Examining the Intersection of Immigrant Women’s Acculturation & Mental Health

Executive Summary

Funded by the Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF), this needs assessment is one of the outcomes of a joint collaboration between the School of Social Work at McMaster University, the Immigrants Working Centre (IWC), the Emergency Support Committee for Refugee (ESCR) and the Hamilton Community Legal Clinic (HCLC).

The overarching goals of this study were:

(a) to contribute to building a healthy, caring and inclusive community that fosters the social and economic integration of women immigrants to Hamilton, and:

(b) to engage in a formal partnership between McMaster University and community organizations.

To achieve these goals, the following objectives were developed to define the area of inquiry:

To learn how the intersection between (i) acculturation and integration, (ii) gender relations and intimate partner violence, (iii) intergenerational tensions, (iv) trauma, loss and ongoing political fear, and (v) economic exclusion impact WI mental health and in particular their socio-economic integration to the Hamilton community.

For this project, a qualitative research design was utilized, including community consultations, followed by focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. In total, 78 people participated, including five adolescent/adult children, 35 professionals involved in service provision to Women Immigrants (e.g. settlement workers, counsellors, case managers, home visitors, public health nurses and community workers) and 38 Women.

The findings suggested that women’s experiences of migration were navigated in the context of their family. Women also encountered barriers and stressors during their migration journey, for example language, missing information about community resources leading to significant struggles in meeting their basic needs. It was also found that trauma and the migration journey had significant impacts on women’s mental health. There was also a link between the stress of migration and integration and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).

In response to these findings, the following recommendations were put forward: Flexible service provision to newcomers, family interventions and programming, community based anti-racism training, specialized mental health services—particularly trauma, and understanding the complexities of migration and experiences of IPV.