IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND WIFE ABUSE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to explore and illustrate the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women. Five women from various cultural backgrounds from the Greater Vancouver area volunteered to describe their experiences of living in and leaving their abusive marriages in individual, in-depth, audio-taped interviews. Eight common themes were extracted from the interview transcripts using Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step procedure for phenomenological data analysis.

The results indicated that the women felt increasingly vulnerable and at risk, accountable for the abuse, ashamed and worthless, and betrayed and abandoned the longer they stayed in their relationships. While the women continued to act in many resourceful ways to control the abuse and to maintain their personal freedom, they experienced that their sense of self was eroding and that they became increasingly trapped in their marriages. While most of the participants did not mention lack of language proficiency as a barrier, they all felt that their unfamiliarity with the larger Canadian society contributed to a sense of isolation and unawareness of their rights and available services. The participants reported that these factors-compounded their fear and entrapment in their abusive relationships.

The women reported that concern for their and their children’s safety and welfare, and the meaninglessness of their lives if they stayed in their abusive relationships, served as catalysts for them to move out. While the participants in this study continued to struggle with such things as finances, helping their children to heal from the adverse affects of the abuse, and their own healing after they had left their abusive husbands, they all reported enjoying their new found freedom and independence, and their stronger sense of self and self-reliance that had emerged during the process.
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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Wife abuse has been prescribed, condoned, and accepted by society and its institutions throughout the history of humankind (Dutton, 1988). Although violence against wives was declared illegal in the late 1900's in Canada, United States, and England in practice legal institutions pay little attention to wife abuse unless the wife loses her life at the hands of her husband (Dutton). The women’s movement in the 1970’s brought the issue of wife abuse and the discrepancy between legislation and practice into public awareness. As a result more services are starting to become available for abused women, and a growing number of researchers have started to take an interest in the study of wife abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dutton; Frankel-Howard, 1989).

Family violence, and with that wife abuse, has been called the main social concern of the eighties (Gondolf & Fisher, 1990). Reflecting this concern, the wife abuse literature has multiplied exponentially during the past decade finally reaching a current point of considerable complexity and controversy regarding the theories, and consequently, the definitions, consequences, interventions, and meaning of wife abuse (Frankel-Howard, 1989; Gelles, 1993).

The different wife abuse theories can be grouped into three major research directions. The supporters of the psychological model propose that individual psychopathology is a major factor in the causation and/or acceptance of abuse and battering (Faulk, 1977; O’Leary, 1993; Shainess, 1977), the supporters of the sociological approach see abuse as a learned behavior maintained by the interactional dynamics of marriage in socio-economically stressful contexts (Gelles, 1993; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), and the supporters of the feminist approach question the two
previous views by pointing out that these perspectives continue to perpetuate the problem of wife abuse if they focus only on the individual characteristics of and/or interaction between the victim and the perpetrator without examining the basic assumptions of patriarchal societies that, if not directly, indirectly continue to tolerate and condone wife abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Yllo, 1993).

The phenomena of wife abuse crosses not only historical dimensions but also cultural, racial and social class boundaries as well. It is recognized as a reality for many women in societies around the world (Counts, Brown, & Campbell, 1992; Gelles & Cornell, 1983; Levinson, 1989). It has been estimated that one of every ten Canadian women is a victim of wife abuse (MacLeod, 1980). Two recent Canadian studies report an even higher incidence rates. The results from the Violence Against Women Survey (Statistics Canada, 1993) suggest that one quarter of all Canadian women have been physically abused by a current or previous spouse or partner. According to the results from the Women's Safety Project (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993) 27% of the women report abuse in an intimate relationship.

Even though there are no official statistical data of the incidence of wife abuse within Canada's immigrant population, service providers who work with immigrants, confirm that wife abuse exists within immigrant and minority groups (personal communication with S. Assanand, June 1993; B. Genezero, May 20. 1993; K. Gill, May 17. 1993; K. Ng, June 10. 1993). The necessity of acknowledging and studying the phenomenon of wife abuse within the immigrant population has been strongly supported (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988; Chan, 1989; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Pilowsky & Mor, 1990; Shin, 1991; Wiebe, 1991).
Some writers maintain that the issues and the problems related to wife abuse are similar for immigrant women and women from the mainstream culture (MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Ng, 1985; Wiebe, 1991). However, for immigrant women the impact of wife abuse can be further complicated by various factors such as language difficulties, the woman’s immigration status, unfamiliarity with and isolation from Canadian social structures, institutional and organizational barriers, racism, changing occupational demands, transformation of traditional family structures, and the process of acculturation (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; MacLeod & Shin; Ng; Verjee, 1992; Wiebe). Furthermore, it has been noted that the mainstream approaches to violence against women are not always appropriate or sufficient in meeting the needs of abused immigrant women because of differences in history, social context, and value systems (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence; Chan, 1989; MacLeod & Shin; Shin, 1991; Wiebe).

Today, few published research studies exist on the phenomenon of wife abuse among the immigrant population. The data and information that is currently available on the topic is often published in monographs, overviews, reports, or other secondary sources (e.g. British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Verjee, 1992; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Riutort & Small, 1985; Wiebe, 1991). Existing research studies generally are focused on examining such issues as availability and quality of support services for abused immigrant women (Pilowsky & Mor, 1990). For example Chan (1989), in her exploratory study, examined the rate of wife abuse referrals to the Chinese Family Life Services of Metro Toronto as well as demographic variables, needs, and help-seeking behavior of their clients. Ng (1985) conducted telephone and in-person interviews with 62 health, legal, and social service providers, and in-person interviews with five
non-English-speaking Chinese-Canadian survivors of wife abuse from the Greater Vancouver area to determine what the needs of the abused women were, as well as the extent to which the women utilized the existing community services.

With the exception of the Ng (1985) study the data for most studies have been gathered primarily from front-line workers and service providers who assist and support immigrant women with their concerns. While such information is useful and important the voices of immigrant women themselves are remarkably absent in the literature. MacLeod (1987) warns against the assumption that professionals have a better understanding of what battered women need than the women themselves:

This attitude is used to explain away the battered woman’s needs at any particular time and to dismiss the woman’s ability to make decisions for her future, thus perpetuating her entrapment in ambivalence... leads to program and policy planning which does not adequately consider differences among battered women nor the different stages that individual battered women experience... [and] has also hindered the development of operational definitions of wife battering to more closely mirror the meaning of battering for battered women (p. 13).

MacLeod and Shin (1990) mirror this assertion by maintaining that “true progress in meeting the needs of women who are abused must begin with the experiences and concerns of the women themselves” (p. 22). In saying that MacLeod and Shin call for more in-depth research about abuse within the immigrant population. Research aimed at understanding the lived experiences of abused immigrant women as well as the lived experience of those immigrant women who have left an abusive relationship seems important so that appropriate policies, strategies, and services can be developed to better meet the needs of abused immigrant women.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate and to describe the phenomenon of wife abuse in an intimate relationship as it was lived and experienced by immigrant women. It was thought that immigrant women, who had lived through the experience of living in an abusive relationship and who had left it while dealing with conflicting cultural norms, might possess intimate and novel knowledge of the dynamics of the phenomenon in the context of the acculturation process. The research question guiding this study was: "What is the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women?"

This research was conducted with immigrant women who had lived in and who had terminated an abusive relationship. A phenomenological research approach (Colaizzi, 1978; Van Manen, 1990) was employed to explore in depth the nature of the phenomenon as it was experienced and understood by the participating women. An extension of that goal was to allow the women to describe what the experience of wife abuse and leaving the abusive relationship meant to them.

It was hoped that the descriptions gained from this exploration would assist other researchers and helping professionals to better understand the experience and the meaning of wife abuse for immigrant women. Furthermore, it was hoped that by examining the experiences of immigrant women who had left their relationship with a battering husband or partner, information might be gained that was useful in supporting other immigrant women who wished to do the same. The consequences of leaving for the woman and her children might be illuminated, which in turn might facilitate better understanding among helping professionals. In addition, it was hoped that participants in this study might feel empowered in being able to tell their stories.
Silence surrounding the issue of wife abuse needs to be broken within immigrant communities and within the dominant culture. The voices of abused immigrant women need to be heard and their concerns need to be documented. MacLeod and Shin (1990) maintain that in order to achieve real progress in dealing with the needs of abused immigrant women intervention efforts have to be based on the experiences and concerns of the women involved; experiences and concerns that were the focus of this study.

Therefore, community workers, counsellors, and therapists may find results from this study useful in planning and implementing programs and intervention strategies to better meet the needs of abused immigrant women. The findings from this study might be helpful to other immigrant women who have been abused by their husbands and partners, by validating their own experience and/or facilitating further understanding of the meaning and experience of wife abuse as it is lived by immigrant women.

Definitions

According to Frankel-Howard (1989) the following definitions have been used by different writers and researchers from various disciplines to describe the phenomenon of violence and abuse against wives: family violence, domestic violence, conjugal violence, spouse abuse, wife assault, wife abuse, wife beating, and wife battering. The definitions may encompass all or some aspects of the following: severe physical, less severe physical, sexual, emotional, economic, social, and psychological violence.

Lamb (1991) and Sinclair (1985) criticize the use of such terms as family violence, domestic violence, conjugal violence, and spouse abuse because these terms obscure the fact that women are by far the more likely victims of violence than men, and because these terms diffuse the identity of the person who is responsible for committing the violent act, which in
most cases is the man. In order to maintain clarity of the direction of violence as well as the identity of the perpetrator the use of the terms mentioned above is avoided except in reference to particular studies in which they have been employed.

**Wife assault, wife abuse, wife beating, and wife battering** are sometimes used to describe different dimensions or degrees of violence. Sometimes they are used interchangeably. In some studies **wife assault** and **wife battering** are understood to refer to mainly physical acts of violence (Dutton, 1988; Sinclair, 1985; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Statistics Canada, 1993). It is important to note that the dimensions of violence reach beyond these more obvious physical aspects of abuse and that the impact of sexual, verbal, psychological, emotional, and economic violence can be as damaging as physical violence (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; MacLeod, 1987; Sinclair; Walker, 1984). Therefore, for the purposes of this study MacLeod’s more extensive definition of the term **wife battering** is used. In referring to battered wives, MacLeod means:

women who are the direct victims of ongoing or repeated physical, psychological, economic, sexual and/or verbal violence or who are subjected to persistent threats or the witnessing of such violence against their children, other relatives, friends, pets and/or cherished possessions, by their boyfriends, husbands, live-in lovers, ex-husbands or ex-lovers, whether male or female (p. 16).

The phenomenon of wife abuse is a complex issue that touches highly emotional areas of an individual’s life such as intimate relationships, family, and cultural values. Therefore, perhaps it is difficult to agree on just one ‘umbrella’ definition for the phenomenon. The number of different terms that are used to refer to violence against women in intimate relationships and the variation in how they are defined reflects the many perspectives through which this phenomenon
is conceptualized by the researchers in the field. The chosen definition for this study reflects this researcher’s understanding of what *wife abuse* means by stating that most often it is the woman who is the victim of the assaults and that whether the assaults are physical, sexual, economic, verbal, or psychological they can have devastating effects on the woman. For the purposes of this study the term *wife abuse* is used interchangeably with the terms *wife battering* and *wife assault*.

Physical assault may take the form of slapping, punching, kicking, pushing, shoving, shooting, burning, stabbing, choking, beating and so forth (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; Dutton, 1988; Sinclair, 1985; Statistics Canada, 1993; Straus & Gelles, 1990).

Sexual assault refers to all sexual activity that the woman does not consent to, or does not feel that she is free to refuse participation in because her partner threatens her or her children with violence, or because of her beliefs in the submissive role of the wife. The forced sexual acts may range from unwanted touching to rape, including extreme jealousy and sexual accusations by the man (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; Dunaway, 1988; Sinclair, 1985).

Psychological abuse refers to various ways of undermining a woman’s self-confidence and esteem. It can take the form of threats of physical violence towards the woman, her children, her pets or other loved ones; threats to harm her property; threats of deportation if the woman is an immigrant and is dependent on her husband for maintaining her immigration status; verbal demeaning attacks towards a woman’s personality; and isolation from friends, relatives, community resources and so forth by controlling money, time, transportation and other means required to create and maintain social contacts (Barnsley, 1980; Canadian Panel on Violence

The term **immigrant woman** is used to refer to an individual who may or may not belong to a visible minority group, and for the purposes of this study this term is understood to include those Canadian citizens and permanent residents, who may have resided in Canada for many years but who still consider themselves to be outside the mainstream society in terms of their linguistic, racial or cultural backgrounds, and who therefore still define themselves as immigrants. (MacLeod & Shin, 1990, p. 8)

The terms **dominant culture** and **mainstream culture** are used interchangeably in this study. They refer to the English-speaking group of people in British Columbia whose history, social context, values, and beliefs grow predominantly out of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. This culture is called dominant because it largely dictates the economic and political life in the province despite the presence of other large cultural groups (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992). The term **cultural minorities** refers to other cultures apart from the mainstream culture that have their own distinct history, social context, beliefs, and values, and that may be minorities only in terms of their representation in the Canadian cultural context but not necessarily in the global context (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence).

The term **intimate relationship** refers to a sexually and emotionally intimate, marriage-like relationship between a man and a woman. **Marriage and intimate relationship** are used interchangeably in this study. Individuals that are involved in such a relationship are called **spouse** and **partner**.
CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this study is the experience and meaning of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women. In order to provide background to this exploration the following areas from the literature on wife abuse are highlighted: Incidence and prevalence data are discussed in the first section of the chapter, followed by a section on the impact of abuse on women who have been abused by a spouse or a partner. Findings on the physical and psychosocial consequences of physical, sexual, and psychological violence on abused women are reported and discussed in this section. In addition, cycle of abuse, battered wife syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, and process of leaving are being discussed. Factors related to the battering experiences of immigrant women are discussed in the third section. Included in this section is discussion on obstacles that an abused immigrant woman may have to face in addition to dealing with her battering. Obstacles, such as language difficulties, institutional and organizational barriers, racism, isolation from private and public support systems, immigration issues, and issues related to the acculturation process are elaborated on in this section. A final section examining the literature on the experiences of immigrant women who have been abused by their spouse or partner concludes the literature review.

Incidence and Prevalence

Definitions of violence against wives abound. This in turn results in variation in the estimates of the incidence and prevalence of the phenomenon. Therefore the exact comparison of results from various studies becomes problematic. Looking at results from various cross-cultural and national research projects, however, it is clear that women are primarily the victims of violence in intimate relationships. Dobash and Dobash (1979) studied Scottish police reports and found that wives were the targets 75.8% of the time compared to husbands who were the
targets 1.1% of the time in assaults occurring between family members. Similarly, Levinson (1989) found in his study of family violence that involved 90 small-scale and peasant societies, that wife beating was the most common form of family violence around the world occurring at least occasionally in 84.5% of the sample societies. In contrast, husband beating was found to occur in 26.9% of the sample societies and only in societies where wife beating was prevalent as well.

According to a frequently quoted statistic, one of every ten women in Canada is suspected to be a victim of abuse by her husband (MacLeod, 1980), although this is considered to be a conservative estimate (Sinclair, 1985). MacLeod (1987) estimates that nearly 1,000,000 women are physically assaulted by their husbands or partners in Canada every year, a figure also quoted by the B.C. Task Force on Family Violence (1992).

More recent studies using randomly selected samples of women confirm a high prevalence of wife abuse (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; Statistics Canada, 1993). Results from the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women funded Women’s Safety Project, that utilized in-depth interviews with 420 Toronto women between the ages of 18 and 64, revealed that 27% of the women had been physically assaulted in an intimate relationship. In 36% of those cases the women reported that they feared for their lives. Fifty percent of the women reporting physical assault, reported that their husbands or partners had also been assaulting them sexually.

Results from the first national study of its kind in the world, the Violence Against Women Survey by Statistics Canada (1993), based on interviews with about 12,300 women 18 years of age and older, parallels the previous results by revealing that 25% of these women experienced physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner in a current or previous relationship. In 44%
of the incidents a weapon was used by the abusing spouse, and more than 10% of the women who reported violence in their relationships indicated that they have feared for their lives at the hands of their husbands or partners.

While it is easier to tabulate the number of separate incidents of physical abuse than it is to measure and count the ratio of the more insidious psychological abuse, in reality it may be difficult to separate one from the other. Walker (1984) found in her study with over 400 battered, predominantly white American women, that physical abuse occurred rarely without psychological abuse. In over 80% of the battering incidents that were reported, the violent acts were accompanied by verbal abuse. According to Walker, all the women in her study had suffered from such forms of psychological abuse as isolation, interruptions of sleep and eating patterns, abusive partners' obsessiveness and possessiveness, threats to harm the women or their families, degradation and humiliation, forcible use of drugs or alcohol, and financial abuse. The women in Walker's study reported that it was the psychological abuse that was the most painful type of abuse that they had experienced.

There are no official statistics available on the incidence and prevalence of abuse against women in specific ethnic groups in Canada. Both the Women's Safety Project (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993) and The Violence Against Women Survey (Statistics Canada, 1993) include women from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, however, the collected data has not been analyzed with regards to the ethnicity of the respondents. Although statistical evidence of the incidence and prevalence of wife abuse within Canadian cultural minority groups is lacking, workers from various community based agencies and organizations in the Greater Vancouver area that provide counselling and settlement services to immigrants and members from cultural minorities confirm that wife abuse exists within these groups just as it

Similarly, anecdotal evidence of violence against immigrant women has been reported in newspaper articles. Horwood (1993) quotes a mental-health worker with SUCCESS, a community agency providing services for the members of the Chinese immigrant community, who reports that violence against wives in the Chinese community is a continuous concern. At least 13% of the recent Cantonese-speaking clients at the agency are reported to be victims of violence (Horwood). McLellan (1992) recounts a story of Savitri, a 30 year old woman from Guyana, who defied the wishes of her extended family and despite their counsel to remain in the relationship left her husband after years of physical and sexual abuse, abuse that started on her wedding night.

Tait (1994) discusses in her newspaper column the phenomenon of wife abuse within the Indo-Canadian community where young Indian brides often become victims of violence in their male-dominated marriages shortly after their arrival in Canada. Tait maintains that these women are particularly vulnerable because it may take a long time before they learn about available resources for help and how to access them. Some of these women are murdered by their husbands before they have a chance to get help. Tait reports further that even those Indo-Canadian women who have lived in Canada for a long time, who are fluent in English, and who are aware of the laws and know how to contact the police are faced with difficulties when they try to deal with their abusive husbands. A woman’s extended family is often a source of support in conflict situations. However, Balbir who was interviewed for the article, was disowned by her family when she married a man beneath her own class and could not turn to them when she needed refuge from her husband when he became abusive.
Despite the obvious need to learn more about the nature and extent of wife battering within the immigrant population, few actual research studies deal with the topic. Studies that focus on the issue of wife abuse may include immigrant women in the sample but usually do not analyze the data with regards to the ethnicity of the women (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; Statistics Canada, 1993). However, the reports by various immigrant organizations and by the media suggest that wife battering is indeed a serious problem within the immigrant population as it is within the mainstream population. Population estimates predict a growing number of new immigrants to Canada in the future, further emphasizing the importance of research on wife abuse; research that may well be relevant to the existing as well as the new immigrant population.

**Impact of Wife Abuse**

The multifaceted and horrendously damaging impact of battering on women’s physical and emotional well-being is well documented in the literature (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dutton, 1988; Mullen, Romans-Clarkson, Walton & Herbison, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1990; Walker, 1984; 1980; Whittaker-Leidig, 1992). In most battering incidents verbal abuse accompanies physical abuse (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990), and as many as 59% of battered women may also be sexually abused by their spouses (Walker, 1984). Results from the recent survey on violence against women by Statistics Canada (1993) indicates that nine in ten wife abuse incidents reportedly had not only a physical but an emotional impact as well on the woman.

It is difficult to determine what type of abuse; physical, sexual, or psychological is the most detrimental to the woman. Walker (1984) conducted a study with 435 volunteer abused women participants from the Rocky Mountain region in order to identify central psychological
and sociological factors that are related to the battered woman syndrome, to test theories, and to collect extensive information about battered women. One of the findings of the study was that although the physical consequences of violence were often more readily observable, it was the psychological abuse that the participants rated to be the most painful. It is important to bare in mind that the degree of the hurtfulness of any abusive act is difficult to define; the life context and circumstances of each abused woman need to be taken into account in the final assessment of the impact of abuse (Whittaker-Leidig, 1992).

Physical acts of violence can have very immediate as well as long term physical effects on the abused woman. Women may be so seriously injured that their capacity to function at home and at work is impaired and they may require medical care and/or sick leave (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women 1991; Gelles & Straus, 1990; Stets & Straus, 1990). Commonly reported injuries include bruises, bleeding, black eyes, bone fractures, subdural hematomas, detached retinas, head injuries, and neurological damage (Barnsley, 1980; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1984). Some of these injuries may require emergency medical treatment and some may result in permanent damage.

Sexual assault victims have been found to have chronic problems with blood pressure, backaches, headaches, sleep disturbances, pelvic and vaginal pain, and menstrual pain (Burgess, 1984; Waigand, Wallace, Phelps & Miller, 1990). The psychological terror experienced by women who have endured both physical and sexual battering is often manifested in physiological symptoms such as feelings of suffocation and heart palpitations (Walker, 1993). Battering during pregnancy may result in a miscarriage (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1984). Some women die as a result of injuries received during battering incidents or rape (Campbell, 1984; Gelles & Straus, 1990; Walker, 1991, 1984).
Physical consequences to an abused woman’s health can be related to the more obvious types of violence, such as physical and sexual assaults. According to Whittaker-Leidig (1992), however, it is possible that exposure to even less severe violence may play a role in diminished health in that “constant awareness of these small victimizations may make women hypersensitive, hypervigilant, and stressed, yielding untoward physical effects” (p. 153).

The psychosocial effects of wife abuse have been extensively recorded (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Bogard, 1988; Campbell, 1989; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Herman, 1992; Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1991; 1989; 1984; 1980; Whittaker-Leidig, 1992). In their recent review of the literature on psychosocial aspects of wife abuse Barnett and LaViolette assert that the predominant experience of all victims is chronic fear that is developed and maintained through dynamics of learning under adverse circumstances. A host of other psychological effects for the abused woman have been identified, and together these manifestations may result in what Walker (1993, 1989, 1984) calls a battered woman syndrome (BWS); a subcategory of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These views are supported and elaborated on in the current literature on wife abuse.

Abused women have been found to have considerably higher levels of fear than women who are not abused (Mullen et al., 1988; Russell, Lipov, Phillips, & White, 1989). Regardless of the type or intensity of the battering, the accompanying sense of threat is a potent factor in inducing fear that often becomes a constant companion to the abused woman and influences the way she views the world (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Campbell, 1984; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Martin, 1976; Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1989). The woman who lives under constant threats of further injury, even death, is frequently afraid to stay and afraid to leave, trapped by the fear of further reprisals from her partner (Barnsley, 1980; Campbell, 1984; Martin; Sinclair,
1985; Walker, 1989). Anxiety-based symptoms, phobic responses, and hypervigilance to danger signs may arise as a result of living in constant terror (Walker, 1993). Some women kill their husbands as a result of the prolonged terrifying fear they are forced to endure (Walker, 1989).

Distortion of self-image is one of the most adverse affects of abuse because continued violence may completely erode abused women’s self-esteem (Cascardi & O’Leary, 1992; Finkelhor, 1983). Battering damages these women’s self-confidence, and destroys their trust in their abilities and worthiness, creating or contributing to feelings of defectiveness (MacLeod, 1987; Sinclair, 1985). Women are traditionally socialized to think that they are responsible for the relationships in the family, and when there is a problem they frequently blame themselves for failing to fulfill their duty. Feelings of shame, embarrassment and self-blame about the battering are common experiences of abused women (Campbell, 1984; Dunaway, 1988; Sinclair; Walker, 1980). Abused women may deal with intense feelings of fear, shame, self-blame, and the seemingly unbelievable notion that they are being abused by someone who is supposed to love them by minimizing or denying the problem (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Dunaway; Sinclair; Walker, 1989).

Helplessness is another of the intense feelings experienced by women who are abused (Shepherd, 1990). If the woman’s repeated attempts to control the battering fail, her feelings of helplessness deepen and become related to extreme feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness about her ability to change the battering situation in any way (Pagelow, 1981; Sinclair,1985; Walker, 1989, 1984). Due to their debilitating powerlessness to stop the abuse abused women are particularly vulnerable to depressive symptomatology (Martin, 1976; Stets & Straus, 1990; Walker, 1993, 1989, 1984). Some abused women may see suicide or homicide as their only solution to the problem (Martin; Walker, 1980).
Various themes of isolation are common in an abused woman’s life (Barnsley, 1980; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Sinclair, 1985; Walker, 1984, 1980). Isolating the woman from family and other social networks is a control tactics often utilized by the abuser (Pagelow, 1981; Sinclair; Walker, 1980), but the woman may also cut herself off from others to keep the shameful battering a secret or to protect others from harm (Barnsley; Sinclair; Walker, 1984). A abused woman who is isolated from others may believe that she is the only one being treated so badly, which may perpetuate her feelings of isolation, powerlessness and helplessness (Walker, 1980). These psychosocial consequences of battering may affect different women in different ways depending on their individual personality characteristics, prior experience with similar traumatic events, support systems available to them, and the intensity and frequency of the battering (Walker, 1993).

Battering behavior has been found to follow a cycle of three predictable phases (Walker, 1984, 1980). During the tension building stage the man’s verbal and physical attacks on the woman grow exceedingly oppressive. Control tactics, such as coercion, intimidation through displays of physical power, threats, emotional and economic abuse, isolation, blaming, threats to harm children and other family members, and reliance on male privilege, employed by the abusive husband during this phase, which may last from the first several months to several years into the relationship, leave the woman feeling still somewhat in control of the abuse but nevertheless, angry and fearful of further harm. As the cycle is repeated the woman’s unsuccessful attempts to control the situation increase her feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Denial of and rationalizations for the gradually increasing abusive incidents also characterize this phase of an abused woman’s experience (Walker).
During the acute battering incident phase the tension builds up and eventually explodes into severe violence and it is during this phase in the cycle of violence that the woman faces the greatest risk of serious injury, sexual abuse, or being killed (Walker, 1984; 1980). Her sense of fear intensifies, often turning into terror. The unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of the attacks may leave the woman feeling stressed out and suffering from stress related symptoms such as anxiety, depression, disturbances in sleep and eating patterns, and a host of other psychophysiological symptoms. According to Walker the second phase in the cycle of violence is also characterized by perceptions of being trapped and unable to escape the violent situation. The actual attack is typically followed by initial shock, denial, and disbelief, and help is often not sought immediately unless the woman needs medical emergency treatment. If the abuse is reported to the police at all, it is done during phase two. Walker found also that often the abuse escalates after the police leave.

During phase three, the honeymoon stage, the man is remorseful and pleads for the woman's forgiveness promising that he will not hurt her again (Walker, 1984, 1980). He shows her affection and she is often willing to trust that the abuse is over. Both partners believe that the woman is responsible for the relationship and its survival. They feel deeply dependent on each other forming a symbiotic pair. If the woman decides to leave, she then is blamed for being the one who is guilty of breaking up the relationship and destroying the happy future of her husband and the family. If the woman decides to stay, the tension starts to build up and the affectionate behavior of the husband starts to decrease. If he is like most abusive men eventually he will abuse the woman again. As the cycle repeats itself, the honeymoon stages become shorter and the abuse becomes more frequent and severe.

After experiencing repeated cycles of violence the woman may become convinced that attempts to leave the abusive relationship are futile. She may feel that there is no way to control
or stop the abuse, a feeling that is compounded by her isolation, fear, and a sense of shame and self-blame. Walker (1984) refers to these psychological changes as learned helplessness to explain why the abused woman finds it difficult to escape from her violent husband. According to Walker (1980), abused women and their partners may perceive that life without the other is not possible, and that the women are the “bridge to their men's emotional well being” (p. 68). The couple in such a relationship may form what Walker (1980) calls a “symbiotic pair”, where each individual is “so dependent on the other that when one attempts to leave, both lives become drastically affected” (p. 68).

An interaction of the psychosocial consequences of the violence that has been employed to control the woman, and the particular life circumstances of the abused woman, may lead into a recognizable pattern of psychological symptoms that Walker (1993, 1980) has named battered woman syndrome. Walker (1993) suggests that battered woman syndrome is a subcategory of post-traumatic stress disorder included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) “as are rape trauma syndrome . . . , combat veteran’s syndrome . . . , child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome . . . , battered child syndrome, . . . , and similar psychological syndrome reactions in other crime victims and sequelae from other traumatic incidents” (p. 135-136). Rather than evidence of individual pathology battered woman syndrome and other less intense effects of battering are regarded as responses that any normal person might develop after exposure to severe trauma (Walker, 1993). Whether or not an abused woman develops battered woman syndrome, the consequences of battering take a heavy toll on the woman's physical and psychological well-being. The abused woman is left to try to understand her experience in the confusing societal context where battering is condemned by law but where, in every day life, the violence continues.
Process of Leaving and Recovery From an Abusive Relationship

Regardless of the often seemingly insurmountable barriers and difficulties many abused women manage to extricate themselves from their relationships. Although many women may leave their abusive relationships only to return later, this pattern itself can be seen as part of a larger process that eventually leads to the final break (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Pagelow, 1981). There is a growing interest among researchers to study this process to find out what motivates and enables women to leave their abusive partners in the first place and how they adapt after leaving (Russell & Uhlemann, 1994; Campbell-Ulrich, 1993). Three models (Ferraro & Johnson; Landenburger, 1993; Turner & Shapiro, 1986) that each offer a slightly different perspective on the process of leaving were chosen because of their complementary nature to illuminate the process of leaving for abused women.

The Ferraro and Johnson model. In a participant observer study, Ferraro and Johnson (1983) identified and described factors that may serve as catalysts for abused women to redefine their rationalizations for the violence and, subsequently, lead to leaving their abusive relationships. Experiences and stories of 120 women, between the ages of 17 and 68 years, who stayed at a shelter situated in a suburban city in the Southwestern United States, were recorded by the researchers during daily interactions with the women. Additional data were collected through informal discussions, staff meetings, crisis phone calls, and interviews with ten shelter residents and five abused women who had left their husbands without entering the shelter. The researchers postulated that the women’s growing self-awareness regarding factors related to their abuse resulted in feelings of anger, which in turn motivated them to leave.

Ferraro and Johnson (1983) found that there were various catalysts for redefining abuse and leaving for the women in their study. They described and discussed six of these catalysts in a
subsequent article based on their findings. The first catalyst was a perception of changes in the level of violence. While severity of abuse in itself was not found to be a factor in the women's decisions to leave, the researchers suggested that it was when the women realized that they might die at the hands of their abusive husbands that they decided to leave. A second catalyst for re-evaluation was a change in resources. The researchers found that while some women perceived that they did not have any other options but to stay with their abuser, other women started to see their abuse in a different light when they became aware of resources available to them, resources that were necessary for leaving. Transition houses and public support played a role in conveying a strong message to some of these abused women that they did not need to continue to tolerate the abuse. In contrast, cutbacks in government funding limited the provision of support services, and inadequate support services in turn were a factor in compounding the women's fears that they would not manage financially if they left their relationships.

According to Ferraro and Johnson (1983), the third catalyst for re-evaluation of their rationalizations for the women was a change in their relationships. These researchers based the formulation of this catalyst on Walker's (1980) theory of the cycle of violence, saying that "... as battering progresses, periods of [husband’s] remorse may shorten, or disappear, eliminating the basis for maintaining a positive outlook on the marriage [for the woman]" (Ferraro & Johnson, p. 332). If the women did not retaliate or attempt to escape, the abusers might conclude that there was no need for apologies. Increasing lengths of time devoid of remorse and loving behavior led some of the women to re-examine their feelings towards their abusive husbands and the situations where they lived in, a process that resulted in the women realizing that they were abuse victims.

According to Ferraro and Johnson (1983), the fourth catalyst, despair, emerged as the abuse became progressively worse. The women lost their hope that the abuse will stop. In
addition, as their hopes were crushed and replaced by increasing despair, the women realized that they were being victimized. A fifth catalyst, change in visibility of the violence, involved the women being abused not only in private but now also in public situations. The researchers observed that having outsiders witness the abuse left the women feeling overwhelming shame, which in turn led them to re-evaluate their previous rationalizations for the abuse.

The sixth and final catalyst for re-evaluating abuse for abused women was external definitions of the relationship. According to Ferraro and Johnson (1983), external definitions either reinforced or undermined the women’s perceptions of their abuse. Non-supportive responses from officials and family members contributed to the women’s beliefs that they did not have any other choice but to continue to endure in their abusive relationships. In contrast, the researchers observed that unconditionally supportive responses of the abused women, and clearly disapproving responses of the abusers and their behavior could act as powerful catalysts in increasing an abused woman awareness of the fact that abuse is not acceptable. This awareness in turn was found to undermine the women’s own rationalizations of their abuse. Friends, family, and shelters were seen as crucial sources of external reinforcement of the notion that abuse was not to be tolerated. Ferraro and Johnson suggest that “... the closer the relationship of others, the more significant their response is to a woman’s perception of her situation” (p. 333). The researchers suggested for instance, that it was likely that children’s willingness to leave their violent fathers would support their mother’s decision to leave.

Ferraro and Johnson (1983) suggest that the consequences of leaving for abused women vary depending on the shelter atmosphere, presence of new partners, employment opportunities, and their ex-partners’ responses. They found that women in their study felt generally optimistic about new relationships. They suggest that while engaging in a new relationship shortly after leaving the previous one may alleviate women’s feelings of loneliness, it may however, interfere
with her dealing with the negative impact of the abuse and with developing her own independence. Some women were found to be turned off by the idea of becoming involved with another man, and others seemed to enjoy their new found freedom to a degree that a new relationship was not even being considered as an option by them. The researchers found that based on success in forming new positive relationships, degree of self-confidence, and managing to see the future in an optimistic light, only thirty of the participants in the study could be considered to have dealt with their abuse experiences. Sixty women of the total of one hundred and twenty participants returned to their relationships, and the remaining thirty women who had left continued to struggle financially, emotionally, and interpersonally.

**The Landenburger Model.** Landenburger (1993) offers a similar perspective to the Ferraro and Johnson (1983) model in that certain changes happen in an abused woman’s self-concept in relation to their process of leaving. She postulates that both entrapment in and recovery from an abusive relationship are essentially inseparable parts of the same process, a process that is imbedded in the meaning that a woman ascribes to her experiences of abuse as well as in her social context. Landenburger’s model is an outgrowth of two separate studies. In a qualitative study, employing a semi-structured, open ended interview format, she explored the experiences of 30 predominantly white women, between 16 and 40 years of age, over half of which had children, and who were currently in or had recently left abusive relationships (Landenburger, 1989). A constant comparative analysis format was used to analyze the data.

Landenburger (1993) conducted a second study to deepen the understanding of what it was like to leave an abusive partner and to identify helping and hindering factors in that process. Ten women of the total of seventy current community shelter residents who were recruited to participate in the study, were interviewed using the same interview format as in the first study on their experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship. Two follow-up interviews
within three month intervals were conducted with the same ten women, to explore how the women had attempted to rebuild their lives after leaving. In addition, all seventy women participated in self-directed, monthly focus groups, with approximately seven women in each group, for a period of ten months. Information on the demographic and ethnic characteristics of these women is not included in the article by the author. By using constant comparative analysis to organize data collected from all these sources Landenburger identified "... a process of leaving that is an integral part of the process of entrapment in and recovering from an abusive relationship" (p. 379). Results from the second study were used to expand the model that is discussed in detail below.

Landenburger (1993, 1989) suggests that the experiences of women who have been abused are best understood within "... the socio-cultural context in which a woman lives, the context of the relationship as perceived by important others, and the perceptions of the women about the relationship, the abuse, and her 'self' (p. 379). The researcher points out that women in abusive relationships inhabit two contradicting realities. Typically, outsiders witness only the positive aspects of a relationship, a situation that at the time is validated by them and the abusers. The other reality includes the abusive aspects of the relationship and is rarely seen or is denied by outsiders, a situation that leaves abused women alone, and their experiences of abuse unrecognized and invalidated. It is in this confusing situation that abused women are left to try to make sense out of their lives, a process where they may end up losing their sense of self, their sense of being valued individuals, and their hope for survival. The process of entrapment and recovering is divided into four stages: the binding phase, the enduring phase, the disengaging phase, and the recovering phase. Landenburger says that rather than linear and mutually exclusive, these four phases often 'bleed' into and overlap each other.
The first stage, the binding phase, involves initial relationship development and beginning of the abuse. Women’s hopeful expectations and dreams for their partners and relationships help them to dismiss and ignore early warning signs such as negative characteristics of their men or beginning abusive events. During this stage women try to placate their partners as best they can. Abusive incidents are not perceived as being abuse.

During the enduring phase, and while the abuse becomes progressively worse, women continue to tolerate it due to their persisting commitment to the relationship (Landenburger, 1993, 1989). Women want to believe that that their husbands are sincere when they promise to change and stop the abuse. Women also feel that they are accountable for the abuse, and they don’t want to disclose it to others. In the meanwhile, women start to grow increasingly tired of trying to fulfill their husbands endless demands, they feel like they are mere objects, and their self-concepts begin to erode. While women feel hopelessly trapped in their relationships, they also become increasingly aware of the possibility that they might die at the hands of their husbands, or that they might kill their partners or themselves. This feeling of entrapment serves as a catalyst for the following phase of awareness of their situations.

During stage three, the disengaging phase, abuse has become a principal characteristic of the relationship (Landenburger, 1993, 1989). While women start to feel growing connectedness to other abused women, they are also struggling with conflicting loyalties towards their ‘selves’ and towards their partners. Regardless of the risks involved, women start to reach out for help and for people who might support them instead of looking for help from those individuals who judge and blame them. Women realize that their lives are not worth living if they stay in their abusive relationships and they may decide to leave. At various points in their marriages the women’s ‘selves’ start to re-emerge. These re-emerging selves might be initially repressed by the
women who feel overwhelmed by these new connections to their inner selves, due to what has sometimes been years of hiding their true feelings.

The last stage, the recovering phase, involves readjustment to new lives after women have left their abusive relationships (Landenburger, 1993). Landenburger suggests that women may use up their energies in trying to explain to others why they left. Concerns about practical day to day survival are intertwined with struggles to regain a positive sense of self and trust in personal abilities that have been damaged during the time in the abusive relationships. Landenburger suggests that “regaining positive images of self is a process, just as ... declining sense of self was a process” (p. 382). Important in the recovery from an abusive relationship is the understanding of abuse in a societal context where women in general are often blamed for relationships gone wrong and even for violence against them. Women who have been abused need to know that they are not responsible for it.

Landenburger (1993) suggests that women have taken a leap forward when they can see their husbands as belonging to the past. According to Landenburger, a grieving process is an integral part of this phase that is full of losses, such as the loss of the relationship, the loss of roles inherent in that relationship, the loss of friends, and often the loss of the father of the children. She says:

If a woman can manage to reject in her mind the importance of her partner and place in its stead the importance of self, the power her partner has over her will diminish, and she will gain internal endorsement for who she is and her expression of self (Landenburger, p. 383).

The Turner and Shapiro Model. Turner and Shapiro (1986) perceive the process of leaving an abusive relationship to be similar to a grieving process. As such they propose another alternative to how to conceptualize this situation characterized by powerful emotions, emotions
that if not dealt with appropriately, keep many women stuck in their destructive, even dangerous relationships, or contribute to women repeatedly returning to their abusive partners. Turner and Shapiro's two-level approach involves, first, identifying the losses related to the leaving process, and secondly, mourning of these losses.

Turner and Shapiro (1986) identify and discuss three areas where women who have been abused and who are contemplating of leaving may experience losses. The first category of losses includes the loss of the idealized relationship and has to do with crushed expectations for a fulfilling marriage. Women in particular are socialized to think that they are more valued as partners than as individuals, and consequently, they often feel satisfied and complete in a relationship, but feel unfulfilled and lonely when on their own. Relationships are sometimes seen as solutions to life's dissatisfactions, and high expectations are placed on intimate partners as contributors to these solutions. When violent incidents in relationships challenge the accuracy of these idealized expectations, abused women may try to deal with the dissonance by blaming themselves, trying harder to please their partners, avoiding sensitive interactions to keep the peace, and focusing on the positive characteristics of their husbands and marriages; or by gradually acknowledging the damaging and abusive characteristics of their relationships, a process in which feelings of sadness and betrayal play a major role.

Role loss is another type of bereavement that abused women may need to work through (Turner & Shapiro, 1986). When a woman gets married her status often rises and her role repertoire expands. In contrast, the loss of roles in the event of divorce or death of a spouse often means lowered personal status for a woman. She may feel that she has lost her roles as a partner, lover, and friend, roles in which she has invested energy and time to master. The accompanying emotional pain may render a woman vulnerable and increase her need for support.
The loss of security (Turner & Shapiro, 1986) involves both practical and emotional aspects of loss and is seen as a major factor in a woman’s reluctance to leave her abusive partner. A woman who is starting to plan a new, independent life may perceive that the provision of basic life necessities, such as food, shelter, and clothing for herself and her children is essential but difficult, particularly if her vocational skills are limited. Having to rely on social assistance to satisfy her basic needs may seem degrading and it may act as a deterrent for a woman to leave. When these basic needs have been at least partially met, an abused woman may begin to satisfy her need and her children’s’ needs for safety, orderliness, and protection. While a woman may leave to protect herself and her children from the abuse, leaving does not necessarily ensure safety from her abusive husband who may continue to harass her. In addition to arranging legal protection, a woman may need to arrange for a new place where to live, and to start to assume full responsibility for other aspects of her life.

When safety needs have been attended to, a woman usually attempts to form a new relationship network of friends and family to combat loneliness and isolation and to meet her needs for belonging (Turner & Shapiro, 1986). Due to her partner’s jealousy and controlling behavior an abused woman may have lived in virtual isolation and she may feel apprehensive about starting to reach out and connect with other people. She may also feel a sense of loss when rewarding aspects of her ex-partner and their relationship are remembered. When a woman has worked through losses related to ending her abusive relationship, she usually feels able to attend to her self-actualization needs. According to Turner and Shapiro, a solid sense of independence from her abusive partner, a sense of connection to important others, and a readiness to risk personal growth indicate that a woman has succeeded in coming to terms with her losses.

Turner and Shapiro (1986) postulate that while there is individual variation in ways of working through these losses, the mourning process can be viewed as following a predictable
pattern of denial, anger, bargaining, grief, and acceptance. During the denial stage an abused woman denies her abuse or denies that it is a problem. She believes that it should be kept a secret, that she is to blame, and that she deserves to be abused. It is during the following stage, anger, that a woman is most likely to reach out for help and support from outsiders, either because she wants things to change or because she has left her partner. She may feel angry towards her parents, her in-laws, friends, and her children for their non-supportive actions during her abuse or leave-taking; or anger directed towards herself for not having left earlier. Turner and Shapiro suggest that it is anger towards the husband that is likely to be expressed openly, although it too may be suppressed out of feelings of embarrassment, guilt and partial denial. These various aspects of anger need to be dealt with to reduce the risk of anger turning inwards and leading to depression. A woman’s anger may act as a powerful catalyst in taking the final step out of her abusive relationship and motivate her to strike out independently.

The third stage in this model, bargaining, involves a woman being overwhelmed by ambivalent feelings with regard to her leaving (Turner & Shapiro, 1986). Having dealt with her feelings of anger she may once again feel drawn to the positive aspects of her partner and the security that their relationship seems to offer in contrast to the exhilarating but unknown freedom that awaits her and her children if she makes the change. A woman may also feel pressure from her partner to return. In exchange for her return a woman may agree to return if her husband promises to get counselling, stop the abuse, or to meet other conditions set by her.

Stage four, grief, may appear briefly in conjunction with the anger stage, and re-appear after the anger has been resolved or when the losses have actually materialized in the life of the woman leaving the abusive relationship (Turner & Shapiro, 1986). Due to societal expectations that anger and relief are the only appropriate feelings at this time, feelings of grief may be buried inside and not disclosed to outsiders. Indirect indications of grief in an abused woman may
include expressions of being tired, exhausted, in physical pain, or even plans of returning to the relationship and focusing on its positive aspects.

The various aspects of grief need to be worked through in order to move to the final stage in resolving the losses related to leaving an abusive relationship (Turner & Shapiro, 1986). Common characteristics of this stage include taking the final step out of the abusive relationship and into an autonomous and self-supporting living situation. While acceptance does not just arrive as a sudden realization for a woman after she has left her abusive husband, it is characterized by a solid sense that she has done the right thing. While a sense of loss and sadness may still linger on, the woman is now able to reflect on her experiences of living in and leaving the abusive relationship without feeling overwhelmed by pain, guilt, and intense anger. Acceptance of her losses will allow a woman to start to regard herself in more positive terms and to feel more capable of dealing with her situation. The woman acquires a sense of wanting to put the past behind and to move on with her life beyond the abuse.

In summary, leaving an abusive relationship is seen as a complex and multi-leveled process that is characterized by intense and often conflicting emotions for a woman (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Landenburger, 1993, 1989; Turner & Shapiro, 1986). As an abused woman works through the various stages in the leaving process her self-awareness is transformed, perhaps as a result of her effective coping responses or of learning new ways to restructure and to give meaning to her situation (Ferraro & Johnson; Landenburger). Furthermore, the process of leaving may be perceived as a grieving process, where feelings of loss, ambivalence about leaving, and inadequacy regarding her self-reliance can be reframed as aspects of sadness that, if expressed and mourned, may enable the woman to choose to leave and to move on with her life beyond the abuse (Turner & Shapiro).
Factors Related to the Abuse Experiences of Immigrant Women

Being an abused woman and an immigrant adds to the complexities of an already difficult situation. An abused immigrant woman may have to deal with such obstacles as language difficulties; institutional and organizational barriers; racism; isolation from her family and friends; unfamiliarity with and isolation from community support networks and Canadian legal, social, and medical institutions; and fear of deportation while trying to make sense of the abuse that she is experiencing (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Ng, 1985; Verjee, 1992; Wiebe, 1991). Due to the above mentioned factors the immigrant woman may feel deeply dependent on her husband and may become even more vulnerable to her husband’s threats and attacks (MacLeod & Shin).

In addition to the terror induced by the battering, an immigrant woman may fear that she, her children, or her husband will be deported if she reports the battering incidents to outsiders (MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Dunaway, 1988), or that she will endanger their chance to obtain Canadian citizenship if she gets into trouble in some way (MacLeod & Shin). Even though the fears may be unfounded the immigrant woman’s lack of knowledge of her legal rights and unfamiliarity with Canadian institutions may help to perpetuate her fears and allow the husband, if he is the woman’s sponsor to Canada, to use the threat of deportation as a means to silence and control her (MacLeod & Shin). Fear of the police and the legal system itself based on the woman’s previous negative experiences in her country of origin, may prevent the immigrant woman from seeking help (Riutort & Small, 1985). She may be afraid that she will lose the custody of her children, be ostracized by her family and her community, and/or that she will not be able to provide for her children if she decides to leave (Crites, 1991; MacLeod & Shin; Riutort & Small).
Linguistic isolation may act as a barrier for abused immigrant women in limiting their chances of becoming aware of and accessing information about their legal rights and available support systems and even in reporting the battering to the police (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Riutort & Small, 1985). English as a second language (ESL) classes are not accessible to all immigrant women due to inconvenient or inaccessible locations, transportation difficulties, lack of child care, or time constraints (Riutort & Small). Many immigrant women are sponsored into the country by their husband who is legally bound to provide for their wife's needs for a period of 10 years. These women are not eligible for training allowances while taking ESL classes which may further emphasize the woman's dependence on her husband and intensify the experience of battering (MacLeod & Shin, 1990). Inadequate command of English also keeps the immigrant woman trapped in linguistic isolation and ghettoized jobs with other immigrant women with few opportunities for more education and better employment (B.C. Task Force on Family Violence; Estable, 1986; MacLeod & Shin; Ng, 1985).

Abused immigrant women, who decide to leave and manage to break away from the abusive situations and seek outside help within their own communities or in the society at large, are often faced with additional hurdles in the form of organizational and institutional barriers. Organizations and agencies that provide support for immigrant women are often underfunded and understaffed (Chan, 1989; Ng, 1985; Pilowsky, 1990), and help may not be available when help is needed.

Furthermore, support may not be available in the women's mother tongues or by professionals from their own culture. If women are not sufficiently proficient in English or French they often cannot voice their concerns and needs to mainstream helpers who do not speak
the immigrant women’s language. Some immigrant women may feel reluctant to disclose their concerns to someone outside their own cultural group. Yet others may feel more comfortable confiding in a person outside their own cultural group to resolve an issue laden with shame, such as battering, because of concerns of rumors spreading into the women’s respective cultural communities (Ng, 1985). Western health care and therapeutic approaches may also be foreign to abused immigrant women and may fail to address their needs and concerns in a culturally sensitive way, serving only to compound the oppression that they may be experiencing (Anderson et al., 1990; Crites, 1991; Shin, 1991).

Racism is another barrier that many immigrant women have to face. A woman of colour may encounter multiple forms of discrimination and prejudice from the professionals and institutions that she has sought out for help. She may experience discrimination first as a woman, and second as a woman of colour (B. C. Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Pilowsky, 1990; Riutort & Small, 1985). In the report of the B. C. Task Force on Family Violence it is pointed out that:

the woman of colour may be under pressure from her community not to report incidents of sexual abuse or wife abuse so that the solidarity of the community is not breached. A woman of colour may then be caught between a system which is offering help to her as a woman, but is racist; and a community which provides support to her as a person of colour, but may not deal with the sexual abuse or wife abuse (p. 229).

Ng (1985) notes that the atmosphere in the transition houses, where some of the non-English speaking Chinese-Canadian women survivors of wife abuse that she interviewed sought refuge, was not accepting of the women’s cultural lifestyle, (e.g. differences in mealtimes and meal preparations). Walker (1993) points out that some symptoms of the battered woman
syndrome “are more likely to be potentiated when battering interacts with other forms of oppression, such as racism” (p. 134). The mutually reinforcing and complex interaction of sexism and racism, factors in such situations of multiple oppression, and their relationship to wife battering remains to be recognized and explored (B. C. Task Force on Family Violence, 1992). The ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ situation may immobilize the immigrant woman to stay in the abusive relationship and increase the powerlessness and helplessness that she may already be experiencing.

**Acculturation and Conflict in Cultural Values**

Kim and Berry (1985) define acculturation as “change resulting from continuous first-hand contact between two distinct cultural groups” (p. 159). According to Kim and Berry, acculturating individuals may experience five different types of changes: physical (e.g. new climate, new place to live), biological (e.g. eating habits), social (e.g. altered relationship patterns with other people), cultural (e.g. different political, economic, religious, and social institutions), and psychological (e.g. shifts in attitudes, values, and beliefs). While both cultural groups in contact can influence each other, it is usually the mainstream culture that sets the stage for acculturation by defining the acceptable norms. Acculturating individuals can adjust, adapt, reject, or make changes to these norms. Due to the mainly one sided changes that individuals within an acculturating group may be undergoing, the process of acculturation may be experienced as stressful by some people, resulting in adverse psychological affects such as depression, identity confusion, mistrust, and hostility (Berry & Annis, 1974; Berry, 1986). According to Berry and Annis “individuals who are less independent of events in their milieu will be more susceptible to changes due to acculturative influences, and hence will exhibit greater acculturative stress” (p. 388).
Culture conflict is related to the psychological changes that acculturating individuals may be undergoing (Berry & Annis, 1974). As such, it is a well documented experience of individuals who are juxtaposed between two or more social worlds or cultures that differ from each other with regard to their beliefs, attitudes, role expectations, and rules for appropriate behavior (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Stonequist, 1937). Attempts to resolve conflicts may lead to re-evaluations of self and one’s value system. Consequently, an individual’s value system may be expanded and redefined and a new base for one’s self identity may be established (Weinreich, 1985, 1983). Underlying this conflict are essentially contradictions between the value system into which the individuals have been socialized to in their ancestral cultures or ethnic groups and the value system of their new host culture (Furnham & Bochner; Stonequist; Weinreich, 1985, 1983). The degree of variation in these cultural values can be seen in relation to where the cultures fit along the individualistic/collectivist or continuum (Triandis, 1990).

Typically, in collective cultures the family is the primary unit of survival, the family’s goals take precedence over individual goals, and behavior is regulated by family and community norms (Triandis, 1990). In individualistic cultures on the other hand, the pursuit of personal goals is more important and behavior is regulated by personal likes and dislikes. In collectivist cultures hierarchies are important: Fathers are heads of their households and women are subordinate to men. In contrast, individualists emphasize equality among people. Furthermore, maintaining harmony, saving face, and keeping disagreements hidden from people outside the family is characteristic to collectivists, whereas in individualistic cultures confrontations and assertiveness in general are acceptable, even desirable (Triandis, 1990). Collectivists value interdependence among members of the family and the community, whereas individualists value personal achievement and independence. In collectivist cultures the “self “is perceived as part of
the family and community and individuals are highly influenced by these groups. In individualistic cultures the "self" is viewed as a separate unit and behavior is less influenced by others opinions. In addition, collectivists value family integrity, security, conformity, and obedience more than individualists who, in contrast, emphasize achievement, pleasure, and competition (Triandis).

Conflict in values may become particularly real for immigrant women as they are trying to make sense of their experiences in intimate relationships where they are being violated by their partners. In fact, different views on gender equality, gender roles, marriage, child-rearing practices, parental authority, and double-income families have been mentioned as factors in confusion and conflict about cultural values, beliefs, and traditions for these women (Anderson et al., 1990; B.C. Task Force on Family Violence, 1992). Carillo and Marrujo (cited in Torres, 1991) found in their study with the Hispanic population in the USA that acculturative stress was related to marital conflict with regards to changing sex role expectations, family obligations, and relationships.

While being cautious about generalizations, several writers have noted that many abused immigrant women are socialized into cultures that are reflective of a traditional collective orientation where extended family and community plays an important role, shaping the values, beliefs, and rules of acceptable behavior of its members (Anderson et al., 1990; Chan, 1989; Ng, 1985; Wiebe, 1991). These cultures are typically patriarchal in orientation where men are entitled to more authority and decision making power in relation to finances, marriage, work, and life in general than women. In some cases women may be considered as the husband’s property. Marriages may be arranged by parents whose perceptions of a suitable marriage partner override the wishes of the children (Wiebe). Marriages are not easily broken, and often divorce
is not considered to be an option even though there may be serious difficulties in the relationship. Women may be considered to be responsible for the emotional and social well-being of the family members, as well as for the transmission of the cultural norms of the family (Epstein, Ng, & Trebble, 1978).

A function of a collectivist family and community structure is to provide support and assistance to its members, who in turn remain respectful, grateful, and committed to their family and community thus reinforcing cohesion and a sense of interdependency (Triandis, 1990). At its best, the extended family of an abused immigrant woman may serve as a source of support, its members intervening on her behalf to stop the violence (B. C. Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Wiebe, 1991). For brides who leave their own extended families behind in their country of origin to join the husband’s family, the loss of the traditional support network may be devastating, depriving them of an acceptable escape route (B. C. Task Force on Family Violence; Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993). However, the extended family of both the woman and the man may also be a further source of negative sanctions and oppression. The extended family members may agree that a husband has a right to abuse his wife, they may counsel the wife to stay, and they may even help to cover up the battering perpetuating the abused woman’s isolation (B. C. Task Force on Family Violence; Chan, 1989; Crites, 1991).

Immigrant women may initially feel a need to preserve their social practices, values, and traditions of their own community under any circumstances in order to maintain a sense of security and cultural identity (Wiebe, 1991). However, exposure to North American individualistic ideas about family structure, intimate relationships, gender equality, and pursuit of personal interests however, those practices, traditions, and values may be questioned, and
inevitable clashes between cultural practices may result in conflict (Anderson et al.; B.C. Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Wiebe).

Conflicting values may play a role in immigrant women’s difficulty in and reluctance to leave their abusive relationships, even when their safety and personal aspirations are at risk (Wiebe, 1991). Disclosure of abuse may bring both individual shame over the woman because she is likely to be blamed for breaking up the family cohesion and not her husband, and collective shame over her own as well as her husband’s family, because she has broken a taboo by revealing family problems outside the extended family unit (B. C. Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Crites, 1991; Wiebe). Separation or divorce may stigmatize the woman and her children indefinitely as well as lead to total ostracism by her extended family and community (Anderson et al., 1990). The woman’s financial savings may be controlled by her husband or some other extended family member making it difficult for her to draw upon these funds, and further limiting her chances to leave (B. C. Task Force on Family Violence). Therefore, for an immigrant woman to leave the abusive relationship under these circumstances, when her self-confidence and esteem may have been eroded by abuse, would seem to call for tremendous determination and resourcefulness.

In summary, abused immigrant women may need to deal with issues related to adjustment to new cultural influences, a process that may add more stress to their situation (B.C. Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Torres, 1991; Wiebe, 1991). Adjustment to a new cultural environment may require them to face challenges to their traditional beliefs, values, and customs that may result in intra-psychic and/or interpersonal conflicts (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Stonequist, 1937; Weinreich, 1985, 1983; Wiebe). Furthermore, leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women may turn out to be overwhelmingly difficult if their identities are closely
connected to their family and community, and because of these women’s fear of negative sanctions by their families and/or communities (Wiebe).

**Research Literature Related to the Experience of Abused Immigrant Women**

In comparison to the large amount of literature that is available on various aspects of wife abuse occurring in the mainstream culture, the literature on wife abuse and its victims within immigrant communities is scarce. Information on the topic can mostly be found in monographs, overviews, Task Force reports, or other secondary sources (e.g. British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Riutort & Small, 1985; Shin, 1991; Wiebe, 1991).

The available Canadian studies have often been commissioned by various community organizations, such as Chinese Family Life Services of Metro Toronto (Chan, 1989), India Mahila Association (Dosanjh, Deo, & Sidhu, 1994), and Chinese Family Service of Greater Montreal (Chan, Hum, & Guberman, 1989). The Ng (1985) study is an unpublished master’s thesis. Similarly, an American study by Bhaumik (1988) on wife abuse in the American and the Asian-American culture is an unpublished doctoral dissertation. The findings and conclusions reported in these studies represent a beginning in an area of research that begs for systematic attention. These studies will be discussed here with focus on the purpose, sample, method, and conclusions of each study. In addition, an article by Chin (1994) on wife abuse among Chinese immigrants will be discussed.

Dosanjh et al. (1994) conducted a community based phone interview study with fifteen South Asian Canadian women from the Vancouver and Lower Mainland area, who had been abused in their intimate relationships, to determine their specific needs and barriers to services,
services accessed, impact of violence, action plan to provide protection from abuse, and other perceptions of the participants with regards to role of extended family, role expectations, and acculturation process. The women were recruited through referrals from various community based organizations, agencies, transition houses, and through talk shows to answer questions about their experiences of abuse in an intimate relationship.

A sixty-item questionnaire was used as a loose guideline for the interviews, and the women could expand on issues that were most pertinent to them. Most of the women were separated or divorced at the time of the interview; their age range was between 18 and 35 years; their residency in Canada varied from 1 month to 18 years; most of them had come to the country under their husbands’ sponsorship; all of them had completed at least high school either in Canada or in their country of origin; the women’s language proficiency ranged from no English to fluent in English; and most of them had come to Canada in their late teens and twenties. The interviews were conducted mostly in the women’s mother tongues.

Results indicated that the women in the study felt socially, psychologically, and financially dependent on their husbands. The researchers found that as immigration sponsors the men held power over their wives and could use that as a lever to control them. The men limited their wife’s outside contacts to their own family and friends, the wife’s interactions with others were closely monitored, and the women were denied to watch television programs that informed viewers about crisis resources and help available for abused women (Dosanjh et al., 1994).

The fact that the women had little or no control over their own earnings or the family finances further compounded their dependency on their husbands. With their own families far away and little opportunity to access outside services, these women could not develop their own support and social network. Given their linguistic, cultural, and social isolation, the women in
the study had little opportunity to participate in the larger Canadian community, and to educate themselves about their new environment and resources that might be available to them (Dosanjh et al., 1994).

Dosanjh et al. (1994) found that “the dominance and control exercised by the women’s husbands and their families, lack of language skills and familiarity with the Canadian society and resources available, all generated a multitude of fears in these women” (p. 2). Fear of reprisals, not being able to get their share of family assets, not having any money to live on, not being able to sponsor their own family members to the country, and fear of having their children taken away if they decided to leave, were all part of the women’s experience. The women’s fears were used by their husbands as an effective method to control them. With little or no knowledge about their rights and isolated from information sources the women felt alone, isolated, powerless, and trapped in their abusive relationships (Dosanjh et al.). According to Dosanjh it was the women who were blamed for the abuse by the abuser and his family. Suicide was considered as a way out of the violent relationship by some women. The women indicated that their work performance during the abuse was negatively affected due to stress, low self-esteem, depression, constant worry, fear of losing their jobs, loneliness, financial problems, and childcare concerns. When the women left their relationships they continued to be held responsible for the abuse and the marriage breakup. Fear of further reprisals was a companion of some women who had left their relationships.

Although the abuse became progressively worse for all the women in the study, it was reported to the police “only as a last resort” (Dosanjh et al., 1994, p. 35). Reluctance to disclose family concerns to outsiders prevented the women from seeking or accepting help from outside sources. Related to the difficulty of reporting the abuse was the women’s lack of language skills
and knowledge about their rights, absence of close friends and family; and fear of losing their possessions, reputation, and respect that the women connected to their identity and status in the family and community. When the women reached out for help, however, the outside connections played a crucial role in increasing the women’s awareness of their rights as well as options available to them (Dosanjh et al.).

Dosanjh et al. (1994) discovered that the women in their study were concerned about their children, who according to the women had also been negatively affected by observing the abuse of their mothers or by being abused themselves. The women expressed a need to get support in assisting their children to deal with these ill-affects. Typically, the women bore the sole responsibility of taking care of the children’s emotional and practical welfare both while in the relationship and after they had left. Some mothers felt guilty for not being able to endure the violence for the sake of their children. Contributing to their guilt was the experience that they did not have enough time and energy for their children because of preoccupation with their own problems (Dosanjh et al.).

Dosanjh et al. (1994) found that the women’s help seeking preferences and experiences varied considerably from one case to another. Members of one’s own family and friends as well as husband’s family that were sought out for help were sometimes helpful, and sometimes not helpful at all. Some women did not want to talk to any family members. Experiences from transition houses were different as well, ranging from praise for the services to feelings of being treated in a culturally insensitive manner. The police response also received mixed ratings. While some women regarded the police as understanding protectors, others felt that the police were more on the husband’s side and that they minimized the problem. One woman expressed
her dissatisfaction with a lawyer who mismanaged her divorce case, as well as her helplessness regarding what to do if you are not happy with the legal aid that you are receiving.

Immigrant support agencies were appreciated by some women, whereas others were dissatisfied with regard to the services received. Some women liked to talk to a helper who spoke her language and who was from her own community, while other women were concerned about the helper revealing their issues to the community. Women's organizations and media were seen as valuable sources of information and education about issues regarding wife abuse. However, a source of frustration with both agencies and women's organizations was the observation that workers in these places seemed to be always busy and not available when their help was needed the most (Dosanjh et al., 1994).

Dealing with the legal system was also found to be a challenge (Dosanjh et al., 1994). Lack of awareness of how the system works contributed to the women's difficulty to exercise their rights. Although the husbands enjoyed more stability and security in their jobs, they often failed to contribute their share of child support if the women had left. Often abuse charges did not lead to convictions, because the women were pressured by the husbands' families to drop the charges. Because of their better financial status the men were able to hire legal counsel of their choice, while their wives on more limited incomes had limited options to legal aid (Dosanjh, 1994).

Chan et al. (1989) report findings from a qualitative study with eight abused Chinese-Canadian women, ranging from 18 to 65 years in age from different socio-economic backgrounds, and two social workers with an extensive caseload of abused Chinese women from the Greater Montreal area. The purpose of the study was to "identify the specificities of wife battering" (Chan et al., p. 3), to determine how abused Chinese women define their needs, and to determine what kind of services are needed to meet those needs. The women were located
through letters sent to various agencies, hospitals, women’s shelters and Chinese physicians; through word of mouth from the Chinese community; and through referrals from the Chinese Family Services of Greater Montreal. The average length of stay in Canada was nine years. The data was collected through semi-directed individual interviews mainly in Chinese. There are several methodological flaws in the study: The method is said to be ‘qualitative’ but the type is not further defined. Procedure for data analysis is not clear. There is no information who the two social workers are and how they were selected to participate in the study nor is it apparent how the views of the social workers have been accounted for in the analysis of the data. Bracketing information on the researchers is missing, therefore, the reader of the report is ill-informed about the researchers’ biases and assumptions that may have influenced the study.

Although the findings of the study need to be considered with caution they still provide insight into the experience of wife abuse among Chinese-Canadian immigrants. The results of the Chan et al. (1989) study suggest that wife abuse occurs regardless the socio-economic background of the family. According to the researchers the results also suggest that psychological abuse, and physical and economic abuse are the most common forms of abuse occurring among the study participants. Contrary to Walker’s (1980) commonly cited research finding and suggestions in other available literature on abused immigrant women (Dunaway, 1988; Riutort & Small, 1985; Wiebe, 1991) none of the eight women blame themselves for the abuse. The women indicate that battering has major adverse effects on their mental and physical health. Three of the women report depression and one has attempted suicide. Two others describe experiencing crying spells, nervousness, difficulty in concentration, confusion, insomnia, constant worry, and isolation. One woman reports having trouble sleeping due to fear of being beaten in her sleep. These findings are consistent with assertions made in the research

Five of the eight women in the Chan et al. (1989) study turned to friends and family for support. One woman was counselled to leave her husband even though she did not see leaving as a solution. Another woman was told to keep her problems to herself. Two of the four women who spoke no French or English wanted neither their families nor friends to know about the abuse out of fear that the family would start to worry, and that the friends would laugh at them or say that they were unable to help. Two of the eight women interviewed sought help from mainstream service providers. One woman expressed a need for Chinese speaking interpreters and shelter workers. Three of the women were in contact with transition houses; one was pleased with the support that she received in the shelter, but the two other women felt that the shelter was not suitable for them. These findings reflect the complexities in help-seeking behavior, an issue that is discussed in various handbooks and publications on abused immigrant women (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; Dunaway, 1988; Riutort & Small, 1985; Wiebe, 1991). At the time when the study was being conducted two of the women were not living with their husbands. Those women who remained in their relationships had thought of leaving but had decided to stay because of financial difficulties, because they thought that it was in the best interest of the children, and because of the influence of traditional family values.

Chan (1989) collected and coded data based on clinical and program recordings, staff discussions, and observations during a thirty-five month period at the Chinese Family Life Services of Metro Toronto for her exploratory study on wife abuse among Chinese-Canadians that came to seek help from the agency. The study was started in May 1986 and ended in March 1989. Chan focused on prevalence of abuse, causal relationship between migration and violence,
counseling service needs, and appropriate types of service delivery with the Metro Toronto Chinese-Canadian community. The size of the sample is not clearly stated, although it appears to be 50. Information on the method employed, and the type of data analysis is also scarce and incomplete. Descriptive statistics and frequency tables with very little accompanying analysis have been used to present the results. Because of the obvious lack of rigorous research standards the results of the study can only be considered as tentative. The researcher concludes that wife abuse is indeed occurring within the Chinese-Canadian community, and suggests that the abuse is underreported. Although causality cannot be determined based on the results from the study, Chan suggests that migration does not cause wife abuse. She suggests that violence may have occurred in many families before immigration and that stress from immigration may serve to perpetuate the violence.

With regards to the professional counselling service needs of abused Chinese-Canadian women in Metro Toronto, Chan (1989) reports that half of the women in the study did not have family or friends to turn to for support, 46% of the women disclosed the abuse to their family members and/or friends, and 12% of the women did not like the kind of advice they received from them. In accordance with the findings from the Chan et al. (1989) study, Chan speculates that some women refrain from talking about the abuse in order to protect their family and/or the husband's family from shame and worry. Some women may endure the abuse because they see it as their fate. Most of the women in the study reacted to the idea of seeking refuge at a shelter with "abhorrence" (Chan, p. 39). Only 6 of the 50 women that were counseled went to a shelter, and only 2 of the 6 women said that they adapted to shelter living, both with great difficulty. The women cited cultural and language differences with the shelter staff as being at the root of the
difficulties. Culturally sensitive services for abused Chinese-Canadian women were found insufficient due to underfunding.

In her participant observation study Ng (1985) explored how aware the Chinese-Canadian community and the mainstream community are about wife battering among the Chinese-Canadian population; how sensitive the respective communities are in dealing with the issue; and service delivery needs of abused Chinese-Canadian women, their children, and their families. Five Chinese-Canadian women survivors of wife abuse were recruited through word of mouth and a one-hour personal interview was conducted with each woman in Cantonese. In addition sixty-two participants representing legal, social service, and health personnel from various institutions and organizations, as well as representatives from Chinese-language churches in the Greater Vancouver area were contacted and interviewed either in-person or on the telephone. Mind-mapping was used to extract “associations and patterns in the interview data which could be woven into a context in understanding wife-battering within the Chinese-Canadian community” (Ng, p. 23). Ng does not explain what she means by ‘mind-mapping’. All five women who participated in the study indicated that they were aware of the existence of wife abuse incidents within earlier as well as present generations of Chinese women. They cited social, familial, and economic inequality between men and women in the Chinese society, problems with the husband’s extended family, husband’s insecurity, poor problem solving and communication skills, and fate as contributing factors to their abuse. Language difficulties and the absence of the woman’s extended family that would offer support during crisis were seen as factors in deepening the isolation that these abused Chinese-Canadian women were already trapped in, due to the taboo nature of wife abuse within the community.
Ng (1985) suggests that many women blame themselves for the abuse and are unaware of their right to leave the abuser. She reports that abused Chinese-Canadian women will often not seek outside help, often exhausting their personal resources, “until the abusive situations deteriorate to catastrophic proportions” (p. 75). According to Ng, those women who attempt to leave may decide to stay in the abusive relationship after all for a number of reasons. The women may decide to stay because the husband’s extended family threatens to deport her and/or to separate her from her children. Often the abuser regrets his abusive behavior and promises to change and the woman may stay wanting to believe in his sincerity. The women may decide to stay because of economic reasons. The fear of the children growing up without a father and the fear of being a single mother without adequate social support may influence some abused Chinese-Canadian women’s decision to stay in the relationship. The fear of being condemned to loneliness as a result of social ostracization within the Chinese-Canadian community may act as a deterrent from leaving for some women.

The community resource people that were interviewed for the Ng study confirmed that wife abuse exists and expressed suspicions that it is underreported. The Chinese-Canadian community at large may be reluctant to acknowledge that wife abuse does occur among its members because “it fears the accompanying shame and negative image in an already racist society” (p. 85). The study participants expressed a need for bilingual staff; support and parenting groups for abused women survivors; support for children who have witnessed their mother being abused; English language training with child care services provided; better legal advice and advocacy in dealing with child custody, access to the children, and asset-division matters; more public education about wife abuse to the community; and improved employment for immigrant women. The results of the study may reflect mainly the observations and
perceptions of the support, legal, health, and spiritual services personnel since they significantly outnumbered the abused women included in the study. Although 5 abused women of Chinese-Canadian origin were interviewed their experiences of abuse were not recounted separately from the observations and perceptions of the 62 individuals representing the above mentioned types of organizations and institutions. While the results of the Ng (1985) study provide a wide and informative perspective into the possible circumstances of an abused woman from a Chinese-Canadian community, it is nevertheless still not known how the women themselves experience living in and leaving the abusive relationship.

Bhaumik (1988) investigated differences in the experiences of American and Asian-American abused women in the greater Los Angeles area. Bhaumik administered a battery of standardized and non-standardized tests to 69 volunteer abused women participants. The Conflict Tactic Scale, the Traditional Family Ideology Scale, the Symptom Check List 90-R, the Marital Equality Index, and four other scales developed by Bhaumik to measure degree of ethnic identification, availability of support systems and help-seeking behavior were utilized in the study. The American sample consisted of 39 white, black, and Hispanic American women. All but one of the 30 Asian-American participants were born outside of the US and had resided in the US for an average of five years. The women were originally from Korea, Philippines, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, and India. The American participants were staying at a shelter that provides services to abused women mainly from the mainstream culture. The Asian-American abused women were staying at a shelter that serves mainly the Asian-American population. Both groups were comparable with regards to age, level of education, and income of the participants. Bhaumik found that in comparison to the abused American women, the abused Asian-American women held more patriarchal attitudes, had stronger identification with their ethnic group, were
less equal in their marriages, had less social support, suffered from more serious abuse, and stayed longer in their abusive relationships before going to a shelter. Bhaumik does not discuss the possibility that the Asian-American abused women in her study appeared to be experiencing more serious abuse than the American abused women because they tended to stay longer in their relationships. Earlier research by Walker (1984) has shown that the abuse becomes more frequent and more severe over time. Informal sources of support and help such as friends and relatives and formal sources such as doctors, counsellors, and police were sought out less frequently by the Asian-American women than the American women. Due to the non-randomized sampling method the findings from the study cannot be generalized to the larger population.

Chin (1994), in his discussion paper on wife abuse among Chinese immigrants in the US, asserts that due to the increase in the number of new brides arriving from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China to marry American-Chinese men, wife abuse has become an alarming social problem within the community. The writer bases his discussion on data from newspapers, magazines, interviews with out-of-town brides, case files of a social service agency, and personal working experience with the members of the Chinese community in the New York area. Although many new brides arriving to the US enjoy happy lives there are others who end up in a relationship where they are being abused. Based on articles in Chinese language newspapers and reports by social service providers who work with the Chinese population, Chin has found evidence of numerous cases of wife abuse among the Chinese ‘out-of-town brides’. Chin maintains that systematic research on violence against Chinese wives in general and out-of-town brides in particular is non-existent, perhaps due to the reluctance of Chinese people to reveal their problems to outsiders and especially to official institutions. Chin mentions language and
cultural barriers, no knowledge of where to look for help, fear of deportation, fear of reprisals to relatives who may be applying for visas, and distrust of the officials as reasons why many Chinese immigrants keep the concerns about wife abuse to themselves. As a result official data on wife abuse within the Chinese community is scarce.

Chin (1994) proposes an integrated model of wife abuse within the Chinese community and includes variables such as differing expectations of married life, value conflict, family disharmony, husband’s suspicion of the wife’s social and sexual infidelity, and power inequality as factors related to abuse. In addition, Chin discusses the traditionally subordinate position of the woman in a Chinese marriage as a factor in the woman’s victimization. The woman may be physically, psychologically, sexually, or verbally abused by her husband. Chin suggests that psychological abuse such as isolating the woman from social activities, not allowing her to take English classes, preventing her from calling or writing home, not sharing the bank account, and retaining travel documents are the most common forms of abuse. Chin cites a story of one Chinese woman who is said to have traveled over 100 miles to a Chinese community service agency for help after being repeatedly hit and kicked by her husband. Some women are killed by their husband or by a professional killer. Some husbands demand unusual sexual favors or pressure the wife to have sex whether she wants to or not. Chinese husbands are seen as controlling “legal, financial, and social power over their ‘out-of-town brides’, thus making these brides somewhat defenseless to abuse, with little access to legal remedies or social controls” (Chin, pp. 63-64). Chin concludes that traditional patriarchal values and norms compounded with structural constructs such as the stresses of immigration and social isolation help to create an atmosphere where Chinese brides become vulnerable to abuse from their husbands.
In summary, although there is considerable information on wife abuse in general, a dearth of systematic research is obvious in the area of wife abuse among the immigrant population and as such has been identified as a topic in urgent need of research (British Columbia Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988; Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; Chan, 1989; Chin, 1994; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Ng, 1985; Shin, 1991; Torres, 1991; Wiebe, 1991). Existing studies are plagued with methodological shortcomings and/or they are based entirely or for the main part on secondary sources of information containing little analysis of the experience of immigrant women (Chan; Chan et al., 1989; Chin; Ng). Studies that rely on results from tests, questionnaires or semi-structured interviews (Bhaumik, 1988; Chan; Ng) limit the amount and nature of information that a participant can give and are based on the notion that the researcher already knows the important areas for inquiry. To date very little is known about wife abuse within the immigrant population in general, even less is known about what meaning immigrant women make of living in and leaving a battering relationship in particular in the context of their adaptation to new cultural values, beliefs, and practices. This study is an attempt to begin to explore and describe that experience.
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

The concept of methodology has to do with the philosophical underpinnings of what constitutes human experience, and basic assumptions about how a researcher should proceed in studying that experience (Harding, 1989; Van Manen, 1990). Van Manen says that "the methodology is the theory behind the method, including the study of what method one should follow and why" (p. 27-28).

My choice of the research methodology for this study has been influenced by the fact that research on the phenomenon of wife abuse within immigrant populations in Canada is sparse, by the nature of the research question, and by my personal and theoretical assumptions.

**Design**

A qualitative phenomenological design based on the ideas of Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1985), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Van Manen (1990) was utilized in the study. A qualitative phenomenological research approach was chosen because few studies exist on the phenomenon of wife abuse within the immigrant population and because data for the existing studies (Chan, 1989; Chin, 1994; Ng, 1985) has largely been collected from secondary sources resulting in an omission of immigrant women's own experience of the phenomenon in the current literature. In order to identify and understand the phenomenon of wife abuse for immigrant women it was important to return to the lifeworld of some immigrant women who had lived through the experience of being repeatedly abused by their husbands or partners and who had extricated themselves from these relationships. It was important to explore their experience in-depth, and to document their experiences by using their own descriptions. A qualitative phenomenological research approach was considered to be particularly appropriate for this purpose (Borg & Gall, 1989).
A phenomenological researcher aspires to identify and understand complex human phenomena in-depth and in its totality, as it is lived by individuals in their particular life context (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Van Manen, 1990). In order to be able to identify and understand the phenomena of wife abuse as it was experienced by immigrant women, this researcher attempted to follow Colaizzi’s idea of objectivity: “When someone is said to be objective, it means that his statements faithfully express what stands before him, whatever may be the phenomenon that he is present to; objectivity is fidelity to phenomena” (p. 52). The research process in a phenomenological study is interactive and collaborative involving both the researcher and the participant on an equal basis (Borg & Gall, 1989; Colaizzi). The researcher is present and involved rather than distant and presumably impartial during the entire research process (Colaizzi). These statements echo the goals and aims of the researcher in the present study.

**Bracketing**

Following Colaizzi’s (1978) ideas, I believe that human experience and theories of it are closely interconnected, and that human experience should not be, indeed, cannot be separated from scientific inquiry. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the naturalistic paradigm, which phenomenology falls into, as employing a holistic study of multiple, individually constructed realities. This paradigm recognizes the interconnectedness of the researcher and the research participant in a value-bound context. Because of the researcher’s deep involvement, her personal beliefs and assumptions about the phenomenon invariably influence all aspects of the research process from the wording of the question, to deciding what the data are, to collecting the data, and finally to interpreting it (Osborne, 1990). The phenomenological researcher, therefore, examines her beliefs, assumptions, and biases regarding the phenomenon under study and makes them known to the reader. The process is called **bracketing**. Bracketing orients the reader to the
researcher's perspective and helps the reader to be mindful of the influence of the researcher's beliefs, assumptions, and biases regarding the phenomenon.

I became interested in wife abuse within the immigrant population in the Greater Vancouver area two years ago when I was searching for a suitable thesis topic. Based on interviews with directors, coordinators, and front-line workers from Immigrant Services Society, MOSAIC, Multicultural Family Support Services Society, OASIS, and SUCCESS it became apparent that wife abuse was an issue that many of their clients were dealing with. Informed by my own experiences as an immigrant to two countries and by my studies as a graduate student in cultural adjustment issues I was also aware of the challenges that might be a part of a cultural adjustment process. It seemed to me that the task of trying to deal with something as shattering as abuse by someone who was supposed to love and support you in a context where one's traditional guidelines of appropriate conduct might be changing would be a feat of no small proportions. I became curious about what this experience was really like for immigrant women who had lived in and left an abusive relationship. As I was reviewing literature on wife abuse, I noted that documentation of personal experiences of immigrant women regarding wife abuse was virtually non-existent. I concluded that to conduct a study, phenomenological in nature, would be a good way to recognize and value immigrant women's experiences of wife abuse, and to provide a forum for the infrequently heard voices of these women.

Born and raised in Finland, I emigrated to Sweden to study and work there for a number of years before moving to Canada soon thirteen years ago. It was hoped that the perspectives gained through my personal experiences as an immigrant woman would help me to understand the trials and the rewards involved in the process of acculturation for the immigrant women that would participate in the study. I also hoped that our shared experiences as immigrants would help to
facilitate an equal and collaborative working alliance (Harding, 1989) during the research process.

I did not want to single out any cultural groups and to suggest that violence against wives was particularly problematic within those groups. Rather, I perceived issues of abuse to be universal in their nature. I believed that wife abuse was a shared concern regardless of differences in ethnic, economic, educational, social, or religious affiliation. I expected to find many similarities in the experiences of abused immigrant women and abused women from the mainstream culture. However, I was aware of the fact that immigrant women had to face additional barriers when they were dealing with abuse and that their concerns might be compounded because of various social and cultural factors. Therefore, I assumed that the experiences of abused immigrant women might be more complex and that their options might be more limited in comparison to abused women from the mainstream culture.

I believe that the struggle for a life free of violence requires an abused immigrant woman to find and utilize personal qualities that help her to survive in an extremely adverse situation. Therefore, I am likely to be sensitized to emerging themes of strength and survival in the interview material. For instance, feelings of helplessness have been found to be a big part of an abused woman's experience (Pagelow, 1981; Shepherd, 1990; Walker, 1984). I suspect that helplessness, although it may be present, is not a determining characteristic of an abused immigrant woman. On the contrary, I am convinced that abused immigrant women possess and show strength, courage, endurance, and resourcefulness in dealing with the abuse and that these qualities may have enabled them to remain for a time in the abusive relationship, and to eventually leave it.
As I continued to review the literature and write the thesis I was keenly aware that there was a personal process, parallel to my research, going on. In my mind, battering is an extreme form of misuse of power, and while reading and writing about it, I was being pulled into deep reflections on my personal experiences with the misuse of power, on my own relationship to violence, and what it all meant to me. It was apparent that the research process enabled me to notice misuses of power in my own life in a clearer way than before. This seemed to be a process of personal transformation that included moments of powerlessness as well as liberating empowerment that inspired and propelled me forward in my personal development as well as in my research project.

I was aware that my own experiences as an immigrant woman and my presuppositions about immigrant women and their strengths might influence what I would hear and find in the interview material. While I attempted to remain aware of my own biases and beliefs regarding wife abuse and immigration experiences, I also felt confident that my own life experiences would further my understanding of the experiences of the women that I would interview. However, I tried to maintain an openness and a sensitivity even to those experiences of the participants that differed from or did not otherwise fit into my interpretation of the phenomenon of wife abuse.

**Participants**

In the course of a five month long recruitment period five participants who met the inclusion criteria were recruited for the study. During the recruitment process it became apparent that the researcher would have needed to spend a considerably longer period of time in making herself better known within various immigrant and minority communities and in establishing trust and rapport before more women would have come forward and volunteered to participate in
the study. However, the sample size in qualitative research depends on the richness of information in the participants’ stories. Therefore, the varied experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship of the immigrant women in this study ascertained that five was a sufficient number of participants to begin to articulate the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship (Colaizzi, 1978).

For inclusion in this study participants were required to meet the following criteria.

1) The participants belonged to an ethnic or a cultural minority, defined themselves as immigrant women, and had come to Canada within the last twenty-five years. The women were Canadian citizens or they had acquired permanent resident status, but they continued to define themselves as immigrants because of their linguistic, racial, or cultural backgrounds (MacLeod & Shin, 1990). Initially, it was the intention of the researcher to include only those participants who had come to Canada within the last fifteen years. Due to difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of participants that met this initial requirement within a reasonable period of time, however, the length of stay in Canada was extended to twenty-five years.

Front line workers, that this researcher talked to during the recruitment process, suggested that many, more recent new Canadian women who have left their abusive relationships while in Canada might be reluctant to be interviewed about their experiences because of language difficulties and/or because of the fact that they did not want to disclose their experiences to a stranger. While three of the volunteering participants had arrived in Canada between six, eleven, and fifteen years ago respectively, two of the women who wished to be interviewed had arrived to this country nineteen and twenty-five years ago respectively. It appears that these women had reached a considerable comfort level with their English language skills and that they were highly
motivated to share their experiences, factors that made them suitable participants for the current study.

2) With reference to the definition of abuse discussed previously, the participants were abused by their partners repeatedly (more than once) in their marriages or cohabiting relationships, they left their relationships at least two years ago, and they did not return to live with their spouses or partners during that time. Research into dynamics of leaving an abusive relationship suggests that it is a process where many women may leave their partners temporarily, only to return to live with him again after a while (Martin, 1976; Pagelow, 1981). Furthermore, the time period right after the woman has left the relationship has been noted as potentially dangerous for abused women because it is then that the violence may escalate, perhaps even into homicide (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Pagelow; Rounsaville, 1978). It was assumed that women who had stayed apart from their husbands or partners for at least two years had likely reached a definite decision not to return to the relationship. In addition, this criterion was based on the assumption that participants needed to have sufficient distance from their experience of battering and leaving the relationship to be able to reflect upon these experiences (Cochran & Claspell, 1987). Less than two years from the termination of the relationship would not have provided enough distance from the experience for deep reflection by the abused women.

3) The women were able to articulate their story in English. Ability to articulate their experience is a basic requirement for participants in a phenomenological study (Colaizzi, 1978). Therefore, and because the researcher was limited to do the study in English, the women were required to tell their story in English.
Procedure

Recruitment. Participants were recruited in the Vancouver and Lower Mainland area through placing notices (Appendix A) with various agencies and associations that served the immigrant population, community centers, women’s centers, Neighborhood Houses, and community colleges. In addition, notices (Appendix A) were displayed at the B.C. Institute on Family Violence, Battered Women’s Services Society, and the International House at the University of British Columbia. The researcher also attended a conference (Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Family Violence: Immigrant and Refugee Issues in Richmond, B.C., Feb. 23-24, 1995), and using information extracted from the notice (Appendix A) she gave short presentations about her study during a number of workshops.

Furthermore, editors for a number of community newspapers in the Lower Mainland area and a journalist with “The Province”, a Vancouver based newspaper, included information based on the notice (Appendix A) in their “Community Events” sections and a bi-weekly column respectively. One of the five participants contacted the researcher after reading about the study in “The Province”. Word of mouth resulted in the inclusion of the other four women in the research. Two of these women were contact persons who were called in order to disseminate information about the study in the community, and who subsequently volunteered to participate in the study themselves. The other two participants heard about the study from a friend and asked that the researcher contact them by phone. In addition, there were three other potential co-researchers who were interested in participating in the study. Two of these individuals decided to withdraw from the project before the actual interview took place. The third woman did not fit the inclusion criteria.
During the initial contact the prospective participants were informed about the nature of the study, the limits of confidentiality, and the approximate time commitment required. The participants needed to be aware of and to have “control over the circumstances under which their personal views [might] enter into the discourse with their social worlds” (Mishler, 1986, p. 125). This was very important in a study of wife abuse within the immigrant population in particular, because of the taboo nature of the topic in many cultures, and because of the risk for retaliation against the abused woman, a risk that is present regardless of the woman’s cultural background or any other demographic descriptor.

The first five women who met the selection criteria were invited to participate in the study. Each of the women who volunteered to become a co-researcher was asked how much contact she continued to have with her ex-husband or partner, and where and when she thought it would be safe for her to tell her story. Then, an appointment for a personal in-depth interview for each woman was made. Baby-sitting money for participants with young children, as well as money to cover transportation costs to the interview location were offered and provided by the researcher as applicable. Two participants were reimbursed for their baby-sitting costs. One participant accepted compensation for her transportation and parking expenses.

**The Interview.** The private interviews were conducted in various locations in the Vancouver area. The interview locations were chosen with consideration to the safety and convenience of the participants. One interview was conducted at the participant’s work in a vacant meeting room. Another interview took place at a Women's Centre in a quiet basement room. Two interviews were conducted in meeting rooms rented by the researcher and within an easy reach from the woman’s residence. The last interview was conducted in a department office on campus at UBC. The audio-taped interviews varied from one hour to three hours in duration.
depending on the individual needs of each of the participants in recounting her experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship.

The researcher and the participant spent the first few moments of each interview making themselves comfortable in the interview room, and engaging in casual conversation. After this initial rapport building phase the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study and discussed the roles of the researcher and the participant. The participant was invited to ask any questions regarding the study at any time during the research project. Furthermore, each woman was reminded of the fact that she could discontinue her participation at any time. Issues of confidentiality were discussed again, and the participant was reassured that her identity would remain concealed in all material generated during the project. To this end, each woman was asked to choose a pseudonym for herself to be used in any oral or written account of the research material. The participant was reassured that any identifying information would be either omitted from, or changed in, the resulting thesis. The researcher then asked her to read the consent form (see Appendix B) and to sign two copies of it. Each participant was given a choice of keeping one of the copies for her records, or leaving it in a sealed envelope in the care of the researcher.

At this stage the tape-recorder was turned on to start to record the interview. The researcher began the session with an orienting statement (see Appendix C) to provide a catalyst for recollection of the participant's experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship. Then the researcher encouraged the participant to reflect on her experience as if she was telling a story with a beginning, middle, and an end. Colaizzi (1978) stresses that the research interview take place "in a situation of trust" (p. 69) to facilitate the process of uncovering personal material that may not have been examined before. To that end the researcher attempted to
demonstrate and maintain a respectful and empathic manner towards the interviewee by being sensitive to her verbal and non-verbal behavior and communication patterns, by listening to her attentively, and by reflecting on her experience without judgment, interpretations, and presuppositions. An unstructured interview technique such as this facilitates the elicitation of varied, information-rich, and in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon under study (Mishler, 1986).

The researcher allowed each participant to tell her story with as few interruptions as possible. However, clarifying questions were used when necessary to further illuminate issues that the interviewee had raised. Open-ended questions (see Appendix D) were also asked when the topics were raised by the participants or to deepen her exploration of her abusive relationship. Respectful silence, empathy, paraphrasing, and reflection was used throughout the interview process to help the women to express their feelings and thoughts as fully as possible. A period of 'empty' silence seemed to characterize the fact that the women had come to an end of their story. Often they verbalized the fact that they had reached the end of their recollections. At this point the researcher made some last clarifying questions with regard to the material presented by the women where applicable, and she concluded by inquiring whether there was something that the women wished to add before the tape-recorder would be switched off. After the women had expressed their last remarks, the interviews were ended.

The audio-tapes were transcribed immediately following each interview. After the transcribed material from all five interviews was analyzed and organized according to themes common to all participants each woman was contacted and arrangements were made to deliver the thematic descriptions to her. Once the participant had read the results, as well as a short
biographical synopsis of her life prepared by the researcher, a meeting to discuss the material was scheduled.

During this final meeting, ranging from twenty minutes to one hour in duration, each participant was invited to comment on the validity of the findings thus far. They were invited to add any missing information that was relevant to their experiences, and/or to suggest changes to the thematic descriptions so that they would more accurately reflect their experience. While all five women indicated that each of the eight themes closely mirrored their experiences of living in and leaving their abusive relationships, they suggested that aspects of some of the themes should be highlighted, elaborated on, or modified to improve the "goodness of fit" between the themes and their perceptions of their experiences. One woman wished to change her pseudonym to another name that less resembled her real name. The additional information that resulted from the validation interviews was incorporated into the final form of the thematic descriptions and the biographical synopsis. Through their involvement in confirming the accuracy of the findings the women continued to participate in the research process. Thus, they also provided a measure of internal validity of the study results. According to Colaizzi (1978) this validation interview process helps to ascertain that the final research product reflects as faithfully as possible the experiences of the participants in the study.

During the research process referrals were made for two participants in the study. The researcher provided information on and a phone number to a community based advocacy and support group for one woman, who was interested in joining such a group in her area of residence. In telling her story, another woman became aware of a need to continue to process her experiences of the abuse. As she expressed a wish to find a counselling professional to do it with, referrals to counselling agencies in her community were provided for her. At the same
woman's request, the researcher assisted her in finding an organization that provides job search support for immigrant women.

**Data Analysis**

Once the tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, the analysis of the data began. Colaizzi's (1978) seven step interpretive procedure was followed. First, the researcher acquired a general feeling for the transcript **protocols** by reading and re-reading them. The second step involved pulling out key phrases and sentences, referred to by Colaizzi as **significant statements**, that directly related to the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship, from each protocol. During the following step the researcher, relying on her creative insight, articulated the deeper meaning underlying each statement, a process that Colaizzi calls **formulating meanings**. Here, according to Colaizzi (1978), the researcher “must leap from what [her] subjects say to what they mean” (p. 59) while maintaining a faithful connection to the participant’s original description.

Upon completion of the three steps for each protocol the formulated meanings were grouped into **clusters of themes** (Colaizzi, 1978). The researcher once again relied on her creative insight to find the unexpressed meaning by “leaping from what was given in the meanings to themes given with them” (Colaizzi, p. 59) while remaining mindful of Colaizzi’s advice for the researcher to be tolerant of eventual discrepancies in or between the clusters of themes. He says that “what is logically inexplicable may be existentially real and valid ... [and that the researcher] must refuse the temptation of ignoring data or themes which don’t fit” (p. 61). Throughout the analysis of the data the researcher worked in close connection with her thesis supervisor who provided guidance and feedback with regard to the analyzing process. This guidance helped the researcher to maintain an orientation of truthfulness to the data, while
extrapolating from it to find commonalities in all formulated meanings and to establish clusters of themes that were emerging from the material. Initially, ten separate clusters of themes were identified in co-operation with the research supervisor.

As the analysis continued the data was collapsed and reworked until the themes seemed to encompass all relevant material, and to fully and meaningfully reflect the experiences of the women. For example, due to the complementary nature of their content, themes initially called “A Sense of Self-Blame and Shame” and “A Sense of Worthlessness and Insignificance” were rearranged to form a larger theme of “An Eroding Sense of Self.” Similarly, themes previously titled as “An Increasing Sense of Own Power” and “An Emerging Sense of Individual Identity and Entitlement” were collapsed into a theme of “An Emerging Sense of Self” that seemed to better illustrate the experience of the women in this study. Thus, this process resulted in eight related, but distinctly independent themes. These final themes were repeatedly compared with the original transcript protocols to validate their accuracy. The analysis was completed by formulating an exhaustive thematic description of the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women to capture the essential meaning structure of this experience as closely as possible.

The final step in the analysis involved returning to each of the participants, asking them to read the researcher’s descriptive results, and inviting them to comment on how the thematic descriptions compared to their experience. While the women indicated that the eight themes reflected their experiences very closely, the women, nevertheless, pointed out some aspects and areas within the themes that needed to be clarified, emphasized, or elaborated on to more fully and accurately represent their perceptions of their experiences. The feedback given by the
women during these validation interviews was worked into the final thematic descriptions. An essential structure based on all findings was formulated as clearly as possible.

Limitations of The Study

According to Osborne (1990) phenomenological researchers look for “empathic generalizability” (p. 86). It is understood that although each interview is a unique and unrepeatable situation co-created by the interviewer and the co-researcher, a “unified description of a shared phenomenon” or a theme can be found emerging from and transcending the multiple perspectives presented during the interviews. The “stable meaning” (Osborne, 1990, p. 87) outlined in the thematic descriptions may then reflect experiences of other individuals who share the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship regardless of their interpersonal differences.

The results of this study are intrinsically related to the individual qualities and characteristics of the researcher and each of the five participants. The interviews were conducted in English, therefore, the study was limited to selecting the participants from a pool of immigrant women who speak English. Although the researcher felt competent and comfortable enough to conduct the study in English, it is nevertheless her third language acquired later in life. Therefore, it is likely that the language factor may have had some influence in gathering, interpreting, and analyzing the data.

As a self-report study, the research was limited to what the women wanted to share of their experience, as well as the degree of their self-awareness. Nevertheless, it was assumed that the participants in this study attempted to describe their understanding and awareness of their personal experiences in a way that was most meaningful and salient to them, material appropriate to the study (Osborne, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).
Another limitation of this study was the fact that it involved recollection of experiences that had taken place in the past. Therefore, the participants' recollections may have been affected by memory. Considering the painful nature of the experiences that were being described it is possible that some of the memories were distorted or even omitted from the participants' stories. This may be true for women who have left their abusive husbands in particular since they may be keen on putting the past behind and moving on with their “new” lives. According to Van Manen (1990), however, the factual accuracy of a participant’s report is less important than “... whether it is true to [her] living sense of it” (p. 65), a ‘trueness’ that is assumed to be present in the accounts of the participants in this study.

The researcher did not seek to examine the experiences of the abusive spouse, eventual children, and the extended family involved in the participants’ life situations, although the importance of examining their experiences is acknowledged. However, this study was limited to describing the women’s experiences from their particular perspectives relying on data collected during one personal in-depth interview with each study participant.

A final limitation of this study was the fact that while the research participants share the experience of immigration, they vary with regard to their different cultural backgrounds. Given that beliefs, assumptions, and values with regards to such things as role expectations, marriage, and familial obligation vary from one culture to another, it is likely that there are also cultural variations in the construction of meaning of wife abuse. Therefore, additional themes might emerge from interviews with people who share the same cultural background. However, this study was limited to identifying and describing the similarities in the experiences of participants regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Although the researcher attempted to suspend her own
cultural biases and assumptions throughout the research project, it is possible that they have influenced the study results.
CHAPTER FOUR - RESULTS

This chapter begins with a short, biographical synopsis of each of the five participants. In the following section eight common themes, extracted from the women’s stories of their experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship, are outlined and discussed in-depth.

The Women’s Stories

Four of the five women who volunteered to participate in this study were recruited through word of mouth. One of the participants was recruited through a notice in a Vancouver and Lower Mainland area newspaper. Prior to the beginning of the in-depth interview each participant chose a pseudonym for herself to be used in the study. Following is a biographical synopsis of each of the participants:

**Camille.** Camille, age 34, is an East-Indian woman. She was born and raised in Fiji, in a family where she was the middle child of five. Her family was well known and respected in their community. Camille attended private schools and was known as an outgoing, outspoken, and bright student with many engagements in public speaking. Camille says that she never saw her parents fight or her father abuse her mother. The children were treated with respect and they were never beaten. Although there was no abuse in her own home, Camille tells that she grew up with the understanding that abuse against women was acceptable in her community, and if a woman was being abused in her home she should not complain.

Camille immigrated to Canada with her family 19 years ago when she was 15 years old. Three years later the family arranged her marriage to an East-Indian man, a son of a wealthy Fijian family with a degree in applied sciences. During their short engagement Camille became concerned about his drinking habits. When Camille brought her concerns to her parent’s attention she was told that it was her responsibility as the future wife to change his behavior.
once they were married. Camille’s only option would have been to run away and, as a consequence, be rejected from her family for ever. She chose to stay and marry the man her family had chosen for her.

Camille’s husband continued to drink heavily. Three months into the marriage he beat her up for the first time, and after the first incident the violence became more frequent and severe. Name calling, pushing and shoving grew into punches and beatings. Camille was often bruised, her nose and other bones were being broken. Three years into the relationship abuse had become part of a daily routine. Camille had four children, who are now between 8 years and 13 years of age, and “every pregnancy was like ... I could see death coming.” With more time the violence was turning into torture. Camille tells how her husband on various occasions burnt her with cigarettes, shaved patches of her hair off, tried to kill her by forcing her to swallow Valiums and to drink Lysol, raped her most every night, and emotionally abused her by constant put-downs and tormenting remarks. He pointed a gun to her head and threatened to kill her. At one point Camille’s husband sought and won full custody of the children for a while after having lied to and convinced the authorities that she was abusive, suicidal, and therefore an unfit mother to their then two children.

As the abuse was going on Camille was hospitalized several times, she went to a transition house, stayed with her brother some time, had her husband arrested and had charges laid against him. After each incident she either went back to him, or allowed him back in the home wanting to believe that he would stop the abuse. Often she was pressured by her parents to go back, or her parents begged the husband to take her back. Camille tells how her husband made elaborate plans to lure her to leave Canada. What first looked like a family holiday turned into a kidnapping scheme that landed the family in Fiji without Camille’s consent. For over four years
Camille and her two children, all Canadian citizens, were trapped there living with the husband’s family. During all those years she never talked to her parents in Canada. Camille had two more children while in Fiji. During this time the abuse and even attempts to kill her continued, now with the encouragement of and sometimes help from her in-laws.

After over four years in Fiji Camille was able to flee from the country and her husband with the help of an influential law enforcement officer, but she had to leave her four children behind. Soon after the Canadian Immigration authorities were able to assist in bringing the two Canadian born children back to their mother. However, two and a half years would pass before the other two children, born in Fiji, would be reunited with their mother. When plans to bring the children to Canada legally failed, Camille had to resort to an elaborate plan to retrieve them herself. She flew to Fiji, where she managed to kidnap her two youngest children while they were at school. Once they were back in Canada Camille had to face kidnapping charges, threats from Canada Immigration authorities that her two Fijian born children would be deported, and continuing harassment from her husband who had also returned to Canada. In comparison to overcoming these obstacles, Camille says, “kidnapping seemed to me like a piece of cake”.

Camille left the abusive relationship five and a half years ago. Six months ago her husband was found dead in Fiji where he had returned after the separation. She continues to fight for the children’s rightful share in his estate. A year after she left her relationship Camille went to college to earn a diploma in the field of social work. She is a community activist who uses her own experience as a springboard to help to stop violence against women. Camille sees her parents regularly, and their relationship is improving. She says that her experience has been a catalyst for change even to her parents, who now have started to realize not only the scope of and injustice in her suffering, but also the amount of her personal strength in living through it.
Camille is in the process of negotiating a movie contract to be based on the book she is writing of her experiences.

**Sarra.** Sarra is a 42 year old mother of three young children, and she has been in Canada for 11 years. She was born and raised in Iran, but had to leave the country in 1979 during the revolution because of her political, anti-government involvement. Sarra emigrated to India where she met and married her Iranian husband. Both of them obtained graduate level university degrees and in the beginning their relationship was very happy. The couple emigrated to France where their son was born, and it was after their move to France that their relationship started to deteriorate. Sarra recalls that her husband had an affair with another woman, and even though she knew about it, she felt that she couldn’t confront him with her awareness. The couple stayed together, nevertheless, and moved on with their son to Canada.

Their relationship deteriorated further and Sarra’s husband attempted to commit suicide. Sarra felt that she had to stay in the marriage because she was afraid what her family in Iran and her friends might think if she got divorced. Sarra’s husband had frequently abused her emotionally and verbally, and after the birth of their second child, a daughter, he assaulted her physically for the first time. She remembers how her husband became more and more disillusioned about the politics he had been so intensely involved in before, and how he started to regard his life as being in total state of crisis. He was threatening to kill his family before he killed himself. Sarra’s son, who was six years old at the time, and who had been witnessing the emotional and verbal abuse of his mother, became depressed and was talking about killing himself.

Sarra started to plan her escape from her husband, and then, with some help from friends secretly moved to the Vancouver area with her two children. She had to leave a comfortable
home, her car, clothes, and most of her other personal belongings behind. Sarra’s husband found out where she and the children were hiding, called, and threatened to have her and the children killed.

Sarra has brought up the children without any financial support from the children’s father, who always earned a good living and is a businessman. For four years the children’s father has not been allowed to have any contact with his son because his influence seemed to disrupt the boy’s emotional health. Sarra and the two eldest children have been in therapy to help them heal from the impact of the violence. Recently the children’s father has moved to the Vancouver area, and has started to see his son again. Sarra would like to be able to share some of the parenting responsibilities with him, but he has refused any communication with her.

Sarra left her abusive husband five years ago, and is now happily re-married. In addition to Sarra’s two children she and her new husband have a daughter together. She talks about her children with pride, and says that they have grown to become strong and independent individuals. Sarra now works as a program co-ordinator within the public education sector. She has also obtained a counselling certificate from a counsellor training institute, and is helping other abused women. Sarra is also known for her involvement in many activities within her own community.

Nadia. Born and raised in a Middle Eastern country and now in her mid-thirties Nadia immigrated to Canada fourteen years ago to be with her husband of the same ethnic background, who had already lived in North America for many years. Although the marriage was arranged by her parents Nadia had been allowed to attend university to attain a degree in health sciences, to work after her graduation, and to have a busy social life in the town where she was working, privileges unheard of to most young women of her generation in the country. She was very
successful in her studies as well as in her field of work. Nadia and her eight siblings grew up happy in a comfortable home, in a family where the children were never hit or abused. Nadia had reservations about getting married to a man whose father, as she was told, had been very abusive to his entire family, and whose insistence that the couple return to Canada after the wedding meant that she had to leave her budding career, her family, and her many friends behind. After her father had assured her that her fiancee, a university graduate in applied sciences, was a good person and not like his father at all, Nadia felt that she had no other choice but to marry him.

Nadia recalls that her husband literally raped her during their wedding night although he had agreed not to touch her until they had more time to get to know each other. One week after the wedding Nadia and her husband flew to Canada. The first years were not so bad, she says, although her husband made sure that she, nearly a total non-English speaker then, remained almost completely isolated from the outside world, confined to small apartments without a phone, without money of her own, and with no friends. Nadia says that she was not physically abused by her husband. However, verbal, emotional, psychological, and sometime sexual abuse escalated over the years to the point where Nadia could not sleep at night for fear that her husband would kill her in her sleep. The two children born during their ten year relationship were verbally abused, and held, along with their mother, under extreme physical and psychological control. Through occasional contacts over the years with a number of people - a landlady, a public nurse, a priest, a workshop leader - Nadia was able to learn about support services available to abused women. She left her husband five or six times to stay at a transition house either with the children or on her own before she managed to take the final step out of the marriage four years ago. Nadia's husband was arrested several times by the police because he
kept harassing her during their separation and divorce process. Nadia and her children have relocated since the divorce was finalized.

Nadia is currently looking for a job that would have some connection to her education within health sciences and she is also planning to return to university to continue her education. She volunteers a good deal of her time for various community projects. Nadia finds great solace and support in her spiritual practice. She remains in touch with her family in her country of origin and hopes to someday be able to take her children there to visit them.

Victoria. Prior to arriving in Canada six years ago Victoria, now in her mid-twenties, and her husband lived in a few other countries after having left their native Middle Eastern country. Next to the youngest of nine siblings she grew up in a strict and traditional middle class family with very close ties to her mother. Fresh out of high school, at the age of seventeen, Victoria married a son of a very wealthy family, a cab-driver with a high school diploma. The marriage had been arranged by their families who were distantly related. Victoria liked her handsome husband a lot from the beginning and willingly ignored the early signs of possible problems. Three months into the marriage she heard that her husband had been in jail for a sexual offense prior to their marriage, information that had been kept secret from her and her family with hopes that he “would be straightened out” once in a stable relationship. Pregnant now and not able to tell even her mother about her concerns Victoria felt trapped in her marriage in a country where divorce would not be allowed. Shortly after the couple immigrated to another country, Victoria’s husband started to slap and beat her while she was still pregnant. They moved to Canada where Victoria felt very isolated now with a small baby to take care of twenty-four hours a day.

The abuse continued almost on a daily basis. After each beating and stays at a shelter Victoria returned to her husband because she did not want her parents to find out what was going
on. After one particularly severe beating Victoria lost consciousness. Eventually, after she found out about an affair her husband was having with her best friend she decided to leave.

Victoria has been out of her marriage for three years, and she has recently changed her place of residence in order to keep her ex-husband, who has threatened to kill her, from harassing her and her young child. According to Victoria her child seems to be very happy and does not appear to miss her biological father. Although her ex-husband cannot reach her anymore he continues to harass her parents who are still in their native country with threats to kill her if he does not get his child back.

Victoria returned to a university while she was still married and attained an undergraduate degree in health sciences. She is currently studying for a provincial exam to become a registered practitioner in her field. She is proud of her professional and personal achievements and looks forward to a happy life full of opportunities together with her child and her new boyfriend. She has been able to tell her parents about her experiences in the abusive marriage and about her divorce. After recovering from an initial shock her parents have realized that she is an independent individual who can take care of herself, and they have given their full support to her decision. Victoria considers herself a role model to her child, to her sisters, and to other female members of her family by having shown that it is possible to leave an abusive relationship and survive.

**Christine.** Christine, age 52 and a mother of three grown daughters, was born and raised in Germany in a family of four brothers and three sisters. Christine’s parents both worked, but it was her mother who was the main breadwinner in the family. She says that the family could have had a good standard of living had the father, who was abusive of the mother, not drank and gambled the money away. Like many other children at the time when Christine was growing up
she and her siblings were disciplined in a way that today would be called child abuse. A financially independent young woman, with a high school diploma and three years of dental college, and determined not to get involved in an abusive relationship, Christine was weary of long term relationships. Dislike towards “bossy” German men led Christine to become acquainted with and later marry a French Canadian man stationed at an army base in Germany. After being promised that they would only stay a couple of years Christine agreed to accompany her husband with their two young daughters to Canada 25 years ago.

The abuse started almost immediately after the couple had settled down in an apartment in Vancouver. Thinking that things would be different if they had a house Christine used the money she had with her from Germany for a down payment on a house in a rural community outside of Vancouver. However, isolated now from other people and financially dependent on her husband, Christine was beaten and emotionally and verbally abused even more than before. When the children’s father started to physically abuse them Christine left him. Unable to return to Europe because she did not have the money Christine stayed in Canada, only to get married two years later to an Anglo Canadian man, a firefighter with some high school education, who also became abusive of her only a couple of years into their marriage.

The abuse started with discreet criticism regarding the way she dressed and the friends that she kept, only to escalate into full blown psychological manipulation and control of virtually every aspect of her life. Christine’s husband started also to emotionally manipulate and, later, physically abuse her children. Christine went to a shelter for a while but returned shortly after to live with her husband. Realizing that she was pregnant with a third child Christine planned to have an abortion, however, her doctor refused to go ahead with it after he had informed Christine’s husband about the pregnancy and he refused to let her go ahead with the abortion.
Regardless of the fact that they had bought a farm where they, as Christine had thought, could lead a healthier life style “the violence got progressively worse.” It culminated in an incident where, after Christine had refused to participate in “wife swapping stuff” at a hot tub party on their farm, her husband, drunk, stormed into her bedroom at night and nearly strangled her to death. Saved by her daughter who had heard the noise and had come into the room, Christine was hospitalized a couple of days later with a life-threatening blood clot in the brain. Consequently, Christine took her husband to court and left him. In the process she lost her financial security, and later even the house that had been awarded to her, because her husband managed to gain control of their shared assets so that she could no longer have access to them.

Feeling betrayed by her ex-husband and the legal system, disillusioned with the unacceptable conduct shown by many professionals that she had sought out for help, and surviving on minimal income seven years after the divorce, nevertheless Christine feels hopeful about her future. After twenty years of working as a carpenter she returned to community college to earn a certificate in the area of community support work where she is currently employed. Feeling responsible even as an individual to bring about social change, Christine is interested in community activism.

In summary, this sample consists of five middle- and upper-middle class, well-educated (college/university 4, grad school 1) women that represent a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. At the time of the in-depth research interviews they ranged in age from 26 to 52 years (average of 38.2 years). The women had come to Canada under differing circumstances at different stages in their lives, most of them together with their husbands, and they had been in this country for an average of 14.4 years (range from 6 to 25 years). Their abusive relationships
had lasted roughly from 5 to 18 years (average of 9.4 years), and they had been out of their relationships from 3 to 5.5 years (average of 4.5 years).

Common Themes

Eight common themes emerged from the data gathered during one in-depth interview with each of the participants. These eight themes were further refined based on feedback from the validation interviews with the women. Although their experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship vary, these eight themes reflect the similarities in those experiences for all five women in this study. The participants talked about their experiences in a loose, chronological order starting from the beginning of their relationships. While the themes are described roughly in the order that they seemed to emerge from the women’s stories, the sequence in which they are presented is not an indication of their relative importance or definite linearity. Each theme contains quotations that have been extracted from the participants’ accounts to highlight the essence of their experiences. Following are the eight themes:

1. An Eroding Sense of Self
2. A Sense of Overwhelming Fear and Vulnerability
3. A Sense of Entrapment
4. A Sense of Betrayal and Abandonment
5. A Sense of Maternal Concern
6. A Sense of Injustice and Anger
7. An Emerging Sense of Self
8. A Sense of Meaning and Purpose

Each of the eight themes are described and elaborated on in the following section:
An Eroding Sense of Self

The theme of eroding sense of self emerged from the stories of the participants in the study. Components of the theme included a sense of accountability and blame, shame, and worthlessness. It is important to note that all the women reported that these elements seemed to become a part of their self-perception gradually and in a "twisted" way that they could not quite explain. These changes appeared to become more established the longer the women stayed in their increasingly abusive relationships. Isolated from sources of positive feedback the women started to believe that they were somehow deficient human beings, and that they were to blame for the problems in their relationships as well as the abuse. The abusers' repeated verbal abuse, manipulation, and blatant violations of the women's basic human rights convinced the women that they were worthless individuals. Most of the women grew to think that they had somehow failed in their duties as a wife to take care of the emotional well being of the family and, consequently, they felt ashamed to tell anyone about the abuse. Often their perceptions were reinforced by the things that they had learned about being a woman when they were growing up. Other times it was their family and friends that supported the idea that the women were responsible for the anger and actions of their husbands. The women used expressions such as "I started to believe that I was really stupid", "I was totally demoralized", "I used to blame myself", and "... there must be really something wrong with me" to describe their deteriorating sense of self.

Endless criticisms, accusations, put downs, and various forms of emotional manipulation were perceived as very damaging to their healthy sense of self by the women in this study. They indicated that it was the "mind games" that had hurt them the most because of their underhanded and hidden nature. One woman summed it up: "Even after I figured it out it still worked, it still
worked somehow. I don’t know what it was.” She elaborated on her sense of being defenseless to ward off the accusations: “What he was saying was not really the right thing, but when I heard it I believed it ... that I’m bad luck to him, and everything bad is happening to him since he met me. Somehow I believed it.” Repeated devaluations of the women’s way of being and doing things undermined their sense of personal pride and worthiness to the point where they were feeling like mere objects “functioning until I break down, and to me breaking down was the end.” In one extreme case one participant was not allowed food and for a while she had to steal scraps from her children’s plates to survive. As their sense of worthlessness was internalized the women lost their interest in even the simplest tasks of personal grooming and self-care. The feelings of no longer having value as a human being were expressed by one woman in this way: “He made me feel like I was dirt. I was nothing.”

The women in this study believed that their isolation from other people increased their vulnerability to the abuse, the derogation, and an increasingly diminished sense of self as worthy and competent. One woman put it this way:

I was an idiot, I wasn’t good enough, everyone else was prettier. It totally demoralized me. I got to the point where I started believing it. And I had been the strong one before, I always held everything together. I had really nobody to tell me it wasn’t so, because I had the children, I had no money, I was stuck in this apartment, I didn’t know any neighbors. And I started to believe I was really stupid.

The women indicated that lack of validation of their perceptions that the abuse was going on or minimization of the abuse by other people increased their self-doubt. One woman in particular mentioned how she was the only one, apart from her children, who saw the abusive side of her husband. In the company of other people he always appeared to be “the nicest person you ever met.” This woman remembered thinking: “Oh, my god! There must be really something wrong with me, because nobody else is having a problem with him but me!” In their growing
desperation the women tried harder and harder to do things “right” with the following consequence described by one of the participants: “This just compounded the problem, because I just kept sinking further and further, and trying more and more to please when it wasn’t possible to please him.” Many of the women found themselves even doubting their sanity because the people around them did not confirm the accuracy of their perceptions.

In most of the women’s cultures it was considered shameful to disclose family problems to “outsiders.” The women explained that shame would befall not only on the person who breaks the taboo, but that the whole family would be shamed as well. Within their cultures a woman may be labeled as sinful and irresponsible if she decides to leave her husband. As such many of the women revealed that they had been prepared to sacrifice everything to make their relationship work. They did not want to talk to outsiders in order not to bring shame upon themselves. Sensing their wives vulnerability, many of the husbands used shaming as a way to beat their wives into submission. One woman gave an account of a cruel method her husband used to keep her in the house: “He would burn me with cigarettes, he would shave my [hair] off, not all of it, just enough that it shows. Because of embarrassment I wouldn’t go out and tell people: Look this is what my husband has done!”

Many of the women in this study also linked the things that they had learned about a woman’s role during their upbringing to their vulnerability to start to feel accountable for the abuse. They suggested that the belief that they were responsible for the anger and actions of their husbands predisposed them to blame themselves when the husband would not change, how hard they tried. In one woman’s words: “I truly believed he would change. And I thought, when he was not changing, maybe there’s something I’m doing wrong. And I was always taking the blame.” Their sense of being accountable for the abuse was often reinforced by their own family
members, in-laws, or members of their communities who counselled the women to stay and endure the abuse without complaints. Sometimes their parents suggested that the women had not tried hard enough, sometimes that they had done too much. It was in this confusion that the women’s sense of accountability was solidified:

I felt like a loser. Here I was, listening to them, they were telling me to do these things and he would change, and I am doing it, and it is making things worse: Maybe it’s me. Here are my parents who are saying it is your fault, why did you say it? I was getting mixed messages. So I truly believed it was me, that I was doing something wrong.

Even in cases where the police had arrested the man for assault or when the woman was hospitalized for her injuries the parents and friends suggested that it was the woman who had made him angry, instilling and enforcing blame for the abuse and shame for having let the police know.

The sense of utter worthlessness had driven some of the women either to seriously consider or to actually attempt to commit suicide. After having tried to please their husbands who could not be pleased many women were driven to think that suicide was the only thing left for them to do:

First thing I did was I tried to commit suicide. I just couldn’t handle it any more. It’s not going to get any better. I can’t be that wife he’s looking for. I think I am almost her but it’s not even working anyway. And I cannot tell anyone in my country about what is going on. I can’t really go anywhere, I don’t know anyone.

Once the blame had been internalized the women did not need external validation of their worthlessness. Even friends trying to reason with them were not able to convince the women that they were not to blame: “She tried to make me understand that it wasn’t my fault and I would get into arguments with her that it was my fault, because I wasn’t just up to his standards”.

Regardless of their personal sacrifices to keep the peace in the home and their considerable
contributions for the good of the family the women started to believe that nothing that they did was good enough.

**A Sense of Overwhelming Fear and Vulnerability**

A sense of overwhelming fear and vulnerability was found to be a part of every participant’s experience of living in and leaving their abusive relationship. The women were afraid that they and their children would have to suffer more abuse, that their children might be kidnapped, or even that they and their children would be killed by their father. A distressing sense of threat and danger permeated their experiences, influencing virtually every aspect of their lives. It was present while the women were in their relationships, as well as long after they had left the relationship. They felt that they were not safe anywhere. At times the participants in this study regarded their home as the most dangerous place for them and their children. Experiences of fear and vulnerability ranged from feeling worried and scared to a sense of overmastering terror, extreme anxiety and hypervigilance. The women described their experiences of fear with terms such as “afraid”, “I was too scared to scream”, “I was too scared to speak”, and “terrified.” The ever present sense of vigilance became apparent in one woman’s words: “Any sound that I heard in the night I thought: It’s him!” In order to guard themselves and their children they needed to remain alert to any sign of danger to be ready to do whatever they could to ward the impending danger off.

The women’s fear for their own and their children’s safety was manifested as growing worry and concern, suspicion, mistrust, anxiety, and hypervigilance. Regardless of the initial misgivings that some of the women had about their future husbands they all had expected that they would be safe and cared for in their marriage, and it was only after some time of having been exposed to the abuse that some of the women realized that they were in danger. One
participant recalled how she had been surprised by her observation: “Oh my god! I’m just in a cage with an angry lion! He is just going to rip my face off if I don’t calm him down!” One woman became aware of the presence of danger only a few months after her wedding. The abuser’s demonstrations of love and remorse after the abusive incidents reinforced the women’s hopes that the abuser would change, while the repeated abuse and threats of more abuse contributed to the women’s increasing sense of fear and being at risk.

The fear and vulnerability that the women felt shaped their thinking, perception, and behavior in various ways. One woman found herself obsessively trying to foresee and to fulfill the demands of her husband in order to minimize the likelihood of being hurt. She described her continuous fear of not knowing what would trigger her husband’s ire as feeling like she was “walking on egg shells.” For another woman the ever present threat of more abuse intensified her concern of talking about issues that might upset the husband: “I was really, really scared to say anything, because I knew ... [that] if I stood up for my rights I’d get beaten up.” The abuse became progressively worse for all the women as they stayed on in their relationship, and with the escalating abuse the women’s sense of fear and vulnerability was intensified. The extent of one woman’s suspicions and mistrust of her husband was reflected in the following words:

But for the past few, for the last year when I was living with him I was scared to sleep the night. I had the scissors behind my pillow in case I wanted to defend myself. I had my holy book lying on my chest in case he tried to stab me.

The overwhelming terror that they felt in situations of actual danger was internalized by many of the women to become a lingering sense of danger that occupied their mind even when there was no immediate danger present. For example in one woman’s words, when the police had arrested her husband and “even when they took him, I was too scared to stay in the house.” One woman revealed that being close to certain areas of, and items in the house that had been
previously associated with abuse or threats of abuse triggered a fearful response in her. Other women felt that their home was not a safe place for them: “I used to spend all the nights up and find any excuse to go to the store and sleep in the car in the parking lot. That was more safe to me than being in the house.” Another woman stated that the “… washroom was the safest place for me to be. That was the only place where I could sit, close my eyes, cry, make faces, do whatever, and he wasn’t there. Anywhere else he was there.” In response to their fear of the persuasive threat of violence three of the women indicated that, as a last resort, they had contemplated killing their husbands in self-defense.

The sense of overwhelming fear and vulnerability that the women felt was intensified by the fact that they were new immigrants to Canada. Many of the women talked about a sense of mistrust and apprehension that they felt about the world outside their home, a perception that in their view was based on unfamiliarity with and isolation from the Canadian society and culture. In one woman’s case her husband used her fear of the unknown to keep her under his control in extreme isolation where she was terrified to stay and terrified to reach out for help in fear of reprisals by the foreign society: “And he made me feel like if I ever talk to a psychologist, or a counsellor, or anybody, they are gonna take my kids away from me, they are going to take my [professional] license away from me, and I will never be able to work in this country.” When talking about her lack of knowledge of the support services available at the time of the abuse, one woman recalled her mistrust of the Canadian police based on her experience in her home country: “Police in my country … has never been for people, always … for government.” As such she did not report the abuse to the police. Unfortunately for many of the participants in this study their lack of awareness of the function of police and people in helping professions in general in Canada amplified their discomfort about disclosing their abuse.
Most of the participants came from cultures where intimate details of family life were not disclosed or discussed even within the closest family. For them divorce was not an option even in cases where the relationship was severely dysfunctional. Furthermore, in their cultures it was the woman who was held responsible if there are problems in the relationship. As such, those who break the rules risk being stigmatized and ostracized by their own family as well as the larger community. It is in this context that the fears of one of the participants, who was repeatedly turned down by her parents when she pleaded to them for refuge from severe abuse, torture, and attempts by her husband to kill her, were magnified to the extent that she felt that her parents had “purchased [her] a ticket to death.” Ironically, the fear of hurting their parents feelings and concern over what their parents and friends might think if they knew about the abuse prevented three of the women from disclosing the ongoing abuse and the deterioration of the relationship. This secrecy in turn deepened their own sense of being hostages to fear, evident in one woman’s words: “I had a very good relationship with my mother, I could tell her everything. But this one could hurt her really bad. I couldn’t tell anybody! I could keep it inside and burn, I couldn’t tell a soul!” The realization that she had no friends or family in Canada, that her parents in the old country were totally unaware of what their daughter was going through and unable, because of their own lack of resources, to ever find out what really caused her death if she died in the hands of her husband, contributed to a sense of overpowering fear for one of the participants.

The women in the study were also concerned about the safety of their children, although not all the children were directly abused or threatened by their fathers. The women’s worries and concerns were manifested in different ways. One woman found herself monitoring signs of danger in the interactions between her husband and the children to be prepared to intervene whenever necessary. In her words: “I was always trying to keep the peace”. Another woman
talked about trying to control the children’s behavior and arrange their daily routines so that they would not in any way disturb their father and raise his ire. Yet another participant realized how serious the situation was when she heard that her then six year old son had been talking about killing himself at school. Interestingly, for several of the participants it was the realization that the children were in danger and the need to provide safety for them that empowered many of the women to eventually leave their partners. As poignantly stated by one participant: “He slapped her and that was it for me. I thought, that’s enough! He is starting on her, his own daughter! She didn’t deserve to be hit at all.”

Although the women had left their abusive husbands the violence did not stop, nor did their fear of reprisals. Some of the husbands had threatened, or attempted to kill their wives while they were in the relationship, but it was after the final leaving, when the men realized that their wives were not coming back, that the threats of violence escalated. Fearing for their and their children’s lives many of the women felt that they had no other option but to move to an unknown location far away from their husbands. The women found themselves in a strange environment, with only few of their familiar things around, and, as in some cases, completely alone without the support of friends that had been left behind. It is in this context that the women’s fears escalated as well. Their fear was particularly manifested as hypervigilance, panic, anxiety, feelings of terror, mistrust, and suspicion. After having moved secretly from one coast to another to safety one woman found herself experiencing severe anxiety reactions that required hospitalization even though her husband did not pose an immediate threat at the moment. Many of the women harbored intense feelings of suspicion and mistrust towards their ex-husbands who often continued to stalk, harass, and threaten them. One of the women expressed her feelings of suspicion and fear regarding her ex-husband:
I don’t trust him. And any time I want to get in the car ... I look around the car, I look inside. The fear is still there. I am afraid to go at ten o’clock out, or anytime, or come from fitness [class], all those things. I am just afraid. I cannot trust him, ever. And I can suspect him always.

For some of the women the continuing sense of vigilance after they had left was manifested as sleep disturbances to the point where one woman revealed: “The night I want to sleep I have to bring a friend over to sit in the couch and watch so that I can close my eyes and get some sleep.” The same woman did not trust that her ex-husband had stopped looking for her even though she had managed to keep her whereabouts unknown to him for over a year. She expressed her subsequent sense of fear and need for vigilance: “I hate when the phone rings. It is one more reminder of him, it could be him. Now I have a really hard time with phone, but I know when it is going to be him on the phone.” Many of the women who were in hiding were afraid that their husbands would find them and kidnap the children. It was particularly difficult for one mother to send one of her children away to school where she felt he would be a vulnerable target: “I thought, he’s here! Anytime he will take my son. He will run away, he will do anything!” Another participant had instructed both her daughter and her teachers to be aware of suspicious people attempting to pick her up from school. It wasn’t until the police offered her support and her ex-husband was thousands of miles away that this woman started to feel a sense of safety in her new environment.

The sense of overwhelming fear and vulnerability was an intense theme described by all the participants of this research. They feared for their own safety and, more importantly, for the safety of their children. Afraid of their husbands, afraid of telling friends and family or not being supported by them, mistrustful and suspicious of police and other helping professionals, and strangers to the Canadian society, these women felt isolated and trapped in their abusive relationships, afraid to stay and afraid to leave. Concern for the safety of the children was the
catalyst to leave for some of the participants. However, for many of the women in the study feelings of fear, vigilance, suspicion, and mistrust prevailed long after they had left.

**A Sense of Entrapment**

The experience of entrapment was found to be one of the themes in the participants' stories of living in and leaving their abusive relationships. Throughout their stories the women gave numerous accounts of situations where they felt dependent on, controlled, dominated, violated, and possessed by their husbands. They indicated that, as a consequence, they felt increasingly isolated, alone, and trapped in their marriages. In addition, the participants perceived their limited knowledge of the options and resources available to them in the Canadian society and their traditional cultural beliefs regarding the sanctity of marriage to be contributing factors to their dependency on their husbands and to their susceptibility to control and abuse. It was under these circumstances that the participants started to feel that they were prisoners in their own marriages. In reference to their sense of entrapment the women used terms such as: “I had no choice”, “I was totally dependent on him”, “I was addicted”, and “[there was] no way out of it.”

The participants in this study recalled having experienced various degrees of physical, emotional, social, and financial control by their husbands. Consequently, some of the women had limited opportunities to become informed about the society at large as well as to develop new social support systems to replace the old ones. The women indicated that their husbands were able to start to manipulate them because as new immigrants they were already feeling vulnerable and insecure. In the process their sense of isolation, dependence, and powerlessness increased little by little. Three of the women reported that their husbands regulated their social contacts to the point “… where he would tell me what people I could talk to, what subjects I
could discuss, what I couldn’t talk about. It ended up so bad, I couldn’t believe it!” Two of the women said that their husbands attempted to prevent them from returning to school and one of them was not allowed to work. Two of the women reported that in order to meet people that they liked, they had to maintain secret friendships. In one woman’s words: “I had another girlfriend that I had for years. I just saw her occasionally when I could sneak away, or she would come by when my husband wasn’t at home.”

Some of the women described how little control they were allowed over money regardless of their contributions to the family finances. In speaking about her secret life one woman revealed how she had managed to learn to drive a car, to work as a door-to-door salesman to make some money, and to maintain occasional friendships long enough to learn vital information about the world outside, all behind her husband’s back. But, as she said, he would always catch her in the end, and “... the more he found out that you were able to do something, [the more] he beat your energy down so that you could not do anything.” In some cases the husbands were able to frighten away the women’s personal friends and other acquaintances by threatening them with reprisals if they did not stop seeing or talking to the women. These women felt totally helpless as they watched person after person disappear from lives already deprived of supportive social connections as it were.

The women who had been assaulted by their husbands talked about an overwhelming sense of physical powerlessness when they were attacked. One woman recalled her experiences of downright imprisonment and torture: “He stripped me, he tied my hands, he tied my feet, he cut the telephone cord. There was a couch in front of the door, I couldn’t open the door ...” A prisoner in her own home with no neighbours nearby to hear her screams she was left to fight for her life. Alone.
Other participants in this study gave accounts of instances when they felt that they had entirely lost their freedom and their ability to make decisions and to take action. One woman talked about a feeling that all her movements and her every thought were monitored by and known to her husband. For her, the ultimate loss of her own sense of power came when she had to give in to her husband’s orders to abort a child she was expecting: “The third time I went ahead with the abortion. When your self-esteem goes down by the years, then you lose the power of standing up and saying anything. You just do what he wants.” Another woman described a moment when she thought that she no longer had any other choices left, but to give in to the tyranny of her husband and his family after she and her children had been kidnapped and flown out of Canada:

He took me to his parents in our country of origin, and he had told them everything. I did not know until we got there, that my house was signed over to his sister, and that they had by then cleaned my house, they had taken everything. ... All my documents were taken away from me. I was told that there was going to be constantly somebody watching me, because my in-laws dominated the country. And anything I’d do they would find out. So my documents were ripped, thrown into the fire in front of me. So I thought I had no choice now. ... He tried three times over there to kill me, but I guess someone, a higher power was always watching over me.

Many of the women noted their husbands’ uncanny ability to use whatever the women’s fears were as levers to make sure that they would remain compliant. One woman’s husband pointed out to her that he could literally get away with murder without anybody ever being able to find out what really happened to her. The extent of her isolation and helplessness was crystallized in the following statement: “Neighbors? I didn’t have any neighbors! Community? I didn’t have any community! I was not in touch with the church. I was not in touch with anybody! Who was going to ask about me?” Later, the same woman continued, she felt that she had no other alternative but to return from a transition house back to him because he threatened to tell her family that she had deserted their marriage. She recalled her terrified response at the time:
My god! He is going to tell my family! Oh, my god, my father has a heart problem, I don’t want him to go through any of this! No way, no way! I’ll go back! I don’t want him to go there and harass them, no way: It’s bad enough what you are doing to me, don’t do it to my family! And I also didn’t trust what he was going to say there. I thought that he was going to go there and say that: She is sleeping around with men! And who is going to tell I am not?

Regardless of ongoing physical and emotional violence the women revealed that they continued to feel deep attachment and love towards their husbands. They wondered about the strength of the bond and used words such as “dependency” and “addiction” to refer to it. One woman summed it up:

It was like I was addicted to him. For example, if you are addicted to a drug it is bad for you. It is really bad! This was nothing ... no way out of it. Every time he beat me up I just went and hugged him, and I kissed him, and I put his arm around me. I was addicted to him!

Most of the women in the study referred to their experiences as new immigrants to Canada in further elaborating on their sense of powerlessness and helplessness in dealing with the abuse. They pointed out that not having their friends and families around, possessing limited knowledge of the society and culture in general and of their legal rights and resources in particular, not having their education recognized in this country, having small children to take care of, and having no money of their own if they did not work, made them feel isolated, alienated, and to varying degrees, more dependent on their husbands. One of the participants described her entrapment in the relationship in this way:

Let’s say that this wouldn’t have happened to me in my country of origin. For one thing I would not have stayed in an abusive relationship for very long. I would have had options, while I didn’t have options here. Workwise I always had very good paying jobs there. I could always support myself quite well. I had lots of close friends over there that I went to school with and who I grew up with. [I would have had] support from family and friends, which I didn’t have here. It would have been very, very different. ... I didn’t know about the welfare system. I didn’t know that I had options of staying at home as my children were still little. I did not know about divorce laws.
Another woman reported that during her first years in the country, when she had only limited knowledge of English, she depended almost exclusively on her husband for any information from outside. She summed up her experience:

So here I was after being free, working independently, traveling on my own, making my own money, having tons of family and friends around me, in a strange country! I didn’t know the name of the province, I didn’t know the name of the city, I didn’t know the name of the street, I didn’t know what address I was in, I had no home. I was stuck in this one bedroom apartment, I was not allowed to go near the window, I was not allowed to go to answer the door. I was waiting for my [husband] to come home.

For some of the women emigrating to Canada meant loosing their status and many of their previously enjoyed freedoms. Their loss of personal power and independence contributed to and compounded their feelings of disempowerment. On the other hand, two of the participants eventually perceived Canada as a refuge, that, regardless of their initial struggles and difficulties, eventually provided them with an opportunity to free themselves from a violent relationship.

In wondering about their sense of powerlessness and helplessness the women in this study often turned the focus to their families of origin and their cultural communities to illuminate the role that the values, beliefs, and role expectations learned during their growing up years had played in their lives. While four of the women had grown up sheltered in loving families where the children were not abused and where the parents were not abusive of each other, they nevertheless indicated that they had absorbed a strong sense of loyalty and obligation to one’s marriage under any circumstances, exemplified by one woman’s expression: “... if you were married, you were married. That’s it. Nothing you could do about it.” The women also believed that the family honor took precedence over their individual concerns. To disclose problems in the marriage to outsiders, let alone to leave the marriage was considered a serious breach of family loyalty that, if it happened, brought disgrace and shame mainly to the woman and her
family. The woman’s responsibility in the event of marital discord was described in this way: “

... it was up to you to make it better, and make it work.”

Regardless of their incorporation of these traditional cultural and familial values and
gender role expectations, many of the women struggled to deal with the discrepancy between
their experiences of growing up as respected and cherished individuals, and their experiences of
living in an abusive relationship. They found themselves feeling confused and defenseless as to
how to deal with abuse when it became a reality in their own marriages. In one woman’s words:

I knew ever since I was little ... that abuse was O.K. and that you didn’t complain about it,
and that if you were a woman, you were supposed to accept it. I grew up with that
understanding. But because I had never seen my parents fight, or my dad beat up my mom,
I didn’t know how to react to it.

Another woman suggested that she was able to put a stop to physical violence due to what she
had learned as a child:

He never hit me physically. The only time was in the first early year when he threw me
with a chalk, and I remember, automatically without me thinking, I hurled them back at
him. Because ... I grew up with an idea that it never could happen, it never could happen.
It was in my right brain: Nobody’s allowed to hit me, nobody’s allowed! So he never did
it any more.

However, she recalled how vulnerable she had felt in situations where she was emotionally
abused and how ill-prepared she was to deal with this insidious form of covert violence.

As the abuse became a reality in the women’s lives many felt that they were left to fend for
themselves with little or no support available to them. Being far away from their own families
and old friends intensified the isolation that the women were already feeling. While problems in
one’s marriage might not have been openly discussed even among the closest family members in
the women’s countries of origin, it was still likely that family members may have been able to
offer some support and/or intervene on their behalf in some way. The fact that the women were
thousands of miles away did not make it easier to let parents in particular, know what they were
going through. Aware of the stigma attached to leaving a marriage in their own country, many of the women feared that their parents would suffer if they knew of their troubled relationships, or they were concerned that the parents would not understand their circumstances in a foreign country with different values, customs, and practices than those that they were accustomed to. In retrospect, one of the women said: “I was thinking of everyone else but myself!” The decision not to tell their family and friends meant that the women were cut off from their traditional sources of support in a new country where they knew only very few people, perhaps friends chosen by the husband, if any.

Family members were not necessarily supportive even though they were made aware of what the women were going through. Two of the women recalled being left feeling as if their concerns were just “complaining” and unimportant after having told their siblings about the abuse. In an extreme case the woman’s parents totally colluded with the abuser, refused to offer her safety in their home, and repeatedly pressured her to return to a husband who they knew was literally torturing her. This woman expressed the sense of helplessness she was feeling in a situation where she knew her life was at risk:

They told me to go and bail my husband out, which I did. And when my husband came home with me to their house, my mom was crying, and she went and she begged him to take me back. And I didn’t want to go back, because I knew what was going to happen. But I had no choice, and I left [with my husband].

Many of the women either did not know that they could call the police or were reluctant to do so even when they were severely assaulted, because they were not aware of the legal consequences of reporting. They summoned the police only as a last resort, or the police were alerted by other people who happened to witness the abuse. As one woman said: “I did not know I should dial 911! I was not confident enough [about] my rights. If I do that, what will happen later? I had no clue what is this!” One woman, who was aware of the legal ramifications, did not
report the abuse because she knew that her husband would abuse her even more if she had the police involved. Two of the participants indicated that even though they were called in the police were ineffective in providing protection to them. Some felt that the police tended to minimize the violence, further exacerbating their sense of being isolated in a situation that was becoming increasingly dangerous to them. One woman recalled her frustration with the response of a policeman after an abuse that two days later resulted in her hospitalization with a life-threatening blood clot in the brain: “He never sent me to the hospital. He never said, this and this you can do, nothing! He did not pick my husband up. He didn’t tell me I could charge him.”

After unsuccessful attempts to stop the violence many of the participants started to feel increasingly helpless and powerless. Feelings of depression and numbness set in for many of the women in this study as a response to situations where they seemed to have lost all their personal power.

To summarize, the sense of entrapment for the participants in this study included a feeling that their actions and thoughts were strictly controlled by their husbands. It also included a feeling of isolation from their families, friends and communities, as well as the larger Canadian society. Loyalty to familial values and beliefs regarding sanctity of marriage and gender role expectations served to deepen the women’s sense of entrapment in that they felt that there was no way out of their abusive relationships. Unawareness of the role of the police on one hand and the ineffectiveness of the police to help the women once they were called on the other hand compounded the sense of helplessness and powerlessness for the participants. Lacking other escape routes many of the women became depressed and numb to their own feelings.

A Sense of Betrayal and Abandonment

Another theme that emerged in this study on the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women was a sense of betrayal and abandonment. All the
women in the study entered their respective marriage, regardless whether it was by their own choice or whether it had been arranged for them by their families, trusting that they would be loved, respected, and cared for by their husbands, hoping that their relationships would be mutually satisfying and supportive, and looking forward to a wonderful life together as a family.

In describing herself when she had just married her husband, one woman said: “I was an innocent seventeen year old person going to live with that man until I died.” Repeatedly finding themselves deceived, abused, even threatened to be killed by someone whom they had made a lifetime commitment to, contributed to an overwhelming sense of betrayal for the women, starkly revealed in one woman’s words: “I was hurting, not because of the physical pain but because of the emotional pain. The man I married, the man I was supposed to love was going to kill me!”

The participants gave accounts of situations where they indicated that “I was lied to”, “I was made a fool”, “I was betrayed”, “I was not treated with honesty”, and “I had no one fighting for me.” To convey their consequent sense of disillusionment, crushed expectations, and feelings of having been forsaken the women said that they had felt “disappointed”, “hurt”, “unhappy”, “depressed”, “unloved”, and “not cared for.” The sense of betrayal and abandonment was magnified by incidents such as their family, friends, community members, helping professionals, and the society at large either colluding with the abuser, violating the trust given to them, or providing the women with very little or no help at times when they needed it the most.

Some of the women left their countries, careers, friends, and family behind with feelings of reluctance, but all of them sincerely believed that they would continue to be loved and cared for by their husbands once they were in Canada. Three of the women became aware of their husbands’ deceptions and betrayals just shortly after their arrival. One woman came into this country only to realize that the pictures sent to her and her family prior to the wedding by her
future husband, depicting a fine home and his other grand possessions in Canada as well as pictures of places where they would go to spend their honeymoon once in this country were not true. She described her sentiments upon her arrival to her new home in this way:

And there was no hotel, and there was no trip. ... across the street was the apartment, which was one bedroom apartment. We are talking about a very highly educated man, who had a brand new car, who was giving gifts like crazy, and this was his house! I couldn’t believe this, I just couldn’t believe it!

This woman felt that not only was she deceived, but that her parents had been misled as well to believe that their daughter was marrying a suitable person.

All the women in this study were initially willing to brush off their budding suspicions, and to adjust and sacrifice their personal aspirations and needs in order to make their relationships work. The same woman continued:

But I had complete faith in him. At this time I really thought he was everything. In my mind he was like my big brother. I had no doubt that he was going to look after me, and that he was going to be there for me ... I really adored him, I don’t know why ... I guess I grew up with the idea that you went to school, then you went to the university, then you got married. That was it. This was the end of my [first] career. This [marriage] was my other career.

The women recalled that for a period of time they were able to dismiss the recurring deception, betrayal, manipulation, even abuse by their husbands, and that they were willing to believe their husbands’ ensuing excuses, expressions of remorse, and repeated promises of change in order to maintain an image of a happy marriage for their own and their family’s sake. One of the participants indicated that “... every time I was physically abused I went back to him, because I was still protecting my family. I wanted them to believe that I had a happy life, and I couldn’t tell them what a monster he was.” In talking about the repeated opportunities that she gave her husband to change, another woman said:

[The] violence got progressively worse. I thought that if we switched to a different area and started a different lifestyle he wouldn’t have that much time to sit around So we bought this ten acre farm and, again, he promised to change. He really loved his daughter at the time and I said that he had to think about her! [But the abuse] was just like before.
We got a hot tub, and we had parties. I got to do all the work, and he got to have all the fun. He was a big kid. He was one of those very irresponsible people that just want to party and ‘don’t tell me any of your problems’. If things didn’t go his way he would have a temper fit and he became abusive. And that’s what he did.

Regardless of their accumulating experiences of betrayal the women in this study recalled how hard they clung to the hope that their husbands would change even after years of abuse. One woman, whose husband had been charged several times with abuse, explained her situation just days before he was going to court this time, perhaps, to be sentenced to prison:

After he beat me up, for the first time he apologized to me, because he knew I was going to run. He said [that] it would never happen again, and that somebody was behind this, somebody did not want us to live together. He said that he really loved me and cared for me, and that we should go for a holiday, [because] he wanted to give something back to me. And I believed him. I thought [that if] we spent some time away from people we would get to know why [the abuse] was happening. The morning we left for Hawaii was the day that he was to go to court. ... When we got to Hawaii he beat the living daylights out of me in the hotel room. I thought I was going to be paralyzed for the rest of my life.

This woman and her two children, all Canadian citizens, were actually being kidnapped by her husband and returned to his family and birth place. It took over four years before they were able to return to safety in Canada.

The fact that some friends, family members, members of the community, even the police seemed to side with the abuser contributed to the participants’ sense of betrayal and abandonment at the time when they were still trying to cope with the abuse or when they were attempting to leave. The pain of betrayal, caused by parents rejecting her pleas for help and support in fear of loosing their face and esteem in their community, is evident in this woman’s words:

I phoned my parents and [told them that] I just got him arrested. They asked me why I did that. I said to my mom that I was bleeding, and [asked, would she] come and see me. But she said that she didn’t have a ride. She lied to me, we were living a five, ten minute drive from each other. The man I married ... was going to kill me, and my parents said: “You did the wrong thing, we don’t want you now.” It was like they cared for the abuser more and their pride more than my pain. They could afford to lose me, but they could not afford to lose their pride in the community.
Although many of the women talked warmly of friends and acquaintances who believed and supported them, they also mentioned how betrayed they had felt by those people who colluded with the abuser when they questioned whether they were going to stay in their relationships with their abusive partners. One participant recalled her experience after she had sought shelter in a transition house:

I gave her my address, and within half an hour my husband showed up. She had phoned him right away and told him where I was. I was very upset, I felt betrayed by her. It was the only shelter in the area at the time, [and] if I ever wanted to get away he knew where I would be.

Another woman remembered the response of a friend at the time when she was contemplating leaving her relationship: “A very close friend of mine, when I talked to her, said that my kids were small [and that] I should stay until my kids get older. That was very discouraging.” Another participant recalled several instances where she had been further victimized by medical and counseling professionals that she had contacted to get help in dealing with the abusive situation. In the end, she reported she had lost her trust to the point where “… I didn’t even go to help anymore. Every time I went for help it was a disaster. Most of them were men, and when I was young I was fairly pretty and they used to come on to me.” She indicated that at the time when she needed support, there were not as many services available as there are now, and that the services failed to offer her and her husband help when they were desperate for it:

I told him I couldn’t go on like that. He promised to go to counseling, and that things would change. ... We made an appointment to see a marriage counselor after that. [The appointment] was six weeks away, and in that six weeks everything was back to ‘normal’. ... When the appointment came up he said that he could not take time off. And that was the end of that counseling. I found that really hard with the system, that you couldn’t get help when you needed it.

In addition, two of the women talked about their feelings of being deserted in reference to instances where the police had not fulfilled their obligation to protect them. In one woman’s words:
When I got married, it was nineteen eighty, we had no support system around. Even the police was not doing very much. They would come and even if I was bleeding they would ask, whether I wanted my husband arrested. And when he [husband] gave me that look, and when I knew that I had no other place to go, I said: No, don’t take him. And they would leave.

Later the same woman was left feeling betrayed by everybody around her in a bizarre twist of events where her husband managed to prove that she was an unfit mother for their children. In her words:

And then my husband brought his two sisters, a letter from his lawyer, a letter from the court. When I read all that it said that he had the custody of the children, and that his sisters were the caregivers from this day on, and that I was not allowed near the business, near the children, near him, or at home. ... He was the one who drove me to the point [of suicide]! He gave me the bottle, he was standing beside me. When I drank it he was satisfied and called the ambulance. He showed he was a very caring husband. The last time when I had Valium, [it was] he [who] shoved it in my mouth! And he’s got the custody!

The women felt that their and expectations had been disappointed by family, friends, professional helpers, and the police. As a result the women felt that they were forsaken, and that they were left to their own devices to defend themselves from the violence.

For two of the participants their husbands’ affair with another woman was a catalyst for them to take the final step out of the relationship. For one of the women the fact that her husband had been unfaithful to her with her best friend amounted to an insurmountable sense of betrayal where there no longer was any room for forgiveness. She described her shock when she discovered the affair:

My best friend that I used to call ‘mom’ [was] sleeping with my husband! Bingo, it was over! The affair [happened] after the major beating. The affair, I couldn’t live with the affair! I could live with the pain, I could live with the physical abuse, but I could not live with the affair.

Another woman made the decision to stop giving chances to her husband after he had violated the parent-child bond by starting to abuse his then teenage daughter who left home after the
incident: “I remember saying to him that I would never forgive him for that. That was pretty much the end of it.”

To summarize, the sense of being betrayed and abandoned for the participants in this study grew out of situations where their expectations of a supportive and loving relationship were crushed by repeated acts of abuse and violence by their husbands.

The women continued to hope that the abuse would stop, giving their husbands one chance after another to change, and in the process they were prepared to embrace their role of a wife who relinquishes her own interests for the sake of the family. The sense of betrayal and abandonment was compounded by instances where the women’s own families and friends withdrew their support and/or colluded with the abuser. Experiences of having been let down by helping professionals, support services, police, and society at large further contributed to the sense of being forsaken at times when the women needed the support of other people and institutions the most.

A Sense of Maternal Concern

A sense of maternal concern was found to be present in all the immigrant women’s stories of their experiences in their abusive marriages as well as after they had left them. The women were worried about possible immediate ill affects of observing abuse and being abused on their children, as well as on their relationships with them. Furthermore, they were concerned about how their children would be affected by the absence of their father if they did decide to leave. The women wanted to do what was best for their children and, consequently, struggled with the decision of whether to stay in or leave their marriages. Interestingly, the children were often a final catalyst for these women to leave. The women were anguished when they realized that the emotional and psychological well-being of their sons and daughters had been negatively affected
by them having been witnesses and targets of violence, and they did whatever was in their power
to help them heal. The women in this study cherished their offspring. When they were asked
what had helped them to survive, the following statement was repeated by every one of them:
“My children.”

Although most of the children of the participants in this study were not directly physically
abused, they suffered emotional and psychological abuse, and/or they observed the abuse of their
mothers. The participants expressed concern about the safety of the children as well as the
harm that might be incurred to them because of name calling, excessive control, inappropriate
discipline, irresponsible behavior, and in one case physical abuse by their fathers. On the other
hand they were compelled to keep their family intact for the benefit of the children. Referring to
her desire to do so, one woman said: “I gave him so many chances [just] to have a father for my
child. I thought [that] my daughter deserved two parents.” The participants indicated, however,
that the longer they stayed in their relationships the more they became aware of the detrimental
affects of the violent environment on their children. Realizing that her then six year old son was
severely depressed, contributed to one woman’s feelings of agitation and distress. Another
woman was pained to hear that her son: “…felt like a slave. His father always called him names,
he never called [the son] by his own name.”

Another facet of the sense of concern that some of the participants started to feel over time
was their worry about the quality of the relationship between them and their children. As the
stress level in her relationship rose one woman realized that “…I was not even [being] with my
children, I was screaming at them, because I was so busy doing what he wanted me to do.”
Another woman felt that there was no real sense of bonding left between her and her children
because of psychological manipulation by her husband’s parents: “I was not allowed to show
feelings, they were not allowed to show me feelings. I was just a care giver, but I didn’t show them any emotions. I wanted to get that back.”

So strong was their sense of maternal protectiveness that two of the participants wanted to abort their unborn babies in order to protect them from being exposed to abuse. In one woman’s words: “I had an abortion because I wasn’t going to [bring] another child into this life, knowing that the father was not the right [kind of] parent for it.” One of the women could not go ahead with the abortion, because her doctor asked permission of her husband, who refused. She explained: “I’m glad now I didn’t, because my daughter is a great person. But [then] I figured I didn’t need another child to complicate the situation. It was the worst time to get another child.”

Although most of the women in this study went to stay in a transition house several times before the final break up, they often returned home out of concern for their children. One woman who could not take her children with her reported: “I came back, because I wanted my children. I should not have left without them.” Yet another woman was pressured to go back home by her children who “were very unhappy” at the shelter where she had taken them. Concern for the children was a major contributor to all the women’s decisions to end their relationships. For some women it was the final reason to leave. One of the participants recalled her experience when her daughter became the target of her husband’s physical abuse: “That was the first time he ever hit her, and she just melted. ... And I said to him that I was seeing a lawyer [that day], and that was it.” Another woman drew her strength to first escape herself, then to return and kidnap her children from a country entirely controlled by her husband’s parents, to bring them back to Canada, and to fight for their immigration status out of her desire to provide a better life for them in this country. The same woman suggested that her concern for the children not only gave her the incentive to leave, but that it also kept her motivated to stay alive during the years of violence: “If I had no children I would have probably been dead, not by him ... I would
probably have committed suicide.” It was a sentiment that was shared by many other women in the study.

Witnessing the relief that their children exhibited after they had been taken out of their abusive home environments assured the women in this study that they had made the right decision. However, while they were now safe the women had a better opportunity to assess the damage done to their children. Some mothers reported that their children were initially “passive-aggressive”, “scared”, mistrustful, and feeling bad about themselves and their abilities. In other cases there were long term consequences: “We left his father when he was six years old, now he is twelve, and ... still there is anger and behavior problems [at home] and at school.” One woman had been hoping that “… the new generation would be smarter …”, and that her grown daughters would have learned from her experience not to get involved with abusive men. However, she said, “… my children were doing exactly the same mistakes. They have all had boyfriends or husbands with the same mental set-up as my ex-husband.” Making a link between the young age of her child when she was exposed to the abuse and her emotional well-being one mother said: “I was fortunate that she was so small that she was not affected. I’m not an expert, but as a mother I can see that there’s no bitterness, there’s no anger.”

Concern for the children had prompted many of the participants in this study to send their children to a counselor or a therapist, to seek professional help for themselves, and to become involved in educational and therapy groups in order to facilitate the healing process. The children had, perhaps, lost their old lifestyle and their connection with their father, however, the mothers were determined to do whatever was in their power so that the children’s emotional and psychological well-being would not be compromised. One woman described her initial struggle and subsequent success in helping her son:

I took a self-esteem course ... and I taught the same things to my son, [such as] to say something positive last thing before he went to sleep. ... I was tying my tongue to [find]
anything that [was] positive in what we did that day, because I couldn’t see anything good either. I said: “We did wake up, that’s good enough for today. You ate your breakfast, you did good! We went to sleep on time, that was good enough for today.” He was not doing well at school, so I couldn’t say that. And the first thing that shocked me was when my son one day said: “Oh, I’m so smart, I did that workout!” And I thought: “It’s reaching there! He is hearing me!” And for me that was enough success at that time.

Even though all the women considered their decisions to leave beneficial to the welfare of the children, many of them worried about the absence of the biological father, and would have liked their children to remain in touch with their fathers if possible. Because of the danger involved two of the mothers had to cut the connection to the fathers of their children completely. Yet another mother had allowed her child to stay in touch with the father by phone in order to ease the child’s adjustment difficulties after the divorce: “I thought the conversations ... would help. They didn’t, it was the opposite. It was disruptive.” When the contact was later resumed she suggested, unsuccessfully, that an impartial mediator be consulted to repair the relationship between the parents: “That would have helped our children. Otherwise he could have gone his own way if we didn’t have the children between us.” Mothers’ new partners sometimes represented a new father figure to the children. One of the mother recalled how her worry about the absent biological father had lifted after a talk with her child: “My [child] said that a father was the person who cared about you. It was understood by a seven year old that a father was a person who cares! I don’t know why it took me so long to understand it!”

All the women talked about the importance of nurturing a healthy sense of self in their children and bringing them up with values that don’t condone violence. In describing what she wanted her children to learn one woman said:

[I want them to be ] assertive, not to put up with what I did, [to know that] there’s limits to things. I keep telling my boys that they do not have the right to abuse anyone, and my girls that they don’t have to put up with abuse.
The participants realized that perhaps the most powerful way to teach their children appropriate boundaries and behavior was by their own example. The mothers discussed their desire to provide a good role model for their children, their daughters in particular. In one woman’s words: “It was important that she knew that there was an option, that you didn’t have to live with abuse, and to realize that mom did it [decided to leave the abusive relationship].”

In contrast to their own childhood where they had grown up with the understanding that violence in the family was a taboo subject and as such was not to be discussed, many of the women had decided to be open about their own experiences and often talked with their children about the abuse. In one woman’s opinion: “I think it is very therapeutic to talk about it. [They need to know] that it is not O.K. to abuse, that it is O.K. to speak about it and to go get help before it is too late.” In addition, the women felt a sense of satisfaction for the fact that members of their extended families could benefit from their actions. In one woman’s words: “My aunt lived in an abusive relationship, she never did anything about it. I am so happy I got divorced! ... my sisters, my niece, my nephew, my child, anybody in the family now have a role model.”

In summary, a sense of maternal concern was a theme in the experiences of the women in this study. This concern manifested itself in the women wanting to provide a safe and growth promoting home environment for, and to have a loving and close relationship with their children. Concern for the emotional and psychological welfare of their children was often a catalyst for the women to finally end their relationships. The women utilized their inner resources as well as the support of professional helpers to promote healing, the learning of healthy boundaries, and personal growth in their children. Although the women recognized that the absence of a biological father was a big loss for the children, they suggested that the toll on the children’s emotional and psychological well-being would have been greater had they stayed in these violent relationships. A sense of pride and accomplishment was also related to the awareness that they
were role models for all members of their extended families and that their actions provided an alternative to traditional views on intimate relationships.

**A Sense of Injustice and Anger**

Another theme that became evident in the experience of these immigrant women who were abused was a sense of injustice and anger. The same factors that had contributed to the women’s sense of betrayal and abandonment while in the relationship seemed to be factors that contributed to their sense of injustice and anger after they had left the relationship, such as family and friends colluding with the abuser, misconduct of professionals, and ineffectiveness of the legal system to provide protection from the often increasing threats and harassment by their husbands. In addition, after having left their relationships the women had to deal with economic hardship, the challenges of single parenthood, loss of old friends who had to be left behind because of the necessity to relocate, and, as in one woman’s case, disputes with Immigration Canada.

The participants in this study found it difficult to understand and to accept that even after having left their abusive relationships they and their children were the ones who continued to be penalized, while the abuser was able to continue his life in comfort. The women’s experiences ranged from feelings of annoyance and unfairness to intense feelings of anger and outrage at the violation of their rights. In describing their experiences the women indicated that they had often felt “upset”, “angry”, “infuriated”, and “outraged.”

The men continued to harass the women after they had left, enraged by the fact that the women had by their actions dared to challenge their power and control. Even though they were still afraid of their husbands, the women started also to become angry with them. One woman, tired of endless harassment after years of separation retorted: “... he was still not getting it, he still believed I was his wife.” Another woman described her outrage: “He didn’t leave me alone,
Finally I took him to court.’”

Their sense of anger and injustice was also apparent in the women’s stories regarding the role of the police and the legal system in helping them to deal with the abuse after they had left. The women indicated that a restraining order was often ineffective. In one woman’s words: “... it was worth nothing. He came around whenever he wanted to, he harassed me whenever he wanted to.” Discussing an appointment in court where her ex-husbands was on trial for assault that nearly resulted in her dying, she said:

The prosecutor was an absolute joke. He said he couldn’t prosecute ... [ex-husband] ..., because he was charged for general assault. He should have been charged with assault causing bodily harm. Because he wasn’t charged with the right offense [the prosecutor] could not do anything. I got removed from the court, because I started screaming and yelling. It was so outrageous ... I was the one who was the injured party and he who hurt himself when he hit me was allowed to use total lies against me. I was infuriated, and I was removed [from the court].

Her husband got off by claiming that she had hurt him also by injuring his thumb.

Another woman was outraged at the seeming reluctance and unwillingness of politicians and representatives of Immigration Canada to assist her in bringing her two children, born when she was held in virtual captivity abroad, legally to this country. Relying on her own ingenuity she managed to bring the children to Canada only to face more battles when what she needed was support:

My parents said I shouldn’t have done it, my husband was on my case, Immigration was waiting for me, I was to get arrested for kidnapping charges, my children were going to get deported. They refused to give the two children status, not even to go to school. I had no lawyers, I had no one fighting for me.

The women were relieved at having reached a place of relative safety after they had left. Escape from the violence, nevertheless, meant for many of the women that they had to leave things that were important in their life behind, with little likelihood of ever retrieving any of
them. The unfairness of it was summed up by one woman who had to move secretly to the West Coast: “I worked hard and I bought a new car ... furniture, everything for [our] home. I left everything. Living on social assistance here, I had to start from zero.” Although she had not had to move to the other side of the country away from her husband, another woman reported being “upset” after she had lost nearly all her possessions to her husband who had, prior to their divorce, invested their mutual assets so that she could not gain any kind of access to them. The other women expressed their resentment towards their ex-husbands because of their failure to make child support payments. One woman, a mother of four, described her frustration in these words: “He owed me thousands of dollars. ... [he] never paid me a penny.”

The same woman expressed her anger towards her parents-in-law, who, after her husband’s death, refused to award the children what was rightfully theirs: “All his estate was divided, they gave it to their other children. My four children were not allowed anything.” Another woman recounted her experience: “I never could get any help financially and it has been seven years [since leaving].” She was angry because she had to rely on social assistance for a while and to work very hard in order to provide for her children, while her husband was making a good living and contributing nothing. The same woman had little faith in the legal system in effecting an adequate solution to the problem: “This Family Reinforcement Program, they never could get any money from him to support the kids. I am angry with them.” Many women who had to go on social assistance after having left their abusive relationships did so reluctantly even though they recognized its importance in providing them with an opportunity for independence. One woman in particular felt angry about the demeaning treatment that she had received in a welfare office: “Welfare was snotty. They treated you like dirt there. I had a few fights there and I told them that I was a human being, I didn’t expect to be treated like that!”
Another aspect of the sense of injustice and anger for the women in this study was the fact that it was they and their children who needed to extract themselves from the family home and consequently, from their friends and their communities, while their husbands could continue their usual lifestyle. Some of the women had to keep their current addresses secret even from their families abroad in fear of their ex-husbands finding them. In one woman’s case her ex-husband felt free to contact her family, continuing to threaten them in the absence of his wife.

One of the penalties for one woman, who now lives in hiding from her ex-husband, was at least a temporary disconnection from her old community elsewhere in Canada and her family abroad:

I haven’t heard from him for a whole year now, which is great. I’m still in touch with my family only by phone, so they don’t really know where I am. And I don’t contact anyone from the other province [but] my best friend just to let her know that I am O.K. and safe. Nobody really knows where I am.

Many of the participants in this study felt unfairly treated by and angry at their parents or friends. Even though most of the women had gained their parents’ acceptance and support for their decision to leave their abusive marriages by the time of the research interview, some of them recalled having felt resentful towards their parents because of their earlier non-supportive reactions. Brought up by parents who had fostered independence and self-reliance in their children one woman described how her parents, nevertheless, mistrusted her judgment and her capability to take care of herself after she left her abusive husband. This contributed to her feelings of injustice:

Actually, my family betrayed me for a while. [Because] I was getting a divorce, they didn’t talk to me. My ex-husband had called them and said that I am a slut, [that] I was working as a prostitute. ... I sent them a copy of my grades from the university and asked how a slut could be so successful? ... Those facts worked for my mother and she said: ‘Oh, yes! That’s true.’

Although disappointed at her parents this woman also said that it was difficult for them to assess the situation properly because they did not know of the ex-husband’s criminal history or the
abuse during the marriage, and because of their traditional cultural beliefs that assume the husband to be the head of the household who takes care of the family by making all the important decisions regarding its members.

In her anger one woman was planning to renounce the name of her parents:

I didn’t want to have anything to do with them, simply because they knew what I was going through. They saw my appearance of pain, the hurts, the bruises, the cuts. They never acknowledged [any of] it. I thought that this was not what parents were for. They were supposed to help you!

One woman was particularly outraged with the couple’s mutual friends who colluded with the abuser even after the divorce: “I lost all my friends. They thought I was the biggest bitch. Nobody believed that he did what he did, even now.” She reported that even though some of her old friends politely invited her to join them, she could no longer afford to participate in their activities on her social assistance income. According to her: “We had nothing in common any more.”

A sense of resentment towards certain representatives of their own community and religious groups was also expressed by some of the participants in this study. They felt that these people had betrayed their promises to help and/or acted in the best interest of the community but not necessarily in the best interest of the women. One woman was upset because a social worker from her own community had tried to influence her to reconcile with her husband when she was determined to leave. In addition, for this woman her community turning a blind eye to her suffering and colluding with the abuser was an outrage that encouraged her to continue fighting for her rights:

A lot of it was my determination, because I was so angry. He was doing this, but why was the community with him? They could see that this was a man who was an alcoholic, drug addict, ... and a chronic abuser. Yet, he was the guy that people respected, he was the guy that people believed. And that made me very angry.
Energized by her anger, she continued to speak up openly about wife abuse, an issue that according to her was still hidden in her community, despite advice by some of its members that she should not be so open about her experiences.

In summary, the sense of injustice and anger experienced by the women manifested itself mainly after the women had left their abusive relationships. This theme was 'accentuated by feelings of unfairness based on the fact that it was often the abused women who continued to be penalized even after they had left. The women were upset that they often had to leave their possessions behind with little chance of ever retrieving them, and that their standard of living was greatly reduced while the abusers remained living in comfort. The theme also included feelings of anger and outrage at various aspects of law enforcement that failed to stop the abusers from continuing their harassment and that failed to force them to contribute towards the financial support of their children. The instances where the women’s family, friends, and/or members of their community colluded with the abuser, if only temporarily, were another source fueling their feelings of injustice and anger for.

**An Emerging Sense of Self**

The theme of an emerging sense of self was found to be present in the stories of all participants in this study. The participants used terms such as “tremendous [change]”, “a rediscovery of self”, “being through so much pain gave me power”, and “a good learning experience” to describe the process they had undergone. Components of the theme included a growing sense of individual identity, entitlement, self-worth, agency, and confidence. One woman said: “Before I didn’t trust myself, I didn’t trust my own judgment. I really trust myself [now], I know I can make good decisions.” Reflecting an awareness of her own separate identity, another woman said: “I’m more like a grown-up. I can say what is good for me now, not what is
good for my mother.” In addition, an increasing sense of worthiness was also part of the women’s experience. Although one woman revealed that she was “still working on [her] self-esteem”, she, nonetheless, had realized that: “I am not helpless ... I have a lot of resources ... [and] I don’t really have anything to be ashamed of.”

Instrumental to the women’s process of self-discovery and transformation was the role that various individuals and services from the larger community played in breaking the women’s isolation and providing information and support for them. By providing information about their rights and options, by validating the women’s experiences in their abusive relationships, and by giving practical and emotional support these people enabled and empowered the women to start to make decisions about changes they wanted to make in their lives. Sometimes the women sought out contacts and help, other times they were approached by people wanting to help. A landlady, nurses, police officers, a priest, a real estate woman, secret friends, a neighbor, doctors, counsellors, group leaders, and staff at shelters were mentioned by the women as having been among their helpers and sources of information and empowerment over the years.

With their ability to trust and their sense of self worth having been damaged in their abusive relationships, the women’s first contacts with people and places of safety outside of their homes were characterized by initial feelings of hesitance, mistrust, and doubt. After years of denigration and accusations, the participants had difficulty believing that they were not to blame for the abuse, particularly when it was the people from the mainstream culture telling them so. One woman described her experience the first time she was taken to a transition house:

It was very different, because there were these white women running up to me, hugging me and saying that it was O.K., and that [the abuse] wasn’t my fault. I did not want to believe that. I knew that it was my fault, because that was what I was told to believe ... all my life I had accepted it. And all of a sudden somebody was telling me that, no, [the abuse] was not my fault, and that it was O.K. for me to be in that house.
Although their experiences were finally being validated, the full meaning of these messages was difficult for the women to believe. They had been convinced of the opposite by their husband and, perhaps, family and friends. In reflecting on her experience of learning to trust, one woman recalled a psychiatrist of her own ethnic background, who had approached her after she had been hospitalized following a brutal murder attempt by her husband:

He said that he believed me, ... and that if I was O.K. ... he wanted to talk to me. I said that I didn’t want to talk, because I wasn’t sure who he was ... He came back and said that they had checked me up when I came to the hospital, and he asked if I wanted to tell him where my bruises had come from. For the first time I spoke out.

The women were initially mistrustful of the messages that affirmed their experiences of abuse and that challenged their internalized blame. These messages, however, were like seeds of new possibilities that started to sprout and develop with time. One woman who had reluctantly confided in a Christian priest about what she was going through captured it in her words:

Even [though] he was not a man of my religion he was right. There was something wrong here, and it was not me. It was [my husband]! It was the first time I [thought so]. But again, did I really want to leave him?

With their sense of self-worth and personal resources having been diminished by their husbands’ extreme control and possessive dominance during the years of abuse, many of the participants desperately needed the support and encouragement from others to repair and restore what had been damaged and lost. Receiving assistance in redefining the boundaries of acceptable behavior as well as support in asserting those boundaries was experienced as helpful by the women in the restoration of their own ability to set and maintain healthy limits. One woman who for the first time was assisted by the Canadian legal system to lay abuse charges against her husband, to get her property back, and to regain the custody of her children was afraid of getting her hopes up. She thought:

Oh, somebody was giving me my power back! ... I thought I was dreaming, [and that] I would wake up with hands and feet tied up, him [there] with a belt to beat me up. I didn’t
want to admit that this was really happening, because I didn’t know whether it was going to last.

In referring to moments of empowerment another woman recalled a talk with the leader of the job club she was attending:

The more [we] talked, the more I started to realize what was happening. And she asked me why I had not answered him [husband] back, and I said: “Oh, my god! Answered him back, and said what? ... I can’t!” But she said that I could.

Aware of the danger involved in challenging her husband’s power in any way, the same woman chose a relatively safe place and stood up for herself. She spoke about her new found power with pride: “I think I did it for the first time in my life, I answered him back!” Three of the women indicated that the help that they received from staff in transition houses was important in restoring their depleted personal resources. In referring to her “addiction” to her husband one woman said: “... to get over that I needed a re-hab center, and for me the shelters [provided] the re-habilitation.”

Underlying the experience of an emerging sense of self for many of the participants was a sense of being caught between two conflicting cultural value systems. On one hand they felt obligated to adhere to their traditional cultural beliefs and assumptions that included the notion that a woman must sacrifice her interests for husband and family, and that divorce was not an option even if her life was at risk. On the other hand, the participants had become influenced by ideas prevalent in the mainstream Canadian society, ideas that valued personal freedom of choice as well as pursuit of individual interests even within intimate relationships. Not surprisingly, this resulted in both internal and external conflicts for them, conflicts that were an intrinsic part of the women’s decision making process regarding whether they should stay in or leave their abusive relationships.
The participants' internal conflicts were fueled by their growing trust in the belief that they were not to blame for the deterioration of their relationships or their husbands' violent behavior, that they did not have to tolerate abuse, that they had options, and that they had power to choose whether or not to stay in their relationships, beliefs contrary to their cultural teachings. This conflict was characterized by a strong sense of going against one's grain. In one woman's words: "I was going against all the things that I was taught and brought up with ... it was difficult for me." To appreciate the amount of turmoil and agony involved in the decision making process the women understood that no matter which alternative they chose, they would suffer serious consequences. If they chose to stay their family and community would accept them, but they might end up killed by their husbands. If they chose to leave they would have a chance for a life free of abuse, but, their family and community might reject them.

Members of their family and community tried to pressure some of the participants to continue to comply with the traditional values, creating external conflicts and adding to the confusion already felt by the women. Reflecting on that confusion, one of the participants recalled the words of a member from her community after she had once again run from her abusive husband to a transition house, and her own subsequent reaction:

[She said to me that] people from our country and religion didn’t do that. That was how Canadians did things! [She asked me to] look around and see if I saw any [other] people from our country there. [I thought] she was right, there were no other people from our country there! How come I was doing as people from a different nationality? How come was I following different customs? That was not right!

Another woman contacted her parents from a transition house after she had made up her mind to leave her husband. She was made to feel guilty for abandoning her traditional values by her mother:

It was a very hard time, because I was preparing to talk to my family about this. When I told my mother that I was getting separated ... she said [that I] was crazy, and that I had lived in [this] strange country and become an American.
After what often was years of wavering between staying and leaving, something happened that compelled the participants to say: "Enough is enough!" Some of the reasons contributing to the women's sense of having had enough and to eventually leave their relationships were concern for the children, fear of getting killed, and their husbands' affairs. For many it was an accumulation and a combination of several things. A need to retrieve what had been lost from their former sense of self was mentioned by some women as strongly related to their motivation to leave. One woman recalled thinking: "I have lost so much and I want all those things back!"

The participants' attempts to prove to various members of their families and communities that they were not to blame for the abuse, and to gain their support and approval were initially unsuccessful. Fueled by a growing sense of who they wanted to be and what they wished to do in their lives the women found enough trust and confidence in themselves to continue their journey of personal transformation and growth alone, regardless of the views of their families and members of their communities. One woman poignantly described her position during her final stay in a transition house, when a woman from her community once again tried to convince her that she should return to her husband: "That was it! I didn’t care who thought I was right, and who [thought] I was wrong. I just didn’t care. I knew I was right, and I was not going to go back. That was enough, period!" Another woman summed it up in the following words: "I stopped proving [to others that I was right]. I started working on myself."

To honor their emerging sense of self these women needed to separate themselves from their abusive husbands, regardless of the possibility that the violence would escalate, that they might lose their economic security and social status, that they would be blamed for the break up, and that their families might reject them. Empowered by the awareness of their rights, options, and the support available to them some of the women left their husbands, while others took legal action and had their husbands extracted from the house for the last time. Referring to
her disagreement with her family over her divorce she said: “It was easier to get divorced ...
because my family was not here ... I could go and talk to a counsellor ... That was the only thing
I needed, somebody to listen to me.”

Although the experience of leaving their abusive relationships for these women was
characterized by many positive changes in their lives, there were also areas that were initially
problematic and painful for them. One such area had to do with survival in everyday life. One
woman, for instance, had not been allowed to take any control of the family finances when she
was in her relationship, and once she had left the shelter to live on her own she experienced even
paying bills as overwhelming. Recognizing the initial necessity and usefulness of social
assistance in enabling them to gain independence in the first place some of the participants,
evertheless, reported that they felt degraded when they had to rely on welfare. One woman in
particular felt as if she was entrapped in another dependency relationship not unlike the
relationship that she had left behind.

In addition to facing challenges in the practical areas of their lives many of the women
continued to deal with the psychological damage that they had incurred during years of abuse.
Referring to her difficulty of getting used to the fact that she did not have to ask for her
husband’s permission any longer one woman said: “… to get over his effect on me I have to stop
and say [to myself that] … he’s not here anymore, I can do that. I have to allow myself to feel, to
think the way that I used to ten years ago before I met him.” Another woman whose husband was
killed shortly after their final separation indicated that she needed to ward off occasional feelings
of guilt that were reinforced by her in-laws. After recounting several areas of personal growth
one woman also recognized that she needed to continue to find ways to replenish her sense of
self-worth. She suggested that this was a long process where “… it was easy to slide down, but
difficult to climb back up.” The same woman pointed out that while her feelings of mistrust and
caution towards people other than her immediate family served to protect her from getting hurt, these feelings also prevented her from forming close and intimate relationships with others.

Feelings of regret and loss connected to the perception that they had not left or acted more assertively earlier with their abusive husbands was part of some women’s experience of an emerging sense of self. After describing several areas of personal growth one woman said: “The only thing that really bothers me is that I didn’t leave long time ago.” Furthermore, many women shared a perception that the abuse would have stopped if only “I had stood up to him the first time ...”. However, another woman’s understanding of her situation represented a different outlook:

I don’t blame myself why the relationship continued so long, because I wasn’t ready to leave the relationship. ... for me the affair was really bad. Maybe if the affair was not there, I would never have realized that something was really wrong.

Even though another woman did not regret her decision to leave, she said: “My biggest loss was that I lost a husband [and parenting partner], and my children lost a father.” Another woman mourned the loss of part of her personal history represented by the absence of memorabilia. Obeying her husband’s wishes she had left all her personal belongings behind in her native country. Remembering back one year when she was asked to show an item with personal meaning one woman said: “I couldn’t think of one thing that I really appreciated that I would have liked to bring to the group and share with them. I had nothing.”

In summary, at the time when their personal resources were depleted after years of abuse and when they were feeling torn between loyalty to their families on one hand and loyalty to their individual interests on the other hand the participants in this study struggled to make a decision whether to stay in or whether to leave their abusive relationships. The women were empowered by the awareness that they had rights and options, and that support was available from the society and from other people. Various reasons contributed to a sense that “enough is
enough" for the women and motivated them to leave their abusive relationships. Regardless of the initial disapproval of members of their families and communities, the women stuck to their decision to leave. They realized that it was futile to try to change others, and that the only thing they could change was themselves. This realization propelled the women forward on their journey of personal transformation and growth, a journey that was characterized by confusion, pain, and struggle, but also by a sense of growing personal power, worth, and confidence.

A Sense of Meaning and Purpose

A sense of meaning and purpose crystallized into a theme through the stories of the participants in this study. Reflecting back to their experience of living in and leaving their abusive relationships these women indicated that they had been involved in a “harsh” and painful process that, nonetheless, resulted in positive internal changes as well as meaningful changes in their relationships. All participants felt that they had made the right decision in leaving their husbands, and they used expressions ranging from “It is not an easy life, but it is a life” to “I am so happy I got divorced! I have such a happy life right now ... exploring new things ... looking forward for tomorrow” to describe their current life situation. Furthermore, feelings of compassion towards other abused women inspired many of the participants to become social agents for change through their chosen careers and through community involvement.

Finding meaning in their experience of being in an abusive relationship for these women meant re-evaluating their traditional cultural values and assumptions about role expectations, sanctity of marriage, and familial obligation. The women were involved in a process full of turmoil and agony, a process that eventually drove them to the point of desperation where they found it necessary to reject or modify some of those values to better fit their personal lives. However, that did not mean abandoning their appreciation for and connection to their own cultures or religious practices.
Reflecting on their sense of purpose of living in and leaving their abusive relationships, the
women spoke with warmth and pride of their children. One woman said: "... one good thing that
came out of that marriage is the beautiful child that I have. I adore her and I wouldn’t give her up
for anything." Another aspect of the understanding that they had gained from their experiences
was the women’s sense of increasing confidence and self-reliance in their abilities to define and
assert their expectations and boundaries in their intimate relationships.

The women indicated that they had acquired a skill to “tell if a man was abusive or not”,
and that they were no longer “naive”, or “innocent” in a sense that they could be lied to. In
referring to a meeting with a rejected suitor one woman recounted:

- I could tell that this person was abusive, not happy with himself. He had different set of
values in life [than I] ... I didn’t want any lies. [I want] a sincere, honest man with the same
religion as I have, not fanatic, just normal ...

Another woman recognized that setting limits was a two way street, however crossing her
boundaries would bring severe consequences: “If [my partner] would cross the limit it would be
the same as crossing the Iraqi border: He would get in trouble. That would be the end of it!"

Not surprisingly, the participants indicated that they had also gained appreciation for their
individual independence in regards to intimate relationships. One woman said: “If I were to
settle down with a man, regardless of his race, religion ... I would not want to be dependent on
him on anything. Support would be the only thing.” Achieving and maintaining financial
independence was particularly important for the women in this study, because, as one woman
put it: “When you are financially dependent on a person, you are dependent in every other way
[also] ... you cannot have a good relationship.”

Another aspect of finding purpose in their experience of living in and leaving an abusive
relationship for four of the women in this study was their renewed connection to their parents.
Regardless of their initial dismay, even horror at their daughters’ unthinkable act of leaving their
marriages, all the parents eventually began to support their daughters. Respectfully, but firmly, the women asserted their boundaries even with their parents. One woman, for instance, remembered a meeting with her parents who had come to visit her in Canada long after her separation, where her father suggested that she return to her ex-husband: “I said: ‘Father, I love you and I respect you, but I am not going back. I don’t expect you to understand me or even support me, but I just want you to know that I am not going back!’” The same woman revealed to her previously uninformed parents the horror that she had lived through, and the subsequent words of acknowledgment by her father became the most important validation of her experience and her personal strength that she had received so far. Referring to an instance where her parents had suggested that they arrange a new husband for her after her separation, one woman recalled her response: “I told them: No! They left it, and brought it up again after my ex-husband’s death. I told them that when I was ready, I would choose one [myself].” She explained that her parents too had changed to the point where they regretted that they had pressured her to stay in the relationship even thought they knew about the abuse.

An essential part of the experience of meaning and purpose for the participants was the compassion that they felt towards other women who were still being abused. “I feel their pain”, one of the women said. Turning tables on their victimization many of the women asserted that rather than victims they were survivors, and that as survivors they wanted to utilize their experience and understanding in such ways that “no one else would have to go through what I went through.” Fueled by their compassion for others many of the women had felt compelled to choose careers and engagements where they were in a position to influence attitudes and beliefs about violence through education, public speaking, writing, and advocacy. Education at schools and in their communities in general, and for men who abuse in particular was seen by many
women as a way to eradicate violence from society at large. One woman summed it up:

"Prevention is so much more worth than healing afterwards."

In summary, a sense of meaning and purpose was found to be a significant element in the experience of the participants to this study. The women understood that their struggles and pain had not been for nothing, and that as a result of their struggles and pain their lives had been enriched. As such the women in this study identified themselves as survivors. Positive changes in relation to their inner sense of self as well as in their relationships to their partners and family members were a source of pride and satisfaction. Furthermore, their compassion for other abused women led them to build careers and to develop interests that had to do with influencing and educating others in regards to wife abuse issues.
CHAPTER FIVE - DISCUSSION

This final chapter includes a restatement of the purpose of the study and an essential structure that represents a condensed overview of the women’s experiences. The results are then discussed in relation to the existing literature on wife abuse. The chapter is concluded with implications for counselling and future research.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

It was the purpose of this study to investigate and to describe the phenomenon of wife abuse in an intimate relationship as it was lived and experienced by immigrant women. The research question guiding this study was: “What is the experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women?” A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore and to illuminate the subjective experience of living in and leaving an intimate relationship for immigrant women.

The Essential Structure of the Experience of Living in and Leaving an Abusive Relationship for Immigrant Women

The five women in this study came from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, who came to Canada at different stages and under different circumstances in their lives, typically together with their husbands. Four of the women reported growing up in a loving and supportive family environment where they had not been abused and had not observed abuse between family members. In contrast, one woman had witnessed her father abuse her mother and she had been an abused child. All the participants were well educated and they remembered themselves as being strong, independent, and capable young women at the time when they were first married. Regardless of whether the marriage was arranged by family members or whether the partners
chose each other, all women in this study entered their intimate relationships feeling hopeful about their future and trusting that they would be loved and respected by their husbands.

However, the hopes and expectations of a supportive and loving relationship began to crumble quickly for some women as their husbands proceeded to abuse them only a short time after the wedding. Other women enjoyed a couple of years of relative happiness before abuse became a reality in their relationships. The types of abuse that the women suffered ranged from controlling behavior, possessiveness, criticism, psychological manipulation, verbal and emotional abuse, to sexual and physical abuse. The husbands accused their wives of being responsible for the abuse, and although the women typically felt confused and did not understand what they were possibly doing wrong, they tried their best to act in ways that would contribute to a reduction in the violence and to the preservation of their intimate relationships. The women were willing to forgive and to keep on giving new chances to their partners who, as is often characteristic of abusers, apologized and promised to change after the abusive incidents, only to abuse again.

The women endured in their abusive relationships because they thought, according to tradition, that it was their responsibility to make sacrifices for the good of the family, that a marriage is forever, that it was in the best interest of their children, and that their husbands would change, perceptions that were strongly supported in their families. However, under the husbands' repeated verbal and/or physical attacks and accusations that the women were to blame for the abuse their positive self-perception started to erode. Isolated in a strange country, without sources of validating feedback, and unable to stop the abuse no matter how hard they tried, the women started to believe that they had failed in their roles as wives and that they really were to blame for the abuse. Often the abuse was kept a secret because in most of the women's cultures it was considered shameful to disclose family problems to other people. When they knew about
the abuse family members, members of their communities, and/or friends often reinforced the idea that the women were to blame. Many women did not want to tell their parents living abroad about the abuse in order not to cause them to worry and/or for fear that they would be judged, by their families.

As the abuse became progressively worse with time for all the women in the study, they started to feel increasingly fearful for their own and their children’s safety. Their own homes turned out to be the most dangerous places for them. A lingering sense of fear became a constant companion for the women, fear that disturbed their sleep at night and preoccupied their minds during the day. Unfamiliarity with, and isolation from, the Canadian society and culture served to compound the women’s sense of fear and vulnerability and made it even more difficult for them to tell anyone about the abuse. One of the women did not want to report the abuse to the police due to her negative experiences of the police in her home country. Fear of negative consequences to her career opportunities and fear of losing her children prevented another woman initially from seeking outside help. While the third woman was more aware of the services that the police and other institutions and organizations provided, she did not wish to report the abuse because she was afraid of severe reprisals by her husband. Consequently, the women were terrified to stay and terrified to reach out for help. This sense of fear was often used by the abusers to help to increase their control over their wives.

The women tried to defend themselves best they could against their husbands’ increasing possessiveness, controlling behavior, and other violations towards them and their children. They felt emotionally and financially dependent on their husbands who were the principal decision makers in their families and who, therefore, were to be obeyed. In addition to their traditional cultural assumptions regarding role expectations and the sanctity of marriage most of the women in this study perceived their limited knowledge of the options and resources available to them in
the larger Canadian society to be a contributing factor to their dependency on their partners and, consequently, to their entrapment in their abusive relationships. Finding themselves trapped in a destructive marriage as opposed to living in a supportive and mutually satisfying relationship as they had hoped, contributed to feelings of profound betrayal for the women. Friends, family, members of their communities, helping professionals, and members of the police that the women perceived as colluding with their abusive husbands at the time when they needed their support the most, added to their sense of betrayal and abandonment.

Although the violent incidents got progressively worse the women remained committed to their relationships, and they believed that their husbands might still change and stop the abuse. In the meanwhile the women’s self-concepts kept deteriorating to the point where many of them started to feel utterly worthless as human beings, and their energies were running low as a consequence to trying to please their partners, partners whose demands were seemingly impossible to fulfill. Suicide seemed like an only way out for many of the women in the study. Interestingly, it was the women’s children that provided them with a motivation and strength to stay alive. Feeling hopelessly trapped in their abusive relationships, the women grew increasingly certain that they would get killed by their husbands. One woman disclosed that in her desperation she was prepared to kill her husband in self-defense.

Concern for their own and their children’s safety, wanting to retrieve what had been lost, and a sense that they had suffered enough compelled the women to muster all their resourcefulness and strength to leave their abusive relationships. For many women this was a process of many departures followed by subsequent returns until the final leave-taking. An intrinsic part of this process was the struggle between conflicting cultural values that the women had to face in trying to make a decision whether to stay or leave their marriages, a decision that had the potential of many uncertain outcomes regarding relationships with their families and
their communities. In addition, the women were faced with questions regarding their individual place and identity in the context of these two conflicting cultural value and belief systems, questions that required them to redefine who they wanted to be and what they wanted to do in their lives.

Reasons such as fear for their and their children’s lives, husband’s infidelity, a sense that they had reached the rock bottom of their tolerance of abuse, and a sense that life was meaningless if they stayed in their relationships, contributed to the women’s decisions to take the final step out. Regardless of the fact that the women felt like they were going against everything they had previously learned about sanctity of marriage and family obligation, regardless of losses involved, regardless of their feelings of uncertainty about an independent future, and regardless of their fear of their husbands’ retaliation, and empowered by help from individuals and services in the larger community that were supportive of them, as well as relying on their own inner resources, the women left these men who had caused them such agony and pain.

The women tried first to explain friends, community members, and family why they had left their husbands. Most of the women reported considerable difficulties in disclosing to their families living abroad the abuse that they had endured and their subsequent decision to leave their marriages. In addition to the internal conflicts, many women reported conflicts with parents who still believed that marriages were forever, and who were concerned of the stigma attached to women who abandon their husbands. At some point in the process the women saw the futility of their efforts to convince other people that they deserved a better life and that they were fully entitled to leave their abusive marriages. They decided that they had heard enough of arguments countering their decisions, and that they had explained themselves, and justified their choices enough. Many of the women reported that they just did not care any more who thought that they
were right and who thought that they were wrong. As far as they were concerned, there was no return to the abusive husband. The women stopped trying to prove to others that they were right and started instead to work on establishing their own independent lives.

Most of the women indicated that while leaving their relationships was hard, it was the time after leaving that turned out to be challenging for them. Fear remained an disconcerting companion in particular for those women whose husbands were threatening to kidnap the children and/or to kill the wives after they had left. Free from their husbands' control, however, the women could unleash their feelings of injustice and anger regarding the fact that it was they and their children who continued to be penalized while the abuser was living in comfort. Resentment was also felt towards societal institutions, friends, and family that had left the women alone to defend for themselves. Furthermore, most of the women struggled economically. Many of the women had left the bulk of their possessions behind when they left their husbands, husbands who later did not pay child support.

After several years of autonomous living most of the women continued to live below their previous standards of living. While the women did not regret their decisions to leave, most of them still experienced a variety of losses such as absence of the biological father of the children and parenting partner, lost contact to old friends, loss of personal history, loss of trust in men and people in general, regrets that they had not left earlier, and loss of freedom to visit home country. Some women reported that their children continued to suffer from the negative impact of abuse on their emotional health. While emotional support was considered important, many of the women expressed a need for practical support in particular at this stage of their experiences.

Regardless of the difficult experiences that the women in this study went through, they indicated that those experiences had resulted in many positive internal and inter-personal changes for them. Two women were involved in new and rewarding intimate relationships. Most
of them had formed new friendships and had created new support networks for themselves and their children. The four women who had experienced conflicts of varying degrees with their parents had reconciled with them. Most of the women indicated that not only had they learned to recognize warning signs for abusive behavior, they had also learned to set limits and to assert those limits in their relationships with other people.

Furthermore, the women valued their independence, sense of self-reliance, decision making abilities, resourcefulness, and personal freedom, qualities and feelings that had been repressed and stifled during years of abuse, but that had started to re-emerge during their struggles to free themselves from their entrapment and during the years out of their abusive relationships. While some of the women noted that their journey to recovery from their abuse experiences was still not finished and that they were still in the process of re-building their self-esteem, they suggested that their lives had meaning and purpose again. They referred to themselves as survivors rather than victims. The women cherished their children in particular and were committed to bringing them up with values that wouldn’t condone violence.

The women in this study were inspired to build careers and develop interests that allowed them to utilize their own experiences and understanding to become agents for social change and to help other abused women. Four of the five women had acted as peer counsellors to other abused women. Two women eventually trained themselves as counsellors, and at the time of the interview, one of them was helping to set up a transition house that aims to provide culturally sensitive support services to abused immigrant women. Another woman, who perceived the society at large as ineffective in trying to stop violence against women in general, and particularly in providing adequate support for abused women, wanted to join a grass root organization to promote women’s status in the society.
Comparison to the Literature

The experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women was explored in this study. Here, the findings from the present study are first compared to literature on immigrant women and abuse. In the next section similarities and differences between the findings from this study and the general body of literature on wife abuse are discussed.

Comparison to the Research Literature on Abused Immigrant Women

The results of the current study suggest that living in and leaving an abusive relationship is a complex and multi-faceted experience for immigrant women. While the body of research studies that have examined this phenomenon within the immigrant and minority population in Canada is limited in scope and methodological rigor, due perhaps to financial and other resource constraints of the commissioning organizations, this literature offers some insights into and observations on this important topic. An attempt is made below to compare the findings from the present study to the findings of these studies.

All the participants recalled feeling that they were confident, capable, and worthy individuals prior to the abuse. Gradually, as the abuse progressed and as they continued to be isolated from sources of positive feedback, the women's self-perceptions started to deteriorate and they began to believe that they were to blame for the abuse, that they had somehow failed in their roles as wives and finally, that their human worth was lessened. Although not elaborated on in their studies, this finding is supported by the observations of Dosanjh et al. (1994) and Ng (1985) who reported that the women in their studies perceived that they were blamed by others and/or assumed accountability for the abuse. It conflicts, however, with the results from the Chan et al. study (1989), where it is reported that none of the eight participants in their research project blamed themselves for the abuse. One explanation for this discrepancy between study results may have to do with individual differences in the understanding and meaning of the
concept of blame itself. Chan (1989) for instance found that while the women in her study did not feel directly accountable for the abuse, they perceived that it was their fate to be in an abusive relationship and to endure the abuse. As such, discrepancies in perceptions with regard to accountability for abuse may be related to culture specific beliefs and assumptions of the participants.

The participants in the current study described feelings of increasing entrapment and dependency on their husbands the longer they stayed in their abusive relationships, although these feelings were experienced with varying intensity by the five women. Their husbands’ controlling behavior with regard to family finances, social contacts, the women’s right to work and study, interactions with others, and other personal aspects of the women’s lives were reported to contribute to these feelings of entrapment. This finding is similar to those of other studies on abused immigrant women in which the researchers report that the women typically felt socially, psychologically, and financially dependent on their husbands, that they had little control over the family assets, their outside contacts were often limited to the husbands’ family and friends, their interactions with others were closely monitored, and other personal freedoms were denied from them (Chin, 1994; Dosanjh et al., 1994; Ng, 1985).

Chin (1994) noted in his paper based on anecdotal information collected from newspaper articles and other secondary sources on the experiences of abused Chinese brides married to North American Chinese men, that in addition to employing similar control tactics discussed above these men often retained the women’s travel documents decreasing the women’s chances to escape their abusive situations by returning to their home country. Evidence of similar control tactics was found in the current study where one participant, a Canadian citizen and her two children were kidnapped, taken back to a small island republic in South Asia where, upon
arrival, the woman’s passport was taken away from her and promptly destroyed by her abusive husband and his family. This woman was left with little opportunity to obtain a new travel document in a country that was largely controlled by her in-laws, and where she had even less chance to get help and access support than in Canada. While it is not known how common similar incidents are among abused immigrant women, the fact that they can be so effectively cut off from sources of support and sometimes lured out of reach of legal interventions may put them in positions of extreme vulnerability and danger.

Lack of proficiency in French or English is cited as a common barrier to finding out about one’s legal rights and support services, accessing these services, and reporting the abuse for many immigrant women (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; Dosanjh et al.; Riutort & Small, 1985; Wiebe, 1991). However, only one of the five women in the present study cited language difficulties as an initial barrier during her early years in the country. This inconsistency may be an indication that the five participants in this study were drawn from a pool of immigrant women with certain characteristics (e.g. high level of education and fluency in English) that may have influenced their experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship, making their stories different from the experiences of those immigrant women who do not speak English or French. For instance, the women in the current study felt isolated in their marriages, but because of their proficiency in English they were able to educate themselves about their options and rights and to eventually extricate themselves from the abusive situations.

As with abused immigrant women in other studies and reports (Dosanjh et al. 1994; Chin, 1994; Wiebe, 1991), reported feelings of isolation for the participants in this study were related to an initial lack of knowledge of their rights and support services available in Canada, limited outside social contacts, lack of familiarity with the new culture, and in most cases isolation from
their own families who lived abroad. Three women in the present study indicated feeling isolated and alone also because they felt that they could not or should not disclose the abuse to their parents, out of fear that the parents might judge them or start to worry if they knew. Similarly, Dosanjh et al., Chan et al. (1989) noted that several women in their studies indicated that they did not want to burden their families by talking about the violence. In fact, the same three women in the current study reported that they disclosed the abuse to their parents living abroad only after having left their abusive husbands for good. These disclosures often caused temporary conflicts with the parents who were shocked to hear not only of the abuse but also that the women had left their marriages, an unacceptable act in many traditional cultures (Wiebe, 1991). A fourth woman in the study who told her parents (who were living in Canada) about her abuse, reported that they refused to help her and instead, asked her to return to her abusive husband. It appears that while one might expect immigrant women’s social isolation to be lessened in the presence of their own families, their isolation was not alleviated even though their families were nearby, due to the difficulty and risks involved in bringing out in the open not only such a shame laden issue as abuse, but also the impossible idea that the women might want to leave their abusive husbands and thus violate the traditional cultural value of the sanctity of marriage.

Dosanjh et al. (1994) and Ng (1985) also found that non-supportive or directly violent actions by the husbands’ family members compounded their feelings of isolation and helplessness reported by many of the women in their studies. Dosanjh et al. for instance, noted that all fifteen South Asian women in the study had lived with the husbands’ extended families during the abuse, and that “... in almost all cases [the husbands’ family] either remained silent or actually took part in escalating the abuse” (p. 42). Similarly, one woman of South Asian origin in the current study reported that her in-laws colluded with and even joined her husband to abuse her during the time when the couple lived with his parents abroad. The four other women,
however, made no mention of their in-laws as they described their experiences in their abusive relationships. This discrepancy in the findings is most likely based on different cultural practices with regard to living arrangements, such as living in a nuclear family vs. living in an extended family. Based on these findings this researcher recognizes, in accordance with Dosanjh et al., that while immigrant women's extended families may ideally "... serve as a source of strength and support for some [women]", they may also "... become a source of suffocation for others" (p.42) in that in-laws may collude with the abuser and help to perpetuate the violence against the women.

Similar to Dosanjh et al. study findings (1994) that indicated that the women in their study typically became aware of the resources that were available to them through another service such as a TV information program, ESL classes, job training classes, etc., some of the women in the current study began to ask questions and look for help from various secondary sources such as supportive friends, acquaintances, job club group leaders, medical doctors, and public health nurses who informed the women about primary resources that could be accessed. The participants reported varying degrees of utilization and satisfaction with various primary services such as the police, transition houses, and counselling services, a finding that is similar to those of other researchers (Chan et al. (1989); Dosanjh et al.). One woman indicated that she did not report the abuse to the police because of her negative experiences from her country of origin where the police serves the government, not the people, a finding that is supported by other literature on abused immigrant women (Riutort & Small, 1985).

Researchers have found that while some immigrant women do not consider transition houses as viable options for them in providing safety from the abuse due to language difficulties, cultural differences, or other reasons, others find them helpful to varying degrees (Chan et al.,
1989; Chan, 1989; Dosanjh et al., 1994; Ng, 1985). This finding was also reflected in the various experiences of the participants in the current study. While one woman who had thought of going to a shelter decided not to in fear of disrupting her children’s lives, the four other women in the study accessed transition houses. Three participants, all women of color, felt that the staff had acted in respectful and culturally sensitive ways toward them. One woman reported that it had felt somewhat strange to be greeted with open arms by an all-white staff. It appears then that although the women in this study had reached a level of language proficiency that enabled them to take advantage of this service, uncertainty with regard to what a shelter visit might entail still deterred one woman from actually going. For another participant who described her shelter experience in generally positive terms, the fact that the shelter staff was all white Caucasian women left her feeling somewhat out of place.

Similar to other abused immigrant women (Chan et al., 1989; Dosanjh et al., 1994; Ng, 1985), the participants in this study reported several reasons for staying in their abusive relationships, including financial concerns, fear of reprisals by their husbands, concern for the children losing their father, reluctance of violating the sanctity of marriage by leaving their husbands, and social ostracism if they left. Contrary to findings by Dosanjh et al. and Ng, however, the women in this study did not mention fearing that they would be deported if they left their abusive husbands, since each had secured her immigration status at the time of the abuse. It is important to note that for the many abused immigrant women who arrive in this country under the sponsorship of their husbands, deportation threats may be used as effective control tactics to silence their wives and to keep them trapped in the relationships. (Dunaway, 1988; MacLeod & Shin, 1985). The women in the current study, however, had either Canadian citizenship, independent refugee status, or they were landed immigrants at the time of the abuse.
Therefore perhaps, the threat of deportation was not a factor contributing to their fears or holding them in their relationships.

Similar to the women in the study by Dosanjh et al. (1994), the women in the current study continued to experience challenges in their independent lives in that many of them lived in fear of reprisals by their husbands; they were concerned about their children who had suffered emotional and psychological damage as a result of having been abused or witnessed their mothers being abused; they struggled financially whereas their ex-partners lived in greater comfort, and yet many men did not make their child support payments; some were afraid that the children would be taken away from them, and some felt overwhelmed by the tasks and decisions that needed to be dealt with in a cultural context that was not familiar to them. Dosanjh et al. emphasized the amount of courage, resourcefulness, and inner personal strength that the women in their study had shown in living in and leaving their abusive relationships, qualities that seemed to also characterize the personalities of the women in the current study.

While other researchers and writers (Chan, 1989; Chan et al., 1989; Chin, 1994; Dosanjh et al., 1994; and Ng, 1985) have discussed the role of traditional cultural values in relation to wife abuse issues in general within their ethnic communities, they have not discussed the challenges to, and changes in the identity perception that may occur for immigrant women as they decide to leave their abusive husbands, a decision that may be contrary to these women's familial cultural values and beliefs. The women in the current study reported that as they were contemplating of leaving their abusive husbands, they needed also to re-evaluate who they were as individuals and what they wanted to do in their lives. This was a process that involved modification of their previously held values and beliefs regarding the sanctity of marriage, familial obligation, and role expectations. Similarly, there is little information in other studies on
abused immigrant women on what the recovery process is like for those immigrant women who have managed to leave their abusive husbands and the meaning that these women ascribe to this process, areas that were identified and described in this study. Living in and leaving an abusive relationship seemed to involve a process of personal transformation for the women in the present study. Aspects of this process, described as an emerging sense of self, included a growing sense of individual identity, entitlement, self-worth, agency, and self-confidence. Once the women had experienced this new connection with their ‘selves’, and the sense of empowerment that came with it, the women did not want to let other people determine the course of their lives any more, regardless of inevitable conflicts of varying degrees with their friends, families, and community members. In deciding to embark on their own personal journey, the women were able to reconnect with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives that had become lost during the years of abuse. Regardless of their continuing struggles each of the women described positive changes in their and their families’ lives in their own different ways. While their experiences had been harsh, these women managed to re-emerge not as victims but as survivors, suggesting that they were unique in their strengths and in their ability to rebuild healthy lives regardless of their traumatic experiences and adversity that they had to face.

Comparison to the General Literature on Wife Abuse

According to Walker (1984, 1980), wife abuse and its impact on women who are inflicted by it is best understood in the context of the cycle of violence and learned helplessness theories, two connecting models that offer an explanation of the process of victimization for an abused woman, her gradual entrapment in the abusive relationship, and her difficulties in extricating herself from this relationship. The work and models of Ferraro and Johnson (1983), Landenburger (1993, 1989), and Turner and Shapiro (1986) offer a perspective into the process
of leaving and recovering from an abusive relationship. These models serve as a backdrop to the following discussion of the study results. A rough division between stages of staying, leaving, and recovering from the abusive relationship is made for the sake of a clearer presentation. In reality the division of experiences to separate stages is impossible, as they dove tailed into and overlapped with each other in the women’s stories.

**Staying.** The experiences of the five women in this study show similar patterns to the experiences of the 120 predominantly white abused women in Walker’s (1980) study, experiences that formed the basis for her cycle of violence theory. Corresponding to the tension building, the abusive incident, and the honeymoon phases in Walker’s theory, the participants in the current study reported escalating tension as their husbands increased their control, intimidation, and threats, while the women dismissed, rationalized, and minimized these incidents; erupting violence or escalating intimidation that left the women in fear for their lives; and periods of relative peace and calm where the women’s abusive husbands made amends and promised to change their behavior, and where the women were willing to give their partners another chance. As with the women in Walker’s study, there were individual variations in how this cyclical pattern was manifested in the relationship of the women in the present study. These findings seem to suggest that the dynamics of abusive relationships follow similar patterns regardless of the cultural backgrounds of the individuals involved.

Corresponding to findings from various other studies with other abused women, many of the participants in the present study reported increasing feelings of fear (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Campbell, 1984; Martin, 1976, Sinclair, 1985; Walker, 1984, 1980); sleep disturbances, fatigue, and constant vigilance in anticipation of more violence and abuse Walker (1993, 1991); increasing feelings of helplessness and powerlessness (Pagelow, 1981; Shepherd, 1990; Sinclair, 1985); depression (Martin; Stets & Straus, 1990; Walker, 1993; 1989; 1984); isolation (Pagelow;
Sinclair; Walker, 1984, 1980); and gradual deterioration of their “selves” where they started to blame themselves for the abuse, to doubt their own abilities, and to feel increasingly worthless as human beings (Campbell, 1984; Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Dunaway, 1988; Finkelhor, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Sinclair, 1985). Walker (1980) suggests that in addition to shock, disbelief, and numbness that characterize the experiences of abused women during the tension building phase in the cycle of violence, each minor battering incident also increases tension felt by these women. The women’s feelings of anger “steadily increase, even though [they] may not recognize it or express it” (p. 57) at this time in order to protect themselves from further harm. Feelings of anger seemed to appear for most of the women in the current study first as feelings of profound betrayal and abandonment; feelings that turned into a sense of anger and injustice only after these women had left their relationships. As such this may be a reflection of the extreme sense of vulnerability that these women were experiencing at the time of the ongoing abuse; anger was a feeling that could be acknowledged only after a place of relative safety from the abuse had been reached.

While there were individual differences in the intensity of these feelings among the participants in the current study, most of them reported that their experiences of the abuse were intensified and compounded further because they were new immigrants to this country. One participant reported that her limited knowledge of English at the time of the abuse further isolated her from her new environment and compounded her sense of isolation and entrapment in her relationship. Similarly, several authors on wife abuse issues within the immigrant and minority populations in Canada (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, 1992; MacLeod & Shin, 1990; Wiebe, 1991) have pointed out that lack of adequate language skills and lack of familiarity with, and isolation from, the larger society serve as compounding factors in immigrant women’s experiences of abuse. While being abused by someone who is supposed to
love and cherish you is a devastating experience for any woman, this experience may be particularly ravaging to immigrant women who have little awareness of their legal rights and options in their new country, suggesting the importance of effective outreach and education programs for this population.

Furthermore, while the women in this study were resourceful and active in their attempts to control and to avoid abuse in the context of their marriages, they reported that after numerous such attempts they learned that there was nothing they could do to control or prevent the violence. Although these women felt initially that there was no way out of their relationships, they did eventually manage to leave their abusive husbands. This finding seems to be opposite of Walker’s (1984, 1980) notion of learned helplessness where it is understood that abused women stay in their abusive relationships because they have learned that they cannot control or stop the violence. The responses of the women in the current study are better understood as a process where attempts are made to avoid and to stop the violence, where the futility of these attempts is gradually realized, and where new strategies are eventually employed, strategies that finally enable the women to leave their abusive relationships (personal communication with A. Henderson, August 1995). In reflecting back on their experiences in the abusive relationships, the women in the current study were also puzzled about the deep attachment they had felt towards their partners regardless of the ongoing abuse. Three of the women referred to it as an “addiction” or a “dependency”, references that are suggestive of symbiotic bonding (Walker, 1980) where both partners perceive that they need to stay together in order to survive; a reflection of mutual overdependence and overreliance that is characteristic of many abusive relationships in general.

Similar to Walker’s (1980) finding that “... most abused women adhere to traditional values about the permanency of love and marriage, [as such] they are easy prey for the guilt
attendant on breaking up a home ... “(p. 67), many of the participants in the present study reported that their upbringing with traditional cultural values left them vulnerable to, and compounded, their dependence on their husbands. Bhaumik (1988) found in her comparative study with abused women in two Los Angeles area shelters that the 30 first generation Asian-American participants in her study held more traditional attitudes and beliefs about marriage and family than the 39 American born women. While the degree of adherence to traditional cultural values was not measured for the women in the current study, they described the importance of the traditional values of the sanctity of marriage and of the preservation of the family unit within their cultures; values that were reinforced by friends, family members, and other members of their communities. This suggests that immigrant women from more traditional cultures may be even more vulnerable to feeling dependent on and obligated to remain with their abusive husbands than abused women in general.

Leaving. Corresponding to catalysts such as change in the level of violence, change in perceived opportunities, relationship change (Ferraro & Johnson 1983), an increasing awareness that they might die at the hands of their husbands, and an increasing connection with their “emerging selves” (Landenburger, 1993, 1989), changes in the perceptions of the participants in the current study help motivate these women to leave their abusive partners. These participants reported that a realization that they might end up being killed by their partners; an increasing awareness of available resources and options; realizing that there was no more love in their relationships; starting to yearn to reclaim parts of their “selves” that had been lost during the years of abuse; and realizing that they did not deserve or need to tolerate the abuse as reasons for leaving their marriages. As with the women in other studies (Ferraro & Johnson; Landenburger) these factors helped the participants in the current study to re-evaluate their abusive relationships, to see the abuse from a new perspective and ultimately, to leave their abusive
husbands. These findings seem to be indicative of similar motivating factors in the process of leaving for abused women in general. In addition, most of the women in this study reported that concern for their children’s lives and welfare influenced their decisions to leave. This finding supports the suggestion made by Ferraro and Johnson that that children play a crucial role in their mothers’ decisions to leave. It seems that the realization that their children’s lives are threatened, and/or that the children are negatively affected may serve as a catalyst for abused women in general to leave their abusive husbands.

In addition to struggling with conflicting loyalties towards their emerging “selves” and towards their husbands, as a part of the process of leaving, and similar to the experiences of the women in Landenburger’s (1993) study, all participants in the current study reported varying degrees of feelings of being torn between two value systems represented by their ancestral culture on one hand, and the Canadian host culture on the other hand because of their identification with aspects of each culture. Corresponding to the experience of culture conflict that is characterized by struggles with contradicting values between one’s ancestral culture and the host culture (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Stonequist, 1937; Weinreich, 1985, 1983), the participants in the present study reported struggling to reconcile these apparently dichotomous values.

In particular, the participants reported struggling with their cultural traditions, that reinforced the sanctity of marriage and preservation of the family unit at all costs, and the women’s role and responsibility for making the family work. These values forced the women to continue to endure in their abusive relationships or risk judgment, rejection, or ostracism by friends, family, and their own community members. On the other hand the women were also influenced by the attitudes and beliefs of the host culture, where in contrast to their own cultures, individualism and the pursuit of personal aspirations are held in high regard. These values and
beliefs offered the women in the present study a way out of their abusive relationships but also created conflicts with regard to their identity and conflicts with their families, friends, and community members who resisted and objected to the women's plans or decisions to leave their marriages. Based on these findings it seems, that abused immigrant women from more traditional cultures, who are vacillating between staying with and leaving their abusive husbands, may also be involved in trying to resolve a conflict between two sets of discrepant cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs, a conflict that in order to be resolved may require a re-evaluation and reconstruction of their value systems and their identities (Triandis, 1990).

Both Ferraro and Johnson (1983) and Landenburger (1993) found that the process of leaving was not linear and that individual variations occurred among the women in their studies, variations that also characterized the experiences of leaving for the participants in this study. For example, one woman who was the youngest of the five participants, who stayed the shortest time in her abusive relationship, resided in a large urban area with a variety of services available, and who enjoyed her current line of work, and was in a new and satisfying relationship at the time of the interview, perceived her leaving process in a purely positive light regardless of the barriers that she had to overcome. In contrast another woman, who was the oldest of the five, who stayed the longest time of all the five women in her relationship, lived in a smaller rural community, and who had only a limited number of services available to her at the time of the abuse, described her experiences from a considerably less positive perspective. Rather than age, this variation in experiences may be attributed to variations in available resources during different time periods and/or the place of residence of the abused woman. As such, this finding is suggestive of cohort differences among the participants in this study. This finding also indicative of the importance of improved support services in particular to immigrant women in rural communities.
Recovering. Corresponding to the recovering phase in Landenburger’s (1993, 1989) model of the process of leaving and recovering from an abusive relationship the women in the current study reported that during the initial period after leaving their relationships they were mainly concerned of their day to day survival, that they tried to initially justify to friends, family, and members of their communities why they had left their marriages, and that they were rebuilding their trust in themselves and their abilities. While Landenburger suggests that abused women in general may expend a lot of energy in trying to explain to others why they left their abusive husbands, immigrant women may find it particularly draining and risky to tell their family about their decisions to leave due to the stigma attached to women who leave their husbands. Three participants in this study for instance, were worried that their parents living abroad would be so shocked to hear of the marriage break up that they would fall ill, a fear that became true for one woman when her mother had to be hospitalized after hearing about her daughter’s decision. Other women reported temporary conflicts with their families that, while later resolved, were painful for the women.

As with the women in Landenburger’s (1993, 1989) and Turner and Shapiro (1986) studies, the participants in the present study reported that they had suffered several losses such as loss of an idealized relationship, role loss, and loss of security which included concerns about the provision of daily necessities, safety and protection from abuse in new living quarters, loss of the father of their children, and loss of friends. Similar to losses involved in the migration experience (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), losses that some individuals may suffer even years after immigrating, one of the women indicated that she had lost the connection to the earlier part of her life because her ex-husband had told her to leave all personal items behind when she immigrated to Canada, knickknacks that were reminders of important events and dear friends from her school years. Two of the women mentioned a loss of their careers that might have been,
had they not immigrated to Canada. Well educated professionals in their countries of origin, they could not work in a similar positions in Canada due to differences in education requirements in the two countries. This contributed to their dependence on their husbands while they were in their relationships and to their difficulties in supporting themselves after they had left their abusive husbands. The losses involved in the immigration experience may thus serve as compounding factors in entrapment in their abusive relationships and add to bereavements that need to be mourned for some abused immigrant women.

Corresponding to the grieving processes outlined by Landenburger (1993, 1989) and Turner and Shapiro (1986) some of the women in the current study had worked through many of their losses, while others were still feeling the pain more acutely. All five women reported, however, that they had reached a point where there was definitely no chance of return to their abusive husbands. Two of the women were engaged in new and rewarding relationships. Three women were living on their own together with their children. While the process had been painful, they all had managed to create new lives for themselves, albeit not worry-free. They had formed new friendships and connections to others and most of the women had reconciled with their parents. According to Landenburger, and Turner and Shapiro, these are characteristics of women who have successfully extricated themselves from their abusive relationships and who are well on their way to recovering from it.

Finally, it is important to note that a fear of reprisals from their ex-husbands was still a part of the experience of three women who participated in this study. This finding corresponds to the Turner and Shapiro (1986) postulation that because leaving does not necessarily ensure safety for abused women, these women may need to both mourn the loss of their sense of safety and to make legal and practical arrangements to guard it as well as possible. For two of the women in the current study the fear had become less intense. Regardless of the fact that it has been more
than four years since she left her abusive husband and more than a year since she heard from
him, the third woman felt the presence of fear through premonitions that her ex-husband may
find her in her secret location. Consequently, the process of recovery from an abusive
relationship may depend not just on whether the many losses have been successfully worked
through in terms of a personal grieving process, but whether abused women feel completely safe
and are thus free to live their lives. For some women, as was the case for one woman in this
study, this opportunity may not present itself until their ex-partners are no longer living.

**Implications for Counselling**

The findings from this research offer a number of insights for counsellors and other
professionals working with immigrant women who are living in abusive relationships, who are
contemplating leaving, or who have already left their relationships. Many immigrant women are
not accustomed to or familiar with seeking help for individual or interpersonal problems in
general, and for abuse issues in the family in particular, outside their extended families. Outside
intervention is often sought as a last resort. In so doing, abused women may run a risk of severe
reprisals by their husbands if they learn about their wife’s actions. Therefore, when a woman
decides to reach out for help, it is important that the counsellor consider this decision an act of
courage in itself and take every precaution to ensure the woman’s safety both in and outside the
counselling session.

The women in the present study reported that their initial lack of awareness regarding
existing services and resources, their lack of familiarity in utilizing these services, and as with
one woman, her fear of reprisals if she sought help from a counselling professional and her lack
of language skills, compounded their fears and their isolation and entrapment in their abusive
relationships. One woman in particular reported that she received information about primary
resources such as transition houses through secondary sources such as friends, acquaintances,
and other individuals in the larger community, secretly from her husband who controlled and monitored all her outside contacts. Therefore, it is imperative that effective outreach and education programs, informing abused women of their legal rights and available services and resources, delivering information about the nature of these services and how they can be accessed, are planned and offered to the immigrant population in Canada. While counsellors can help abused immigrant women to this information, these women’s awareness of their rights and available resources should also be raised in a variety of other ways such as through public education about wife abuse issues, mainstream and ethnic media attention to these issues, schools, and ESL classes (Dosanjh et al, 1994). As suggested by Dosanjh et al., a wider effort by the societal institutions should be made to inform immigrant women of their rights and responsibilities prior to leaving their home countries and upon arrival in Canada as a preventative measure. An effort should be made to deliver this information directly to even those immigrant women whose lack of literacy skills may prevent them from accessing it.

Most of the women in the current study stayed at a transition house at some point during the ongoing abuse. While most of them reported that they were satisfied with the service that they received, one of the participants, a woman of color, remarked how strange it had felt for her to be surrounded by an all white staff. This may be an indication that there is a need for transition houses that serve specific minority groups, and/or that mainstream services hire staff that reflects the ethnic make-up of the area that they serve. Some abused immigrant women may feel less threatened to seek help and to talk about the abuse if they can communicate with a person who shares their cultural background, values, and traditions (Crites, 1991; Wiebe, 1991). However, the same participant in the current study expressed her disappointment at a counsellor from her own community who had tried to persuade her to reunite with a husband that she had already left with no intentions to return. Consequently, this woman felt misunderstood,
manipulated, and not supported at all, which led her to terminate the counselling relationship. Therefore, regardless of their own ethnic or cultural backgrounds, counsellors need to be aware of and able to suspend their own biases and assumptions in working with abused immigrant women, in order to not alienate these women and cause them to terminate the counselling relationship prematurely (Crites; Wiebe).

All the women in the current study reported that their sense of self-worth suffered as a result of the abuse, and that they felt accountable for the abuse, a sense of accountability that was reinforced by their friends, families, and community members. While self-blame is typical of most abused women (Campbell, 1984; Dunaway, 1988; Walker, 1980), immigrant women from more traditional cultures are particularly vulnerable to self-blame and to being blamed by others for causing the abuse, due to traditional cultural beliefs that women are to blame for relationship dysfunctions, and due to the subordinate status of women in these cultures that undermines their sense of being worthy of respect (Crites, 1991). Counsellors can assist immigrant women to see the connection between their socialization and their sense of accountability, and point out that the women's husbands are responsible for their violent actions, not the women. This can assist immigrant women in reframing their situation, help them to avoid feeling responsible for their husbands' abusive behavior, and help to reduce the shame that contributes to their sense of entrapment in the abusive relationship. Furthermore, by recognizing abused immigrant women's resourcefulness, courage, and other strengths counsellors help to instill and restore their sense of confidence, self-efficacy, and self-worth that have eroded during the ongoing abuse.

While it was vital to have the experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship validated by others, all of the women in this study indicated that what they also needed from their helpers was more practical information and concrete help at various stages during their
experiences. As these women often are isolated from and unaware of the larger Canadian society and services available to them, counsellors can serve as a crucial link to the outside world helping to break the women's isolation and supplying them with vital information about a host of things, such as legal rights and services that can be accessed. One of the women in the study indicated that although she was aware of her rights and available services, she did not know how to pursue legal course of action with such matters as restraining orders and divorce process. This means that counsellors employing western therapy approaches need to be prepared to modify them and even assume a more active role of an advocate to better serve the needs of abused immigrant women.

Given that some of the abused women in this study were not included in decision making, and given their sense of entrapment and diminished sense of self and personal power, starting to make decisions independently seemed like an insurmountable task for these women. Therefore, counsellors working with abused immigrant women may need to be prepared to teach their clients decision making skills. While counsellors are ethically responsible to inform women of increasing risk to their safety if they stay in their abusive relationships, as violence tends to escalate with time, they need to be careful not to push the women to make the decision to leave. Lack of action or immediate changes may be due to women's awareness of unreliable support and realistic fears of serious consequences to them and their children if they do decide to leave (Chan et al., 1989; Dosanjh et al., 1994; Wiebe, 1991). Counsellors need to explore various options available for their clients, assess possible consequences, and develop feasible action plans. The women in this study indicated that it was not helpful to be directly advised to leave, and that leaving was a process that they needed to be allowed to follow at their own pace.

As they struggled to make a decision about leaving their abusive relationships the women in this study were faced with questions regarding their place and identity in the context of two
conflicting cultural value and belief systems. Counsellors can facilitate the exploration of clients’ sense of identity and belonging, role expectations, assumptions and beliefs about marriage and intimate relationships, as well as connection with extended family from the two different cultural perspectives. This process may help clients to reconstruct the understanding of who they are as individuals and what they want to do with their lives. As well as gains, this personal transformation process also involves losses (Landenburger, 1993, 1989; Turner & Shapiro, 1986). Counsellors need to explore both aspects of this process and support their clients through an eventual grieving process. Like women in the current study, other abused immigrant women may be suffering from such bereavements as loss of their hopes and dreams of an idealized relationship, loss of security, loss of a parenting partner, and loss of a father of the children. These losses are similar to what other abused women in general may experience. In addition, some of the women in the present study reported losses related to their immigration experience, such as loss of connection to one’s history, loss of career, and status loss. While counsellors can assist immigrant women to face these losses, to mourn, and to accept them, it may be also useful to explore ways how immigrant women’s work experience and credentials from their countries of origin could be utilized in Canada. As with the women in other studies (Dosanjh et al., 1994; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983), many of the women in the current study reported financial difficulties after they had left their abusive relationships. Those women who could either find a good job or to return to school to get an education that led to a career, seemed to recover faster from the abuse, suggesting the importance of secure employment for these women.

Most of the women in the current study disclosed the abuse and the separation from their husbands to their parents living abroad only after they had left their abusive relationships. An initial period of conflict, that varied in intensity for different women, followed this disclosure.
Some women felt betrayed by their parents for their initial non-supportive behavior, and one woman reported strong feelings of anger towards her parents who knew about the abuse and who colluded with her abusive husband throughout their marriage. Regardless of their sense of betrayal and anger towards, and/or conflict with their parents, however, most of the women in the present study wanted, and managed to maintain close relationships with their families.

Counsellors may need to help other abused immigrant women to create alternative support networks if these women’s own families, their traditional sources of support, are not in the country, or if they are not willing to help the women. Some abused immigrant women may also need help in exploring and finding appropriate ways to deal with their anger and resentment not only towards their ex-husbands, but also towards their families if they failed to support the women.

Many of the women in this study suggested that while leaving their abusive husbands was difficult, it was the time after leaving that was really challenging for them. Counsellors need to be aware that immigrant women whose husbands may have controlled every aspect of family finances, may lack the skills and/or the confidence to run even as simple sounding an errand as paying a telephone bill once on their own. Therefore, immigrant women who have left their abusive relationships may require guidance in practical, “how to” life skills such as paying the bills, handling bank accounts, renting an apartment, having the phone connected, etc.

Counsellors may also serve as ‘cultural guides’ explaining Canadian customs and practices that may be unfamiliar for abused immigrant women as they go about their everyday lives. Furthermore, many women in this study talked about their struggles to help their children who they fear had been negatively affected by observing their mothers being abused or who had been abused themselves. Therefore, counsellors need to be prepared to instruct their clients in appropriate parenting skills and, perhaps, provide counselling support for their children as well.
While one of the women in the current study, who joined a support group for abused women after she had left her relationship, reported that hearing the abuse experiences of other women was not helpful because it seemed to keep her stuck in the past, other immigrant women may benefit from joining such a group because it can be an effective way in combating feelings of loneliness and isolation and in providing support after the women have left their abusive husbands (Crites, 1991). Meeting other women who have been in similar situations and talking about one’s experiences may provide a source of mutual validation, a safe place where silence surrounding the taboo issue of wife abuse can be broken, and where survival and coping strategies can be shared. This may be particularly important if the women have been rejected by their families and communities. Group approach may not suit everyone, however, as some women may feel reluctant to disclose their experiences out of fear that confidentiality will be broken, or because they continue to believe that it is not acceptable to talk about family matters in public. Some women in this study found it meaningful and healing to share their experiences in public, at schools, at conferences, through media and during inservice for counsellors and front-line workers with various agencies. Counsellors may suggest that their clients become involved in a community or advocacy group where the women can utilize their experiences to help other abused women and “transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action” (Herman, 1992, p. 207).

In summary, counsellors need to be aware and to be able to suspend their own cultural biases when working with abused immigrant women, regardless of their own cultural background. Counsellors may also need to adopt a more active role in working with this population by educating the women about their legal rights, options, and resources available to them, and by becoming an advocate for new immigrants who may need help to deal with societal institutions that are unfamiliar to them. As abused women in general, abused immigrant women
may find it helpful in reframing their situation if they are assisted in connecting their
socialization to the woman’s role and responsibility for the emotional well-being of family
members, and their susceptibility for the abuse. Counsellors need to emphasize strongly that
abuse is not acceptable under any circumstances. Counsellors working with abused immigrant
women who are living in or who have left their abusive relationships may need to teach these
women practical life skills and decision making skills; to plan feasible actions; to explore these
women’s own emerging identities in the context of two, sometimes conflicting cultural value
systems; to explore issues of loss related to both the abusive relationship and the immigration
experience; and to help these women to rebuild new support networks.

Implications for Future Research

Few research studies exist on immigrant women who have lived in and who have left their
abusive relationships. While this project represents merely a preliminary exploration of the
experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women, the findings
seem to support the need for more research on this phenomenon. Therefore, it is hoped that the
findings will spark more research interest into this topic.

Given that the findings emerged from data collected from only five participants, who were
all volunteers, these findings may be a reflection of the experiences of a homogeneous group of
immigrant women and as such, they may not be representative of the experiences of other
abused immigrant women. More research involving a larger sample is needed to verify and to
provide more information with regard to variations within themes. Repetitions of this study
would not only help to refine the current themes, but similar findings from other studies would
also help to strengthen the findings from the present study.
This sample consisted of five well educated, middle and upper-middle class immigrant women from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, who all had children, who held or obtained a secured immigration status during the ongoing abuse, who had been in Canada between 6 to 25 years, who stayed in their abusive relationships between 5 to 18 years, and who ranged in age between 26 and 52 years. However, purposeful sampling might be used by future researchers to provide additional and more specific information that may be related to participants' age, immigration status, length of stay in Canada, length of stay in the abusive relationship, as well as their cultural, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Cohort and class differences may contribute to variations in the experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women. Awareness of these possible differences would be helpful for organizations and agencies in planning effective prevention and intervention programs with regard to wife abuse among the immigrant population in Canada. Furthermore, the women who participated in this study were all from the Vancouver and Lower Mainland area where there are a number of services available to abused women. Future research into the experiences of immigrant women who live in rural areas where services may be more limited, might yield different accounts of the experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship.

Furthermore, the participants in this study represent a group of immigrant women who speak English. Phenomenological studies with non-English speaking immigrant women conducted in their chosen languages, would allow for variations in experiences to emerge. Findings from such studies would not only help counsellors and therapists to better understand their clients, but these findings if translated, might also contribute to improved program planning and service delivery to non-English speaking immigrant women.
The participants in the current study reported a variety of informal and formal sources that they had reached out for help during the abuse, citing varying degrees of satisfaction with the availability and service delivery of these resources. For instance, one woman terminated her counselling relationship with a professional from her own community due to the counsellor pushing her own agenda with regard to the goals of their work. While it is important to assess the service delivery needs and helper preferences of abused immigrant women, it would also seem to be necessary to explore the other side of the coin, which is the attitudes and perceptions of professional helpers who work with this population. It would seem imperative to find out how sensitive these helpers are in responding to abused immigrant women’s needs, as insensitive responses from helping professionals may lead to some abused immigrant women terminating their counselling and/or group participation, or deter these women from seeking help in the future.

As with women in other studies (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Landenburger, 1993, 1989) and according to other theorists (Turner & Shapiro, 1986), the participants in the current study referred to their experiences of living in and leaving their abusive relationships as a process. Given this finding, longitudinal studies where several interviews would be conducted with the same participants over a period of time, would provide additional information of the nature of this process for abused immigrant women. As suggested by the findings from this study, future research could be conducted on the process of mourning related to the losses in living in and leaving an abusive relationship, as well as to the losses related to the immigration experience.

Given that all the women in this study talked about experiencing changes to their self-perception and beliefs about traditional cultural role-expectations as they were vacillating between staying in and leaving their abusive relationships, research examining the women’s experiences during this process would seem to provide valuable information regarding both
identity development and decision making processes in the context of conflicting cultural values and beliefs. Research on other obstacles to leaving for abused immigrant, such as fear of judgment and/or rejection by their extended families and community members for women from more traditional cultures, would be very useful in understanding what the dynamics and process of leaving are like for these individuals. Counsellors, health care providers, the police, and other professionals who come in contact with abused immigrant women, might benefit from such information as they try to help these women to extricate themselves from their abusive relationships.

Speaking from their own experience, many of the participants in this study suggested that although the process of leaving was difficult, it was the time period after leaving that provided the greatest challenges and obstacles for them. These women strongly recommended that further research be conducted on the experiences of immigrant women who have managed to leave their abusive relationships. Needs assessment in particular was mentioned as an important area of study with regards to implementing effective second stage support programs.

The women in this study commented on how their involvement at various stages in this research process contributed to a sense of being valued participants. Some women reported that being able to tell their stories had been a healing experience. Many of the women reported that they felt respected and validated due to the fact that the initial findings of the study were shared with them and that their feedback was requested to refine these findings. One last recommendation for future research, therefore, is that any research aimed at immigrant women who have been abused would start and conclude with their experiences, that the women would be involved at various stages of the study project, and that an essential part of any research process would include the sharing of results with all participants, the true experts on their lives and experiences.
REFERENCES


Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees (1988). After the door has been opened. BC: Canadian Cataloguing.


Wife abuse crosses over all social, economic, religious, and cultural barriers. Many researchers have studied different aspects of wife abuse for over twenty years. During this time laws have been passed that make wife abuse a criminal act and programs have been put into place to protect abused women, and to stop the abuse from happening. However, very little research has been done with immigrant women who have experienced abuse in the hands of their husband or partner. As a result, very little is known how abused immigrant women experience their situation. The purpose of this study is to attempt to identify and describe the experiences of immigrant women who have lived in and left a battering relationship. The results from the study may be helpful to other immigrant women who are living in an abusive relationship. The results may also help counsellors, support workers, and other people in the community to better understand the needs and experiences of abused immigrant women, and perhaps help everybody involved to make better plans to protect immigrant women from abuse. This study is part of a Masters thesis in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia, and it is supervised by Dr. J. Daniluk (822-5768).

You can be a participant if you ...
..... are an immigrant woman to Canada and have come to the country within the last .... seventeen/eighteen years
..... have been repeatedly assaulted by your husband or partner,
..... have left the relationship at least two years ago without returning to live with your ..... husband/partner during that time
..... are willing to tell me about your experience in English.

What is involved in participation?

..... talking to a female researcher, herself an immigrant, about your experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship during private, personal interviews,
..... two separate interviews with the researcher, for a total of approximately three hours.

If you decide to respond to this recruitment letter your anonymity, whether or not you become a participant, is assured. If you would like to participate in the study or would like to know more about the project, please contact the researcher at the following number:

Maija 688-7107
M.A. Counselling Psychology (Candidate)
Appendix B - Consent Form

A Masters Thesis research study on
IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND WIFE BATTERING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

The experience of immigrant women of living in and leaving an intimate relationship where battering has occurred is the focus of this study. The results from the study may help us to better understand the nature of this experience and its impact on immigrant women. This study is being conducted as apart of the requirements for a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology at UBC.

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be engaged in a personal, in-depth interview with the researcher. The interview will be audiotaped and the tape(s) will be transcribed at a later date. You will be asked to tell about your experience of living in and leaving an intimate relationship where you were battered by your husband or partner, and to discuss how you make sense of the experience. The interview will last approximately 2 hours or as long as you need to tell your story. Later a follow-up interview, no longer than 60 minutes in duration, will be conducted. During the follow-up interview you will be asked to read a document containing a biographical synopsis and a summary of the themes extracted from your description. You will be asked to suggest changes, additions and/or deletions to the text to ensure that it represents an accurate reflection of your experience.

All identifying information will be changed or omitted from any written or oral material resulting from this study. Only the research supervisor and the researcher will have access to the audio-tapes. The tapes will be erased upon completion of the study. The transcripts will later be destroyed. You have a right to terminate the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. Your withdrawal from the study will not affect your participation in other studies, or your right to use the services of the agency or organization where you may have seen the posted notice of this study.

You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about the procedures and/or the project by contacting the researcher, Maija Wiik, at 688-7101, or the research supervisor, Dr. J. Daniluk at 822-5768.

I, ____________________________ acknowledge having received and read a copy of this consent form. I understand the conditions outlined in the consent form and I hereby agree to participate in this study.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ________________
Researcher: Maija Wiik
Department of Counselling Psychology
Faculty of Education, UBC
688-7107
Appendix C - Orienting Statement

Before the first interview the researcher will read the following orienting statement to each participant:

Before we start I would like to give you some background information related to the study to set the stage for the interview. Many women in our society are being abused by their husbands or partners. It is known that battering crosses all cultural, social, economic, and age boundaries. Battering is being discussed on TV and in the newspapers more than before, but little is being said about immigrant women's experiences of living in and leaving an abusive relationship. Researchers have studied in detail how battering affects women of the mainstream culture, however, recordings of immigrant women's experiences are missing from the research. I assume that being an immigrant woman has an impact on your experience of living in and leaving an abusive relationship, but this may be only my assumption. I am curious about and interested in your experience of having lived in and having left an abusive relationship and I wonder what this experience has been like for you and what it means to you as an immigrant woman. The specific question that I am asking is: What is your experience of having lived in and left an abusive relationship and how do you now make sense of this experience in your life?

You can take as much time as you need to answer the question. I may ask you to elaborate or clarify some points to be sure that I have understood your experience as fully as possible. If you feel uncomfortable about answering any of my questions or discussing particular aspects of your story, please let me know. Are these guidelines clear to you? Would you like to ask anything before we begin?
Appendix D - Sample Questions

General research question:

What is the experience and meaning of living in and leaving an abusive relationship for immigrant women?

Interview question:

What is your experience of having lived in and having left an abusive relationship and how do you make sense of this experience in your life?

Additional interview questions:

1. Can you tell me about your life as an immigrant woman who has been abused by her husband/partner perhaps like a story with a beginning, a middle and an end?
2. In retrospect, what was it like for you to be abused in your relationship? What was it like to leave? How do you make sense of it now?
3. What kind of issues did you have to face while in the relationship? What kind of issues did you have to face after you left?
4. Describe the kind of personal changes, if any, that you experienced while living in your abusive relationship?
5. What changes have happened in your life/in your children's lives since you left?
6. If you were talking to another woman from your culture who was being abused by her partner, what would you tell her?
7. How do you think this experience might have been different for you if you were not an immigrant in this country?
8. What were the greatest costs involved in leaving your relationship? The greatest benefits?
9. If you could live this part of your life over again, what would you do differently?
10. Where did you draw your support from in making and acting on your decision to leave this relationship?

11. What did you experience as helpful in the support that you received? What did you experience as not being helpful?