

YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs Practicum Written Report

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Summary and description of the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs.

For the 2025 winter semester practicum, I was placed at the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs. The centre is based out of Halifax and offers a wide variety of programs and outreach services for newcomer and immigrant children, youth, and their families that have come to Canada. The programs and services offered by the centre seek to provide inclusive, welcoming, and practical community-based support to aid in settlement. Programs and services range from study skills programs for children and youth, to employment and language support, including the development of new programs to cater to the identified needs and interests of the community. By building community trust and relationships, as well as partnering with schools and other organizations, the centre strives to further support the community by identifying and understanding issues and barriers faced by newcomers to Canada. Some of these sorts of services includes the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Prevention Projects like the National GBV Settlement Sector Strategy, as well as Awareness and Prevention Workshops and Training for both service providers and newcomer clients.

In April 2019, with funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth Centre partnered with The Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO), the Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA CAN), and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), to form the GBV Settlement Strategy Project. Guided by the values of anti-racism, anti-oppression, cultural safety and humility, gender-based analysis, intersectionality, as well as trauma and violence informed approaches, the project expands the ability of settlement and anti-violence organizations to prevent, recognize, and respond to GBV for newcomers, immigrants, and refugees across Canada. Kathryn Bates-Khan is the project manager who also does targeted programming and

was my assigned supervisor for the practicum placement. Between 2019-2022, some of the materials for organizations that the project partners created include: an environmental scan of GBV supports among Canadian settlement and anti-violence sectors, a series of webinars, released the GBV Settlement Sector Strategy, and Bridges to Safety was launched (an online course). The next phase of this project, in 2022-2026, seeks to further build the capacity of anti-violence and settlement sectors with a coordinated and comprehensive approach through collaboration across Canada, with the ultimate goal of better supporting newcomers, immigrants, and refugees.

My Participation and Projects.

I started my placement by doing the proper onboarding processes, which included background checks and child safety courses, and then meeting virtually with Kathryn Bates-Khan, who, as I previously mentioned, was my supervisor. We discussed my interests, as well as how to integrate them into this placement. I explained the structure of the placement, such as weekly hourly requirements, and we discussed what a weekly schedule could look like. Kathryn also gave me an overview of the GBV project (the one that I described in the previous section), proposed online courses for me to complete, and we decided when I could come in person to the centre's office in Halifax so I could meet the others at the centre and attend some virtual meetings with Kathryn. The first meeting I attended with Kathryn was to discuss the workshop format of an upcoming GBV campaign called Empowering Safer Spaces which was a resource for other organizations in the anti-violence and settlement sector to address GBV and support immigrant and newcomers in a respectful and meaningful way. The other meeting I attended was to discuss the campaign called The Things Youth Carry: Countering Hate Speech and Preventing

Violence to enhance health and well-being among newcomer, immigrant, African Nova Scotian, and Indigenous youth through participatory action research. These project meetings allowed me to meet leading experts in GBV and leaders working with youth across the Halifax Regional Municipality, offering me insight into the ongoing development of emergent projects and resources for organizations working to combat GBV, hate speech, and violence among and against immigrants and newcomers across Canada.

The next couple weeks I worked on completing an online course offered by the GBV Settlement Strategy Project called Bridges to Safety: Building the Capacity of the Settlement Sector to Respond to Gender-Based Violence, Together with the Anti-Violence Sector. The Bridges to Safety course is a five-module foundational online training program offered nationwide for professionals in the settlement and anti-violence sectors. Its goal is to establish a shared understanding, raise awareness, and strengthen the ability of service providers to identify and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) in ways that reflect the specific experiences and needs of newcomer, immigrant, and refugee communities. Bridges to Safety emphasizes the critical role of intersectoral collaboration in effectively addressing GBV by seeking to enhance collaboration between the settlement and anti-violence fields, encouraging connection and cooperation rather than isolation. Through this course, I was able to explore various forms of gender-based violence, learn how to identify them, and develop skills to provide support that is culturally sensitive, anti-racist, trauma- and violence-informed, and rooted in an intersectional approach. This course encourages me (and other participants) to: learn various forms of gender-based violence; understand the root causes of gender-based violence; identify, respond to, and address incidents of gender-based violence; provide unique tailored support to newcomer,

immigrant, and refugee survivors of GBV; and foster stronger connections between the settlement and anti-violence sectors.

While working through the Bridges to Safety course I was invited by the centre to join the Staff Champion Network. The Network is a diverse collective of service providers from settlement and anti-violence organizations who are committed to strengthening their individual and collective capacity to address gender-based violence, with the goal of creating safer communities for everyone. The first Champion Network session I was invited to join was the Client Workshop Facilitator Training. In this session I learned more about what GBV is, who is affected, myths and misconceptions, laws against abuse, as well as responses, supports, and community services. The point of this session was to provide training for facilitators on understanding trauma, how to offer trauma-informed facilitation through creating an emotionally safe space, how to handle a disclosure of GBV in a trauma- and violence-informed manner, and other ways to support and help clients. They offered materials like a facilitators guide, a newcomer workshop PowerPoint presentation, and a survey.

The second Champion Network session I was invited to join, in February, was on Advancing Equitable and Inclusive Approaches to Caring for Women Living with Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) in Canada. This session had a guest speaker Bilkis Vissandjée, a FGM/C Expert and Advocate, who shared her research and efforts for change. This special session aims to deepen awareness and understanding of FGM/C. In this session we examined the ethical and interpersonal complexities involved in service provision, and emphasized the need for cultural sensitivity when supporting women, adolescents, and girls affected by FGM/C. It highlighted promising practices, strategies for minimizing harm or further

risk, and the critical role of connecting healthcare services, community organizations, and individuals in need of care.

After this, Kathryn and I discussed having me work on the Men and Boys engagement resource that the centre was developing. This resource is developed to include practical strategies for frontline workers so they can support and involve newcomer men and boys in GBV education and prevention efforts, informed by research, case studies, and guiding principles for engagement. Kathryn asked me to do some research for this resource focussing on de-escalating angry or violent individuals, cultural context specific to the experience of immigrant men and boys, traumatic and harmful experiences, and the connection between men who use violence and men who have previously been harmed. In my research I found lots of interesting sources that I felt were relevant and helpful to include into the pre-existing resource that was shared with me.

I did share my research and findings with Kathryn in a document and gave her access to my document. However, I was unable to re-connect with Kathryn to further discuss and work on this project. So, in the last couple weeks of the semester, I decided to get involved in the volunteering programs offered by the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs. I was able to volunteer with the Saturday Study Skills program offering support for children ages 6-12, as well as the After School Homework Club for junior high and high school students.

My Experience and Takeaway

Overall, I believe this experience was very important and I learned a lot from it. Initially, Kathryn and I had corresponded over email (prior to the start of the placement) to discuss what sort of work I could get involved with at the centre. As a student double majoring in political

science and philosophy, I expressed my interests, and Kathryn had told me I could be involved in developing policy papers on GBV. However, this was not entirely my experience in reality.

Additionally, although I had discussed with Kathryn about in person work with the placement, I only met with Kathryn once in person and the entirety of the rest of the placement (other than the volunteering) was completely virtual. However, this was not necessarily a purely negative thing.

After my first day meeting with Kathryn and sitting in on meetings with her, she suggested I complete some online courses. I believe that I was able to learn a lot of valuable lessons and skills from the Bridges to Safety courses as well as the Champion Network sessions (both held virtually). These courses proved to be very educational and helpful for me in deepening my understanding of GBV and the unique experiences that newcomer, immigrant, and refugee communities have in Canada. The Bridges to Safety course helped me learn how to recognize and respond to GBV, strategies for meeting the unique needs of newcomer, immigrant, and refugee survivors of GBV, develop a base of knowledge and learn how to work collaboratively, and examine my experiences, biases, and assumptions surrounding GBV. I was also able to join the champion network and hear from other experts in the field of GBV.

As to be expected with any placement, there were challenges. One of the challenging aspects of this experience was the consistent difficulties I had getting in contact with my supervisor. I was joining her at a very busy time for her and the centre, so it is understandable, however it did add a difficult dimension to my personal experience as a student. After I did my research for the men and boys engagement tool, I was unable to get in contact with my supervisor for a long time, so I did not know what else to do with the research I had conducted other than share the documents with my findings.

After I was eventually able to contact the centre again, I decided that it would be best to participate in the volunteering work and get involved in the community more rather than try and continue my work with Kathryn. I thoroughly enjoyed my experiences volunteering with the Saturday Study Skills program offering support for children ages 6-12, as well as the After School Homework Club for junior high and high school students. I met amazing people who were volunteers and participants, and their passion for community care and service was infectious.

One of the most important aspects I learned from this experience was the reality of what Non-Government Organization work looks like. There are so many unique needs from communities and so many different ways to address them, and an organization like The YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs has many different approaches and strategies that all contribute greatly to their community missions. All of the people working and volunteering through this organization do amazing and important work to try and meet the unique needs of immigrants, newcomers, and refugees in Canada, while working to build a respectful, inclusive, diverse and supportive work and community environment and culture. I am incredibly grateful to Margaret Denike for organizing this placement experience for me and my peers.

YMCA and GBV links

<https://www.ngbv.ca/staffchampionnetworkgbv>

<https://www.yishfx.ca/gbvp>