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EVIDENCE BRIEF

The **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** in collaboration with **Women and Gender Equality Canada**

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision making across all sectors, toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **Gender-based Violence**

International students' experiences of gender-based violence in Canada

About the project

Canada relies heavily on a growing population of international students to overcome its aging crisis and contribute to economic growth. However, this exponential growth in the international student population is not matched by awareness, research, resources and support. This knowledge synthesis project responds to an urgent need to better understand international students' experiences of gender-based violence (GBV). Our scoping review captures the current state of scholarly and non-scholarly work and offers insights on the prevalence of GBV among international students, the different forms, underlying causes, impacts, and support available to them. The project offers recommendations to address gaps in research, policy and practice to prevent GBV among – and provide better support to – international students in Canada.

We reviewed academic databases and institutional and policy output primarily focused on Canada, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. We reviewed 87 scholarly works published between 1984 and 2023, and 56 non-scholarly sources published between 2014 and 2023. Twenty-nine scholarly sources and 44 non-scholarly sources focused on the Canadian context. Non-scholarly work included organizational resources, institutional reports and policies, news articles and a documentary. The following key words were used: "international students AND" "COVID-19," "Gender," "Statistics," "Gender Inequality," "Race," "Visible Minority," "Reporting (GBV)," "Domestic students," "Identity," "Perpetrators," "Power hierarchy," "Mental Health," "Gender-based violence," "Intimate partner abuse," "Intimate partner violence," "Domestic violence," "Trauma," "traumatic experience," and "Consent."

Additionally, we contacted almost 200 Canadian public and private postsecondary institutions, of which 32 responded; only three provided materials that are used in this review.

Key findings

The comprehensive review revealed general themes regarding GBV within the international student population in Canada:

1. A serious dearth of data on GBV experienced by international students:
 - a. Only a handful of small sample studies were found. Given the exponential growth in this population, the lack of information about their experiences is a threat to their well-being and rights as little is known about the extent of GBV, causes, impacts and support needed.
2. International students are at more risk of GBV than domestic students:
 - a. Female international students are more likely to experience GBV than male students.
 - b. The increase in international students is unmatched by provisions to support them.
 - c. International students' GBV can go unreported due to cultural background, unfamiliarity with the legal system, and fear/misconceptions that it will jeopardize student visas or permanent residency prospects.
3. Several interrelated potential causes and factors put this population at higher risk of GBV:
 - a. Financial insecurity: Debt due to higher costs of tuition and living results in precarious living conditions and risk-taking behaviour such as illegal exploitative employment, illegal overcrowded housing, and sex for money.

- b. Housing insecurity: International students report higher rates of housing insecurity than domestic students. They disproportionately experience discrimination and abuse from landlords—overcrowded housing, illegal basement units, overcharged rent and deposits, higher maintenance costs, and sexual exploitation.
 - c. Neo-racism and stereotypes cause this population to be targets of sexualization and GBV.
 - d. Exploitation from professors/advisors due to academic requirements on their visas.
 - e. A culture of silence around GBV due to lack of awareness of what constitutes sexual violence, reporting system and support; cultural barriers; stigma; isolation; and fear of deportation resulting in a continued spiral of abuse.
4. Incidence of GBV exerts a high toll on international students:
- a. Academic performance and mental health suffer.
 - b. They are less likely to report GBV due to:
 - Barriers to reporting and accessing supports;
 - Lack of awareness regarding to whom a formal report should be made;
 - Lack of understanding of supports for students; and
 - A culture of shame.
 - c. Thus, a vicious cycle of lack of awareness, vulnerability and GBV is reproduced.
 - d. International students experience a lack of social support, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and violence, and the repercussions of violence often more damaging.
 - e. International students may be dependent on abusive partners through secondary visa status or due to financial insecurity.

Policy implications

Urgent research that privileges international students' marginalized voices and lived experiences is needed to better inform findings, policies, and practices to prevent GBV and support survivors.

1. Postsecondary institutions should be mandated to promote international students' well-being and rights. Working with relevant government, private and community organizations, they should:
 - a. Gather systematic and regular data on various aspects of international students' experiences including GBV.
 - b. Address financial insecurity and students' dependence on landlords by providing affordable housing.
 - c. Increase access to (emergency/crisis) shelter for students who are financially struggling and forced to live in crowded co-ed dwellings.
2. Establish on-campus support groups for international students that offer culturally responsive counselling practices, and education about available services, legal rights and processes.
3. Educate all students and members of the university community to challenge myths/stereotypes/gender norms and promote healthy gender behaviour.
4. Empower international students by:
 - a. Ensuring they know their rights, support services and processes to follow.
 - b. Providing health education on consent, healthy gender behaviour and strategies to reduce risks.
 - c. Encouraging solidarity and collective action to strengthen students' efforts to achieve their rights and well-being. Often individual students are extremely vulnerable and unable to independently assert their rights.

CONTACT THE RESEARCHERS

Sharada Srinivasan, PhD | Associate Professor,
Principal Investigator: sharada@uoguelph.ca,
<https://sharada.uoguelph.ca>

Shivajan Sivapalan, MD, CCFP, SAAAC Autism Centre,
Co-applicant: shivajans@saaac.org

Sejal Katyal, BA (Hons) Psychology, University of Guelph,
Research Assistant: skatyal@uoguelph.ca

Andrea Burke, PhD candidate, Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies,
Western University: aburke46@uwo.ca

FURTHER INFORMATION

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• Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) works to advance equality with respect to sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression through the inclusion of people of all genders, including women, in Canada's economic, social, and political life. The application of a gender and diversity lens will help us to understand better the intersection of sex and gender with other identity factors. These factors include but are not limited to race, national and ethnic origin, Indigenous origin or identity, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic condition, place of residence and disability.

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