



# Family Violence & Family Law Brief

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Gender-Based Violence and Access to  
Justice for International Students at  
Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions

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# Gender-Based Violence and Access to Justice for International Students at Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions

## Introduction

In the last two decades, the number of international students in Canada has tripled to over 600,000, which makes up more than 14% of overall enrolment in Canadian post-secondary institutions (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2018; see also De Moissac et al. 2020; Firang & Mensah, 2022). For example, 31% of the University of British Columbia's (UBC) student body is comprised of international students (Dwyer, 2017). Similar rates are found at McGill (30.75%), Simon Fraser University (SFU) (20.7%, excluding graduate students), and the University of Toronto (U of T) (21%). Since 2000, the enrolment of international students has increased by 376.5% and, by 2019, international students' contribution to the Canadian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reached \$21.6 billion (De Moissac et al. 2020; Firang & Mensah, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2018, 2020). Many of these students plan to remain in Canada after the completion of their post-secondary education. Specifically, as the CBEI (2016) found, approximately 51% of international students intend to apply for permanent residency following the completion of their degrees.

*What are post-secondary institutions?*

The term *post-secondary* encompasses technical institutes, colleges, and universities.

International students are drawn to completing their post-secondary education in Canada for many reasons, including quality of life, job opportunities after graduation, and immigration pathways (Arrive, n.d.). Additionally, the Canadian government recognizes the many benefits of international students, such as their contributions to the GDP through high rates of tuition and fees (Dam et al., 2018; Firang & Mensah, 2022). Yet, federal and provincial governments have not sufficiently mitigated barriers and challenges faced by international students. These barriers include, but are not limited to, immigration related difficulties, financial insecurity, housing (e.g., insecurity, overcrowding), and limited access to supports and resources (e.g., health and well-being, legal, safety) (Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022), especially those that are culturally safe.

Despite the prominence and rapidly increasing number of international students in Canadian society generally, and in post-secondary institutions more specifically, their experiences with gender-based violence (e.g., sexual violence, domestic violence) is an under-researched topic (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016; Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022; Yakushko et al., 2008). Of the research that exists, much of the focus is on theoretical understandings (for

example, see Park, 2018) and access to services (for example, see Todorova et al. 2022). Additionally, this research largely neglects international students' experiences within Canadian post-secondary contexts. This gap in the research is further amplified by very minimal research focused on international students' experiences with gender-based violence both on and off university campuses (e.g., shared housing arrangements, predatory landlords) (Bonistall Postel, 2020).

Due to the under-researched nature of gender-based violence perpetrated against women international students, especially within the Canadian context, much of the contextual literature has an international scope (e.g., United States, Australia, United Kingdom). However, the barriers to safety experienced by women international students, as well as the intersecting inequalities that intensify their vulnerabilities and put them at an increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence, “translates across borders” (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016, p. 347). As such, this research is relevant to understanding these issues within the Canadian context.

## Gender-Based Violence

The research that explores gender-based violence experienced by post-secondary students focuses almost exclusively on domestic students or treats students as a homogenous group by disregarding key factors such as international student status (for example, see Burczkacka, 2020; Jeffrey & Barata, 2019; Muehlenhard et al., 2017). Of the research that focuses on important intersecting identities and vulnerabilities related to experiences of gender-based violence (e.g., transgender university students), international student status often remains unaddressed (for example, see Martin-Storey et al., 2018). The intersections of “gender, race, class, and international student status” puts women international students at an increased risk of experiencing violence in their host countries by comparison to their counterparts (i.e., domestic students, international students who are white, English speaking, and/or men) (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016, p. 346; Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022; Poljski, 2011). As Poljski (2011) notes, women international students “are more likely than their male counterparts to experience discrimination (even within the international student community), physical abuse, sexual harassment and social exclusion” (p. 17), especially women of colour (Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022).

*Female international students in particular have the added inequality/disadvantage of being vulnerable to power-imbalanced relationships with males, either within or less commonly outside their national groups. Vulnerability to gender-based violence can relate to race or cultural ideologies as international students tend to be exploited by individuals of their own national group who have been afforded misguided trust based on cultural commonalities. The vulnerability can also relate to their lack of knowledge of local cultural norms, which may be exploited by those inside and outside their national group. The large numbers of international students who are financially insecure adds yet another intersecting layer of vulnerability.*

(Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016, p. 349)

Gender-based violence, such as sexual violence and domestic violence, perpetrated against women international students is common, un(der)reported (e.g., shame, guilt, fear, lack of awareness of available resources), and under-researched (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016; Hutcheson & Lewington, 2017; Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022; MOSAIC, n.d.a.; Sable et al., 2006). International students, men and women alike, have also been found to downplay or dismiss their experiences with gender-based violence (Yamawaki et al., 2009). Nevertheless, what is known highlights the gravity and importance of addressing gender-based violence perpetrated against international students, both in Canada and other nations.

Based on their research in Quebec and Ontario, Hutcheson and Parsons (2022) note:

41.6% of international students from Francophone universities in Quebec experienced at least one incident of sexual violence on campus. A survey at McGill University showed that 38.6% of international students experienced sexual harassment and 23.6% experienced sexual assault. (para. 3)

Such violence tends to be perpetrated by individuals known to these women. Often, the abuse is perpetrated by men “from within the same cultural group with whom they have a personal relationship” (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016, p. 347; see also, Forbes-Mewett, 2011; Poljski, 2011).

Fisher et al. (1998) contend that women international students present with “target attractiveness” due to decreased protection (e.g., families, social networks) and support in host countries, as well as a decreased likelihood of “fight[ing] back” (as cited in Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016, p. 349), language barriers, lack of knowledge of Canadian laws/legal systems, and “troubles identifying sexual violence” (MOSAIC, n.d.b., para. 3; see also BurnabyNow, 2019; CBC News, 2019). Of note, individuals who perpetrate gender-based violence against women international students are often those in positions of power (e.g., partners on whom they depend, landlords, employers, and teaching assistants, instructors/professors) (Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022).

### *International Students and GBV*

MOSAIC reported that educational institutions may mishandle cases in which women international students experience gender-based violence.

In a news release, MOSAIC noted, “several international students have told MOSAIC that they received no support or guidance from their schools when they disclose a sexual assault [...] For example, a 21-year-old female student told us that after she was assaulted, she didn’t know where to turn. She eventually disclosed the assault to her teacher who didn’t believe her and made her fear that she would be kicked out of school” (as quoted in BurnabyNow, 2019, para. 5).























[Enhance Access to Safety for International Students: A Toolkit for Service Providers](#)

**MOSAIC BC**

**Law Foundation of BC**

*The Enhance Access to Safety for International Students initiative addresses the need to make legal education, sexual violence awareness and community resources available to vulnerable international students in remote, isolated and underserved areas of the province. In addition, the initiative aims to increase the awareness of service providers within these same communities of the complexities influencing international students' decision to disclose sexual violence and to equip this group with the legal education and cultural humility to support international students (p. 4).*

[Sexual Violence Advocacy and Campus Communities: SV Campus Policies](#)

**Violence Against Women Learning Network: Mobilizing Knowledge to End Gender-Based Violence**

*This Brief provides context for current sexual violence policies on post-secondary campuses and highlights the critical role of collective advocacy for bringing about change (para 1).*

[Courage to Act Knowledge Centre](#)

**Possibility Seeds**

*Courage to Act's Knowledge Centre is a national repository for tools and toolkits to address gender-based violence at post-secondary institutions in Canada. These resources were created by our national network of student leaders, survivors, frontline workers, legal experts, union leaders, and post-secondary educators, staff and administrators (para. 1).*

These tools include [A Comprehensive Guide to Campus Gender-Based Violence Complaints: Strategies for Procedurally Fair, Trauma Informed Processes to Reduce Harm](#) and the [Education and Training Toolkit: Addressing and Preventing Gender-Based Violence at Post-Secondary Institutions](#).

[Many more](#) guides, tools, and toolkits are available to download directly from Courage to Act's website.

[REES CAMPUS](#)

**REES: A Safer Community by a Community that Cares**

*REES is a simple, secure online platform for reporting sexual violence, tailored to the unique setting of post-secondary institutions (para. 1).*

REES' Canadian post-secondary partnerships include, but are not limited to, University of Windsor, St. Francis Xavier College, Mount Allison University, Okanogan College, The King's University, Brandon University, Providence, and Booth University College.



## Post-Secondary Institutional Reports

Simon Fraser University

**Burnaby, British Columbia**

[International Pathways Project: Identifying and reducing barriers that newcomer students have in accessing sexual violence support and education services at SFU](#)

St. Lawrence College

**Kingston, Ontario**

[Supports for International Students: Sexual Violence Support](#)

University of Toronto

**Toronto, Ontario**

[Student's Guide to the Policy of Sexual Violence & Sexual Harassment](#)

## Policy Reviews and Audits

The Canadian Centre for Legal Innovation and Sexual Assault Response

The CCLISAR conducted independent reviews of the policies responding to sexual violence at Bishop's University, Mount Allison University, Saint Francis Xavier University

University of Alberta

**Edmonton, Alberta**

[Sexual Violence Management Audit Report](#)

*Compiled over the course of Winter 2022, the U of A's internal Sexual Violence Management Audit was prepared at the request of the Board Audit and Risk Committee and exclusively focused on the effectiveness of the university's policies and procedures for complaints of sexual violence and harassment, as well as the effectiveness of sexual violence and harassment prevention systems. The audit reaffirms the university's most recent steps to move us towards our goals to address sexual and gender-based violence.*

## Recommendations & Conclusions

Gender-based violence perpetrated against women international students cannot be understood through a singular lens or responded to through a one-size fits all model (Dills et al. 2016; Park, 2018). Approaches to prevention of, and intervention in, gender-based violence among international students, as well as support for survivors of such violence, should be developed through “an intersectional, relational, historically specific, and structural analysis of violence” (Park, 2018, p. 33). This requires not only an intersectional lens (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, culture, class, citizenship, colonialism), but also a heterogeneous understanding (e.g., how racialization impacts individuals and groups differently).

While gender-based violence is perpetrated against international students both on and off post-secondary campuses, these institutions should nevertheless “be held accountable” for the health, well-being, safety, and security of these students (Ridde et al., 2019, pp. 1-2). Dills et al. (2016) recommends post-secondary-based prevention and intervention programming that is developed in a way that is specific to the needs of international students and accounts for their varying, diverse, and unique contexts and lived experiences; that is, not developing a singular approach that treats international students as a homogenous group.

International students’ health, well-being, safety, and security must be a priority for post-secondary institutions, as well as off campus supports and services; this includes, but is not limited to, health- and safety-based responses and programming that meet the specific and diverse needs of international students, with a meaningful and culturally informed focus on gender-based violence (Poljski, 2011). Post-secondary institutions and supports/services off campus also need to account for the unique barriers to safety faced by women international students specifically (see Barriers and Challenges section, pp. 8-11). For instance, it is less common for bystander interventions to take place when gender-based violence is perpetrated by and/or against international students (Kania & Cale, 2018).

### *Student-Centred Services*

Hutcheson and Parsons (2016) recommend the following student-centred services that aim to promote safety and security for international students in Canada.

**MOSAIC**, which is “a Vancouver-based organization that creates international student centered workshops around sexual violence awareness, offering support and resources for reporting and hosting peer focused events for students to access information” (para. 9)

**Sunoh Charity**, “Sunoh, derived from the Hindi work for ‘listen’, is an international charity based in Canada that aims to support the mental health of international students and combat the sex trafficking of international students” (para. 10)

**Consent McGill**, which offers workshops for international students to learn about healthy relationships, consent, and sexual violence” (para. 11)

Combatting gender-based violence perpetrated against international students requires a collaborative, holistic response from post-secondary institutions and off campus organizations and services to ensure these students are safe, secure, and supported throughout their time in Canada. On and off campus supports and services need to provide individualized, culturally informed, and student-centred care, which is especially important when preventing and responding to gender-based violence (Dills et al., 2016; Hutcheson & Parsons, 2022; Poljski, 2011). With respect to gender-based violence specifically, such supports tailored to the needs of international students would include accessible and appropriate information on their rights and the available, culturally safe, and trauma-informed supports/services.

To learn more about the Supporting the Health and Well-Being of Survivors of Family Violence in Family Law Proceedings project, go to: [www.fvfl-vfdf.ca](http://www.fvfl-vfdf.ca) or our partnered research centres:

### The Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children



**Western**

Centre for Research & Education on  
Violence Against Women & Children

<http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca>

Dr. Peter Jaffe

Dr. Katreena Scott

### The FREDA Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children



**The FREDA Centre**

for Research on Violence  
Against Women and Children

<http://www.fredacentre.com>

Dr. Margaret Jackson

### Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research

*in partnership with St. Thomas University*



Muriel McQueen  
Fergusson Centre  
for Family Violence Research



Centre Muriel  
McQueen Fergusson  
pour la recherche sur la violence familiale

<https://www.unb.ca/mmfc/>

Dr. Catherine Holtmann

Karla O'Regan

[Professor's website](#)

### Recherches Appliquées et Interdisciplinaires sur les Violences intimes, familiales et structurelles

*in partnership with Université du Québec à Montréal*



Recherches Appliquées et  
Interdisciplinaires sur les Violences  
intimes, familiales et structurelles

<https://www.raiv.ulaval.ca/en>

Dr. Geneviève Lessard

Dr. Dominique Bernier

[Professor's website](#)

### RESOLVE: Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse



<https://umanitoba.ca/resolve>

Dr. Kendra Nixon

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