

Creating GVB awareness in the LINC classroom

Introduction

The LINC classroom is for many newcomers the first step in their integration journey. It is an opportunity to establish connections, learn about Canadian culture and norms and even plant the seeds of belonging.

Stage I LINC classes generally serve immigrants under family or refugee and humanitarian classes coming from countries such as Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan, Iran, and Eritrea. Upon their arrival, many of these newcomers face additional barriers on top of language, such as lack of formal education, low literacy, being racialized in their new environment, change in socio-economic status, and loss of support networks. They may also be survivors of traumatic events. Historically, there are more female learners in LINC classes than male learners.¹

In the welcoming space of a classroom, learners can share their experiences and are receptive to new ideas and concepts. It is in these spaces where gender-based violence (GVB) conversations can occur, and instructors may or may not have the skills and resources to respond in a culturally sensitive, trauma-informed way and understand what their role is in this situation.

Compounding this issue is that learners may not be aware of GBV at all, consider it a problem, or know what to do about it. They lack the awareness, information and resources to make choices.

The key question is: **How do we empower service providers and clients to navigate GBV issues and make informed choices in a culturally sensitive way?**

To answer that question, we collected information about (i) the specific barriers faced by newcomers in accessing GBV-related services and supports and (ii) existing GBV awareness materials and resources available for clients with limited English proficiency.

Barriers Faced to Access GVB-related Services

Immigrant and refugee communities often face barriers such as:

- **Social isolation:** When women are cut off from friends, family, or their community, they may start to believe an abuser's manipulation or not trust others enough to talk about the violence.²
- **Lack of knowledge about rights and services:** Some newcomers do not know that gender-based violence is illegal in Canada or that help is available.²

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/research/language-instruction-newcomers-canada-client-profile-performance-indicators/section-2.html>

² <https://ocasi.org/sites/default/files/ocasi-gbv-toolkit-english-online.pdf>

- **Fear of deportation:** Abusive partners sometimes use the immigration and refugee system to control women. For example, a woman may depend on her partner's or family's sponsorship or have her refugee claim linked to theirs. Abusers may hide immigration papers or threaten to separate women from their children. Temporary foreign workers have work permits tied to one employer, so it is hard to report workplace abuse.³
- **Lack of legal status:** Women without status face even greater risk, while very few organizations have funding to support them³. Many do not report violence because they fear deportation or negative effects on their immigration process—for themselves, their partners, or their families—especially if both partners are undocumented.²
- **Fear of police:** Because police share information with Canadian Border Services, many women avoid calling the police, fearing that their immigration status could be jeopardized³. Communities with a history of poor treatment by police may avoid reporting violence because they do not expect fair treatment.²
- **Economic exclusion:** Many immigrant and refugee women cannot use their foreign education or training in Canada. As a result, they often have no choice but to get low-paying and unstable jobs. Limited income often makes women financially dependent on abusive partners, which in turn makes it harder to leave or assert their rights.³
- **Language barriers:** Services and information are not always available in women's first languages, and interpreters are not always available.³
- **Racism and xenophobia:** Immigrant and refugee women may experience poor treatment from service providers. Some report that their culture or religion is blamed for the violence. Also, shelters may not have inclusive practices to accommodate diverse communities³. Women who have faced discrimination based on race, language, or culture may believe that the system won't support them.²
- **Family and cultural expectations:** In many patriarchal cultures, a woman's value is tied to being a wife and mother. Fear of losing this status may stop her from reporting abuse.²
- **Lack of appropriate supports:** Even when newcomers seek help, services may not be accessible due to language barriers, funding cuts, or strict eligibility rules². Moreover, there are not enough community resources for immigrant and refugee women, especially for those experiencing violence.³
- **Homophobia and transphobia:** LGBTQ newcomers may avoid seeking help because their gender or sexual identities are stigmatized in their own communities.²

³ <https://www.immigrantandrefugeenff.ca/violence-against-women>

Existing LINC resources

Below, we included resources and materials currently available for LINC Stage I or GVB general awareness. Each resource or material is described briefly. A summarized gaps assessment is included at the end of the section.

OISE's Relationships & Domestic Violence: Learning Opportunities for LINC 1-6 Students

Developed by a research team from the Ontario Institute for the Studies of Education at the University of Toronto in collaboration with the Afghan Women's Organization. The teaching resources include modules, activities and assessments for adult learners at various level of proficiency (LINC CLB 1 to CLB 8). For teachers, it includes lesson plans, downloadable materials and additional educational resources for instructors to go deeper on the topic.

ACHEV's Domestic Violence curriculum for LINC 1-4

ACHEV created a series of interactive H5P modules for Stage I LINC learners on Domestic Violence. The resource is under the Family and Relationships LINC Theme and available for instructors through the Tutela platform. ACHEV also developed a community resources list for service providers supporting students experiencing GVB. Finally, ACHEV's National LINC Curriculum Guidelines (NLCG) project, includes resources for instructors around trauma-informed practices and GBV.

ICAGV's Gender-Based Violence curriculum for LINC 1-8

The Inter-cultural Association of Greater Victoria has available a series on Gender-Based Violence resources for instructors. The materials include slide decks, lesson plans, and material to use in the classroom such as rubric tasks and skill building activities.

BC TEAL's Refugee Men's and Women's Health

The Association of British Columbia Teachers of English as an Additional Language (BC TEAL) has two resources related to GBV. The Newcomer Women's Health Resource – New Strategies for Women Learning English for Better Health and Refugee Men's Health and Well-being: A Resource for Language Instructors. It includes themes such as roles, relationships and divorce.

OCASI's "Telling Our Stories: Immigrant Women's Resilience"

Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) developed a graphic novel for low-literacy learners addressing gender-based violence. The resource is available in 11 languages: English, French, Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Dari, Punjabi, Somali, Spanish, Tamil, and Urdu. This one-of-a-kind resource designed for community education settings including LINC classes was written by immigrant women to support immigrant women and combines visuals with short text to overcome language barriers.

IRCNFF Campaign Video and Lesson Plans

The Immigrant and Refugee Communities Neighbours, Friends and Families (IRCNFF) Campaign provides specialized video resources addressing indicators of violence, risk response, support referral and safety planning with a LINC classroom integration. The resource is aimed at LINC CLB 5 and higher and includes culturally and linguistically sensitive training.

Gaps Assessment

After reviewing the mentioned resources, we noticed the following gaps:

- **too academic:** Some focus on drilling and memorizing abstract vocabulary and concepts, such as the cycle of violence, that might be useful to service providers, but are unnecessary, confusing and likely overwhelming to learners with limited English, literacy, and/or education.
- **text-heavy:** Some have reading, cloze, and vocabulary matching activities with too many words and not enough pictures to be accessible to stage I and literacy learners.
- **too abrupt:** There is sometimes not enough context to ease learners into the topic and make it clear why they are learning about it.
- **one-sided:** The male is always the perpetrator, the female is always the “victim,” the relationship is always spousal, and the abuse is often physical without exploring other forms (financial, emotional, sexual, etc.)
- **too prescriptive:** Often, the only option presented for the “victim” is to leave and/or pursue legal action, without recognizing gradations and nuances of culture and/or other options.
- **unnuanced:** The images to describe domestic violence and other terms were sometimes icons, or stick people, not matching the complex and nuanced content.
- **region-specific:** Some of the reading activities, while useful and level- appropriate, contain information that only applies to one province or city.

Needs Assessment

Found resources are only telling us half of the story; to gain further insights we ran a survey aimed at LINC teachers. The 21-question survey gathered challenges, opportunities and needs in current practices and experiences, classroom dynamics and cultural considerations, and thoughts about future integration and implementation. During the span of 2 weeks 45 LINC professionals answered the survey with the following highlights.

Instructor demographics and experience

Respondents had varying levels of experience:

- Less than 1 year: 8 instructors (18%)
- 1-3 years: 15 instructors (33%)
- 4-7 years: 6 instructors (13%)
- 8+ years: 16 instructors (36%)

The delivery methods were almost spread out evenly across respondents. In person delivery was slightly higher (38%), followed by blended delivery (33%) and online only (29%).

More than half of the instructors have addressed GBV in class (52%). These topics mostly arose by current event discussions, through planned curriculum/lessons and through learners’ questions or concerns. When discussed in class, the top five topics were:

1. Cultural norms and gender roles
2. Healthy relationships
3. What is GBV
4. Where to seek help
5. Forms or GBV

The main challenges instructors have faced when discussing GBV in class were:

- How to navigate cultural sensitivities and differences
- The mixed-gender classroom dynamics
- Uncertainty about how to respond to disclosures
- Lack of appropriate vocabulary/language tools
- Lack of knowledge about resources and support services and
- Students becoming upset or triggered

Needs, challenges and opportunities for implementation

Most instructors feel somewhat confident to respond to GBV disclosures (47%), roughly a quarter feels very confident (24%) and 26% lack confidence in responding to disclosures. Encouragingly, 71% of instructors mentioned they have a safer private space for learners in case they ask for help.

Nevertheless, instructors were clear and loud on the lack of training received to facilitate GBV discussions. 32 out of 45 have received no training, which is 71% of the respondents. Lack of training was the biggest concern instructors had to implement GBV awareness resources in the classroom followed by limited resources/materials available. Other answers included: student resistance or discomfort, mixed proficiency levels in class, insufficient class time, curriculum requirements/restrictions and mixed gender classes.

Finally, when asked about the proposed resource, 76% of the instructors found the interactive picture story approach appealing. Respondents also believe these alternative methods would work well for learners:

- Small group discussions
- Anonymous question boxes
- Drawing or artwork
- Writing/journaling
- Role-playing
- Digital submissions

Taken together, the proposed resource will address one of the main challenges instructors have to implement GBV topics in the classroom, the lack of resources/materials available. The survey validated the proposed storytelling approach and use of alternative methods such as drawing and role-play for Stage I learners. Even more, the survey will inform the focus for the Teachers' Guide about cultural sensitivities, mixed-gender classroom dynamics, uncertainty about handling disclosures and lack of appropriate language. Although the resource is not intended as professional development for the instructors, is an entry point to further resources and training such as Bridges to Safety.

The overwhelmingly positive response to proposed interactive picture stories, combined with clear identification of barriers and needs, provides a strong foundation for developing effective, culturally responsive GBV awareness resources.

Additional Resources for Teachers, Language Educators, and Related Professionals

- [Free Online Courses on Gender-Based Violence](#) (International Gender Champions): More than 30 self-paced courses on recognizing, responding to, and preventing gender-based violence, suitable for teachers, language educators, and related professionals.
- [Certificate in Gender-Based Violence Practice Skills](#) (CREVAWC): Capability-based course rooted in hands-on, skills-building frameworks for educators and service providers.
- [Bridges to Safety Online Course](#): Specifically designed to build capacity among those serving immigrant and newcomer communities, incorporating language education components and responsive strategies to GBV. The course is part of the GBV Settlement Sector Strategy Project (NGbv.ca), which provides tailored campaign materials to create safe spaces in language classrooms and offers ongoing webinars and online workshops.
- [Gender-Based Violence Teacher Toolkit](#) (Leddy Library, University of Windsor): Comprehensive toolkit with lesson plans, classroom agreements, and guidance on reporting and handling disclosures, developed specifically for English and secondary language classrooms.
- [Learning Network Resource Collection](#) (Western University): A broad repository of GBV resources to synthesize and disseminate knowledge for educators and trainers on gender-based violence issues including those tailored for educators working in CLB and LINC environments with immigrant and refugee populations.
- [A Future Without Gender-Based Violence Toolkit](#) (OCASI): Designed for service providers supporting immigrant and refugee women, it includes practical guidelines, best practices, and a graphic novel (in 11 languages) that addresses marital rape, Islamophobia, harassment, and homophobia. The toolkit advises hosting culturally relevant educational events in LINC classrooms and offers online training for staff.
- [Women and Gender Equality - LINC Guidelines](#) (NLCG.Achev.ca): Directly addresses how LINC instructors can incorporate GBV awareness and prevention into lessons, including signs of financial, psychological, and physical violence, as well as approaches to supporting EAL literacy learners who may be survivors. It highlights intersectionality, immigrant women's experiences, the importance of including vocabulary for emotions, and gives references/links to further GBV teaching materials suitable for class integration.
- [There is no Honour in Violence](#) (M.O.S.A.I.C.). A facilitator's guide and resources manual for training frontline service providers. The manual's purpose is to equip service providers with the language, skills and perspective to support clients at risk and ensuring their safety.
- [Free or affordable online courses](#) (EVA BC). Ending the Violence Association of BC provides a variety of courses to support anti-violence workers and community partners. EVA BC also offers a library of resources and training that spans from preventing and addressing vicarious trauma to community coordination training.