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Transnationalism and Hegemonic Masculinity: Experiences of Gender-Based Violence among African Women Immigrants in Canada

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Abstract: Gender-based violence (GBV) is an age-long issue plaguing societies all over the globe. Over the years, GBV perpetrated against women has been justified and legitimized by patriarchal and hegemonic masculine structures. This study explored the role of hegemonic masculinities and transnational cultural conflicts in creating a suitable environment for GBV against women to thrive amongst African immigrants in Canada, gathering perspectives of African immigrants and of the service providers working in immigrant-serving organizations. The paper adopts a qualitative approach and is hinged on the transnationalism framework. This framework argues that immigrants maintain connections while transitioning to their countries of destinations. In such processes, immigrants carry with them their beliefs about cultural norms and hegemonic masculinity, of their country of origin. A total of 13 women immigrants and 20 service providers were purposively recruited to participate in the semi-structured interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed thematically and organized using the Nvivo version 12. Findings show that African immigrant women in Canada continue to disproportionately bear the burden of GBV due hegemonic masculinities. The construction of masculinity in immigrant population is heavily reliant on the communities of origin. As such, the prevailing systems during and post migration such as – unstable residency status, fear of deportation, fear of social and family sanctions and stigmatization, economic dependence on their spouses, and fear of retaliation from their spouses creates an environment that supports toxic masculinity. The study recommends a comprehensive and culturally sensitive programs and services to support African immigrants affected by hegemonic masculinity and GBV.

Keywords: African Immigrants; Canada; GBV; Hegemonic masculinity; Transnationalism

1. Introduction

Immigration is essential to Canada's economic and population growth and over the past two decades, Canada has witnessed an influx of immigrants of diverse backgrounds including those of African descent [1]. In 2019, Statistics Canada estimated that immigration accounted for nearly 86% of Canada's population growth with fastest growing immigrant population being of African descent and those who identify as being Black. Recent immigration statistics in Canada show that Africans are the second fastest growing immigrant population currently accounting for about 13.4% of recent immigrants [2]. Most the African immigrants in Canada are from the sub-Saharan Africa some of who are coming in as refugees with men as principal applicants [2]. Emerging studies on African immigrants in Canada reveal that these families experience several challenges including loss of economic power, changing patterns of gender relationship, gender roles, and renegotiating parenting relationships [3–5]. These challenges coupled with the sociocultural structures in communities of origin that often reinforce oppressive masculinity increase the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) in these immigrant populations [3,6].

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a threat to children and women's health and development [2,7]. Approximately, 44% of women in Canada report experiencing GBV, particularly intimate partner violence in their lifetime [7]. In Canada, a woman is killed by her partner every six days [8]. Most at risk are women of Indigenous background and new immigrants, and especially racialized immigrants [5]. Approximately one in four visible minority immigrant women have experienced gender-based violence; however, this is likely a conservative estimate as evidence also suggests immigrant women report gender-based violence at a lower rate than other groups [9].

A recent scoping review on violence experienced by immigrant communities in Canada showed that new immigrants and refugees are highly vulnerable to GBV [5]. This is because migration increases vulnerability to GBV due to discrimination as well as gender inequities that occur along the migration trajectory, from pre-migration to post-migration [10–12]. As such, immigrant women are more vulnerable to domestic violence due to loss of social network, economic dependence, language barriers, religious beliefs, and a lack of knowledge about community resources in their destination communities. Additionally, immigrant women traumatized by war or oppressive governments are much less likely to report physical or sexual violence to authorities, for fear of further victimization and deportation [12–14].

A significant contributor to gender-based violence is oppressive forms of masculinity [15]. Masculinities are socially constructed roles, behaviours, ideals and meaning that are ascribed to men and boys [16]. Harrington [17] defines toxic/hegemonic masculinity as a set of harmful behaviors, attitudes, and societal expectations associated with traditional masculinity that can have detrimental effects on individuals, relationships, and society as a whole. It often involves the reinforcement of gender stereotypes that promote aggression, dominance, emotional suppression, and the devaluation of traits considered feminine. Toxic masculinity also contributes to issues such as violence, sexism, homophobia, and mental health challenges [17]. Although progress in creating gender-equal societies has been made in most regions of the world, most societies in the global South remain patriarchal and do not support diverse gender identities. In many of these societies, masculinity has been associated with legitimization of violence, emotional control, risk-taking, and identification of men as breadwinners, and women as caregivers [18]. Furthermore, men are saddled with the role of the maintainer of order, and leader of the home to ensure female partners and the children do not transgress gender norms. Historically, wife beating has been legitimized through the unspoken norms that position women as minors and empower their male partners over them [19]. Aside from culture, other systemic drivers of GBV include racism, intergenerational trauma, as well as discrimination based on ethnicity, social class, immigration status and religion [20,21]

As people migrate, they carry along with their sociocultural practices such as hegemonic masculinity, which predisposes women and children to violence [4,5]. Furthermore, the structural barriers such as racial discrimination in destination countries make things worse for immigrant women and children. Addressing GBV amongst immigrant communities requires an understanding of ways through which systems of discrimination and oppressive masculinity can be dismantled with the goal of creating alterative or positive masculinity that supports the needs of the women and children. Undertaking such initiatives, especially among immigrant communities require a clear understanding of people's behaviours, the systems that operate transnationally with migration, and the meanings underlying the behaviours and experiences. Furthermore, there is need to also understand the lived experiences of survivors of toxic masculinity as it relates to GBV if we are to adequately address the challenges of gender related abuse in immigrant populations in Canada. In this study, we explored the experiences of immigrant women of African descent, the role of hegemonic masculinities and transnational cultural conflicts in creating a suitable environment for GBV in African immigrant households in Canada. We defined transnational conflict as tensions, discrepancies, or clashes that arise when individuals or groups navigate and negotiate cultural norms, values, and practices across national borders or within multicultural contexts. These conflicts can emerge due to differences in beliefs, traditions, customs, and societal expectations between the country of origin and the host country, as well as within diverse immigrant communities. The current study captured perspectives service providers working in immigrant serving organizations, and

those of recent African immigrants. The interest was to understand the experiences with transnational cultural conflicts, how they navigate these experiences, the service gaps, needs, and solutions to addressing oppressive forms of masculinity and for strengthening positive masculinities to support integration and stability of African immigrant families.

Transnationalism Framework

The transnationalism framework that describes how immigrants exist in their "receiving" location while they simultaneously maintain connections to their place or country of origin [36] guided this study. According to [asch,Schiller[22], transnationalism is "the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement [23]. Ley [24]further conceptualizes transnationalism as an acknowledgement of a more flexible and circular style of migration where immigrants are more likely to move repeatedly between borders while maintaining an expansive transnational space. This space is facilitated by access to more affordable transportation and communication technologies that hold communities together across national borders. Current-day scholarship from a transnational lens thus emphasizes the adaptive ways in which contemporary immigrants reconstruct their lives while navigating a simultaneous situatedness within multiple societies [23,25]. This framework allows for the exploration of immigrants' family life such as GBV and gender relations, amongst others, which are often neglected aspects of immigration [26].

In adopting a transnationalism framework, this research gives attention to the way female immigrants' identities are shared by the ongoing pulls between their home and host countries. Assimilation and the sustenance of transnational ties are not mutually exclusive realities [26,27], but compatible social processes navigated by immigrants on an ongoing basis. The daily lives of female immigrants depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and their public identities are configured in relationships in their countries of destination and of origin. Multiple sociocultural, political, and economic forces affect their identity, their sense of belonging, and the day-to-day decision-making processes [28]. Through the application of this lens, we gained insight into how sociocultural constructs of masculinity influence perceptions of self and others, thus shaping how female immigrants of African descent perceive themselves, experience masculinity, and gender violence within the post-migration context. A transnational perspective allowed us to explore the manner in which such social relations are implicated in the incidence gender-based violence within the community.

2. Results

The overriding research objective for this study was to investigate the forms of oppressive masculinity that exist among immigrants of African descent in Canada and its relationships with GBV. It also investigates the perspectives of service providers working in immigrant service organizations on the role of masculinities in addressing GBV amongst African immigrant populations. The participants were immigrants of African descent who may have transitioned to being Canadian citizens, asylum seekers, permanent residents, international students, and open work permit holders.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This study included a total of n=33 participants with 39.3% (n=13) being female immigrants of African descent while 60.7% (n=20) were service providers. The participants were of an age range of 21-61 years with over 40% being of the age category of 41-50 years. About 42.1% had lived in Canada for <10 years and were either permanent residents or on open work permits. A majority of the participants were from Alberta (35.6%), Ontario (25.2%), and Manitoba (15.8%). About 82.4% had tertiary level of education.

The service providers are the representatives of organizations responsible for addressing, preventing, and mitigating the effects of GBV on individuals and communities. Service providers are presented as (SP) while service users are (SU). The identified themes and subthemes centered on

participants' experiences of GBV as well as the need to disrupt oppressive masculinities and to address violence against women in African immigrant communities in Canada. Analysis of the interviews generated theme to illustrate the experiences with hegemonic masculinity and GBV among African women immigrants in Canada. The emerging themes include – divergent ways of conceptualization of masculinity; intersections of transnationalism, culture and GVB; Systemic facilitators of toxic masculinity; and gaps in existing services and need for culturally relevant support services. Each of these themes are discussed and are accompanied by the relevant sub-themes as outlined below:

Theme 1: Conceptualizations of Masculinity

The participant's conceptualization of masculinity was shaped significantly by their cultural and sociological perceptions. Even though the participants were immigrants from various African countries, they provided similar descriptions of masculinity, each response revealing individually learned and internalised social norms.

Masculinity is the qualities or traits that are perceived as characteristic of men or boys in a society (SP_005; SU_002).

Masculinity is the behaviours that are expressed or displayed by men (SP_006).

Masculinity has to do with physical traits, and also gender norms surrounding what it means to be a man (SP_004; SP_001; SU_006).

Some of the respondents explicitly described masculinity as a set of roles that men perform and the behaviours they display.

"Masculinity is what they [men] do with their behaviour" (SP_006).

"Masculinity means protection, provision, and providing leadership. But physically, it would probably mean someone who's larger, or someone who is aggressive [Laughs], unfortunately" (SP, 004).

Similarly, SU_004 argued that masculinity means,

Being a man means that you're a protector, you're a provider. You know, a man is the one who is supposed to cover his family and protect his family. A man is the head of the house. A man is the epitome of strength and everything that we are supposed to think of, like an umbrella that covers every bit of his family (SU_004).

Subtheme 1: Hegemonic Masculinity

One of the overriding perspectives from the conversations amongst the participants about the description of masculinity is the dichotomy between contemporary or modern masculinity (which is more prevalent in Canada –their destination country) and hegemonic or toxic masculinity (as obtained in their home country). Some participants recognized that the conceptualization and manifestation of masculinity have evolved over the years, reflecting changes in gender, cultural, and social dynamics. Some recurring traits of traditional masculinity as revealed by the participant include toughness and strength, conformity to gender norms, control, dominance, protection, and provision. Here are some of the excerpts describing masculinity:

Oppressive masculinity is domination, wherein in a relationship the man has most or all the power, whether it's physical, economic, or even emotional. Oppressive masculinity is power and control (SP_008).

I got married at a very, very young age. That was 21 years…And the community that I got married to doesn't believe that a woman has any say. A woman cannot contribute to any conversation, and cannot give any decision. A woman is not supposed even to work (SU_001).

Men do things when they want to do them, but we [women] can't do things when we want to do them. We see that the men also have control over the women's money. When you [a woman] gets her salary, she takes the money to your husband first. He takes whatever part he wants to take out of it, and then he gives you what he wants to give to you. A woman works hard to make that money, but her spouse has control over it (SP_007).

Talking about masculinity, [it means] you are a man, you are the head of the home. You are the finance minister. You are the one working and bringing the money. You are the one taking care of all the responsibilities, feeding the home, taking care of the wife and children. So, from my perspective, being a man in a house, or being a man in the family, like you are the head. You are the king. You are the breadwinner and such, which is something different from what I have seen here [in Canada] (SP_006).

Younger men and boys are groomed quite early in life to internalize stereotypical emotions and adhere to traditional masculine gender norms. Crying, shame, pain, anger, fear, emotions, beliefs, and behaviours are often attached to gender roles.

Culture dictates that the man should not be like a crybaby and that you have to be strong and not express your emotions, … (SU_010).

I've learned from society that masculinity stands for strength, and in my culture, they say men don't cry. Men are known to suppress their emotions. When you are a man you must not cry, you must not act like a woman, and you must not be weak. You must be strong (SP_008).

Subtheme 2: Contemporary/Modern Masculinity

The study participants argued that the meaning of masculinity fluctuates between negative and positive connotations. In contemporary times, masculinity has experienced some significant shifts that challenge traditional male stereotypes. Modern masculinity evolved in response to changes in culture and society and would continue to evolve. Modern masculinity involves inclusivity and diversion, nurturing and caring, authenticity and self-expression, emotional intelligence, challenging traditional stereotypes and gender equality, and changing traditional gender roles.

…you keep on hearing the "societal narratives," that men are supposed to be protectors, providers, and covering and all of that stuff, but when you look at the reality of it all, that's not how it is (SU_004).

Subtheme 3: Masculinity as a construction

Underpinning participants' descriptions of masculinities was the idea of masculinity as something constructed and shaped by both internal and external forces. Participants discussed how aspects of masculinity had changed over time, how masculinity did not necessarily have to be specific to men, how the masculine could also be subordinated, and most importantly, that the performance of masculinity was shaped by socialization. In connecting these, they highlighted the influence of societal expectation and cultural norms in the construction of masculinity, and how these consequently shape expressions of gender. Among those, recognizing the dynamic nature of masculinity was an openness to alternative forms of masculinity.

Coming from an African background, masculinity is something that we see every day from our fathers to our brothers, to relatives. For me, in my own words I will define masculinity as the power that men have over us, and I say power because it's kind of – because of my African background, it comes across like every woman is supposed to be under the man. So we – we do not have a name unless it is tied to that of a man. So I see – I see masculinity as the power over the female gender, in my own words. SP007

Yeah. And other – other communities, they feel like the woman is supposed to be like – like the one submissive, and the husband should be the one who is more like controlling and letting – and like directing the family and the woman has no say. So that could lead to a man being more – more like stronger and that is why when they get married, he will behave the same, bring that character in the home. SU010

Theme 2: Intersections of Transnationalism, Culture and GBV

Cultural beliefs such as perceptions about hegemonic masculinity are endured, perpetrated, and facilitated transnationally as people migrate from one place to another. Analysis of the interview transcripts with the participants reveal that culture and cultural practices spread beyond national borders. As such, culturally established hegemonic views are not limited to the immigrants' nation-states but are carried from the immigrant's home country to the destination country.

When people come here [Canada], they don't forget, some wouldn't forget their culture. So, whatever they had from the original country comes here with them, and they want to continue what they know has always been the practice in their home country (SU_009).

Culture is so strong that culture, we [Africans] are cultural. We migrate from our different African, and Sub-Saharan African countries; we do not leave our cultures behind. We come with our culture, we come with our norms, understanding, and ways of doing things. (SU_006).

I don't think Africans who immigrated here changed the same day, no. They still have that mentality [masculine hegemony]. Yeah, even here in Canada, immigrants from Africa, still do those things I have been saying [masculine hegemonic norms] (SU_011).

Subtheme 1: Cultural Dissonance and family tension are common in migration

Migration demands cultural adjustments and adaptation to social norms and practices different from previous experiences. Hence the hegemonic norms imbibed by both immigrant men and women, experience sharp contrast and they are compelled by the events in the destination country to change, evolve, and become more flexible. This is usually not an easy process and in some cases, it sets the tone for disagreements between intimate partners and consequently becomes full-blown violence. Participants alluded to the fact there are required shifts on the preconceived gender roles.

Here I have seen a man washing dishes, which is very rare in Africa. Where I came from, for a man to wash a dish in the kitchen, cook, or go to the market and buy groceries, is not too common in Africa. It's not too common except because of Western civilization that's infusing into our culture (SP_006).

Coming from an African culture, you see more of be the protector, be the provider, but in Canada, interacting with men who have moved to Canada or maybe North America for a little bit longer, I see a shift in what that looks like. So lately I've been interacting with people, especially younger men, and I see more of that change in masculinity in terms of like. With feminism and all these things, there's this push towards men saying "I don't have to be the sole provider" (SP_004).

The process of adapting to the values, customs and norms of new cultures does not only yield positive changes in gender roles but also causes tension within families.

When people come here [Canada] they don't forget their culture. So, whatever they had from the original country comes here with them, and they want to continue what they know has always been the practice in their home country. And that sometimes is a conflict here because people here expect now to follow the laws of the country instead of what somebody's culture is saying. So that can bring issues within families (SU_009).

When they [women] come this way [Canada], gender equality now becomes difficult, and when the woman now realizes the aspect of that equality and wants to get that equality, the man becomes tough and difficult, to give that position to the wife. Maybe at times unconsciously or consciously (SP_009)

Some participants asserted that exposure to different cultural values and norms could lead to conflicts for various reasons. These issues range from their diverse levels of attachments to their original culture versus the ones being adopted in their new country of residence, to financial strains, to social isolation, to loss of support networks, and then to cultural adjustments to new gender roles.

Subtheme 2: Manifestations of oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence

Further exploration of the relationship between oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence revealed specific impacts on those who are victimized. Participants provided concrete examples and narratives that illustrated the wide-ranging effects of oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence, oftentimes within the household setting. The harms were typically perpetrated towards women, resulting in diminished voice and agency, emotional and psychological abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse and loss of life, sexual abuse, and social control and isolation from others. While gender-based violence is typically perpetuated against women, both service providers and community members noted that men were also sometimes victims as well. Moreover, children in the affected households were also impacted in instances of oppressive masculinity. Participants mentioned experiences with the child welfare systems as well as the limited academic performance for children that find themselves in situations of these kinds.

And, you know, in most of the cases, when somebody is in control of you, he will even like make you have no friends, yeah? Like he sends messages to any friend that you meet, and he's able to disconnect those friendships. You get a job, he's able to make you leave that job, because of the level of seniority that one feels, you know? You feel that you can't control your, you know? I don't know what I can put it, that you have control even what I as a person, or him as a person is the only God who has control over. Yeah. (SU001).

People come here and they lose their safety nets, and so those roles of gender, which are meant to serve and protect, are turned and are being used as measures of control. And so as our expression as men change, our expression through that changes, but if we haven't gotten past that self-expression, we use the same – the same forms of control. SP001

Subtheme 3: Impacts of oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence

The consequences resulting from incidences of oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence were significant, impacting individuals, families, and communities. Participants shared that gender-based violence often led to encounters with the legal system (i.e., police and courts), resulted

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in family dissolution, and was overall detrimental to children's wellbeing. It was revealed that survivors, perpetrators, experienced adverse effects and others close to them as well, thus emphasizing the pervasive nature of gender-based violence. Such effects were associated with long-term repercussions especially in children who would often depict their experiences with violence later on in life either because of embodied lived experiences and/or reduced capacity to achieve their maximum potential in life.

Yeah, this impacts our communities in a very negative way. You find that children are affected mentally, emotionally, and the person who is …like if it's the man or the woman, whoever that is taking control, the other party will be so oppressed they feel emotionally drained, and I think it affects their entire life, like functioning. One will not function well, and the kids will even end up into drugs, and doing such things, and they will not even be able to maybe concentrate well at school, and even the other partner might not even progress and it really affects their lives. SU010

Theme 3: Systemic facilitators of toxic masculinity as experienced by African immigrant women

As demonstrated above, pre and post migration experiences of masculinity are closely linked to GBV and some structural factors in migration facilitate such experiences. For instance, migration policies that are cauterize people as being dependants of a main applicant (who in most cases tend to be men), predispose marginalized individuals – such as women and children to increased risk of toxic masculinity and GBV. As witnessed in previous studies [5,10,11,15], oppressive masculinity occurs in Canada. Various reasons exist for the continuous manifestations of negative masculinity and GBV and the current study reveals the experiences of African immigrants in Canada.

Both community members and service providers highlighted the role of prevailing systemic challenges in creating a suitable ground for violence to thrive. For most immigrants, migration comes with loss of social and economic status as immigrants leave behind their well established social and economic networks. Additionally, the immigration status also determines the experiences with violence and whether a victim would seek the necessary and available support. Individuals whose immigration status are dependent on their spouses who in certain instances are the perpetrators of violence are unable to seek the necessary support due to fear of deportation. According to participant narratives, some African immigrant women have lost their lives in such scenarios.

Subtheme 1: Vulnerability in the immigration process and concerns about immigration Status

African immigrant women in precarious immigration circumstances or who are financially dependent on their spouses face structural barriers; for many in this situation, to leave their relationship equates to a loss of what is familiar—a "comfort zone"—and some aspects of security. As such, victims, who are primarily women, feeling a lack of support, often feel they have to suffer in silence, further contributing to the normalization of gender-based violence. Additionally, the lack of knowledge about the law and their rights in the new country, concerns about their immigration status, and fear of deportation create barriers to seeking services and legal recourse against GBV.

Some of the men here in Canada, decide to go back to their countries of origin to go and look for wives, and their wives are perhaps ten years younger than them, sometimes 15 years younger than them. Most of these young females are looking for a better life and would willingly leave their countries of origin to come to Canada. Once here, the expectations of the husband are sometimes that, "You do as I say. For a while, some of the clients - women that I was getting were worried about being deported because they were saying that the husbands would use the two-year rule, an exception rule that was there in Immigration, that used to say that, if you get married, and it's an immigration marriage and you bring your wife or spouse here, you've got two years to dissolve the marriage, and that person can return to their country of origin (SU_004).

Service providers in particular highlighted issues with meeting resistance from men to changing the status quo or not having the right language when trying to address these issues within African immigrant communities. Lastly, both community members and service providers shared that due to the patriarchal nature of most African immigrant cultures, attempts to promote more gender-equitable dynamics are often perceived as a Western influence and a betrayal to one's culture.

Subtheme 2: Lack of Social Connection and economic independence

Lack of social connections is often one of the reasons why female immigrants who are survivors of GBV would not speak up. This is an excerpt from the conversation with a service provider:

...In these types of relationships, the female is usually less educated. Understandably, I mean, if I'm dependent on my husband's income, and I am in a country that is strange to me, I hardly know anybody, and I cannot speak the language, what will I do on my own? So this is very challenging. Most of these situations are like that, that the women have zero social connections here. They do not have any family. They are brought, they don't understand the system. Oftentimes they're either pregnant or, you know, having children already, so those are complicated situations that are very challenging (SP_005).

Subtheme3: Differing gender equaty laws in destination country

The role of the law in protecting women's rights and amplifying their voices often can make men feel intimidated. Sometimes, to reinforce their position as the lord of their home they resort to the domination and oppression of their wives. See the excerpt below:

Here the laws allow women more of a voice, it makes some of the men feel intimidated, so they even hang on more tightly to their power (SP_008).

Subtheme 4: African societal norms on family privacy and culture of silence

In most African societies, there is a strong emphasis on family stability and unity. Thus, separation or divorce is stigmatized, making it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships without facing social ostracism. Participants expressed concerns about women not speaking up and reporting their experiences of GBV due to internalised beliefs about their responsibility as African women to maintain their family harmony. They would choose to achieve this by enduring GBV in silence.

We don't want to be looked at as the bad person, and we don't want to put our family names out there. So we would rather just suppress everything inside and not even say anything at all. Your parents or your family members have told you, "Don't bring shame to us. Whatever happens, stay in that marriage. Stay in that relationship (SP_007).

I wish that would were more women who would be able to articulate how they feel more, but if they do that they are ostracized (SP_008)

Still, in tandem with the above, there is a culture of silence. Women are often not comfortable when their private affairs are being gossiped about. They feel exposed and betrayed when they speak in confidence about their struggles and their private affairs become a subject of public discussion. The excerpt below provides insight into this:

Africans love their lives private, so making it [GBV] public doesn't encourage them at all to step forward [speak up] (SU_010).

I know one lady, who used to come and tell us what the husband was doing to her. She would say she did not even sleep at home because her husband wanted to beat her up. They started talking about her, not in a bad way but they are like, 'Oh, my goodness, she's gone through a lot. This guy's not good, " and that made her not share anything again (SU_010).

In those societies [African immigrant societies], people do not want to talk about this [GBV] at all, because it will bring shame [to them] (SP_009).

Because of stigma, she [the victims] decided not to talk about it. So that's one big issue because they will say that you are airing your dirty laundry (SP_008).

Sometimes we hear that someone is going through something. But they don't want anyone to get involved because they don't want their names out there, or their family names out there (SP_007).

We see cases of women who for one reason or the other, would cheat on their husbands. Then maybe go to the man and say, "Oh, I did this, and I'm sorry. It was a mistake." Now this could result in GBV, and then when asked, the woman may be so ashamed of what she has done, that she will not be able to speak out because she doesn't want the society to condemn her (SP_007).

Theme 4: Addressing Masculinity in Transnational Communities

Both community members and service providers emphasized the need to address oppressive masculinities and gender-based violence in African immigrant communities. Proposed solutions were primarily community-based and highlighted a need to engage with men in varying capacities.

However, participants also acknowledged the significant barriers to identifying and addressing oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence given the sensitivity and the personal nature of societal challenges.

Subtheme 1: Intentional engagement of men, women, and children in support services

In reference to current support for those impacted by gender-based violence, participants shared that existing services were very fragmented. It was also acknowledged that there were few services specifically addressing gender-based violence, meanwhile women-only supports heavily outnumbered those for men or immigrants. In that regard, participants offered a number of policy and service considerations for future programming to support those affected by gender-based violence.

Both community members and service providers emphasized the need to address oppressive masculinities and gender-based violence in African immigrant communities. Proposed solutions were primarily community-minded and highlighted a need to engage with men in varying capacities. A majority of the support services were criticized for being female focused and with limited interest to uphold the values, norms, and practices of the African immigrants. However, participants also acknowledged the significant barriers to identifying and addressing oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence given the sensitivity and the personal nature of societal challenge. Children were acknowledged as potential conduits for addressing oppressive masculinity. This is not to say that children should take on the role of resolving disagreements in their families but rather being players in relation to providing contemporary perspectives on the different forms of masculinity. As stated by one of the participants born in a family of three girls who had migrated to Canada as an early teenager, the three girls played a key role in grounding their father in Canada by providing information and support. The participant talked about how their father is now playing a key role in mentoring newcomer men to adapt to Canadian culture and society.

Well, yeah, we ran that program for two years and it was interesting where in the forum you have a grown man standing up to ask questions about some of these things and you would begin to appreciate the fact that it's really that they don't know. It is not like they want to. It's really that is the only way they have known life to be before and it was normal than just saying that they are being mean, or they are being wicked, or they don't understand. Like those questions that most of these men asked floored me and it made me reconsider looking into the cultures more before we begin to criticize some of these behaviours. SP002

Subtheme 2: Decreasing oppressive masculinity and incidence of gender-based violence

In discussing ways to address oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence, community members and service providers shared sentiments on potential approaches that would serve the community. Suggestions were very people-centric and revolved around offering various types of support, information sharing, or relationship building. These included peer support and mentorships, role modeling, and seeking therapy or counseling as needed. These suggestions were often provided for promoting masculinity that is more positive.

Community members emphasized the need for equal opportunities for men and women on a broader social scale while service providers stressed the importance of providing information in the community. Suggested education included sharing information about resettlement and transitioning into Canadian society, cultural shift and demystification of psychotherapy, personal rights, masculinity in healthy relationships, gender-based violence, consequences of violence, and available support for those affected by violence. Participants also believed that it was important to meet people where they were and for oppressive masculinity and gender-based violence to be talked about more openly in the community and in gathering places such as in religious spaces. Limited skills and expertise among religious and community leaders to handle issues of oppressive masculinity in the context of Canada were identified as a major barrier. Even though most African immigrants prefer to receive support from their community and religious leaders, these individuals are engaged in multiple shift work which limits their ability to have adequate time to support their community members.

Mm. I think counseling is a good start, but I'm also aware that in our culture it's not a very popular option, because people don't want to talk to strangers about, you know, their lives. But I think if we have a

tighter community coalition, and I noticed that a lot of the groups are mostly women. We don't really – I'm not aware of like family-oriented organization that will bring the men in. You know, so even if there are discussions about gender-based violence, the men could also be present, you know, and I feel like that would be like a form of education for them. But it's always women meeting to talk about what is happening. SP008

I was thinking, even that gentleman I was giving an example of, that I'm saying the unicorn, of approaching him one day and kind of just saying, "Let's create a course together, or a workshop together, and you lead it, because you're a man. You look at the world a little bit differently. You might be able to teach some of these kids and these people different things that might be helpful, in teaching them how to be better human beings, you know." SU004

3. Discussion

This study explored the manifestations of masculinity and GBV amongst African immigrants in Canada and with an interest in depicting the unique experiences of transnational African immigrant women. The study found that patriarchal culture is the origin of violence and the social construction of gender norms that relegate and devalue women to subordinate status. Most African countries are vastly heterogeneous with cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions that differently frame the potentials and capabilities of male and female children. Common practice is that male children are important and receive huge emotional and social investments, while daughters are not worthy investments because they are destined to be their husbands' properties. This is in tandem with the findings by Bartels [29]. These make sons more valued and superior to daughters. Socialization plays a crucial role in tailoring and producing these cultural dichotomies of males and females as different categories of people. Furthermore, gendered social order on female subjugation and hegemonic masculinity is heightened by positioning men as naturally superior to women, heads of households, breadwinners, and owners or lords of their children and wives. Patriarchal structures often frame men as naturally stronger, having stronger sexual drive and having firmer control of their sexuality and emotions than women. Socialization practices similarly train boys to be ruthless and domineering. While the socialization of females inscribes in them a natural inferiority to males. They are taught to be good women and home keepers, obedient, submissive, and meek to their spouses. As such, women who challenge patriarchal domination are seen as deviants. These are in tandem with the male-privileging narratives discussed in previous studies [17,29,30].

One of the resultant effects of hegemonic masculinity is GBV resulting from the objectification of women [3,31]. The dominant cultural ideology that women are instruments for the gratification of their husbands' sexual desires, bearers of their children, specifically sons, and the meeting of other physical needs like the washing of their clothes, and cooking their meals, amongst other roles, denies them of their humanity. These entitlements manifest in coercive and controlling behaviors. This makes it easy for their partners to subject them to GBV. This power dynamic is exacerbated by societal structures and norms such as the payment of dowry that fosters a sense of ownership and entitlement over women's bodies and life as part of the cultures of communities of origin. This cultural norm also brings families together with the wife being officially handed over to her husband's family in marriage. Consequently, some women who have attempted to return to their parental home have been sent back to their marital home with orders or instructions to make their marriage successful. This response makes it harder for them to leave even as immigrants living in Canada.

In African societies, marriage is a maker of identity and status for women and divorce or separation is a stigma. Our findings also support previous findings by scholars such as *[nitha,Roy[32]*. Women are often judged as the culprits when their marriages or relationships fail. Society expects that women should hang on to their oppressive relationships and do all within their power to ensure their marriages work or survive at all costs. Various factors emerged in this study as reasons why women remain with violent partners. Some of them are lack of support systems, lack of proximity to effective support networks, fear of retaliation from their spouses, fear of social and family ostracism, stigmatization, and economic dependence on their spouses. Other reasons identified are the need for the victims to keep their face and esteem in society, protect their parents and family's names from shame as well as preserve their social status as married. These explain why women are often secretive

about their marital crisis and are pressured to appear happy even when they are not. One of the disturbing findings is that despite their experiences of GBV, female victims remain because they stand the chance of losing custody of their children. Thus, prioritizing the well-being and safety of their children above theirs, which in most cases is not the case as the children are negatively impacted by violence in the family. They believe that staying in an abusive relationship would protect their children from experiencing violence from their stepmother and negligence from their father. The findings from the current study demonstrates how these cultural beliefs continue to influence the choices and decisions that transnational women make in times of GVB and oppressive masculinity. This is in tandem with the findings of Dickson and Mbosowo [33], which posits that cultures such as the bride price system when women move out of their matrimonial home after divorce, their children would be in the custody of the husband or his relatives.

The study also found that women cooperate with men to be gatekeepers of hegemonic structures and patriarchal standards that reinforce GBV dynamics. Women internalize and uphold patriarchal values passing it down to their male children because they believe in them or feel pressured to conform with their cultures and as a means of navigating social structures, securing economic security or getting other validations within patriarchal frameworks.

The masculinization of immigration is one of the overarching causes of GBV amongst African immigrants in Canada. Migration decisions, timing, destination, and logistics are gendered and reside with the male partners. In most African societies, women have limited employment and education opportunities, which often result in economic dependence on male family members. When the decision to migrate for better opportunities arises, men are often more financially capable and take the lead due to the societal ascribed role as the family heads, breadwinners, decision makers, and providers. These gender roles and social norms restrict women's mobility and decision-making authority and discourage women from taking the lead in making immigration decisions independently. Hence, by default, the gendered privileges exposure of men to more education, economic opportunities, networks, and information make men the initiator or leads of the migration processes. This finding aligns with the argument averred by Kurebwa [16].

There are also arguments that policies and laws related to immigration create both structural and systemic values that impede the capacity of immigrant women to seek support for GBV, thus making immigrant victims remain in abusive relationships. The study found that there are complications related to immigration status because women's applications are often tied to that of their partners who are often the principal applicants. When women immigrants are disowned or divorced by their husbands, they face unstable residency status and have a fear of deportation. This makes them hesitant about seeking support from the criminal justice system and social service providers. This is corroborated in the findings in previous studies that have shown that dependence on male partner sponsorship makes women vulnerable to GBV [29,32]. Some of the unique challenges that expose immigrant women in Canada to GBV include language barriers, isolation from family and community, immigration-related economic changes, lack of knowledge about services, legal status and cultural differences in seeking GBV-related services.

Migration into developed countries such as Canada has significant impacts on power relations amongst individuals and within the family. Being a complex process, migration involves economic, social and cultural changes that can resonate through family structures, and alter the existing power dynamics such as the redistribution of decision-making power and gender roles in the family. Clashes between traditional gender roles and modern masculine expectations would occur especially when the men involved are more inclined to hegemonic masculinity norms and are unwilling to assimilate new cultures that promote gender equality. Furthermore, migration increases autonomy for women and brings about exposure to different cultures and laws that protect their human rights. Exposure to national laws and service-roving organizations opposing GBV increases the assertiveness and confidence of women to challenge oppressive masculinity. Okeke-Ihejirika and Salami [34] succinctly describes this as "men become baby dolls and women become lions". These dynamics amongst others increase marital conflict and family break-ups amongst immigrants.

It is important to note that despite these clashes, the study finds that there are some adjustments towards modern masculinity. Modern masculinity is shaped by societal expectations, cultural shifts, evolving gender dynamics, and economic changes. Some immigrant men and women are no longer confined to the stereotypical roles of protector, and provider to nurturing roles and other household responsibilities such as caregiving and emotional support. Bringing some positive dynamics, *[yman,Guruge[35]* posit that migration can increase mutual dependence, more joint decision-making, intimacy, changes in communication, and positive conflict resolution.

Implications of Study

The findings of this study provide context-specific information for the government of Canada, provincial governments and other stakeholders in developing policies and interventions for improving the protection of women and African immigrants specifically, from GBV. The study underscores the importance of tailored interventions to address gender-based violence (GBV) among African immigrants in Canada. It highlights the need for policies that specifically target the challenges faced by African immigrant women, providing support services and legal protections without immigration consequences. While Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are crucial in offering culturally sensitive programs and advocacy services, they must work collaboratively with government agencies to enhance accessibility. Furthermore, immigrant-serving organizations are vital in providing culturally responsive services and training programs to address transnational cultural conflicts and empower survivors. Accordingly, stakeholders can benefit from training on cultural responsiveness, gender sensitivity, and the impacts of transnationalism on gender dynamics to promote inclusive practices. Therefore, collaboration among stakeholders is essential to develop comprehensive strategies to prevent and respond to GBV, creating a supportive network that addresses root causes and promotes safer environments for immigrant populations. By implementing context-specific policies and programs, stakeholders can enhance support systems, promote gender equity, and empower African immigrants to navigate challenges related to masculinity and violence.

4. Materials and Methods

Study Design and Participants

This qualitative descriptive study adopted the community-based research approach to explore the connections between hegemonic masculinity and GBV in migration. The study participants were African immigrants who are residents of Canada and representatives of immigrant-serving organizations who were purposively selected to participate in the study. To facilitate Canada wide recruitment, we relied on existing connections in the different provinces and with the immigrant serving organizations. The organizations that provide GBV-related services were prioritized in the recruitment efforts. For instance, organizations whose services are targeted at immigrant women or whose services are targeted at violence experienced by immigrants of African descent were selected.

Exclusion criteria were applied in the selection of participants. For instance, immigrants who are not of African descent were excluded from this study. African immigrants who were uncomfortable sharing their experiences with negative masculinity, and others unwilling to voluntarily participate in the study were also excluded. Similarly, representatives of African Immigrant serving agencies that have been with the agencies for less than 1 year were also exempted from participation. This is based on the assumption that they may not have sufficient experience in supporting African immigrants to navigate gender issues and the barriers to dismantling oppressive masculinities that are unique to the population of interest.

Study Setting

The data for this study were obtained from participants from across various Canadian provinces and Territories – Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Quebec. The relevance of this study to Canada lies in the continuous welcoming of immigrants into the country under various immigration programmes [3–5]. As Canada continues to welcome

immigrants of African descent, measures that guarantee gender equality and safety become very important and relevant to the settlement of the newcomers.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study provided their informed consent. They were notified by either email or phone call about the interview dates and times. All interviews were conducted virtually on zoom using a semi-structured interview guide. Participants were asked about their experiences and knowledge about masculinity and GBV amongst immigrants of African descent in Canada. Additionally, participants shared their experiences with service access, the exiting gaps, and the necessary adjustments to the current support services. The study also captured the perspectives of service providers working in immigrant service organizations on the role of masculinities in addressing GBV in African immigrant populations. Each interview section lasted for between 40 and 90 minutes and was audio recorded to allow for verbatim transcription.

Data Analysis

Using the transnationalism framework, the research team engaged in individual and group meeting sessions to analyze the transcripts and field debrief notes. The team immersed themselves into the data, generated preliminary themes as individuals, and later discussed in the research team meetings. The process was guided by thematic analysis based on the guiding framework and the emergent themes [36–38]. To facilitate data coding, the transcripts and field notes were imported into NVivo version 12 data analysis software.

Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board *(RES# - Pro00131036)* before the commencement of this study. Participants were notified about the essence of this study before the conversations commenced. Informed consent was obtained from each participant and were all assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data are stored electronically in an encrypted file in a password-protected computer to prevent unapproved access.

Quality and Rigour

Researchers kept a reflexive journal of the emerging awareness during data collection, analysis and throughout the phases of the project [39,40]. This allowed researchers to critically reflect on their interactions with participants, the decisions made during the research process, and how these could influence the data and its interpretation. Furthermore, a thick description of the study findings was provided within the study report and the results of this paper. This includes quotes and contexts, which will help support the transferability and clarity of study findings. Data sufficiency was ensured ta by continuing interviews until we have reached data saturation. Participants were verbally provided with a brief statement regarding the preliminary results of the study and subsequently invited to provide their feedback. According to Varvasovszky and Brugha [41] and **[lukotun,Mkandawire[39]**, seeking feedback on interview summaries from stakeholders help to build trust and enable participants to correct inaccurate reporting, give more considered responses or qualify earlier responses. This contributes to the rigour of the study.

Limitations of Study

The study was conducted in specific provinces in Canada, thus, the results cannot be generalized. They however provide insights on the complexities of masculinities and GBV amongst African immigrants in Canada and the need for more context-specific policies, services, and interventions for effective reduction of the manifestations of GBV across Canada. There are limitations inherent in the self-reporting of interviews. These limitations are related to the inability to verify honest views while experiencing the constraints of conducting focus group discussions because of the sensitivity of the issues being interrogated. However, previous studies on GBV have adopted similar approaches and methodologies allowing for comparability of our study findings.

This study only included immigrants of African descent who are service providers and community members who did not clearly distinguish themselves as service users. This study did not include other immigrants of other racial backgrounds and could not get their perspectives about their experiences of GBV. This did not in any way undermine the findings of this study. Rather, it accentuates the experiences of particular racial identity and makes information available to all stakeholders such as policymakers, human rights activists, the judiciary, and enforcement agencies to tailor interventions to address the unique experiences of African immigrant women.

5. Conclusions

African immigrant communities in Canada are still cultural despite the evolving rise of modern masculinity. Although Canada makes an effort to promote gender equality, the transnationalism of cultural, patriarchal and hegemonic beliefs by African immigrants about the superiority of men and the subjugation of women stirs clashes of masculine perspectives. Furthermore, women continue to face GBV due to their unstable residency status and fear of deportation, lack of proximity to an efficient support network, fear of retaliation from their spouses, fear of social and family ostracism and stigmatization, economic dependence on their spouses, and the inclination of some service providers towards supporting hegemonic masculinity. To address these issues, it is recommended that there is a need to re-orientate service providers to separate their cultural prejudices that support hegemonic masculinity from their official responsibilities to protect victims of GBV. There is a need for comprehensive and culturally sensitive programs and services to support African immigrants affected by GBV. Lastly, the government of Canada could create new pathways for migrants experiencing GBV. Victims of GBV who are willing to disclose their experiences of victimization and seek protection should not be daunted and afraid of losing their immigration status in Canada.

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