing survivor-centric and mutually respectful care (*Schucan Bird et al., 2024*). The current lack of capacity of grassroots responses can be linked to the generalized absence of effective education on topics pertaining to gender-based violence as well as limited spaces to build the emotional skills to navigate relationships when people are conditioned and coerced towards individualism (*The Education for*

Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective, 2021).

Notably, there are significant challenges and risk associated with scaling up these types of grassroots responses, particularly the risk of co-optation if they were to be institutionalized as a way to access additional resources (Virani, 2023; Woolford et al., 2025). Researchers and activists alike have demonstrated that the values and core principles that define grassroots responses like Transformative Justice and Restorative Justice are fundamentally incompatible with the criminal legal system (Virani, 2023). While core principles and values can at times be overlooked and the focus shifted towards concrete protocols and practices, our research found that it was the values of any given response that had the greatest impact on the outcome. Ultimately, the response to the question “*what is needed of a grassroots response to gender-based violence*” predominantly yielded the response “*whatever is needed by the survivor in that moment*”. Rather than dictate a set of responsibilities and protocols the response would need to include, participants shared values that would be instrumental to see such a response succeed: by-and-for community, centering the autonomy of the person involved, and self-determination. Participants envisioned a fluid and adaptable response that was rooted in mutual respect, relationality, and was voluntary for all people involved.

These values are starkly at odds with the existing legal responses. The existing legal responses are fundamentally structured with coercive, adversarial, and punishing logics (Virani, 2023). There are no possible reforms that could undo those structures—the very premise of a judge making decisions between a plaintiff and a defendant reflects a hierarchical, non-collaborative approach to decision-making, where only a binary outcome (win or lose) is possible. The carceral logics that define policing and courts are anchored in a broader structural fabric rooted in racist, imperialist, and patriarchal norms, which shape all institutions that emerge from it (Saleh-Hanna, 2017). Recognizing the origins of violence within these systems reminds us that reform alone is insufficient for transformative change—the structures built in their place must fundamentally transform the context in which they exist.

Conclusion

The findings from this research contribute to an important and growing body of work that demonstrates the urgent need for non-legal responses to gender-based violence. This research takes a zoomed-out perspective to understand broadly where and how interpersonal and structural occurrences of GBV co-exist in migrants' lives. When speaking to the Ottawa landscape of navigating access to services while experiencing GBV, participants in this research shared that there were several points of failure that left people without the support they needed. In some cases, the appropriate services simply didn't exist. In others, people lacked information about how to access them, or they didn't have the necessary support to reach those services. In many cases, people experienced a lack of safety, fear, and/or harm when accessing support. Navigating this complex terrain happened while experiencing compounding traumas while working to remain legible to the state as an ideal candidate for citizenship.

For people with precarious immigration status, turning to formal networks for support when experiencing gender-based violence wasn't an option. In those instances, people were left to navigate situations alone, or with the support of informal, grassroots networks. Consequently, there is a deep need for increased grassroots capacity to respond to violence, and a coordinated effort to ensure that survivor-centric values are at the heart of those responses. Advocacy in many areas is needed, including efforts to eliminate the manufacturing of precarity embedded within temporary and conditional status designations. Collective efforts are needed to shift the landscape of response away from responding to gender-based violence towards ending violence in all of our communities.

With these findings, we can now advance to the following critical elements of this important work: recommendation co-development, further capacity building, and knowledge dissemination to take us from research to action. This work in-line with the observations made by frontline workers in Ottawa as well as community members who have lived expertise navigating GBV. This work requires us to take the community calls already present in the Community Safety and Well-Being Plan and engage experts and community members in making them a reality.

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