

**Navigating Legal Boundaries: The Role of NGO Workers in Supporting Immigrant
Survivors of D/IPV and Mediating Police Interventions in Ontario**

Christiane Sakr

Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in Criminology

Department of Criminology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

This thesis explores the challenges NGO workers in Ontario face as they navigate police interventions in cases of D/IPV involving immigrants. Using a qualitative approach grounded in interviews, this thesis examines how workers' legal consciousness is shaped by professional obligations, structural constraints, and cultural contexts, informing their engagement with the legal system. While participants critiqued systemic shortcomings, such as law enforcement's lack of cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed practices, they simultaneously relied on police interventions during crises. This reliance reflects a structural necessity stemming from resource limitations and hegemonic norms that prioritize reactive measures over preventative alternatives. The findings highlight the complex relationship between NGOs, their clients, and law enforcement, highlighting the challenges of addressing systemic barriers while advocating for culturally responsive practices. By situating these dynamics within a broader socio-legal framework, this research contributes to understanding how structural power and resource dependency shape frontline responses to D/IPV.

Cette thèse explore les défis rencontrés par des employés d'ONG en Ontario lorsqu'ils et elles négocient les interventions de la police dans les cas de violence domestique impliquant des immigrantes. À l'aide d'une approche qualitative fondée sur des entrevues, cette thèse examine comment la conscience juridique des travailleurs et travailleuses est façonnée par les obligations professionnelles, les contraintes structurelles et les contextes culturels, informant leur engagement avec le système juridique. Bien que les participantes aient critiqué des lacunes systémiques, telles que le manque de sensibilité culturelle et de pratiques tenant compte des traumatismes de la part des forces de l'ordre, ils et elles se sont simultanément appuyées sur les interventions de la police en cas de crise. Ce recours à la police reflète une nécessité structurelle découlant de ressources limitées et des normes hégémoniques qui donnent la priorité aux mesures réactives plutôt qu'aux alternatives préventives. Les résultats mettent en évidence la relation complexe entre les ONG, leurs clientes et les forces de l'ordre, et soulignent les difficultés à surmonter les obstacles systémiques tout en plaidant en faveur de pratiques culturellement adaptées. En situant ces dynamiques dans un cadre sociojuridique plus large, cette recherche contribue à comprendre comment le pouvoir structurel et la dépendance à l'égard des ressources façonnent les réponses de première ligne à la violence domestique.

Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking my thesis supervisor, David Moffette, for helping me formulate and pursue this thesis. Your patience and guidance have meant so much to me. Thank you for all the feedback and the countless hours you have put into reading whatever unpolished ideas I send you. You may not realize it, but you truly kept me in check when I needed it the most.

To Maritza Felices-Luna, where do I even begin? There is so much to thank you for: the ways in which you have challenged me to become a better researcher, the emotional support, your incredible lectures, and much more. Thank you for just being there and being so willing to provide all this support.

To Kate Fletcher, it has been such a pleasure being your TA. From our talks after lectures to hangouts in your office, it has been an absolute privilege getting to know the wonderful and thoughtful person that you are. The experience I gained from working with you and getting to attend your lectures has been invaluable. I cannot even begin to properly describe how much I admire you as a professor and how much your lectures inspire me to overcome my fear of public speaking so that I can give lectures that are at least half as good as yours.

To Elsie, Disha, and Krista, can you ladies believe it? I (barely) made it out of the thesis option alive! I am so thankful to have met the three of you while pursuing this degree. Thank you for making my time in Ottawa not as boring as anticipated, making sure my priorities were right, and holding me accountable (especially Elsie).

To Ghada and Dunia, the friendship we've forged during our undergraduate degrees is indispensable to me and has helped keep me going. I would have never been able to complete my bachelor's degree without both of you by my side and that is what has allowed me to pursue this master's degree.

To Hussain, I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to read and review entire chapters of this master's thesis while you are pursuing your own. Your input has been so helpful in making this thesis more sound.

To the NGO workers who took time out of their busy schedules and sat down for interviews, I would not have achieved such a level of analysis without your participation. Thank you for all the work you do and your willingness to share your experiences. Your time and service provided to such vulnerable populations will not go unnoticed.

To my parents, thank you for funding this degree, paying my exorbitant rent in Ottawa, and allowing me to carve my own future. I may never truly comprehend the sacrifices you have made immigrating to North America, but I am forever grateful for the opportunities it has granted me.

I would finally like to acknowledge that this thesis briefly discusses the impacts of war and prolonged trauma on Middle Eastern communities, shedding light on the resilience and coping mechanisms developed in highly destabilized, conflict-ridden environments. These reflections aim to recognize and honor the strength of individuals and communities across the globe navigating immense oppression while fighting for systemic change and justice. From Palestine, to Sudan, to Congo, to Haiti, to Tigray, none of us are free until all are free.

Introduction

Domestic and intimate partner violence (D/IPV) is a serious issue affecting individuals across the world, regardless of their migration status. Immigrants, particularly those who have immigrated from the Global South to the Global North, face unique challenges when seeking help and protection from such violence. Many immigrants who face violence at home may also face a lack of support from their families, their community, and the Canadian government (Giesbrecht et al., 2023; Kulwicki et al., 2010; Shirwadkar, 2004). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including community organizations, serving immigrants can play an important role in providing support and resources to those in need. However, challenges surrounding the protocols that these NGOs follow regarding police interventions in cases of D/IPV remain understudied, especially within the context of Ontario. For immigrant-serving NGOs in Ontario, addressing such cases involves mediating between clients and the legal system while simultaneously advocating for culturally sensitive and trauma-informed responses. Thus, my research sought to explore the decision-making processes of NGO workers in Ontario as they navigate police interventions in cases of D/IPV involving immigrants.

The first chapter reviews existing American and Canadian literature on police responses to D/IPV, immigrant experiences, and the role of NGOs in supporting survivors. It also examines the systemic barriers faced by immigrants and the impact of immigration policy. The second chapter outlines the conceptual framework used in the analysis, focusing on legal consciousness, critical race theory, and cultural hegemony. Together, these frameworks allow for a nuanced exploration of how NGO workers navigate the complexities of D/IPV cases involving immigrants, particularly in relation to police interventions. They also provide a basis for critiquing systemic shortcomings and imagining alternative approaches to justice and support.

The third chapter covers the research methodology based on a qualitative approach, and drawing on in-depth interviews with NGO workers in Ontario, specifically based in Ottawa and Toronto, who specialize in supporting immigrants experiencing D/IPV. I discuss how the methodology is designed to capture the participants' experiences, reflections, and strategies, providing a rich understanding of their decision-making processes.

In the fourth chapter, I present the findings of this research organized into thematic sections that explore how NGO workers navigate police interventions, assist clients, and manage systemic constraints. I highlight the participants' critiques of systemic shortcomings and their reliance on police interventions in moments of crisis. While participants were often critical of systemic shortcomings, including the lack of cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed practices in policing, they also recognized the necessity of police involvement in moments of immediate crisis, reflecting the structural and resource-based constraints within which they operate. In the concluding chapter, I revisit the research question and reflect on participants' responses, highlighting the struggle to conceptualize interventions beyond policing. Ultimately, this thesis argues that NGO workers rely on police for D/IPV interventions, despite their systemic flaws, due to the hegemonic legal framework that render police necessary in moments of immediate danger.

Literature Review

The aim of this chapter is to review relevant literature and current research on the issue at hand while gaining deeper understanding of the practices and challenges faced by NGO workers serving immigrant survivors. I explore the state of the scholarship on immigrants using D/IPV services, police responses, and how NGOs handle such cases. There is extensive scholarship on the relationship between immigrants and law enforcement, barriers to accessing services supporting immigrant victims, and the role of immigration laws (Kulwicki et al., 2010; Liao, 2006; Shirwadkar, 2004). The American scholarship tends to focus on American immigration policies and the experiences of undocumented immigrants (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo, 2021; Earner, 2010). The Canadian scholarship is more limited and usually focuses on racial discrimination and policies for policing within multicultural urban centres such as Toronto and Ottawa (Bhuyan, 2012; Ibrahim, 2020; Syed et al., 2018). This scholarship strongly demonstrates that racial profiling is a prominent issue among local police services, attitudes towards police vary among visible minorities, and NGO responses to D/IPV could use improvement. There are still debates about whether diversity among police services and community integration of police officers improve responses to D/IPV (Aspinall et al., 2024; Giesbrecht, 2024; Giwa, 2018). First, I provide an overview of how immigration policies have shaped Ontario's immigration landscape to contextualize how immigrants are received within the province. Then, I examine immigrants' relationship to the police and law and the implications this has for police interventions. Next, I look at factors limiting immigrants' access to resources and why they may turn to NGOs. Lastly, I explore the relationship between NGOs and immigrants to understand how this relationship shapes interactions between NGOs and the criminal justice system. By examining this literature, I explore how these organizations navigate complex relationships with law enforcement and the

challenges they face serving immigrant survivors. Although I use the term D/IPV throughout my thesis, in this chapter I sometimes use terms such as “violence against women” or “battered women” to reflect the terminology used in the scholarship that is being presented.

1.1 Contextual Background

1.1.1 The Province of Ontario and Immigration Policies in Canada

According to the City of Ottawa’s website, Ottawa has a rich history of welcoming newcomers (City of Ottawa, 2024). The 2021 Census specifies that between 2016 and 2021, the Ottawa-Gatineau region had 58,295 recent immigrants, with top countries of origin being India, China, the Philippines, and Syria, and a significant proportion in the working-age category (25-54 years), distributed across various neighborhoods, with higher concentrations in Nepean, Kanata, and Gloucester (Statistics Canada, 2023). Besides English and French, common languages spoken among immigrants include Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, and Punjabi (Statistics Canada, 2023). The city offers a range of services, including settlement, public health, and policing through the Ottawa Police Service (City of Ottawa, 2024). Thus, Ottawa’s history of immigrant and refugee reception, its geographical location, community size, composition, and institutional culture of the settlement sector play a role in shaping the context of this thesis and are important factors to consider when looking at the services provided for immigrants by NGOs.

The City of Ottawa has also built intersectoral partnerships to improve settlement service provision, as well as strengthen the sector and integrate settlement into other key areas of immigrants’ lives (Veronis, 2019). It has been celebrated for its hospitality as seen with the launch of the 2016 Welcoming Ottawa Week (WOW), which was a collaboration between several groups, including the Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership (OLIP), the City of Ottawa, the Ottawa Police Service, Local Agencies Serving Immigrants (LASI), the UNHCR, and the

Refugee Network of Ottawa (RENO) (Marketwired, 2016). Despite the services offered and the city's attempts to convey a welcoming sentiment, scholars have provided opposing assessments that consider how Canada and its immigration policies are discriminatory towards newcomers (Bhuyan & Bragg, 2021; Ellermann, 2019; Shirwadkar, 2004).

Like Ottawa, Toronto is a city known for its diversity and is considered one of the most multicultural cities in the world. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, nearly half (47%) of Toronto's population consists of immigrants, who come from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, making it a primary destination for newcomers to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). According to its official website, Toronto's municipal government has also implemented a variety of services and programs designed to support immigrants and refugees, including settlement services, housing assistance, employment programs, language classes, and access to healthcare (City of Toronto, 2024). Despite these efforts, challenges remain for both immigrants and the organizations serving them. The Canadian Centre for Housing Rights (2013) reported that Toronto's high cost of living, coupled with limited access to affordable housing and employment opportunities, often creates precarious conditions for newcomers.

Additionally, many immigrant-serving organizations are underfunded and experience high turnover rates among staff, which affects the quality and consistency of the services provided (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). Furthermore, research on the role of nonprofit services providing immigrant settlement and integration services by Shields et al. (2016) suggests there is often a lack of coordination between municipal services, NGOs, and other sectors, which can lead to gaps in service delivery. The issue of coordination is particularly critical in cases involving domestic violence, where immigrant women may face unique barriers due to their

legal status, language barriers, and cultural factors, further complicating their ability to access support services or seek police intervention (O'Manique, 2024).

At the provincial level, Ontario has made efforts to improve settlement services and immigrant integration through various policy frameworks, such as the “Ontario Immigration Strategy” and the “Ontario Newcomer Settlement Program” (Government of Ontario, 2024). These programs are designed to enhance employment opportunities, language training, and community integration for newcomers. However, immigration policies under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) often intersect with provincial policies in ways that create additional vulnerabilities for immigrant women. For example, in their research examining how bordering practices impact the delivery of front-line services to immigrant women escaping domestic violence in Canada, Bhuyan and Bragg (2021) argue that the IRPA’s provisions, such as conditional permanent residence for sponsored spouses, place women at risk of domestic violence by making them dependent on their sponsor for legal status. As will be expanded on later, women in this situation may fear that reporting abuse or leaving an abusive relationship could lead to deportation, loss of status, or separation from their children, further discouraging them from seeking help (Bhuyan & Bragg, 2021).

In an analysis of immigration policies in the Global North, Ellermann (2019) contends that Canadian immigration policy has shifted from a humanitarian and multicultural approach to a human-capital and economic approach that creates hierarchies among migrants based on their skills, education, and self-sufficiency. Ellermann also highlights that Canadian immigration policy has increased the legal precarity of migrants by creating more temporary and conditional statuses that are vulnerable to revocation or non-renewal. The article argues that these policy changes reflect and reinforce a politics of belonging that is “shaped by the intersection of

multiple axes of inclusion and exclusion,” such as gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, and class (p. 2464). Ellermann’s analysis highlights how Canadian immigration policy’s shift towards valuing human capital and creating precarious migrant statuses exacerbates power dynamics and systemic barriers for immigrant survivors of domestic violence, as these policies intersect with factors like gender, race, and class, further marginalizing and limiting their access to safety and support. Such barriers prevent survivors from seeking help, as their legal and economic vulnerabilities are heightened under the current domain of immigration policy.

The now-closed Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) is a significant example of how federal immigration policies can harm immigrants. Under this program, primarily women from countries in the Global South were brought to Canada to work as live-in caregivers with the promise of obtaining permanent residency after a certain period of work (Valiani, 2009). However, findings from research by the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic (2018) and Valiani’s (2009) report published by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, both suggested that the LCP created conditions that were ripe for exploitation and abuse. Caregivers were tied to their employers for both employment and immigration status, making it hard to leave abusive environments without risking deportation (Valiani, 2009). Valiani suggested that this situation often eroded caregivers’ rights and increased their vulnerability to abuse. Thus, while Ontario, and its cities like Toronto, have implemented initiatives to support immigrants, the broader context of Canada’s immigration policies can perpetuate systemic inequalities and vulnerabilities. Understanding these intersecting factors is important for critically assessing the services provided to immigrants by NGOs and the police, as well as the unique challenges these entities face in attempting to meet the needs of immigrant populations in Ontario.

1.1.2 Police Responses to D/IPV Across Canada

Despite efforts by various police services across Canada to improve D/IPV responses, scholars have argued that police officers still fall short. A study by Aspinall et al. (2024) examined Canadian police officers' preparedness to respond to intimate partner violence, particularly with new legislation regarding coercive control. Their research highlights gaps in training and responses that are critical for understanding the national landscape of police responses to domestic violence. Of the 219 officers they surveyed, only two respondents had “emphasised the need to add cultural and religious issues for consideration” in such cases with just one of them recognizing the experiences of immigrants (Aspinall et al., 2024, p. 620). This indicates a lack of cultural competency, which is an area of concern when addressing the needs of immigrant and racialized women experiencing D/IPV. Similarly, an article by Giesbrecht (2024) discusses Canadian police responses to domestic violence in the context of coercive control, addressing the importance of training officers to recognize and act upon non-physical forms of abuse. Giesbrecht notes that “police currently do not have tools available to address perpetrators of coercive control or offer protective measures to victims” and pointed to concerns raised by advocates about the potentially negative impact of coercive control legislation on racialized communities (p. 35). Both works provide a foundation for discussing how current police practices may fail to adequately support immigrant survivors, and emphasize the need for more culturally informed, trauma-sensitive approaches within law enforcement.

In an attempt to work with diverse communities, the Toronto Police Service (TPS) introduced the Neighbourhood Community Officer Program (NCOP) in 2013 (Toronto Police Service, 2024). According to a study by Mehmi et al. (2021) that evaluated this program, officers who “used their time wisely by getting to know the issues” of the neighborhoods they were in

could build trust and create partnerships with community members and social agencies, resulting in more positive views of the NCOP and the TPS (p. 9). When it specifically comes to immigrant victims reporting domestic violence, partial Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policies have been adopted to allow those with precarious status to come forward without fearing deportation (Mattoo et al., 2017). These policies came after Toronto adopted its "Access without fear for undocumented Torontonians" policy in 2013 (Hutt, 2017). Despite this, a report by Moffette and Gardner (2015), revealed that between November 2014 and June 2015, TPS frequently conducted immigration status checks, violating city and police policies. A majority of calls made to the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) were for status checks that police often inquired about even without a warrant, leading to the detention of individuals, including those who were victims or witnesses of crimes (Moffette & Gardner, 2015).

Meanwhile, literature on the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) and their responses to immigrants experiencing D/IPV is highly limited. When it specifically comes to violence against women (VAW), news reports have cited OPS's initiatives towards women's safety and efforts to address domestic violence in the community. According to an article published by *WomenPolice Magazine*, the OPS provided a Women's Safety Workshop to demonstrate commitment to women's safety and raise funds dedicated to women and children in crisis (Slaughter, 2017). The workshop covered topics such as domestic violence, stalking, and self-defence techniques (Slaughter, 2017). In 2022, the OPS renamed its domestic violence unit, changing it from *Partner Assault Unit* to *Intimate Partner Violence Unit*. According to a news article published by the Ottawa Citizen, this change resulted from advocacy by community groups that OPS consults regarding its domestic violence response (Crawford, 2022). These efforts made by local police services are important to consider when interviewing NGO staff who witness the frontline work

of police.

The OPS still faces many challenges regarding racialized policing despite the reported efforts made to address VAW (Giwa, 2018). Focusing on community policing in racialized communities, Giwa (2018) discusses a study on racial profiling in Kingston that reveals how Black male residents between ages 15 to 24 were three times more likely to be profiled by police than other racial groups and compares this to data from the OPS reporting, “Blacks and Middle Eastern drivers between the ages of 16 and 24 were 8.3 and 12 times more likely to be stopped by the police, respectively” (Foster et al., 2016 as cited in Giwa, 2018, p. 718). In another publication, Giwa et al. (2014) analyze relations between OPS and youth of color. The authors scrutinize the denial of racial profiling expressed by the president of the Ottawa Police Association stating, “this problem warrants further research and investigation” (Giwa et al., 2014, p. 230). Thus, this research is important to help us understand the relationship between local police services in Ontario and immigrants who are visible minorities. As will be discussed later in this literature review, experiences with police after settlement in Canada play an important role in shaping (mis)trust among immigrants.

1.2 Immigrants’ Relationships to Law and The State

1.2.1 Attitudes of Mistrust Among Immigrants

To begin unpacking how the intersection of power dynamics and systemic barriers impacts the experiences of immigrant survivors of D/IPV, it is important to first understand the relationship immigrants have with the state and law enforcement. So far, literature in North America has demonstrated that lack in trust of the police is one of the common challenges immigrants experiencing D/IPV face. It is important to emphasize here that immigrant survivors of D/IPV are not a homogenous group. Their experiences and risk of being exposed to violence,

whether at the hands of their abuser or the police, varies depending on immigration status, gender, and racial/ethnic background. Specifically, the literature has demonstrated that women and people of colour are more likely to deem police untrustworthy and corrupt (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo, 2021; Giwa et al., 2014; Rancher et al. 2021). While much of the literature on mistrust of the police among immigrants is focused on the United States, Canadian scholarship offers a more nuanced perspective that considers the overlap between visible minority status and immigrant experiences (Chu & Song, 2008; Syed et al., 2018). This allows us to consider how immigrant experiences differ not just when it comes to immigration status, gender, and racial/ethnic background, but also country of settlement.

According to Statistics Canada's 2019 publication on public perceptions of the police, Canadians belonging to visible minority groups were much "less likely to report having a great deal of confidence in the police (35%), compared to non-visible minorities (44%)" (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 3). This disparity highlights a critical area of debate regarding systemic barriers and trust in law enforcement (Ibrahim, 2020). A study on African, Caribbean, and Black youth's perception of police in southern Ontario suggests that the lower levels of trust among visible minorities can be attributed to various factors, including historical and ongoing experiences of discrimination and racial profiling (Syed et al., 2018). These experiences can lead to a perception of the police as untrustworthy or biased, which is noticeable among immigrant communities who may already face additional challenges related to their immigration status and integration into Canadian society. This is also suggested by research on Chinese immigrants' perception of police in Toronto which found that "people who had previous contact (voluntary or involuntary) with the police expressed less satisfaction with police" (Chu & Song, 2008, p. 623).

What shapes these attitudes must be considered to gain a better understanding of immigrant relationships to the state and law enforcement. Studying the reasons that immigrants in Canada distrust the police, Holtmann and Rickards (2018) and Merken et al. (2023) have argued that such mistrust displayed by immigrants can be mediated by experiences in their country of origin where police were seen as dismissive and unhelpful. The same is seen in the United States, where a study on the experiences of immigrant mothers in New York City found that many of them consider the police to be “useless” (Earner; 2010, p. 292, see also Merken et al. 2023). These works demonstrate the impact interactions with police have on immigrants experiencing violence at home. Consequently, immigrants may be less inclined to report abuse to authorities and are reluctant to consider receiving help from any form of law enforcement which may inform and shape the responses of NGOs assisting them.

Attitudes of mistrust in police from one's country of origin can be exacerbated by state and police practices in their new country of settlement. In their study on the relationship between police trust and domestic violence among immigrant survivors in the United States who have self-petitioned for relief under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), Amuedo-Dorantes and Arenas-Arroyo (2021) found that increased cooperation between local police services and Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) negatively impacts the trust that immigrant women have in the police. The authors argue that this cooperation particularly affects those without legal status, as it heightens their fear of deportation and discourages them from reporting domestic violence. The study highlights that for many immigrant women with precarious status, the perception that law enforcement is aligned with immigration enforcement creates a significant barrier to seeking help, conflating all levels of law enforcement, and NGOs by extension, as agents of immigration control rather than protectors of public safety.

Consequently, attitudes of mistrust evolve from not only deeming law enforcement unhelpful but also treacherous, given the added risk of deportation. Understanding this dynamic is important for NGOs working with immigrant clients experiencing D/IPV. Despite not considering the Canadian case, the findings from Amuedo-Dorantes and Arenas-Arroyo's (2021) research demonstrate the importance of creating safe spaces and trust-building initiatives that can help mitigate these fears, thereby encouraging immigrant survivors to seek the support they need without the looming threat of immigration enforcement.

The relationship between police and immigrants is much less studied in the Canadian context. Attitudes towards Canadian police services are typically studied through the experiences of racialized minorities rather than immigrants. For instance, in Ottawa, Giwa (2018) argues that the death of Abdirahman Abdi, a Somali Canadian man, at the hands of the OPS eroded trust among racialized communities. Giwa suggests that, given the growing number of immigrants from non-European countries, organizations such as the OPS "can no longer afford to be seen as unresponsive to racialized minorities' needs and concerns" (p. 725). This is echoed in the findings of Sprott and Doob (2014), who highlight that perceptions of police vary significantly among different racial groups in Canada. Using the General Social Survey (GSS) from 2011, their analysis on views of the police across Canada indicates that visible minorities held more negative views of police compared to their white counterparts (Sprott & Doob, 2014). By examining these sources, this thesis can delve into how NGOs navigate the broader structural and systemic barriers faced by immigrant survivors of D/IPV. These barriers, rooted in both racial dynamics and institutional unresponsiveness, help to explain why non-white immigrant survivors may be reluctant to involve police in D/IPV cases.

Ibrahim's (2020) report is also valuable for grounding this thesis in quantitative data on perceptions of police across different racial and immigrant groups in Canada, supporting discussion on systemic barriers and immigrant experiences with law enforcement. Ibrahim provides key insights into how confidence in the police varies among visible minorities, Indigenous people, and immigrants. Established immigrants, who have been in Canada for more than ten years, have less favorable opinions about police performance compared to non-immigrants (Ibrahim, 2020). This data reflects immigrant communities' struggles with law enforcement, which is relevant to the exploring systemic barriers and police mistrust among immigrant survivors of D/IPV. Couture-Carron et al.'s (2022) study on "battered immigrant women" from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and their decisions on whether to call the police is more relevant here as it accounts for not only the reasons why immigrant women did not report to police but also the experiences of those who did call the police. Those who did call the police had higher levels of education and were more financially stable than those who did not, demonstrating the effect of socio-economic status on the decision to have police involved (Couture-Carron et al., 2022). These sources provide a foundation for discussing how intersecting factors of race, immigration status, and systemic inequality contribute to the marginalization of immigrants within the Canadian legal system, and why my participants may call for legislative and police-community relations reforms.

1.2.2 Canadian Immigration Policy and D/IPV

Shirwadkar's (2004) article on immigrant women and the cultural barriers they face regarding Canadian legislation on domestic violence, contends that Canada has been known for its highly developed policies in domestic violence and multiculturalism. At the same time, these policies still have difficulties addressing the issue of domestic abuse amongst Canada's diverse

immigrant population (Shirwadkar, 2004). Indeed, D/IPV and fear of police involvement are ongoing issue among immigrant communities in Canada. This is important to consider for broader critical discussions of Canadian D/IPV legislation and its applicability to NGO workers serving immigrant victims, helping to highlight the gaps between policy and practice and providing a foundation for exploring more inclusive and responsive legal interventions.

Bhuyan and Bragg (2021) interviewed services providers and legal advocates who consider how Canadian immigration policies in which spouses can be sponsored by their partners with status under the provision that they are living together, may deter immigrant spouses from attempting to escape the violence experienced at home. The policy Bhuyan and Bragg refer to is an amendment made by the Conservative government to IRPA to implement ‘conditional permanent resident’ status which, “required some newly sponsored spouses and partners [...] to cohabit with their sponsor for two years following their arrival in Canada, in order to retain their permanent resident status” (p. 160). This poses the issue of entrapment as immigrants with abusive partners may be left stuck in abusive households leaving their immigration status in limbo. The amendment was presented as a “crackdown” on fraud marriages, a regulation which the authors argue that “shapes how service providers and legal advocates support immigrants who seek to leave an abusive partner in order to minimize the threat of their deportation from Canada” (Bhuyan & Bragg, 2021, p. 160). This is important because it highlights the relationship service providers have with immigrants, which will be discussed later.

Bhuyan and Bragg (2021) highlight the interplay between immigration policy and abusive relationships. Abusive spouses often threaten to deport their partners whom they sponsor to control them, keeping them in the abusive relationship (Bhuyan & Bragg, 2021; Giesbrecht et al., 2023, Holtmann & Rickards, 2018; Kulwicki et al., 2010). This form of policing, termed

bordering practice by Bhuyan and Bragg, was reinforced when the Canadian Conservative government introduced an anonymous tipline for reporting supposed marriage fraud, in which immigrants married their spouses only to obtain citizenship. As of January 2024, the tip line remains active (Canada Border Services Agency, 2024). The policy on conditional permanent resident status also granted the Canadian government power to deport those who obtained permanent residency but did not stay married to their sponsors (Bhuyan & Bragg, 2021). Fearing deportation and lacking means to leave an abusive relationship, immigrant victims are constrained by policies that grant both the state and their partners power over their immigration status. This is important for NGO workers to consider as they may find themselves addressing these fears while assisting immigrant clients with navigating Canada's immigration policies.

1.2.3 Impacts on Children

Taking into consideration what will happen to children is important as this thesis includes workers responses in cases where immigrant children experience D/IPV. The literature highlights the challenges these children face, such as systemic barriers, fear of family separation, and the need for culturally sensitive services (Earner, 2010; Shirwadkar, 2004). While child separation is an issue extending beyond the experiences of immigrants, the scholarship offers insights into the unique challenges faced by immigrant families navigating D/IPV, particularly in the context of state policies, child welfare, cultural dynamics, and the psychological impacts of family separation and reunification (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011; Earner, 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2012). It further provides a comprehensive view of how systemic, legal, and social structures intersect to affect immigrant children's experiences of D/IPV and the services available to them.

Child protection laws are also another important element in which policing extends into the home. Fear of having children taken away by the state is another hinderance for reporting

abuse (Earner, 2010; Giesbrecht et al. 2023; Rancher et al., 2021). It is important to note, however, that those who do rely on the state for interventions in their country of settlement, adopt certain expectations of how the state should intervene. In interviews with Mexican immigrant mothers in the United States, who were involved with public child welfare services due to domestic violence, Earner (2010) found that those wanting to rely on the state for protection, “wanted the state to protect their rights as women, but not violate their rights as mothers” (p. 292). In other words, immigrant mothers wanted the state to have their abusive husbands taken away but not their children as it was important for them to not have their roles as mothers compromised. This desire was rarely respected, reflecting a recurring incapacity by the state and law enforcement to address immigrants’ cultural needs.

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2012) explore the emotional and psychological effects of family separation and reunification among immigrant families in the U.S., highlighting the displacement and trauma experienced by children separated from one or both parents. They discuss how the reunification process often brings additional stress, as children may struggle to reconnect with their parents after extended periods of separation (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2012). This research is relevant to my thesis because it highlights the complex emotional landscape immigrant children face, particularly those who are victims or witnesses of D/IPV. In this context, the work of Suárez-Orozco et al. contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychosocial impacts of violence and separation on immigrant children while emphasizing the importance of providing holistic support services that address both trauma and family reunification challenges.

Similarly, in their work on legal violence as it impacts immigrant Latina mothers whose immigration statuses varied in the United States, Abrego and Menjívar (2011) highlight how separation in immigrant families causes intergenerational conflict, with children balancing

cultural expectations at home and broader societal norms: “The lengthy separations create anguish and tension between mothers and children, even when they are able to find ways to reunite, and even when one or more family members are documented” (p. 18). The authors’ insights into how legal structures affect immigrant children helps inform the analysis of how systemic barriers impact both women and children, particularly where fear of law enforcement and legal structures affect how these families approach support services. For example, fear of deportation or legal repercussions may prevent mothers from seeking help or disclosing abuse, directly affecting their children's safety and well-being (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011). This is important to consider when NGO workers discuss their experiences with providing services to youth as children in these situations may experience additional trauma from witnessing D/IPV, while also being subject to the stress and instability created by legal threats against their families.

1.3 Immigration Experiences, Challenges, and Access to Services

1.3.1 Policy Limiting Access to Public Services and Benefits in Canada

Turning to the province of New Brunswick, Holtmann and Rickards (2018) conducted interviews with immigrant women and service providers on the barriers faced by immigrant women when accessing public services for D/IPV. They highlight the issue of Canadian immigration policies forcing immigrants to be socially dependent on their (abusive) spouses as one of these barriers. In such cases, Holtmann and Rickards explain that abusive partners may take away documentation of citizenship status which can prevent victims from seeking out government services. One of these vital services includes government-funded language classes, which immigrants whose partners are international students also cannot access (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018).

It is evident, according to the literature, that access to public services and benefits for immigrants is limited and impacted by various factors, such as fear of deportation and state-level immigration policies that reduce access to basic needs (Kulwicki et al., 2010). In their work on newcomer women in Saskatchewan experiencing intimate partner violence, Giesbrecht et al. (2023) explain that government-funded settlement programs for newcomers in Canada tend to only be available for those with refugee status. As a result, other immigrants and those without status are excluded from accessing these programs which can be vital to their settlement in Canada. Service providers interviewed by Giesbrecht et al., as well as those interviewed by Holtmann and Rickards (2018), also reported that access to affordable legal services can be a significant challenge for immigrants experiencing violence at home, especially those who are financially dependent on abusive partners. This also highlights an important domain that Canadian NGOs serving immigrants experiencing violence at home need to address.

Immigrants may also face barriers due to lack of awareness about options for legal assistance as well as services catered to language and cultural needs, such as translation and shelter services (Merken et al. 2023). A study by Merken et al. (2023) also shows that American and Canadian service providers for D/IPV survivors report that the lack of public services and assistance for immigrant and/or undocumented clients, particularly in terms of housing and employment, is another pressing issue and a significant challenge in providing support. As will be discussed, language barriers, social networks, and cultural values all play a role in limiting an immigrant's access to services as well.

1.3.2 Language Barriers

Language barriers are a significant challenge for immigrants seeking assistance in D/IPV situations. As noted in the literature, limited language proficiency often impedes women's ability

to access crucial support services, legal protection, and resources. Couture-Carron et al. (2022) discuss in their study that “many women who did not call the police reported language barriers as a reason for not calling” (p. 65). Giesbrecht et al. (2023) highlight how a lack of English language skills can lead to significant misunderstandings, which can prevent women from accessing the services they need, which they argue “can result in denial or inability to access services,” exacerbating their vulnerability and isolation (Giesbrecht et al. 2023, p. 135). Holtmann and Rickards (2018) emphasize the heightened barriers immigrant women face, as many are unable to attend government-funded language classes due to caregiving responsibilities, employment, or controlling behaviors by abusive partners. These women, who are often primary caregivers, face structural barriers limiting their ability to improve language skills, making it harder for them to seek help or gain independence. Without adequate language proficiency, they struggle to navigate public services, especially those offering D/IPV support, and there is a crucial need for affordable, professional interpreters in hospitals, shelters, and courtrooms (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018, p. 298). The role of language interpretation becomes especially important in these contexts, as their ability to maintain confidentiality and professionalism is vital for the safety and trust of the survivors.

Language barriers may also come into play during police interventions, where inadequate communication between officers and immigrant women can lead to complications. Cases where officers are unable to communicate effectively with victims, “may result in their inappropriate arrest or release of the perpetrator,” as Kulwicki et al. (2010) note in their research on immigrant communities in Michigan (p. 729). This illustrates how language barriers not only limit access to social services but also affect the proper delivery of legal and police services, further marginalizing immigrant women. Liao (2006) notes that language barriers can deter women from

seeking outside assistance entirely, leaving them more vulnerable to ongoing abuse without any support from agencies. Thus, language barriers are important to consider as they highlight the gaps between the law's formal protections and its accessibility, shaping the strategies and interactions of NGOs with the legal system and the survivors they support.

1.3.3 Social Networks, the Importance of Family and Cultural Values

Immigrant women are less likely to seek support, both formally and informally, due to shame, stigma, and cultural expectations of maintaining the family unit (Merken et al., 2023). Service providers also reported that some survivors of D/IPV fear being blamed by their communities for leaving their abusive spouses, which can prevent them from disclosing IPV or ending the relationship (Giesbrecht et al. 2023). Survivors who do seek out support, first turn to informal networks before seeking formal support, especially if they and their partners are members of the same cultural community (Giesbrecht et al. 2023).

According to the literature, social networks play a critical role in the lives of immigrants, especially women. Newly arrived immigrants may be more inclined to form new connections within the local community that speaks their native language. This can lead to them missing opportunities to participate and create meaningful connections in other communities throughout their country of settlement (Giesbrecht et al. 2023). The immigration and settlement process can increase the dependence of immigrant women on their nuclear family, as they often lose support systems from their country of origin and face challenges navigating new social systems, norms, and culture (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018; Merken et al., 2023). Those depending on abusive partners for their immigration status might have a harder time developing connections outside the home as their partners may subject them to social isolation as well making it even harder to seek out support (Merken et al., 2023). Becoming reliant on these abusive partners also affects

their mobility. In their study on service providers who support newcomer women, Giesbrecht et al. (2023) explain how once the abusive relationship ends, the women sometimes find themselves overwhelmed, especially those with children, as they no longer have the financial support and transportation provided by their husbands.

Immigrants often prefer to rely on informal support from friends and family over formal support, which may create barriers to seeking help in cases of D/IPV as they are pressured by these social support networks to stay with their partners in order to maintain family values (Merken et al., 2023). Holtmann and Rickards (2018) explain that immigrant women often prioritize their “collective identities as mothers, wives, and daughters” over their individual identities (p. 299). This becomes problematic as values are prioritized over their safety and is further complicated when immigrants come from patriarchal family systems that deem the status of women in the family as secondary to that of the men (Kulwicki et al., 2010). Since many women remain financially dependent on their husbands when migrating to Canada, it becomes harder for them to leave their abusive spouse and easier for men to continue the abuse, preventing victims from leaving and seeking legal help (Shirwadkar, 2004). At times, women victims can turn to their families for support. In Kulwicki et al.’s (2010) research on barriers to accessing D/IPV services among Arab immigrant women in the U.S., the authors found that a positive outcome of patriarchal family systems is how “patrilineal kinship for women involves their protection by their fathers and brothers” (p. 729). Victims can thus turn to their family for protection but may be limited to their mercy since relying on male family members may not be helpful if they are abusive or adopt victim-blaming attitudes.

Even if victims of D/IPV can turn to their families for protection, they may still face stigma and shame for leaving their spouse. For some immigrants, such as Indians, marriage is

considered "a relationship for life" and a big financial investment, discouraging victims from leaving and filing for a divorce (Shirwadkar, 2004, p. 868). This can deter victims from seeking help as they may want to avoid bringing shame to their family. Women are expected to fulfill their roles, which includes getting married and raising a family; failure to do so, including divorcing, can also result in ostracization from their own community (Liao, 2006; Shirwadkar, 2004). Immigrant D/IPV victims, specifically women, are thus visible in their gender roles as wives, mothers, and daughters but invisible to their community as victims and survivors. This invisibility pulls victims away from seeking legal help as cultural/community expectations create barriers, making legal help unfavorable.

1.4 NGOs and Immigrant Survivors: Challenges and Progress in Service Delivery

When immigrants are limited in their access to government resources, they may exhibit distrust in law enforcement, and lack informal social support, NGOs working to serve them can be a beacon of hope. Service providers offer important support and access to resources that informal social networks cannot provide (Hanley et al., 2019). The field of research on NGOs and their role in supporting immigrants is continually growing, with literature examining various regions, including Canada and other parts of North America. A considerable portion of this research focuses on the challenges NGOs face in delivering culturally sensitive services and on the significant strides made in addressing the specific needs of immigrant communities. In the context of the United States, according to Kulwicki et al. (2010), such services tend to have a "lack of ability to respond to immigrants' needs in culturally appropriate ways" (p. 727). By not addressing the needs of immigrant communities, social services no longer become accessible to victims of domestic abuse, increasing abuse's prevalence. However, more recent literature demonstrates that service providers have taken strides to address the barriers faced by

immigrants settling across Canada and other parts of North America (Amuedo-Dorantes & Arenas-Arroyo, 2021; Giesbrecht et al. 2023; Hanley et al. 2019; Merken et al. 2023).

In light of the limited access to public services and benefits for immigrants, the role of NGOs in providing support to immigrant families experiencing violence at home is crucial. This is especially important in cases where immigrants face distrust in the legal system or law enforcement, when NGOs can be a source of hope for immigrant families. Local shelters ran by NGOs can be critical for immigrant women who lack a supportive social network and have limited knowledge of support services (Hanley et al., 2019). These local shelters can serve as a haven for these women, offering them critical resources and support. These resources may include assistance programs and formal advocacy, thus providing a safety net for immigrant families that extend beyond just shelter services.

By providing adequate support and services to immigrants experiencing D/IPV, NGOs can help empower individuals to overcome adversity. According to Hanley et al. (2019), these NGOs typically prioritize connecting women to relevant services beyond just shelter, including healthcare and legal services. Depending on funding and network connections, direct clinical services, such as counseling, may also be available onsite. However, these NGOs face several challenges in providing services to immigrant survivors. For example, Giesbrecht et al. (2023) highlight the challenges of awareness of immigration and D/IPV issues, providing culturally compatible services, meeting specific needs, coordination of services, and funding.

One of the major challenges faced by these NGOs is maintaining confidentiality. Due to the tight-knit nature of local communities, interpreters hired by these organizations often have a connection to the women or their partners, leading to hesitation from survivors to share information (Giesbrecht et al. 2023). To overcome these challenges, some NGOs will prioritize

clear communication with survivors about their right to refuse services and avoid making assumptions about their culture or wishes (Giesbrecht et al. 2023). Some domestic violence shelters may also be inaccessible and screen out women who are not documented, which can exacerbate the intersectional struggles faced by poor and minority women (Smith, 2020).

In response to these challenges, NGOs strive to provide culturally appropriate services for immigrant survivors of D/IPV. Providers aim to work with agencies that are safe for immigrant women by providing “correct food” or a “place to worship” and treating them the same regardless of status (Merken et al. 2023, p. 156). Providers also work around barriers faced by undocumented women by using discretion when navigating the system to ensure they receive the appropriate services (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). According to the interviews conducted by Merken et al., survivors are encouraged to lead the process, with providers asking about their preferred type of support and tailoring services accordingly. Indeed, despite these challenges faced by NGOs, they strive to provide appropriate and empowering services, ensuring that immigrant survivors have access to the support and resources they need.

1.5 NGOs and Police Collaboration in Supporting Immigrant Victims of D/IPV

The relationship between NGOs and law enforcement, especially when serving immigrant victims of D/IPV, is somewhat of an established field of research that examines various forms (including a lack thereof) of collaboration and the challenges associated with them. This literature, spanning both Canada and the United States, is significant in highlighting how NGOs navigate their interactions with police, and how these interactions impact immigrant survivors’ experiences. While much of the research focuses on issues of trust, safety, and confidentiality, studies increasingly emphasize the need for improved responses and cooperation between these entities, particularly in contexts involving immigrant women.

An important practice that many NGOs have adopted in their services to immigrants experiencing D/IPV is to respect survivors' choices, including whether to involve the authorities (Merken et al. 2023). Some providers may also help survivors find alternative solutions to avoid involvement with law enforcement to prevent potential deportation (Merken et al. 2023). The fear of deportation prevents some survivors from seeking help through formal channels, which presents a challenge to service providers. Collaboration between NGOs serving survivors and those with mandates serving immigrants is important in fostering a safe and supportive environment for immigrants (Giesbrecht et al., 2023). Yet, the lack of collaboration between immigrant settlement services and D/IPV services is also an issue according to Holtmann and Rickards (2018). This absence of collaboration is not a result of undesirability among agency workers to come together but rather is due to limited resources and high staff turnover. Giwa (2018) also notes the lack of "interprofessional collaboration" between police organizations and social workers when it comes to diversity and race relations (p. 720). This lack of cooperation creates a significant barrier to the effective delivery of services to survivors.

When discussing how non-profit service providers navigate immigration control and integration policy in Canada, Bhuyan (2012) provides critiques on how state funding shapes the working relationship between anti-VAW organizations and law enforcement. She argues that the state's increasing dominance in how service providers and funders conceptualize issues, as well as strategies to respond to violence against racialized women, is a result of neoliberal policies. Bhuyan goes on to highlight how shelters across Toronto have differing views on the risks involved in opposing immigration and police enforcement. Some organizations will openly participate in anti-police campaigns, while others have expressed fear of public scrutiny, which could indirectly jeopardize their funding. Some shelters have also criticized community

organizing tactics that challenge immigration enforcement, for fear that this could lead to increased enforcement activities and jeopardize the safety of women. These differing views highlight the complex relationship between NGOs that provide services to immigrants experiencing D/IPV and law enforcement.

The relationship between NGOs and law enforcement/police is rather complex and often influenced by the experiences and expectations of immigrant victims of D/IPV. According to Merken et al. (2023), one service worker reported that immigrant clients often have a heightened fear and distrust of court, law enforcement, medical, and school systems, as these systems are often associated with corruption in their home countries. This fear and distrust in filing a protection order or making a police report can present a challenge for service providers. Of course, fear of deportation can deter them from seeking help. In addition, Faller et al. (2018) found that many women do not want the police involved in their cases, as they may have negative experiences with the police and courts and believe that these systems have failed them.

The role of the police and the criminal justice system in cases involving immigrant victims is also complex and can both help and harm victims. On the one hand, service providers recognize the crucial role that the police can play in ensuring the safety of victims. On the other hand, the police can contribute to the fear and distrust of these systems among immigrant victims, as explained by Merken et al. (2023). Similarly, Sibley et al. (2019) found that interactions with the police, or lack thereof, symbolize a part of the complex web of law that victims must navigate and that seeking help from the police stems from the expectation that they know how to handle domestic violence and aid victims.

To address the challenges immigrant victims face, some NGOs have established victim services programs that provide support and accompany police officers to D/IPV calls. In certain

jurisdictions across Canada, however, victims must contact victim services themselves after completing their transactions with the police (Faller et al., 2018). This highlights the need for NGOs serving immigrants to understand the protocols and strategies surrounding police interventions in cases of domestic violence to best support and empower immigrant victims (Faller et al., 2018). The provision of services is also complicated by the differing opinions and experiences of victims themselves, as most women do not want the involvement of the police (Faller et al., 2018). To determine the most appropriate form of intervention in cases of immigrants experiencing D/IPV, it is essential for service providers to understand and respond to the unique needs and experiences of immigrant victims.

As policies surrounding the issues of immigration and D/IPV evolve, it is essential to understand the role that NGOs play in assisting immigrant survivors of D/IPV. This literature review highlights the complexity of the issue of D/IPV experienced by immigrants across North America, and the difficulties NGOs face when intervening in such cases, particularly regarding police involvement. The limited research on the topic points to the need for further investigation and the development of culturally responsive and effective protocols that address the unique needs and challenges faced by immigrant survivors of D/IPV. It is crucial to understand the perspectives of both immigrant survivors and service providers, including those working with NGOs, in order to create a more supportive and effective system for those affected by violence at home. The perspective of NGO workers becomes important here, especially those working in Ontario given that it is the province with the highest immigrant population. With perspectives from Ontario lacking and limited literature on the challenges NGO workers face when it comes to service delivery, my thesis seeks to answer the following question: *How do the competing objectives and duties of NGO workers in Ontario shape the challenges they encounter in*

supporting immigrants experiencing D/IPV when it comes to police involvement? The findings of this literature review will inform future research in this area and contribute to the development of effective strategies to support immigrant survivors.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of legal consciousness, (cultural) hegemony and the framework of critical race theory (CRT) will be used to analyze the decision-making process of NGO workers regarding police involvement. I mainly follow Silbey's (2005) approach to legal consciousness which posits that it is structurally informed. This means that legal consciousness is shaped by broader social, economic, and political structures that are rooted in power relations. In the context of this thesis, cultural hegemony can help us understand how power is structured by race in the legal system, more specifically regarding the actions of law enforcement, and how this affects the legal consciousness of immigrant-serving NGO workers. By adopting a theoretical framework that combines the concepts of legal consciousness, critical race theory, and cultural hegemony, this research provides a deeper understanding of how engagement with law enforcement and the legal system is understood and enacted in the everyday practices of immigrant-serving NGO workers. A reading of legal consciousness that takes race into consideration is essential in this context, as it allows for an analysis of how racialized power structures influence NGO workers' interactions with law enforcement and their strategies for navigating the legal system. This approach brings to light how the racialized nature of legal norms and practices shapes the experiences and choices of both NGO workers and the immigrant communities they serve.

2.1 Epistemological Orientation

This research adopts a critical approach. Indeed, my focus on decisions made at both the institutional and individual levels regarding D/IPV prevention among immigrants, as well as the role of the police, is based on the understanding that these decisions are not made in a vacuum. Rather, they are influenced by historical and ongoing systemic inequalities. These decisions can

have significant impacts on immigrant survivors of D/IPV and their access to justice, safety, and support. By examining these decisions, more insight is gained into the power dynamics that shape them and develop strategies to address the underlying structural issues. More specifically, it can highlight how power structures related to race and culture inform the decision-making processes of these organizations. As Smith's (1990) standpoint epistemology argues, knowledge is socially situated, and "produced by people who are themselves socially organized" (p. 4). Thus, understanding the decision-making processes in these organizations requires an acknowledgment of how race, gender, and class intersect to shape these experiences. It is also important to consider how the role of the police in these cases is complex and has been a subject of ongoing debate and scrutiny as illustrated by the literature.

Mills' (1959) concept of the sociological imagination highlights the importance of linking personal troubles to broader public issues, particularly in the context of marginalized groups. He developed this concept by critiquing social theories that would either solely focus on societal structures or individual experiences. As he explains, "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (Mills, 1959, p. 5). Thus, sociological imagination becomes a means for individuals to understand the intersection between "what is going on in the world" and "what is happening in themselves" (p. 8). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how structural forces within society, such as immigration policies, limited state funding, racialized power dynamics, shape the decision-making processes of organizations serving immigrant communities. NGO workers' decision-making processes, as examined in this thesis, are thus not purely individual choices but are influenced by the hegemonic structures that impact both their clients and the organizations they work for.

Similarly, Lipsky's (2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy highlights how front-line workers exercise discretion within constraints set by institutional policies. He developed this theory after observing how policy implementation is at the discretion of American public service workers. This approach helps me unpack the tensions NGO workers face in balancing institutional mandates and the needs of their clients. Indeed, he describes how workers often "exercise discretion in ways that are shaped by broader institutional constraints" (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). The discretion NGO workers exercise in assessing cases, such as deciding when a situation warrants police involvement, reflects a structurally informed legal consciousness that acknowledges both their duty to protect clients and the limitations of legal systems in addressing the needs of marginalized communities. Indeed, not only must NGO workers navigate complex relationships with law enforcement, but such relationships may be informed by the nature of their organization's work to local police services.

Hill Collins' (2000) approach to intersectionality through Black feminist thought enriches this analysis by illustrating how multiple intersecting social identities contribute to unique experiences of marginalization and discrimination. By unpacking the intersectional experiences of Black women facing oppression, she puts forward how Black feminist thought is *dialogical* as it bridges activism and critical analysis (Hill Collins, 2000). She explains: "On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness" (p. 30). This framework is important for understanding how racialized power structures influence the legal consciousness and decision-making strategies of NGO workers, as they navigate complex relationships with law enforcement in the context of D/IPV cases. This scholarship highlights the importance of adopting an epistemological stance that recognizes the

role of historical and systemic inequities in shaping organizational behavior and decision-making processes.

2.2 Legal Consciousness

2.2.1 The Origin of Legal Consciousness

Ewick and Silbey (1998) developed the concept of legal consciousness to capture how law is situated in the everydayness of people's lives (Halliday & Schmidt, 2009). Legal consciousness refers to how people understand and interact with the law in their everyday lives (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Ewick and Silbey developed this concept based on a large-scale empirical study of how ordinary Americans experience law in different contexts, such as work, family, neighbourhood, and consumption. They conducted interviews with hundreds of respondents from diverse backgrounds and analyzed their narratives using a cultural approach in which they "draw from, the pool of language, of symbols" (Halliday & Schmidt, 2009, p. 217). Thus, they concluded that legal consciousness is not only a matter of what people say about law, but also what they do with law, how they interpret it, and how they resist or comply with law (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). This becomes important to consider when understanding the relationship between NGO workers and law enforcement in the context of their work/professional lives.

In their conceptualization of legal consciousness, Ewick and Silbey (1998) sought to convey that law is something often taken for granted yet reproduced through various interactions. Hence, they argued that legal consciousness is not a fixed or uniform phenomenon, but rather a dynamic and variable one that depends on the situation, intersection of identities, and the goals of the actors involved. Important to highlight here is that Silbey noted how there was "the intuition that [American] court systems were highly discriminatory. Minority citizens would not

turn to law as help for their problems” (Halliday & Schmidt, 2009, p. 215). This is important to the thesis because it highlights that in their conceptualization of legal consciousness, Ewick and Silbey recognize that there is aversion to turning to the law among minorities/racialized individuals which can constitute immigrants. Legal consciousness is thus deemed a social practice that reflects and shapes the meanings of law in society, or as Ewick put it, it is a practice in which “legal meaning is emergent out of interactions and relationships,” hence it is an ongoing (social) process (Halliday & Schmidt, 2009, p. 217).

As they continued to conceptualize legal consciousness, Ewick and Silbey (1998) outline three orientations: (1) *before the law*, (2) *with the law*, and (3) *against the law*. In the context of this thesis, these orientations help demonstrate how legal consciousness operates within the specific professional and cultural contexts of NGO workers and the immigrant communities they serve, respectively. The discretion of NGO workers to have law enforcement involved and navigate police intervention is shaped by how their legal consciousness may fall within these orientations. Standing *before the law* refers to a legal consciousness that deems the law as an idealized system, “formally ordered, rational, and hierarchical,” consisting of “known rules and procedures” (Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 59). This idealized version of the law may not fully reflect the lived experiences of immigrant victims. This may reveal how racialized power dynamics shape interactions with the legal system and influence NGO workers’ strategies for advocating for immigrant clients.

When providing a description of standing *with the law*, Ewick and Silbey suggest that “individuals can shape the content of the law” through the practical use of legal tools to achieve justice (p. 221). The law is deemed just and procedural as when standing *before the law*, but on the account that individuals are agents actively participating in legal processes (Ewick & Silbey,

1998). In this sense, NGO workers may operate *with the law* to advocate for their clients, but they may also recognize the limitations and biases inherent in the legal system that disproportionately affect immigrants. The orientation of *against the law* is characterized by the avoidance of official legal actors and procedures which may be in the form of “silences, refusals, and absences as well as in acts of defiance and disruption” (Ewick & Silbey, 2008, p. 187). It highlights the potential for resistance against oppressive legal structures making it important for understanding how NGO workers advocate for their clients in situations where the law and, more specifically, law enforcement may not serve their best interests. Recognizing the agency of NGO workers helps uncover how they challenge and negotiate legal norms to seek justice and support.

Moreover, Ewick and Silbey (1998) were also able to see that law being about rules, or law-as-rules, provided insight into how legality emerges when rules become a constraining or enabling force in everyday life. It can be both empowering and disempowering for different groups and individuals in society as they note in their description of *with the law* that “people with more resources will have greater success in gaining access, having their voices heard, and determining the outcomes of legal processes” (p. 221). This helps in understanding how immigrants experiencing D/IPV are constrained by their lack of access to law as illustrated in the literature review. This also exemplifies how legal consciousness helps provide an understanding of how legality “is a durable and powerful structure of [...] society because it is ordinary and has a common place in daily life” (Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 249). Indeed, legal consciousness allows us to see how law is not only a formal institution or a set of rules, but also a cultural phenomenon that permeates everyday life. It allows us to see how people construct their own meanings of law and how they negotiate their rights and obligations in relation to law.

2.2.2 Situating the Various Approaches to Studying Legal Consciousness

There are various approaches to studying legal consciousness, each with its own theoretical and methodological assumptions and implications. These approaches differ in how they conceptualize legal consciousness and how they relate it to legal mobilization, resistance, and change. Indeed, such approaches represent different ways of studying legal consciousness, which can be seen as a reflection of the complexity and diversity of law as a social phenomenon. Silbey (2005) offers a historical and critical overview of the field, Hertogh (2018) offers a newer innovative concept of legal alienation, and Chua and Engel (2019) offer a typology of different approaches to studying legal consciousness. Together, they reveal how people experience, interpret, use, or resist law in their everyday lives.

Silbey (2005) traces the origins of the concept of legal consciousness to the Marxist tradition of ideology and hegemony, which aimed to explain how law sustains its power and legitimacy despite its contradictions and inequalities. She argues that legal consciousness research has lost its theoretical “edge” and relevance by focusing too much on individual attitudes and behaviors, rather than on the social and cultural processes that shape and are shaped by law (Silbey, 2005, p. 324). She suggests that because consciousness “both reflects and forms social structures,” legal consciousness cannot be studied as something separate from how legality is social constructed especially when legality can be ideological or hegemonic, meaning that it can reflect and reinforce the interests and values of dominant groups or institutions, or it can be challenged and changed by alternative or oppositional forms of legal consciousness (Silbey, 2005, p. 334). For instance, she emphasizes that legality becomes hegemonic when official legal norms are embedded into mundane expectations of everyday life (e.g. traffic laws), such that they are deemed natural and commonsensical. This structural influence helps normalize the

authority of law and law enforcement. Silbey's approach to legal hegemony is useful as it can help with understanding why NGO workers might adhere to police protocols and professional legal obligations even if they are aware of systemic biases. Hence, Silbey emphasizes that legal consciousness is not only shaped by the existing legal system and culture but also contributes to their reproduction and transformation.

Silbey's approach can be used to understand how immigrants and NGO workers construct and negotiate their legal identities and rights in relation to the law and the police. This framework provides insight into how NGO workers assist immigrants in understanding Canadian laws, decide whether to seek police assistance or alternative forms of justice, and cope with the risks and uncertainties of legal intervention. Silbey's approach helps examine how NGO workers resist or challenge dominant legal norms and practices while using legality to frame and justify their actions and decisions regarding police intervention. This includes balancing their professional obligations and personal values and navigating the tensions between the legal system and different cultures. A critical dimension of Silbey's framework is its attention to the hegemonic role of law, which helps explain how the law functions not merely through overt coercion but by securing consent and respect. This hegemonic dimension illuminates how law operates subtly yet powerfully, often achieving compliance without the frequent need for coercion. By studying legality as a form of legal consciousness in action, Silbey's approach offers a rich and nuanced account of how the law, through its hegemonic influence, shapes and is shaped by the complex interactions between law, violence, and immigration in everyday life, ultimately reinforcing or challenging existing power structures.

Hertogh (2018) challenges Silbey's (2005) critique of the more descriptive and less critical types of legal consciousness research and argues that it is still a valuable and relevant

field of inquiry. He proposes a new approach to studying legal consciousness, which he calls legal alienation, defining it as “the discrepancy between people’s expectations about law and their actual experiences with law” (Hertogh, 2018, p. 3). This discrepancy reflects the gap between public understandings of the law and understandings of the law within the legal system. Indeed, the technical language and rationales that situate the legal system renders law as something alien and unintelligible those who are not legal professionals. He argues that legal alienation is a widespread and significant phenomenon in contemporary society, especially among marginalized and disadvantaged groups. In his comparative study of four cases of legal alienation in different contexts: asylum seekers in the Netherlands, Roma in Hungary, welfare recipients in the United States, and Indigenous peoples in Canada, Hertogh shows how legal alienation affects people’s trust in law, their sense of justice, and their willingness to use law. His approach to studying legal consciousness is based on the premise that legal consciousness is not a pervasive or dominant feature of everyday life, but rather a marginal and contested phenomenon that reflects people’s alienation from official state law and the justice system.

Hertogh’s approach emphasizes that legal consciousness is not simply a matter of how people think or feel about law, but rather a matter of how they relate to law. This is in reference to Silbey and Ewick’s (1998) typology in which individuals could, for instance, relate to law with deference (before the law) but still carry negative perceptions of law enforcement. Legal alienation allows us to see how people express their loyalty, legalism, cynicism, or outsider status towards law in different contexts and situations. This approach can help with examining how immigrants and NGO workers experience and cope with the gap between their professional relationship with law enforcement and how they perceive interactions with the police. Hertogh’s approach can also be used to explore the ways in which immigrants and NGO workers express

legal alienation towards the police and the legal system, depending on their personal backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and values. In turn, the approach would help uncover how these expressions of legal alienation affect their willingness or reluctance to seek police assistance or cooperate with police investigations, as well as their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with police. By studying legal alienation as a form of legal consciousness in relation, his approach can be used to critically analyze the challenges faced by immigrants and NGO workers in dealing with police intervention in cases of D/IPV.

By looking at decades of scholarship on legal consciousness to observe what patterns, debates, and gaps emerge, Chua and Engel (2019) offer a different perspective on legal consciousness research, arguing that it is not a unified or coherent field, but rather a diverse and dynamic one. This becomes important when examining NGO workers' responses to and conceptualizations of law enforcement as their legal consciousness may vary depending on their professional contexts (e.g., workers for VAW shelters may deem law enforcement as more hostile while workers for victim support services may deem them as more resourceful). For Chua and Engel, one of the ways to analyze legal consciousness is through understanding that it is not simply a matter of what people know or believe about law, but rather a matter of how they construct and perform their identities and roles in relation to law. Through a critique of individualistic and Western-centric approaches to legal consciousness, they propose that legal consciousness can be studied by examining the process of relational legal consciousness or how people perceive law as a resource and a constraint in their everyday practices, as well as how they respond to and influence the legal meanings and practices of others.

Chua and Engel's approach is relevant as it can be used to understand how immigrants and NGO workers transform their legal consciousness through their mutual engagements with

law and each other. It can help explore how NGO workers consider law enforcement as a resource and a constraint in their everyday practices, such as reporting abuse, providing support, or resisting oppression and advocating for their clients. In a broader sense, this might reveal how NGO workers respond to and influence the legal meanings and practices of others, such as immigrant clients, the police, the courts, lawyers, etc. By studying relational legal consciousness as a form of legal consciousness in emergence, Chua and Engel's approach would provide a nuanced and contextualized account of the diversity and complexity of law in everyday life.

2.2.3 Legal Consciousness and Hegemony

The relationship between hegemony and legal consciousness is important for my theoretical framework as it helps to explain how law and, by extension, law enforcement maintains its legitimacy and authority in the face of social diversity and inequality. In his conceptualization of hegemony, Gramsci argued that it is not only based on coercion or force, but also on consent or persuasion. Through an "organic engagement with his own society," Gramsci observed that hegemony is achieved when the ruling class succeeds in spreading its worldview, values, and interests throughout society, so that they become accepted as common sense, natural, or universal (Hall, 1986, p. 5). Hegemony is thus a form of cultural and ideological leadership that shapes the consciousness and behavior of the masses. As such, Gramsci's hegemony can be used to analyze how legal consciousness is structurally informed by the dominant ideology of the ruling class. As will be discussed, Silbey (2005) and Chua and Engel (2019) both adopt Gramsci's concept of hegemony in their approaches to studying legal consciousness and reveal that it not only allows us to see how legal consciousness is structurally informed by the cultural and ideological leadership of the ruling class, but also how it can be transformed by the agency and resistance of subordinate groups.

Silbey (2005) demonstrates how people participate in and interpret law through their everyday practices, even when they are not directly involved with the legal system. She argues that legality is a form of legal consciousness that contributes to the reproduction of legal hegemony, as it normalizes and naturalizes law as a part of social reality. The relationship between hegemony and legal consciousness can help explore how immigrant-serving NGOs play a role in mediating between immigrants and the law while providing them with information, services, and advocacy, by examining how these NGOs influence and are influenced by dominant legal norms and practices. However, Silbey also acknowledges that legality can be a source of resistance and change, as people can use legal categories and concepts to challenge or transform the dominant legal norms and practices. This will be used to examine whether immigrant-serving NGO workers may adopt a more critical or oppositional approach regarding police intervention. It also allows me to recognize how NGO workers may seek to challenge the policies and practices that discriminate against or exclude immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, racialized, or marginalized.

Chua and Engel (2019) identify hegemony as one of the schools of thought that can be adopted to study legal consciousness by highlighting the focus of hegemony scholars' work on law's pervasive ideological power and explaining how "law as a pervasive and powerful instrument of state control that shapes the worldviews, perceptions, and decisions of individuals, even when it is not applied directly or instrumentally" (p. 339). Applying such thought for the analysis helps reveal how the protocols of NGOs reflect or challenge the hegemonic power of law over the lives of immigrants experiencing D/IPV. As they unpacked interview responses in Ewick and Silbey's study, Chua and Engel (2019) explain that interviewees "could not help but sustain law's hegemonic power over social life and reinforce its authority and control" (p. 339).

If hegemonic power is sustained over one's social life, then interviews with staff working at immigrant-serving NGOs may reveal how hegemonic power is sustained not just in one's social life but work life as well.

Chua and Engel go on to contend that relational legal consciousness can challenge or undermine legal hegemony, as it reveals the gaps and contradictions between written law and lived law, as well as the multiple and competing legal meanings and practices that exist among different groups and individuals. As discussed in the literature review, visible minorities (and immigrants) often mistrust the police more than their white counterparts despite attempts by police services to be more approachable. This is important when considering how NGO workers whose organizations have varying relationships with local police services may carry competing attitudes towards police that shape their resistance to law as an oppressive structure. Whereas immigrants may deem police untrustworthy and threatening to their immigration status based on lived experiences and past encounters with law enforcement, NGO workers may acknowledge this and simultaneously deem the police a resource and potential safety net given their collaborative relationships with police. What becomes relevant here is Chua and Engel's recognition that relational legal consciousness can reinforce or sustain legal hegemony, as it can also generate consent or compliance with the existing legal system and culture. This helps with exploring how NGO workers may comply with existing legal norms and practices due to the pressures of cultural hegemony, while also identifying moments where they resist or challenge these norms in favor of their clients' needs. This dynamic can reveal the complexities of their decision-making processes and the factors that lead to compliance versus resistance.

Nevertheless, even acts of resistance can uphold law's power as Chua and Engel assert that "resistance operates between law's cracks and thus within its logic and understandings,

rather than outside its framework” (p. 340). Thus, it is important to examine how acts of resistance by NGO workers are shaped by and, in some cases, reinforce existing legal structures. This nuanced understanding of resistance can help with exploring the limitations and possibilities of NGO interventions in the context of police involvement. NGO workers’ legal consciousness may lead them to adopt strategies that comply with legal hegemony, even when those strategies are framed as acts of resistance, revealing the complexities of navigating a legal system that may not fully support the needs of victims.

2.3 Race and Legal Hegemony

2.3.1 Considering the Racial Dimension of Hegemony

The concept of hegemony was developed by Gramsci to explain how the ruling class maintains its domination over the subordinate classes in capitalist societies. Cultural hegemony refers to the ways in which dominant groups maintain their power through the use of cultural institutions and practices that shape the beliefs, values, and attitudes of society as a whole. Provided that the concept of legal consciousness helps us to understand both people’s attitudes and relationship to law as well as law’s hegemonic role in upholding social inequalities, we cannot limit ourselves to a conceptualization that only accounts for class oppression. Indeed, a more intersectional approach is needed, one that accounts for the racialized experiences of immigrants who are visible minorities. Hall (1986) demonstrates that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is relevant and useful for the study of race and ethnicity, because it allows us to understand how racial and ethnic relations are shaped by the cultural and ideological leadership of the dominant groups in society. Hall (1986) defines hegemony as “a form of ‘consensual’ rule achieved through winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural” (p. 16). Hall (1986) applies Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to

analyze how racial and ethnic differences are constructed and represented in the media and popular culture. He explains how the media and popular culture produce and reproduce racial and ethnic stereotypes, images, and discourses that serve the interests of the dominant group and marginalize or exclude the subordinate groups. He also explains how the media and popular culture create a “common sense” about race and ethnicity that obscures the historical and structural causes of racial and ethnic inequalities and conflicts. Hall argues that hegemony is not a static or monolithic phenomenon, but rather a dynamic and contested one that is constantly challenged and resisted by alternative or counter-hegemonic forms of consciousness that emerge from the experiences and struggles of subordinate groups.

Hall (1986) emphasizes that it is important to consider the racial dimension of hegemony because it reveals how race and ethnicity are not only sources of oppression or discrimination, but also sources of identity or resistance for subordinate groups. He suggests that hegemony is not only a form of domination, but also a site of struggle where different racial and ethnic groups negotiate their meanings, representations, and relations in society. As racialized immigrants negotiate their relationship with the police through their identities, D/IPV complicates this negotiation for immigrant victims as their wellbeing and the fear of deportation/loss of citizenship come into conflict. NGO workers must recognize and face this negotiation when considering police intervention; considering the racial dimension of hegemony provides a more nuanced understanding of how they go about doing so.

Similarly, Omi and Winant (2014) consider the racial dimension of hegemony, explaining how race is an integral part of social structure and meaning in the United States. They define race as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (p. 110). Through this definition, Omi and Winant propose a

theory of racial formation suggesting that race is not a natural or fixed category, but rather a social and historical construction influenced by the dominant group's culture and ideology. They explain how racial formation occurs through the interplay of *racial projects* which are, “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 125). For example, Omi and Winant illustrate how law enforcement institutions codify racial hierarchies by linking practices like racial profiling to ideologies of criminality. Thus, understanding the racial dimension of hegemony is important because it reveals how race is a source of conflict and change in society. The concept of racialization also helps explain how institutional norms and practices, such as those of law enforcement, are structured by hegemonic racial ideologies. These ideologies can marginalize immigrant communities by imposing dominant cultural norms and creating systemic barriers to justice. Workers' awareness of how these racialized structures operate helps explain their critiques of the legal system's failure to account for cultural and social diversity.

Omi and Winant (2014) also apply the concept of hegemony to analyze how racial formation is connected to the distribution of power in society. They explain how hegemony operates through racial projects that (re)produce racial meanings and identities serving the interests of the dominant group and marginalizing the subordinate groups. Their emphasis on race as a process allows us to see how NGO workers navigate, and challenge racialized assumptions embedded institutionally. For example, workers may recognize that stereotypes about certain racialized groups can shape how their clients are treated by law enforcement. Omi and Winant also explain how hegemony can be contested by counter-hegemonic racial projects that emerge from the experiences and struggles of subordinate groups. They argue that

hegemony is not static or monolithic, but rather dynamic and contested and that it is constantly shaped by political struggle. It is not only a form of domination, but also a site of struggle where groups negotiate meanings, representations, and relations. This understanding informs NGO workers' strategies to mediate between their clients and the legal system, advocating for cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed approaches that disrupt hegemonic norms.

2.3.2 Legal Consciousness and Race

By drawing conceptualizations of legal consciousness from the scholarship of Gómez, I argue that it is important to have a race-informed notion of legal consciousness. Gómez's works demonstrate that having a race-informed understanding of legal consciousness reveals how race and law are interrelated phenomena that shape each other in complex and contested ways. For instance, Gómez (2004) argues that critical race theory is important for legal studies by highlighting that "law's powerful role in constructing race, racial inequality, and racial identity" (p. 462). Critical race theory challenges traditional conceptions of race and the law by positing that law is not a neutral tool, but rather an intrinsic part of race itself (Gómez, 2004). In other words, critical race scholars argue that law has played a critical role in how race and racial identity are constructed. Gómez explains that this challenges the traditional approach of studying law and society, which considers racial inequality as producing legal outcomes. Instead, it is the opposite, "law makes race" (p. 456). To illustrate, she discusses how, historically, laws and legal decisions have been used to enforce racial segregation and discrimination, which has had a profound impact on the formation of racial identities.

Gómez (2010) explores the emerging field of research studying how law and race co-construct each other, and the role of law in shaping racial categories. She includes a discussion of how colonialism and ideology contribute to racial stratification, in which she argues that

colonialism plays a significant role in shaping racial categories and creating a racial hierarchy. Gómez also notes that ideologies such as white supremacy have been used to justify and maintain this hierarchy and argues that “more work is needed to engage whiteness studies more directly with legal processes and legal consciousness” (p. 500). Critical race theory considers racism to be institutionalized and endemic which makes it vastly unaffected by antidiscrimination legislation. Thus, it is important to examine how legal consciousness affects the way people perceive and respond to issues of race and ethnicity in the legal system and vice versa: how the racialized dimensions of law shape people’s legal consciousness.

Another dimension to consider when drawing connections to race, is second-order legal consciousness, a term used by Young (2014) to examine how one’s understanding of the law is not only shaped by their individual experiences with the law and legal system but also by others’. Young does this by observing how the ways in which communities collectively encounter inconsistent or unjust law enforcement results in beliefs about others’ disillusionment amplifying individual distrust and reinforces legal alienation. This contribution is important when considering how immigrants’ perception of the law as a potential threat rather than protective mechanism may be influenced by shared experiences within their communities and also imposed by their abusers. By analyzing this through the lens of a second-order legal consciousness, it becomes clear that the dissemination of legal misinformation is not just an individual failure to understand the law but a socially constructed barrier that systematically deters victims from engaging with legal processes. As a result, NGO workers may be tasked with debunking any legal misinformation or mediating any mistrust towards law enforcement being presented by their clients. The racialized experiences of their clients and any legal training or interactions with colleagues in a professional setting may contribute to a second order shaping of NGO workers’

legal consciousness. Thus, the connection between CRT and second-order legal consciousness lies in their shared emphasis on understanding how social practices and interactions construct everyday understandings of race and law (Young, 2014).

There are a few empirical studies exemplifying the use of a race-informed understanding of legal consciousness and that provide important insights into how intersectional identities shape individuals' relationships with law and legal actors. For instance, Carbado et al. (2013) use a framework that focuses on structural power when exploring how workers who faced multiple forms of discrimination based on their intersecting identities had to navigate complex legal rules and norms that often failed to protect them or recognize their injuries. Such a framework can also be used for analyzing how NGO workers navigate the legal system's role as both a protective and potentially oppressive force. The dominance of a particular legal system that primarily serves the majority means that NGO workers often act within a system that fails to adequately tend to the needs of their clients. Recognizing the hegemony of existing legal norms and practices allows this thesis to examine how NGO workers develop strategies that either challenge or work around these norms when assisting and advocating for their clients.

To cite another example, while investigating how drivers experience police stops based on their racial identities, Epp et al. (2014) found that Black and Latino drivers were more likely than white drivers to be stopped by police and subjected to searches, questions, or requests for consent, which eroded their trust in law enforcement. The framework used to understand this erosion of trust in law enforcement as a result of racial profiling suggests a race-informed understanding of legal consciousness that can also be applied to the context of D/IPV among immigrant communities, where NGO workers must often weigh the potential for racial profiling and discrimination against the immediate safety needs of their clients. Similarly, using a

theoretical framework that considers how legal consciousness varies between different groups, Nielsen (2000) found that women of color were more likely than white women to confront harassers or seek help from bystanders because they faced more severe forms of harassment and had less trust in the legal system. This mirrors the experiences of immigrant survivors of D/IPV who may similarly distrust law enforcement or feel that the legal system will not protect them, which can influence the strategies NGO workers adopt. Thus, such a framework can be used to analyse how NGO workers adopt such strategies and encounter challenges when navigating police involvement in cases involving racialized and immigrant clients. In such cases, NGO workers may have to navigate tensions between the legal requirements of mandatory reporting or police involvement and a nuanced understanding of their clients' vulnerabilities within a racially biased legal system.

Evidently, linking CRT and the concept of legal consciousness has important implications, especially within the context of this thesis. It can provide a better understanding of how law and legal institutions perpetuate oppression of groups such as racialized immigrants and how individuals such as NGO workers understand and use law in their professional lives. By highlighting the importance of both macro-level analyses of race making and micro-level analyses of individual experiences and practices, this connection may help reveal effective strategies adopted by NGO workers for handling cases of immigrants experiencing D/IPV. Also, a race-informed understanding of legal consciousness helps with recognizing the intersectionality of race and immigration status capturing the nuanced ways in which NGO workers approach police involvement. This is critical in understanding that the legal consciousness of these workers is shaped not only by laws and policies but also by their clients' complex intersections of race, immigration status, and cultural background.

This theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine how NGO workers understand, navigate, and sometimes challenge the legal system in their support of immigrant survivors of D/IPV. By focusing on a race-informed conception of legal consciousness, this framework allows for an analysis of how the NGO workers interact with and use the law in their daily roles, especially in relation to police interventions. This involves recognizing how these workers' actions are shaped by their professional and organizational contexts but also examining their clients' personal experiences and cultural values that inform their interpretations of legal authority and its limitations. Through this lens, the analysis reveals how their legal consciousness influences their strategies and interactions with clients, law enforcement, and other NGOs, shedding light on the tensions between their goals and the hegemonic power structures they operate within. Finally, this framework will enable an evaluation of how these service workers' approaches either align with or challenge dominant societal understandings of law enforcement and the legal system, highlighting their potential role in reshaping legal norms to better serve marginalized immigrant communities.

Methodology

The focus of this research is on exploring Ontario NGO workers' decision-making processes when navigating police interventions in cases of D/IPV involving immigrants. To gain an in-depth understanding of how legal consciousness shapes these processes, I adopted a qualitative approach. Understanding the underlying power relations and structures that shape the protocols and decision-making processes of immigrant-serving NGO workers necessitates a critical approach to analyzing how power is exercised and contested, and how social structures can reproduce or challenge inequalities from the perspectives of NGO staff (Glesne, 2016). The power structures and social inequalities at play include the racialized power dynamics in the Canadian legal system. This, and how NGO staff are cognisant of the experiences of immigrant victims of D/IPV, further justifies the use of a qualitative approach. Hence, to have a critical understanding how legal consciousness shapes protocols and practices regarding such interventions, it was important to investigate understandings of police interventions through interviews.

3.1 Research Question and Goals

Initially, I was interested in understanding organisational protocols when it came to client disclosure of D/IPV and the decision-making process about police involvement. As research progressed, it became evident that my thesis would be looking more at the challenges NGO workers faced when it came to police intervention. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to answer the question: *How do the competing objectives and duties of NGO workers in Ontario shape the challenges they encounter in supporting immigrants experiencing D/IPV when it comes to police involvement?* To capture this, my specific research goals were to examine how systemic structures influence the work of NGOs and their interactions with the legal system in the context

of supporting immigrant survivors of D/IPV, unpack participants' responses to current police interventions and law enforcement measures, and reveal how hegemonic legal frameworks shape NGO reliance on police interventions. The interest in researching this stems from my own critiques of law enforcement and current policing systems. As both an immigrant myself and a friend to a domestic violence survivor who is also an immigrant, understanding how law enforcement can fail to protect us has driven me to pursue this research.

3.2 Recruitment of Participants

Data for this research was composed of interviews. Requirements for participation included working for an NGO based in Ontario who as part of their work, serve immigrants and address questions of violence. Participants also needed to willingly discuss their involvement in, and assessments of decision-making processes related to violence prevention and police interventions within their respective organizations (Glesne, 2016). I recognized that the work of NGOs serving immigrants is complex as they face challenges in providing services to a group that has been historically marginalized (Merken et al., 2023). NGO workers have first- and second-hand experiences as well as knowledge of the issues at hand making their voices critical to understanding the topic's complexities. I acknowledged that these groups may have their own agendas and goals that are separate from the research project. Despite being 'non-governmental,' some immigrant-serving NGOs may receive grants or funding from the Canadian government, influencing their relationship with police services and impacting their protocols for police involvement. This may entail being bound to legal requirements that involve partnership with local police services. As such, criteria in terms of the type of NGOs that staff were working for were kept flexible in hopes of retrieving rich data from varying perspectives.

Recruitment began in September 2023 and ended in February 2024. Recruitment was initially limited to Ottawa given its high immigration population and my location, but due to lack of responsiveness, the sample pool was expanded to include all of Ontario. I sent recruitment emails to general emails listed on the official websites of NGOs and to any administrative staff-specific emails listed. I posted my recruitment poster on LinkedIn and searched for NGOs with active profiles, directly messaging current employees with relevant work titles listed under the organization's profile. Interviewees were selected based on whoever responded willing to participate. Despite emailing over 30 NGOs across the province and emailing the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) to distribute the poster and email invitation to their member organizations, only a fraction emailed me back, some taking over a month to respond. Initial email communication with NGOs introduced the research project, explained its purpose, and expressed the intention to seek permission to conduct interviews with staff members from their organization. Follow-up emails were sent 1-3 months after initial emails were sent out. Sending direct messages via LinkedIn was more useful as potential interviewees would respond as soon as within 24 hours. I turned to snowball sampling as it was useful for obtaining contacts who were responsive and had connections to potential participants or were potential participants themselves. This sped up recruitment and allowed for the development of important connections who could reach out to strong participants as staff from NGOs collaborate on various community projects and share seats on inter-organizational committees.

Having a range of 6-12 intended participants allowed for flexibility in recruitment while ensuring an adequate sample size for data collection and analysis. Completing 12 interviews was the goal as scholars indicate that this number is ideal for gathering strong data but given how rich and insightful responses were while recruitment was slow, it was decided that 6 interviews was

enough (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Setting a range accommodated potential variations in participant availability and increased the likelihood of achieving the desired sample size. This sample size allowed for an in-depth exploration and analysis of participants' perspectives, experiences, and decision-making processes. It provided enough data to gain meaningful insights into the research topic, while still being manageable within the limited resources and timeframe of a master's thesis. In addition to this the unresponsiveness of NGOs can be attributed to understaffing and staff being overworked (Faller et al., 2018). A couple of email responses also affirmed this as administrative staff would reply indicating that no one would be available for an interview due to shortage of staff and highly limited availabilities.

Most interviewees were based in Ottawa due to recruitment beginning in this city. Snowball sampling allowed for the recruitment of participants that resulted in three interviews. Contacting potential participants via LinkedIn led to two interviews and one interviewee was recruited via email. I completed six interviews in total: five with staff from Ottawa-based NGOs and one from a Toronto-based NGO. Two interviews were with workers from the same NGO. One of these workers, however, clarified that they would not be speaking on their organization's behalf (i.e. they made it clear that their views did not represent their organization's). The Toronto-based NGO catered to a specific language/cultural community. Of the organizations based in Ottawa, two provided services catered to immigrants with one specifically catering to women immigrants, one provided victim support services, and one provided shelter services. For the interview with the NGO providing victim services, a joint interview was conducted with two staff members who were coworkers. Out of the six participants interviewed, one was a man, and the remainder were all women. Half of the participants were racial minorities with one being Black and two being of Middle Eastern descent. Occupations included two clinical counsellors

(one woman with a social work background and one male psychologist), one woman in a leadership role for her VAW team, one woman in a managerial position at a women's shelter, one woman executive director, and for the joint interview, one executive director and one program coordinator. Interviewees had three or more years of experience in the field. By the fifth interview, responses began sounding repetitive, and given recruitment challenges but rich data, recruitment ended shortly after the sixth interview.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection for this research was done through in-depth, semi-structured interviews between October 2023 and March 2024. Transcription began at the end of April 2024 and was completed at the start of the following month. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Glesne (2016, p. 109) asserts that interviews need to be held in a “convenient, available, appropriate” location for participants, so I asked participants if they preferred to conduct the interviews in-person at a location most convenient for them or via Zoom. Prior to the interviews, I informed participants of the research goals, discussed how the interview would unfold, and asked for their consent to have their responses audio recorded. After receiving informed consent, I began the interview. The length of the interviews varied between 30 and 60 minutes.

Methodologically, the critical paradigm emphasizes the use of qualitative methods that enable a deep understanding of the “the reality behind the fronts that people present” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 64). For this thesis, qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews were used to explore the protocols and decision-making processes of immigrant-serving NGOs. Conducting such interviews was important for ensuring that participants can speak without feeling any form of judgement in how they go about responding to questions (Hammersley, 2013). Methods like this allow for the exploration of the perspectives, beliefs, and

attitudes of immigrant-serving NGOs, as well as the broader social, cultural, and political contexts that shape their work.

The decision to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews was made to understand how the legal consciousness of NGO workers influences the decision to involve police/law enforcement in cases of immigrant victims of D/IPV. To understand their legal consciousness, I could not access participants' thoughts while they were interacting with clients and navigating police responses. Thus, the interview process alone made the legal consciousness of NGO workers accessible as participants were given the chance to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Barriball and While (1994) note that semi-structured interviews are ideal for exploring complex issues that may be sensitive in nature as they "enable probing for more information and clarification of answers" (p. 330). Conducting interviews with NGO staff helped me to understand their relationship with law enforcement and policing, revealing how interventions are navigated. Indeed, their perspectives provide important insight and contribute to debates about whether police interventions are adequate for cases of D/IPV among immigrants (Aspinall et al., 2024; Giesbrecht et al., 2023; Hanley et al. 2019). Interviewees were given the opportunity to expand on and clarify their responses resulting in the varied emphasis on certain issues surrounding law enforcement and police intervention. For instance, some focused more on the shortcomings of police responses, citing specific cases, while others explored alternatives to law enforcement.

As a researcher, it was important for me to approach these individuals with humility and respect, recognizing that their experiences and perspectives are valuable and should be centered in the research process. This involved recognizing the power imbalances that can exist between the researcher and the researched and actively working to address these imbalances through a

collaborative and respectful dialogue that centers the voices and perspectives of these communities and organizations (Sprague, 2005). Being the one to conduct interviews, it was important to not reinforce this by imposing research guidelines in which participants' responses were recorded and transcribed. To address this, I made it clear in the consent form that they could revoke their consent for any part of the interview, in which case I would delete the recorded data for the portion they wished to have removed. To remain transparent, I outlined that the purpose of recording participants was to ensure accuracy and allow for thorough analysis. This was also verbally communicated at the start of interviews in which I confirmed with participants that they consented to being recorded. Participants were also offered a copy of their audio recording should they wish to listen back and revise their responses such that they felt accurately heard. Through exploring the question of power in social research, Sprague (2005) argues against a misguided belief that researchers can easily turn their power over to research subjects by "giving voice" to the disempowered (p. 61). This view, she argues, does not recognize the complexities of power relations as research subjects do possess some power and can sometimes inhabit more powerful positions than researchers. However, regardless of social position and status, Sprague asserts that researchers still retain control over the research process. This is something I aimed to recognize as a researcher who has control over how data is analyzed and interpreted.

Notably, I understood that empirical material is not neutral or objective, but rather is shaped by power relations, social structures, and cultural contexts. Thus, a critical approach was used to interrogate the ways knowledge production reflects broader societal influences and asymmetries of power (Glesne, 2016; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Sprague (2005) explains how qualitative research is not just about the people you interview and providing insight into how

they are positioned into systems and structure, but what are the things that intersect to produce their understanding of the world. Hence, there was the need to approach empirical material with a critical eye and to question any underlying assumptions or biases that may have been present. I recognized that empirical material is not simply a representation of reality, but rather is a construction shaped by the perspectives of those who produce it and the contexts in which it is produced (Glesne, 2016). As a researcher, my role was facilitating the production of this knowledge, rather than owning it myself. This involved engaging in ongoing dialogue with participants throughout the research process while being open to feedback and critique.

Open-ended questions were asked allowing participants to share their insights and provide detailed narratives. Participants were encouraged to discuss their knowledge, experiences, and opinions about the interactions between NGOs, immigrants experiencing D/IPV, and the police. The questions sought to explore topics such as the protocols followed by NGOs in cases involving police interventions, the factors influencing decision-making processes, challenges faced by NGOs, and the participants' perceptions of the role of the police in addressing violence among immigrants. Because the interest remained focused on capturing participants' understandings of immigrant experiences generally, questions specific to race, gender, and class were not asked. This unfortunately allowed participants to lean into the tendency to homogenise immigrant experiences, which will be discussed as a limitation later. Importantly, Glesne (2016) asserts that asking open-ended questions "allows respondents to tell their stories with as little interruption as possible" (p. 185). I would remain quiet a few seconds after participants concluded their responses to ensure that they were finished speaking and gave them chance to continue should they speak up again. Follow-up questions were then used to delve deeper into specific topics or to seek clarification on participants' responses. When

constructing the interview questions, I considered the following topics: the nature of the relationship (or lack thereof) between NGOs and law enforcement, NGO staffs' assessments of police interventions, how legal consciousness informed by race and culture shape protocols/policies regarding cases of immigrant D/IPV, and possible alternatives to police intervention/law enforcement. After reviewing questions, I decided to add alternative wording for one of the questions to garner a clearer response regarding legal obligations when it came to victim-facing work.

Given my lack of experience in conducting interviews for research purposes, holding interviews was not as easy as anticipated. I avoided asking interview questions by reading them aloud and attempted to ask them in a more conversational manner as a means of easing tension and with the hope of making participants feel comfortable enough to open up in their responses. Interview questions were asked in English but because English was a second language for some interviewees, I let them convey certain ideas and terms in languages that they were more comfortable speaking such as French and Arabic. Barriball and While (1994) note that semi-structured interviews are useful when accounting for language barriers. Thus, letting participants speak in whichever language they preferred throughout the interview was important as it allowed participants to provide concise responses and develop more confidence as the interview progressed. Since all interviews were conducted virtually, I easily took note of any points that I wanted to follow up on by being able to quickly type out notes on a separate document. I gained more confidence in keeping interviews conversational and open-ended as I completed each interview.

While interviews were fruitful and engaging, there were still limitations that influenced the depth and scope of the data collected. Given the nature of NGO work and staff possibly

working overtime, half of the interviews took place during the participants' working hours. Consequently, time constraints during some of the interviews have prevented a more comprehensive exploration of certain topics or nuances within participants' responses. Since some participants were more comfortable speaking languages other than English, language barriers may have hindered communication or led to misunderstandings, particularly given the diverse backgrounds of immigrant-serving NGO staff. Upon reviewing and coding interview transcriptions, it became evident that certain themes may have been underrepresented due to these limitations. I realized that would have been a need for more probing or follow-up questions during interviews to delve deeper into participants' experiences and perspectives.

Additionally, the inherent complexity of the issues, including the sensitive nature of discussing D/IPV and the potential implications of police involvement, may have affected participants' willingness to engage fully in the interview process (Glesne, 2016). The dynamic relationship between immigrant-serving NGOs and law enforcement, particularly in the context of government funding and grant dependencies, adds another layer of complexity that may have influenced participants' perceptions and responses during the interviews. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) describe, rather than engaging in "impression management as part of the everyday setting," participants would have instead been "coping with an interpersonal relation in a non-routine situation" (pp. 108, 109). During interviews, there was, at times, a sense of hesitancy when it came to critiques of police and law enforcement in general. While reviewing the transcriptions, it also became apparent that participants' responses were influenced by their organizational contexts and broader socio-political dynamics, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual experiences with structural factors (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Glesne, 2016). These realizations demonstrated the importance of contextualizing

participants' narratives within broader systems of power and oppression, and the need for reflexivity in interpreting and analyzing the data.

3.4 Analysis of Material

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Three rounds of thematic coding took place allowing me to code with more ease as I had a better idea of what themes to expect already. The three full rounds of coding allowed me to engage with the data meaningfully, allowing me to identify relevant and important themes. I used an abductive approach in my analysis as it allowed for the clarification of the relationship between theory, method, and observation (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Since I was following a critical approach, abductive analysis was used because it offers a way to strategically engage with both the empirical data and theoretical framework, allowing for an open-ended exploration of how legal consciousness manifests among NGO workers supporting immigrant victims of D/IPV.

Following such an approach also involved being reflexive about my own positionality and how my values, beliefs, and assumptions may shape my research. I recognized that my role as a researcher is not to impose my own priorities or critical perspectives of police structures, but rather to engage in an ongoing, collaborative process that is responsive to these organizations' needs and concerns. This approach helped ensure that the research remains participant-centered and responsive to their realities rather than being overly determined by my preconceptions (Glesne, 2016). Using an abductive analysis was key as Tavory and Timmermans (2014) assert that it allows theoretical interpretations to remain grounded in the empirical material while also encouraging a consideration of alternative explanations. Thus, I sought to employ their criteria used for the ensuring the success of abductive analysis which involved assessing the following: (1) *fit* of the data by confirming that the theoretical claims regarding legal consciousness were

strongly supported by participants' real-world experiences; (2) *plausibility* of how the theoretical framework, particularly the structural dimensions of legal consciousness, aligns with the observed patterns in the data while also considering other potential theories that might offer competing explanations; (3) *relevance* of the research and its impact on the broader community of immigrant-serving NGOs, aligning with a goal of contributing meaningful insights (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

The first round of coding consisted of open coding in which I familiarized myself with the data and took notes summarizing each interview, highlighting anything intriguing and insightful. This helped prepare me to organize and categorize the data. Open coding involved breaking down the interview transcripts into meaningful "segments" and assigning descriptive labels or codes to identify key concepts, themes, and patterns (Terry et al., 2017, p. 19). Through this process, I sought to remain open to emergent themes and ideas, allowing the data to speak for itself without imposing preconceived notions or biases. As I progressed through the open coding phase, I encountered a range of perspectives and experiences shared by participants, which enriched my understanding of the complexities inherent in NGO protocols regarding police interventions in cases of D/IPV among immigrants. For instance, some participants had experience working in countries like the United States and Lebanon, which informed their assessment of current interventions in Canada.

For the second round of coding, I identified subthemes and used them to categorize codes. I began to explore the relationships between the initial codes and identify broader themes or patterns within the data. This involved grouping related codes together and examining how they intersected or overlapped to form cohesive themes or concepts. For instance, the data revealed patterns related to client fears and misinformation that participants would have to

address, resulting in codes such as *fear of deportation* and *misconceptions about NGOs and police* being grouped into the subtheme “Clients Being Fearful and Misinformed.” This would later be used to analyze the broader theme of NGO workers’ role and relationship to their clients identified in the third round of coding and would indicate that participants’ legal consciousness is shaped by racial, cultural, and systemic biases faced by immigrant clients demonstrating how second-order legal consciousness manifests. Thus, I aimed to uncover underlying structures and connections that informed the legal consciousness of immigrant-serving NGOs regarding police involvement in D/IPV cases. This stage of coding allowed me to identify more recurrent themes such as power dynamics, organizational priorities, and perceptions of police legitimacy, which shaped the protocols and practices of these NGOs.

The final round of coding organized subthemes into major themes such as NGO workers’ role and relationship to their clients and navigating institutional constraints. This is where coding became more selective as themes were refined into a coherent analytical framework, organizing them in a logical and structured manner. I prioritized the most significant themes and selected representative quotes from the data to illustrate each theme. The refined themes offer a lens through which the interactions between NGO workers, police, and immigrant clients can be analyzed, showing how these workers advocate for culturally sensitive, trauma-informed approaches that both support and critique the role of police in D/IPV interventions. The data was reviewed to ensure that the chosen themes accurately captured the essence of participants’ experiences and perspectives. Through this process of coding and analysis, I was able to uncover the underlying factors and dynamics that shape the protocols and practices of these organizations, shedding light on their role in addressing this pressing issue.

Throughout the stages of coding, I encountered challenges in managing the volume of qualitative data generated from the interviews. Sorting through the transcripts and identifying meaningful units of analysis required close attention to detail and considerable time investment as each interview was rich in data. To address this, I used a qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti) that allowed me to categorize, highlight, and annotate segments of the data, helping to organize insights methodically. Ensuring consistency and reliability in the coding process also proved to be a demanding task, as interpretations of the data could vary depending on individual perspectives and biases. For instance, different types of critiques towards police were coded separately such as “need for police to be more approachable” and “need for cultural responsiveness/awareness” but I had also created a broader code titled “negative assessments of/interactions with police” which was meant to capture any instance in which participants’ spoke negatively about police. This resulted in a lot of overlap that caused confusion as I would overlook what were actual critiques of police versus what were instances in which participants had been describing negative interactions with police that took place while on the job. Renaming and writing clear descriptions reminded me of what each code was meant to capture.

Simultaneously, when coding instances of participants describing their clients’ experiences with law enforcement, rather than coding data to frame how NGO workers *perceive* their clients’ relationship to the law, I coded them in terms of just being different immigrant experiences (e.g., “immigrant experiences of discrimination”). This became problematic as it resulted in slippages throughout the analysis in which I would analyze immigrant experiences when the scope of this study focuses on NGO workers. Receiving feedback that highlights these slippages, and recognizing that I only interviewed NGO workers, served as an important reminder of how I could not make conclusions about the experiences of immigrants beyond the

perceptions of NGO workers. Revisiting the analysis and flagging where I spoke about immigrant's/client's legal consciousness as opposed to the legal consciousness of participants helped me address and avoid this in future drafts. Indeed, periodically revisiting and refining the coding framework while drafting the analysis helped minimize inconsistencies and ambiguity.

Research is never value-free, and the values, beliefs, and political perspectives of the researcher can influence the research process, the knowledge produced, and the implications of that knowledge (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). This highlights the importance of engaging in a range of strategies to mitigate any potential biases or external pressures that may impact the research process, or the knowledge produced. As someone who is especially critical of the law and police structures, I recognize that this may have influenced the research questions I ask or the way I interpreted the data in a way that focuses on extracting empirical material that is also critical of such structures. Therefore, it was important to engage in reflexivity and to critically reflect on my own positionality, biases, and assumptions throughout the research process. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) emphasize the importance of researchers taking a reflective and interpretive approach towards their empirical material to create results that can challenge established knowledge and thus inspire new ways of understanding. By setting my beliefs aside, I resisted internal pressures and allowed myself to be open to having my understandings of the world challenged. Conclusively, thematic analysis allowed me to use a critical lens which sought to uncover underlying power structures, racial dynamics, and cultural influences that shape the decision-making processes of NGOs serving immigrants in relation to police interventions in cases of immigrant D/IPV.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial in all stages of research, including the design, implementation, and dissemination of research findings. I was required to submit an ethics application to the Ethics Review Board since I planned to conduct interviews. This allowed me to demonstrate commitment to ethical research practices, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy and agency (Laine, 2000). In terms of procedural ethics, I ensured that my research followed all relevant ethical guidelines and regulations, such as obtaining informed consent from participants, protecting their confidentiality and privacy, and ensuring that any possibility of the research causing harm is minimized.

When conducting interviews, I tried to be mindful of power differentials between myself and the research participants. I sought to engage in research practices that are respectful and equitable by receiving input and feedback from research participants and other stakeholders in the field to ensure that their perspectives are reflected in the findings. I also acknowledged that my role as a researcher is not to speak on behalf of these participants, but rather to engage in a collaborative and respectful dialogue that centers their voices and perspectives. Additionally, a commitment to reflexivity and self-awareness of the researcher's own positionality and biases is crucial. This included an openness to learning from the communities and organizations being researched while acknowledging and addressing any power imbalances that may exist and ensuring that their voices and perspectives are central to the research (Kovach, 2009).

Throughout the research process and in drafting the thesis, I encountered a range of ethical issues, such as protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants, ensuring respectful presentation of findings, and positively impacting the communities studied. To mitigate potential harms, I engaged in meaningful dialogue with participants, recognizing the

diversity and complexity of their knowledge and experiences while working to decolonize my research practices. Within the critical paradigm for this thesis, I recognize that the way in which the researcher speaks is crucial, as it can have implications for how participants may respond and feel perceived. As a researcher, I saw myself as a collaborator and facilitator of dialogue with immigrant-serving NGOs and immigrant communities. Therefore, I aim to speak in a way that is respectful, open, and responsive to the voices and perspectives of these groups. As a researcher, it was important to engage with the communities and organizations being researched in a safe, respectful, and collaborative context. This involved engaging in dialogue with immigrant-serving NGOs in their own spaces, such as community centres, where they feel comfortable and empowered to share their perspectives. It was important to also engage with other stakeholders involved in addressing immigrant D/IPV such as research consultants and policymakers, to understand the broader social, political, and legal context in which these issues arise.

3.6 Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained from the interviews conducted for this research project, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of six participants may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a wider population of NGO staff working with immigrants experiencing D/IPV. While efforts were made to recruit a diverse range of participants in terms of gender, race, occupation, and years of experience, the limited number of interviews may not capture the full spectrum of perspectives within the field. This also may indicate that data saturation was not reached resulting in the inability to grasp the issue in its entirety from varying perspectives. The recruitment process encountered challenges in securing participation from a broader range of organizations, potentially leading to a bias in the sample towards organizations that were more receptive to the research topic. Also, the majority of

participants identified as women, which may have skewed the perspectives presented in the data. The focus of the study on NGOs in Ontario may limit the transferability of the findings to other geographical contexts or jurisdictions. The unique socio-political landscape and organizational dynamics of Ontario's immigrant-serving NGOs may not be representative of those in other regions or provinces.

Critically, the nature of the interview questions means that they do not account for how the race, gender, or class of immigrant clients shape NGO workers' responses. This unfortunately allowed participants to lean into the tendency to homogenise immigrant experiences despite the intention of open-ended questions being that participants could render in-depth responses. Not accounting for race in the interview questions is especially problematic when considering discussion in the literature review on how perceptions of the police vary based on one's racialized experiences (Syed et al., 2018; Sprott & Doob, 2014; Chu & Song, 2008). Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, participants may have been inclined to provide certain responses. This highlights another limitation: the potential for social desirability bias which may have led participants to provide responses that they perceived as favorable or socially acceptable, rather than fully expressing their true perspectives or experiences thereby influencing the accuracy and authenticity of the data collected. Since interviews also relied on self-reporting by participants, there is a risk of recall bias or inaccuracies in the recollection of past experiences or events.

Analysis

This chapter is structured to systematically explore the themes that emerged from the data, each contributing to an understanding of the intersection between legal consciousness, race, legal hegemony, and the practices of NGO workers. I examine how NGO staff witness and navigate police interventions, cultural responsiveness, and the experiences of newcomers in Ontario. This examination brings to light how the legal consciousness of NGO workers informs their decision-making process and interactions with clients. I argue that legal consciousness, cultural hegemony, and trauma-informed practices intersect to shape the protocols and decision-making processes within these organizations. I critically assess how power dynamics both perpetuate and challenge existing power structures and inequalities within the legal system in the context of D/IPV cases involving immigrants.

4.1 Interactions with the Police: Mixed Reviews

In this section, I unpack how in their work to support immigrant victims of D/IPV, NGO workers in Ontario must navigate complex relationships with local police services. These interactions are critical for participants, as they can significantly influence the safety and well-being of their clients. Notably, participants have explained that these interactions have left them with varying impressions of the police. As participants described their impressions, three things remained consistent: (1) when discussing positive impressions, participants were mostly referring to the police as individual officers, (2) when discussing negative impressions, they were often referring to the police as an institution, and (3) regardless of any critiques, police work and services were deemed necessary for interventions. I analyze how these impressions are informed by participants' legal consciousness. I suggest that the concept of legal consciousness helps us understand how the law permeates from everyday life into the participants' professional

workplaces, as they deem police services to be necessary and needed to assist victims, despite the systemic flaws in policing (Ewick & Silbey, 1998).

4.1.1 Distinguishing Between Individual Officers and Police Institutions

In the participants' descriptions of their impressions of police, it became evident that there was a differentiation between talking about police officers as individuals and police services as institutions. This differentiation is important for understanding their interactions with law enforcement as well as the role legal consciousness plays in these encounters. Positive impressions were often shaped by interactions with individual police officers who were assessed by participants as being competent and successful when assisting victims. Only one participant, Charlotte, a manager at a shelter for victims of D/IPV, expressed mixed reviews of police officers, stating: "it depends on the officer, some are more informed than others on supporting immigrant women fleeing violence." Negative impressions were depicted as critiques of police services as institutions, along with the criminal justice system. While individual officers may foster positive and meaningful responses through their actions, the broader police system often remains a source of frustration and disappointment for participants.

When participants recounted positive experiences, they tended to focus on the actions of individual police officers, as participants could experience law enforcement in action, which often contrasted with their more negative perceptions of police services as an institution. Multiple participants expressed appreciation for officers who went beyond their minimal duties to offer personalized assistance, which in turn fostered a sense of trust and confidence in these officers. This helped participants view the legal system as a potentially supportive and just mechanism, demonstrating a legal consciousness of standing *with the law* (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). These officers were described as patient, helpful, and responsive to the needs of victims. As

Carolina, the team lead for a cultural organization's VAW counselling, mentioned: "We've found some great police **officers** [emphasis added]. Very helpful, and patient with us and with the clients." Expressing such appreciation highlights how participants' perceptions of law enforcement were already critical to begin with, as positive interactions with individual police officers were presented as a pleasant surprise. In a similar sentiment, when describing interactions with police, Mary, an executive director for a gender-based organization, was quick to clarify and explain:

It's not all negative stories with the police, no. There have been many times that we've called the police, and they have responded and taken action. So, I must be clear: that it's not always that we have negative experiences from the police.

Here, Mary's assertion that interactions with police are not always negative foreshadows the critical point made by participants to be discussed later: that despite systemic flaws, police interventions are necessary given certain positive accounts of police involvement. Clarifying that "It's not all negative stories" indicates how Mary already understood that expectations of police were low. Nevertheless, the characterization of police responsiveness included police officers being able to exchange information with NGO staff, to demonstrate sensitivity towards victims, and to offer support services. This responsiveness presented a more approachable and accessible face of policing. Carolina describes this when she states:

I find that being able to give them some initial information has been helpful and that if the police officer, be it female or male, approaches the woman with sensitivity and lays out what their role is, what they can look at doing in terms of listening to her story and gathering from her story, what is in their legal capacity to do, what role do they have in that capacity.... They'll touch on finding support services, which includes [NGO] where they're receiving services with us and looking at how to document things. So, I found some really good police officers...I found that interactions where there's emotional support or accompaniment or some introduction to what's happening had better outcomes in general than when there wasn't.

In instances as described above, the police become more approachable, not just through their procedural actions, but through their ability to adapt their roles to offer victims personalized

support. Accounts such as Carolina's demonstrate a more positive legal consciousness in which law enforcement is perceived as something that could provide justice and protection when applied by officers who understand the complexities of immigrant victims' needs (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Thus, these positive interactions are significant because they contribute to participants' understanding of how the police can function in practice such that they represent the law as what Ewick and Silbey (1998) describe as "a conventionally recognized account of legal processes and justice" (p. 221). Another participant, Aaliyah, who is a program coordinator for an organization providing victim services, exhibits this legal consciousness when she recounts a situation where an officer provided immediate linguistic and culturally appropriate support to a client:

There was one situation where a client needed home safety items and, she was Arabic-speaking, we were able to coordinate with the police department. The officer there actually happened to speak Arabic, so that was really great. I myself speak Arabic, so it really facilitated the support pretty quickly and we were able to get the information we needed to ensure that we were able to send her the supports that she needed.

As Aaliyah suggests, having linguistically and culturally competent officers is important because it can allow participants such as herself to help immigrant victims engage more confidently with the legal system. This aligns with the study by Merken et al. (2023) which suggests that offering victims who are immigrant women personalized support greatly impacts their "ability and likelihood to seek out help from formal supports like IPV service provider agencies" (p. 160). By describing the officer as one who "actually happened" to communicate the same language as the client, Aaliyah suggests that this was not something common, highlighting, once again, that expectations of how police's ability to respond in a culturally sensitive way were low. Interactions with these individual officers and their responsiveness, renders police interventions as something that can be beneficial, contributing to a more positive legal consciousness. Thus,

police officers' responsiveness may render police services as a tool to use when responding to immigrant victims in which participants can stand alongside their clients *before* and *with the law*.

Contrastingly, when participants discussed negative impressions, they were more likely to refer to the police system or services as a whole institution. These critiques were often centered on systemic issues such as the violent, traumatizing nature of police work and cultural/institutional insensitivity towards the unique challenges faced by immigrant victims. As Hailey, who was joint interviewed alongside Aaliyah and is the executive director for their organization, explained:

...it's a big undertaking, because of what they see. They get very jaded, right? And because of all the trauma that they see constantly. They're responding to car crashes, so much death, suicide, horrific things, children who are sick and who pass away. And so, when you do this work for so many years, you tend to sort of think the worst of humanity.

Recognising the violent and dehumanising nature of policing, Hailey already carried the expectation that police responses were not going to be adequate for victims. She also described later in her interview how the police system is vital to the community but simultaneously acknowledged that systemic issues persist, making it difficult for victims to feel fully supported by law enforcement as an institution: "I don't think that policing is really known for a trauma and violence informed response. And, they really have to change that culture." Similarly, Amir, a clinical counsellor working for an organization specializing in immigrant services, highlighted the issue of the police "holding on to that particular way of working through things," which can prevent them from effectively engaging with diverse populations. Amir stressed the difference between policing "as in holding a hammer versus actually being of service," suggesting that a shift in policing philosophy towards wellness and being of service to victims, rather than mere enforcement, could lead to more positive outcomes. Similarly, Giwa (2018) calls for the inclusion of police social workers, who are trained to understand and address the complexities of

human behavior and community dynamics, thus promoting a more service-oriented approach within policing.

In her critique of the police, Mary outlines the various improvements needed for police services to respond better to immigrant victims:

The police need to be more approachable, more understanding, more trusting, more believing of survivors—immigrant survivors of violence—and doing due diligence and getting interpretation when needed because that is a huge piece. ...also, to have diversity in the police force also. That is something that would also bring in hopefully, some of that culture and yeah, I think there should be more diversity in the police force too.

Mary's emphasis on police being more approachable and understanding resonates with the findings of Giwa et al. (2014) in the dialogue between police and youth of color, which highlighted the importance of building trust and understanding between police and marginalized communities. Legal consciousness, in this context, is shaped by the tension between the necessity of law enforcement for safety and the recognition of its flaws.

The participants' impressions of police indeed reflect how legal consciousness is not just about individual encounters; it encompasses the broader, often unspoken, understandings and beliefs that people hold about the legal system (Silbey, 2005). The criticisms participants voiced demonstrate deeper awareness of how the police system's structural limitations and ingrained culture can hinder justice and support for vulnerable populations such as immigrants (Giwa et al, 2014). This awareness contributes to a form of legal consciousness that recognizes law enforcement as both a potential source of protection and a catalyst for further harm or as Sibley (2005) explains, "both promises and fails to live up to its promises" (p. 360). Negative perceptions of the police system specifically reflect a consciousness in which police services are understood to be institutions that often fail to fully address the needs of NGO workers assisting immigrant victims. Consequently, staff may carry a sense of disillusionment and caution when

engaging with law enforcement, especially considering their awareness of how the current system may not provide the trauma-informed responses that victims need.

The distinction between positive experiences with individual officers and negative perceptions of the police system reflects a deeper tension within legal consciousness. On the one hand, participants recognized the humanity and helpfulness of individual officers, which contributed to a sense of security and trust. On the other hand, the systemic shortcomings of the police services often left participants feeling frustrated and disillusioned by the ability of law enforcement to provide justice on a broader scale. This tension highlights the complexity of legal consciousness among NGO workers. It illustrates how legal consciousness is not monolithic but rather multifaceted, shaped by a range of experiences that can be both positive and negative (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). This duality demonstrates that while individuals may have constructive interactions with specific officers, their overall perception of police services can still be deeply critical, especially when the system fails to address their needs or perpetuates injustice.

4.1.2 Unapproachability of Police as an Institutional Shortcoming

Building on earlier discussion of how participants differentiate between individual officers and the broader police system, this section delves into the institutional shortcoming that participants identified as unapproachability within policing. While individual officers may exhibit empathy and professionalism, the overarching system is often perceived as failing to adapt to the diverse needs of immigrant communities. These critiques reflect a broader concern that, despite the professionalism of some officers, the institutional framework of policing often remains ill-equipped to address the cultural complexities and specific challenges faced by immigrant clients (Aspinall et al., 2024). For instance, some participants noted that police services are not always responsive to the needs of immigrant clients or may not fully understand

the complexities of D/IPV in immigrant communities. Bhuyan and Bragg (2021) discuss this as well when mentioning how service providers would report that both cultural sensitivity training and general training for responding to domestic violence were lacking. This can create additional barriers for NGO workers, as they address challenges to ensure that their clients receive the support and protection they need. As Amir expressed while discussing how officers should approach victims of D/IPV: “It’s quite difficult when there is judgment.”

Cultural insensitivity, as highlighted in multiple interviews, illustrates how racialized power structures, shaped by hegemonic Canadian culture rooted in white settler colonialism, influence NGO workers’ legal consciousness and the ways in which they understand their clients’ experiences as immigrants. The failure of the police to understand or respect cultural differences demonstrates how law enforcement may be applied in a way that privileges the dominant culture while marginalizing others. This contributes to a legal consciousness that sees law enforcement as culturally biased and, therefore, less legitimate, or trustworthy rendering it unapproachable. Hailey expressed frustration of this by describing how “society—like our social norms—are still to blame the victims for all the violence that’s committed against them” and suggested that police biases may be informed by such social norms:

There’s other biases, right? And stereotypes that come up when there’s people who are newcomers and, you know, like that, “that culture is more violent” and things like that. So, there’s additional shame put on victims or even, you know, stereotypes of the submissive woman who’s following their husbands...

In their discussions of the police system, participants continuously pointed out the failure to account for the contextual nuances and language barriers that are critical to effectively supporting immigrant victims. This also stages a recurring issue discussed by several participants: the inadequate use of interpretation services by the police when responding to incidents involving immigrant women who do not speak the official languages.

Participants stressed that having interpretation services readily available is crucial for victims to feel supported and understood because it influences the willingness of clients to engage with the police and the broader legal system. Charlotte expressed that access to language interpretation should be “on the spot” for police to better assist victims, considering how the absence of interpretation services can lead to “critical delays” and the possibility of incorrect decisions being made based on assumptions rather than a full understanding of the situation. Though police have made attempts to overcome language barriers, these instances seem to be exceptions rather than the norm. Aaliyah noted the importance of “language access to their support,” stressing that without it, cases can “fall through the cracks” due to the time it takes to arrange for language interpreters. The delays in securing interpretation services can prevent victims from fully participating in the legal process, as Carolina pointed out that it can take “hours for the person to come to the home to take the statement.” Participants understood the logistical challenges posed by language barriers as something that further diminishes the victim’s sense of agency and trust in police.

Mary expressed her frustrations when describing how language interpreters could help alleviate any form of misunderstanding:

...so many assumptions, so many wrong decisions are taken because [the police] haven’t really grasped the reality of the situation, and a lot of it is based on assumption and whatever the person who speaks the language better tells them.

Mary and other participants suggested that cultural insensitivity may manifest in the form of biases and stereotypes held by police officers, which can result in immigrant women feeling disbelieved or disregarded when reporting D/IPV. Mary emphasized that this situation “happens a lot” and incorrect assumptions and decisions are often made “because [the police] haven’t really grasped the reality of the situation” potentially leading to inadequate responses from law

enforcement. From the perspective of legal consciousness, language barriers highlight how law, as embodied by law enforcement, can be not just an instrument of protection, but also a source of exclusion. NGO workers may internalize the belief that the criminal justice system is not accessible to immigrants given such barriers, which can influence their willingness to seek police assistance in the future. This complicates the work of NGOs, who would then have to address the consequences of these misinterpretations. The lack of institutional measures requiring cultural sensitivity indicates a broader systemic failure that fosters unapproachability and unresponsiveness in policing subsequently feeding into individual officers' biases by allowing individual stereotypes (e.g., assumptions that immigrant communities have inherently violent cultural practices) to remain unchallenged. As Merken et al. (2023) suggest, applying a client-centered approach that "considers the survivors' standpoint," and includes cultural sensitivity training, transfers power to clients and acknowledges how structures and systems, including policing, may pose a threat to client safety (p. 161). However, this approach remains largely absent in policing institutions, leading to unchecked biases and stereotypes that negatively impact NGO workers' perception of them.

Mary observes that many immigrant women have faced gender bias and dismissal by police in their home countries describing how:

Many of them also have had very negative experiences with the police in their countries of origin where they have not received good or fair response based on the fact that they're women, and, you know, either being disregarded or not be believed. So, they come with that negative experience of the police and feel that this might be the same here as well. So, that's another issue.

This account of women being disregarded or not believed by the police due to their gender illustrates to Mary that there is a disconnection from law enforcement reflecting a broader pattern of gender bias within legal systems. Her comment also implies that for immigrant women, their

experiences of distrust in the police are a form of legal alienation that NGO workers must address. Failure to have a female police officer present is another factor to this institutional shortcoming of unapproachability, as Carolina pointed out the following:

Sometimes women are afraid to call police because they know a male officer is going to come to the door. So, sometimes in their mind: “the male officer is going to line up with my male partner, and they’re going to be allies and they’re gonna be against me.” That’s been one of the fears that the women have.

Mary and Carolina’s statements point to a disconnect between law enforcement practices and the lived realities of immigrant women, a gap that NGOs often continuously work to bridge. This aligns with Silbey (2005) who discusses how legal consciousness can be shaped by gendered experiences as women may feel marginalized within legal frameworks. The concept of cultural hegemony helps explain how legal systems may prioritize male perspectives and experiences. As Chua and Engel (2019) suggest, the law operates within a framework that often reflects the interests of those in power, which historically has predominantly been men. Given their clients’ statuses as immigrants, there is also the added level of precarity surrounding citizenship. In this context, participants recognize that immigrant women may view law enforcement and the broader legal system as ineffective and potentially hostile, rendering the police unapproachable. The presence and assistance of NGO workers can bridge the gap, providing a layer of protection for clients while advocating for their needs.

The issue of disconnect is exacerbated when children are involved. Rana, another clinical counsellor, highlights:

And if there is abuse, just call the police and the police take the children. And that’s—it’s not the good way. It’s, maybe, the children deviate for doing something wrong. Maybe, they end up in the jail and using drugs or leave the school because we have also a client, from school, suffering from family, from immigration, from the culture shock.

In this quote, Rana discusses how detrimental it can be for children to be taken away should police be called, citing one of her organization’s own clients as an example. Her statement

suggests that not only does it impose a sense of failure and distraught on the parent, but it can also worsen the child's wellbeing. Suárez-Orozco et al. (2012) note that outcomes for immigrant children experiencing family separation varies based on "context and circumstances" suggesting that abrupt and poorly managed separation may further traumatize children (p. 640). The concern of child removal is critical because immigrants tend to not only come from countries where the dominant culture prioritizes family values, but more importantly, they have limited options of ensuring family safety given the precarity of their status (Merken et al., 2023; Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). This is something that NGO workers must acknowledge while navigating police intervention and when considering the legal obligation to file a report should minors be involved. Participants would go on to highlight that the recognition of culture and family values is also something that law enforcement and the legal system fail to account for.

Consequently, participants across multiple interviews emphasized the need for ongoing training to address these biases. In recognizing the violent nature of police work, participants would suggest that the biases police officers bring into their work, often shaped by exposure to trauma or stereotypes, impacts their ability to effectively engage with immigrant communities. For example, Hailey argued, "there needs to be training around, unlearning those, those things that they maybe bring to the role," suggesting that police officers need continuous education to avoid making sudden judgments based on stereotypes and went on to explain,

It's not just violence that we inflict on each other. And so, when they're coming into those situations, they have some of that baggage, right? Like that trauma that they're bringing from other cases, any of those preexisting biases and stereotypes too... the unconscious biases they maybe don't know that they have. So, there's a lot of work and it has to be ongoing learning, right?

This highlights the role of trauma and bias in shaping police interactions with marginalized/immigrant communities as perceived by NGO workers such as Hailey. This

perception highlights how systemic shortcomings within law enforcement structures, such as insufficient cultural humility and inadequate training, challenge the work of NGOs. The legal system may thus be depicted not just as a mechanism for justice but also as a site where racialized power structures are reproduced. It also reveals a legal consciousness informed by NGO worker's professional experiences navigating police interventions as they recognize that the biases held by police officers (whether conscious or unconscious) can obstruct justice and create additional barriers for the immigrant clients they support. NGO workers may, thus, foster a legal consciousness in which the police are not an ally to immigrant communities they serve but a mechanism of oppression (Chua & Engel, 2019). To put it simply, the prevalence of personal biases and the lack of cultural humility among police officers, as perceived by participants, complicates their interactions with immigrant communities which hinders the ability of NGO workers to navigate police intervention.

The general unapproachability of police officers is an overarching issue, as it indicates the likelihood of negative interactions with victims. Participants noted that clients who have attempted to interact with the police on their own often report feeling unheard and unsupported, discouraging them from seeking help in the future and further isolating them from potential support systems. As Mary explained, "immigrant and racialized women, we've come to realize, do not want to call the police when they do need to... there's that lack of trust in the police." Amir echoed this sentiment, describing how his clients would have "negative encounters with the police," and would report that "the police didn't do anything." Such negative experiences, especially among newcomers, complicates how NGO workers navigate police intervention as their clients may be deterred from future engagement with law enforcement. Similarly, Carolina pointed out that clients often share their experiences of negative interactions with police, noting

that “they didn’t feel listened to” when they sought help on their own. This sense of disregard from law enforcement not only undermines the trust between victims and police but, as the participants’ observations suggest, it contributes to a sense of alienation from the legal system reinforcing the perception that the legal system is inaccessible and unresponsive to their clients’ needs (Hertogh, 2018).

The perception of unapproachability is intensified by the lack of cultural competency within the police system. By emphasizing the need for “more diversity in the police force,” Mary is suggesting that increased representation could potentially lead to a more culturally sensitive approach to policing. This critique is not just about individual officers lacking cultural awareness; it is about an institutional failure to prioritize and implement policies that address these crucial aspects of service. She suggested that increasing diversity could help bring in “some of that culture” and make the police more relatable and understanding of the communities they serve. This, according to her, may lead to better communication and a more nuanced approach to cases involving immigrant and racialized women. Their calls for greater diversity within the police force and for more effective training indicate a resistance to racialized power structures. By advocating for change within the legal system, participants are engaging in a form of legal consciousness that is reformist and seeks to reshape law enforcement to be more inclusive and just (Chua & Engel, 2019). This resistance, however, also brings to light the deep-seated nature of the problem; it suggests that without significant structural changes, the law will continue to be perceived as an instrument of racialized power.

While the option to have a female police officer present is one way to increase approachability, Amir proposed that what might help alleviate the issue of being unapproachable is to change how the police physically appear to victims, “to come in in a civilian clothing that

might be helpful. If they would come without the sirens, that might be helpful possibly too.” By suggesting that police officers present themselves in a more casual manner, Amir highlights the disconnect between how the police are often perceived and how they should be perceived to effectively serve immigrant communities. Such recommendations highlight participants’ desire for law enforcement to actively work towards becoming more approachable by adopting practices that make them more relatable and less intimidating. Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) observation, that “typically we become aware of the law and our relationship to it only when the formal law—and the violence embedded in it—makes an appearance,” emphasizes this point (p. 244). The sight of police cars or the sound of sirens instinctively triggers a heightened awareness of the law’s authority, leading individuals to become wary of their own behavior in relation to the law’s power (Ewick & Silbey, 1998).

In their accounts, many participants seem to recognize that this inherent association between law enforcement and the potential for violence can exacerbate feelings of fear and alienation among immigrant and racialized communities, who may already be vulnerable due to their precarious social positions. It reflects a deeper understanding within the participants’ legal consciousness that the very appearance and demeanor of police officers can significantly impact the willingness of victims to engage with the legal system, and consequently, the overall effectiveness of police intervention. For instance, Carolina shared in her interview that she recognized that, “If someone is someone of color, they're going to be much less likely to call [the police] because there will probably be a white officer coming over...And due to their experiences of discrimination and racism and oppression, that is not a comfortable thing for them.” Indeed, her recognition of the racial dynamics between her clients and police officers demonstrates a legal consciousness in which law enforcement are part of a system made to criminalize and

surveil people of color (Giwa, 2018; Hill Collins, 2000). Similarly, after his comment about needing police to present themselves more casually, Amir proceeded to share an instance of a Muslim police officer of colour visiting a local mosque to speak with congregants and inform them of his role and explained,

I see the intention with it, and I see the actual benefit of building a community relationship. At the same time, there is that risk of if there are some people who, especially those who have negative experiences with polices like back home or even like here, I'm not sure how helpful that would be because the thing is that in that case, the police officer came in wearing the officer uniform.

For Amir, having a police officer of color appear at a mosque in uniform might not be beneficial given that the officer's race may not outweigh the fear associated with the uniform. Thus, there is recognition that the presence of racialized police officers in uniform alone does not negate their role within an institution that has been historically weaponized against marginalized communities (Chua & Engel, 2019). Again, this suggests that beyond cultural and linguistic training, there is a need for systemic changes in how police are presented to, and perceived by those they are meant to protect, which could lead to more positive and supportive interactions. As I unpack in the next subsection, these systemic issues contribute to a legal consciousness among participants that views the police system as a flawed, but also necessary institution.

4.1.3 Balancing Legal Consciousness and Professional Obligations

All participants expressed recognition of the role that police officers play in ensuring the safety of vulnerable individuals, particularly in cases involving D/IPV or repeated incidents of abuse. As highlighted in the interviews, the experiences with police officers are not entirely negative. For instance, Mary highlighted the police's unique position as the first point of contact in emergencies, noting: "the police are in an ideal, unique situation in the sense that they are there for 911 calls. A community organization is not a 911." This sentiment reinforces the idea

that while NGOs play a significant role in supporting victims, the police are often the first to arrive on the scene, providing immediate assistance that NGOs are not equipped to deliver. In this case, as NGO staff, participants alluded to a willingness to uphold institutional partnerships that their NGO might have with local police services.

Notably, police are seen as key decision-makers in the initial stages of crisis intervention. Rana described how police involvement is often the “first step” before other services come into play, demonstrating how the perception of the police as the primary upholders of safety with their actions setting the stage for subsequent support and recovery efforts. This perception is shaped by a structurally informed legal consciousness, where NGO workers recognize that, despite its limitations, law enforcement plays a critical role in maintaining public order and ensuring immediate safety. Thus, NGO workers and clients navigate a complex terrain where law enforcement is both a source of protection and a potential site of tension. They understand that while the police may not always be perfect, their involvement is often crucial in ensuring immediate safety and preventing further harm. Silbey (2005) explains that legal consciousness is shaped by the practical realities of how individuals interact with legal systems. In this case, despite any critiques, the practical need for police intervention in crisis situations creates a form of legal consciousness that views the police as indispensable for immediate protection, even if the broader system has limitations.

Participants frequently acknowledged the necessity of involving law enforcement in situations where victims of D/IPV face immediate danger. As Amir describes “immediate risk, that’s where police would be called.” When asked to what extent she believed that police involvement was needed, Rana responded by describing the police as, “Necessary, [especially if] the violence repeated many times.” Despite the reservations and critiques regarding the police,

there was a consensus among the NGO workers that police intervention is often indispensable. This perception is deeply rooted in the participants' legal consciousness which informs their understanding of when and why law enforcement, embodied by police action, must be engaged. Legal consciousness here is not just a reflection of how participants view legal actors, but it also speaks to how they navigate the tension between their critiques of the police and their recognition of the hegemonic role the police play in maintaining order and safety. Ewick and Silbey (1998) highlight that legal consciousness involves how individuals see themselves in relation to the law and how they make sense of the law's role in their lives. In this case, participants see the police as necessary, despite their critiques, because of the structural and hegemonic power the police hold as keepers of immediate safety and authority.

The reliance on police intervention is tied to a hegemonic understanding of its role in society (Silbey, 2005). The participants' legal consciousness reflects an internalized belief that, in situations of immediate danger, the police are the only actors with the power to protect victims and prevent further harm. This belief reveals how hegemonic power structures shape the participants' inability to imagine viable alternatives to police intervention. The idea that "the police are vital, in any and every community," according to Mary, reflects a broader recognition of law enforcement's role as a frontline response in crises. This belief aligns with the participants' legal consciousness, which is shaped by the understanding that, in certain situations, the police provide the necessary authority and power to intervene in ways that other services cannot (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Indeed, there is a hegemonic idea that positions the police as the primary and uncontested providers of security. This understanding teaches us that NGO workers' legal consciousness is not just about recognizing the role of the police in crisis situations but also

about how the hegemonic nature of the legal system limits their ability to conceptualize alternatives to police involvement, as will be discussed later.

Several participants went on to emphasize the cooperative and supportive relationship that can develop between NGOs and police officers. Hailey mentioned that they “don’t think we have challenges necessarily with the police,” and praised the intimate partner violence unit of their local police department for “working really hard.” This highlights a positive dynamic where both the police and NGOs work collaboratively to address the needs of victims, ensuring that they receive the necessary support. Hailey and Mary also noted in their respective interviews the practical aspects of working with the police, such as accompanying survivors to their homes to retrieve essential belongings under police protection. These interactions illustrate how law enforcement, despite being part of a broader legal system that has its shortcomings, is often seen as an indispensable partner in the effort to safeguard victims. The presence of police officers during such vulnerable moments reinforces the perception that police intervention is not only necessary but also an important part of the safety planning process.

4.2 Interactions with Victims: Workers as Mediators and Translators

In their interactions with victims, participants described how they would find themselves needing to address fear and misinformation often rooted in clients’ mistrust of law enforcement as a result of prior experiences with corrupt or unresponsive legal systems in their countries of origin. Specifically, participants discussed how they would have to alleviate any fears of deportation along with not being believed or helped should victims decide to report their abuse to the police. They also had to provide victims with clarification for any misconceptions about the law and the Canadian legal system. Participants also needed to be culturally responsive to the diverse needs of their clients, which they identified as a challenge.

Participants would describe how such fear and misinformation tend to not only be fueled by the victims' abusers but by friends and family within their community as well. From these discussions, it became apparent that NGO workers chose to assume the roles of mediators and translators of the law. This involves not only explaining the rights and protections available within the Canadian legal system but also demystifying the consequences of engaging with law enforcement. Thus, these fears and misconceptions about law enforcement, which participants characterize as the legal consciousness of immigrant clients, are mediated by participants whose legal consciousness deems law enforcement as necessary despite its flaws.

4.2.1 Translating Legal Knowledge

NGO workers must constantly work to address misconceptions and fears surrounding the legal system, acting as translators of legal knowledge for their clients. When doing so, one of the significant challenges they face is addressing the distrust in law enforcement that many immigrant clients carry over from their countries of origin (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). The interviews demonstrated that this inherited mistrust often manifests in misconceptions about the roles and intentions of various actors within the legal system, including the NGO workers themselves. As Amir pointed out, many clients initially seem to perceive him as aligned with law enforcement or even as an extension of the police: "...one of the concerns that when they come to the counseling session is that they think I'm the police or basically like that I'm on the side of the police and we tell them, no..." Such misconceptions create an initial barrier of distrust or hesitation for clients to fully engage with the services provided. Amir suggests that in order to sit down with clients and assist them, it is important to first clarify his role as an NGO worker so that they can have an easier time working together.

To address these misconceptions, NGO workers take on the role of translators; not necessarily in the sense of providing legally accurate information, but in mediating between language barriers, the legal system and clients' fears, concerns, and cultural backgrounds. Language barriers emerged as a significant issue for participants, particularly in the context of police interactions with immigrant victims. Participants expressed that these barriers not only hinder communication but also shape the way immigrant victims perceive law enforcement, its accessibility, and its capacity to deliver justice. The concept of second-order legal consciousness helps unpack how participants' interactions with clients, in which these perceptions are revealed, informs their own perceptions of law enforcement and of its effectiveness in serving immigrant communities. This is complicated when, in addition to the direct threats about immigration status, abusers may also exploit cultural and language barriers to further isolate their victims. Mary pointed out that this is exacerbated when,

...there's inadequate use of interpretation when the police are responding to instances of violence that involve immigrant and racialized women who don't speak either of the official languages.

Mary expressed frustration with this lack of immediate access to language support noting how the police, "tend to gravitate to the person who speaks better English or French," which in many cases is the abuser, "and they listen to that person often ignoring the victim because she's not able to speak the language." Such incidents are something that Mary states she hears a lot from clients who she quotes as often saying, "Well, I didn't get a chance to say what I needed to say" when the police would arrive at their doors. As Mary suggests, this dynamic can lead to the victim being overlooked, as they are unable to communicate effectively with the responding officers. Carolina similarly outlines the case for some clients who have attempted to call police:

...if they've tried, they were not successful because when the police came due to a call that was placed, it was the partner who they spoke with, the partner who spoke English,

the partner who gave the story. They didn't have a police officer speak their language. They didn't feel listened to or attended to. So, then that makes it that much more challenging, much less likely that they will reach out to police and seek help.

As expressed by Carolina, language barriers can lead to a diminished reliance on law enforcement, as she reports that victims may feel that their needs are not adequately understood or addressed by the police. For many immigrants, their encounters with law enforcement are not just shaped by the actions of police but also by their accessibility (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018; Giesbrecht et al., 2023). By hindering effective communication, language barriers can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and a sense of alienation from the legal process. This is when NGO workers may attempt to step in and assist clients as translators of legal knowledge.

While they are not legal experts, participants will offer clients explanations to the best of their ability, interpreting legal realities through their own understanding of how the system works that results in accurate legal knowledge potentially getting *lost in translation*. Carolina's approach to assisting clients reflects this balance between providing what she believes is helpful legal guidance and addressing clients' fears about police and immigration. She explains:

One of those things I hate saying to women is that, "You're a refugee claimant, you need to consider calling the police and getting out of this relationship—with your criminal process—because although they won't be deported because you're the victim, you need to know that immigration might become aware of you and that you now need to make a plan to deal with immigration contacting you about 'hey, you're in the country illegally. You need to just start some paperwork or we're going to send you a letter to deport you.'" It's not that it's going to become automatic.

As highlighted by Carolina, many immigrants do not understand that deportation is not an automatic consequence of police involvement. While Carolina is attempting to provide helpful information, some of what she says is legally inaccurate, as her understanding of the law is incomplete. According to Canadian law, a refugee claimant is not considered to be in Canada illegally unless their claim has been refused, so this information is not exact (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2024). This highlights that NGO workers, while attempting to act as mediators of

legal knowledge, may not always provide fully accurate legal information. Instead, they engage in a translation process where they interpret the law as best they can, mediating between clients' concerns and the legal system. Bhuyan (2012) notes how NGOs that provide shelter services in Canada tend to house more individuals who are in the process of immigration and as a result, "shelter staff often function as immigration advocates," carrying some knowledge about immigration law which shapes their ability to advocate for and assist clients (p. 223). In this process, misunderstandings are not always cleared up with precise legal explanations, but rather through mediated interpretations of the law that aim to alleviate fear and provide guidance.

In her professional capacity, Carolina's legal consciousness is shaped by an understanding that while engaging with the legal system does not automatically equate police involvement with deportation, it nonetheless can lead to unintended immigration scrutiny. She attempts to make the legal system comprehensible and navigable to clients, even when legal interpretations may be imperfect given that many NGO workers are not legally trained. When Carolina advises clients to consider calling the police despite the potential immigration implications, her legal consciousness is mediated by professional duty, practical realities, and ethical considerations. Individuals often perceive the law and its representatives, such as lawyers and law enforcement, through their past experiences and social understandings (Hernández, 2010). Thus, participants' role as translators involves negotiating between clients' experiences, expectations, and the legal framework, even if they are not fully equipped with legal expertise. This mediation process highlights the complex relationship between NGO workers and the legal system, as they attempt to bridge gaps in understanding without former legal training.

Recognizing victims' hesitation toward police intervention, as discussed by Aaliyah, reflects a structurally informed legal consciousness, where participants recognize the necessity of legal intervention but are wary of its consequences (Silbey, 2005). Aaliyah explains:

You know, we've had—I've had to walk a lot of clients through that understanding of why the police are arresting [their abuser] at that moment and what that could look like, because [the police] have to do their job.

Here, she suggests that the victims may not fully understand why police automatically intervene and make arrests in D/IPV cases. This points to a gap between legal norms (which mandate arrest in domestic violence situations) and victims' desired responses in which they may seek to avoid criminal consequences for their partners. Such a disconnect illustrates how cultural hegemony intersects with the legal system, where the law's mandatory response to domestic violence can clash with understandings of conflict resolution. For workers like Aaliyah, navigating this tension requires helping their clients understand why the legal system reacts the way it does, while also respecting their clients' cultural and emotional ties to their partners. This involves translating legal knowledge in a way that acknowledges both the structural limitations of the legal system and the cultural complexities of victims' lived experiences (Chua & Engel, 2019). In this context, translation refers to not just providing legal explanations but helping clients reconcile the hegemonic legal norms with their own cultural expectations.

Participants also discussed how they were aware that their explanations of the law must be culturally sensitive and accessible, especially given that many clients are operating under a collective fear that is reinforced by their social networks. In addition to providing clarity about immigration status, NGO workers would also address misunderstandings arising from cultural differences and norms that may be misinterpreted within the Canadian legal system. For instance, Rana shared a situation involving a Middle Eastern client whose behavior was

perceived as abusive by neighbors and law enforcement due to cultural differences in communication styles. Rana explained,

I have a client whose voice is very high. Because we are from the Middle East and our voice is very high, it's normal. We have overreacted when—and I use my hand when I talk and my voice. So, one of the neighbors called the police because they think he abused the children, and they took the children from home from him. So, I feel I'm not sure, but I told him, "You are wrong because this is Canada, this is not your country. You have to manage before," and the same for his wife. But they need time, and they need to be aware about the laws here in Canada.

Here, Rana describes how cultural norms, such as speaking loudly and using expressive hand gestures, are common in some Middle Eastern households but may be perceived as aggressive or threatening in Canadian society. Rana's comment, "this is Canada, this is not your country," underlines the necessity of adapting behaviors that are perceived differently in a new cultural and legal context. In this case, the client's loud voice and animated gestures, which are considered culturally normative, were misunderstood as signs of abuse, leading to police intervention and the temporary removal of children from the home.

This example illustrates how NGO workers may help clients understand not only the letter of the law but also how their everyday behaviors might be interpreted by others. Based on Hall's (1986) assertion that cultural hegemony shapes dominant norms and societal perceptions, there can be significant misunderstandings between immigrants and the broader community, particularly when legal authorities lack cultural competency. In this context, translating legal knowledge involves more than just explaining rights and responsibilities; it also requires educating clients on how to navigate cultural differences that could impact their legal standing. Rather than encouraging clients to adopt hegemonic cultural practices, NGO workers help them understand the dominant norms that govern legal and social interactions so they can make informed decisions about how to engage with the legal system. By educating clients on how their

actions may be perceived, NGO workers are not asking them to abandon their cultural practices but are instead empowering them with the knowledge of how dominant cultural norms may influence legal outcomes. The NGO worker's role is thus to bridge these gaps in understanding, ensuring that clients are aware of how their actions may be perceived and what steps they can take to avoid misunderstandings that could have serious legal consequences.

4.2.2 Managing Fear and Uncertainty Around Legal Outcomes

The fear of deportation and other legal consequences exhibited by clients significantly impacts how NGO workers approach their roles and responsibilities. Participants frequently encountered clients who held significant misconceptions and fears about the law particularly around issues such as deportation. These misconceptions, often exacerbated by the victims' abusers, can push NGO workers to engage in fear management and clarify any confusion about the legal system. As Aaliyah explained, "the abuser... may use their [victim's] status against them and just scare them with saying like, 'You'll never be able to stay here. You might get deported,' and threaten them in that way." This demonstrates how participants recognize that abusers exploit their clients' lack of legal knowledge to maintain control, reinforcing their own role in countering such tactics. The exploitation of legal ignorance by abusers aligns with findings by Kulwicksi et al. (2010) who argue that in the context of their research within the United States, undocumented status is often used as a tool of control and abuse, with abusers leveraging threats of deportation and separation to instill fear and prevent victims from seeking help. Carolina noted in her interview that abusers often use additional threats related to child custody and permanent bans from re-entry into Canada, reinforcing the perception that the victim has no other option but to stay in the abusive relationship:

If they're here without permanent status because they're dependent on their partner, there's the fear that if, "I call police, I'm going to be deported," either because they

don't understand how the system works here, or because that is a story that's been fed to them by their abuser. And so, they don't know any better, and they're scared to find out because of getting into trouble then having to leave or other coercion techniques or blackmail that the partner does in terms of, "I'll remove the children. You'll lose the kids. I'll hurt your family. You'll never be able to come back again." A multitude of different kinds of threats and fears that keep them from seeking police, from seeking help.

This reflects how NGO workers may be required to navigate supporting their clients while addressing the complexities of misinformation and manipulation rooted in both systemic barriers and the actions of abusers. Similarly, when acknowledging fear of deportation, Mary mentioned how "...even if they're permanent residents, their partners may have told them that they have the power to revoke that. So that is another fear." In these instances, NGO workers are tasked with demystifying the law and countering these harmful narratives, which constitutes their role of mediating between clients and the legal system.

Participants also identified how this fear is often sustained by misinformation that is sometimes unintentionally reinforced by broader community dynamics. Community members reproducing fears that police intervention will lead to deportation or other negative consequences reflects a collective legal consciousness that views the legal system as hostile (Chua & Engel, 2019). This is common in immigrant communities where past experiences, with law enforcement, whether in their country of origin or in Canada, may be traumatizing or discriminatory (Merken et al., 2023). When discussing this matter, Mary points out:

There's word of mouth that goes on in that in the communities...She's going to tell her friend and they're going they're going to say, "Oh, okay. So, the police, is that how they would respond to me?" So, it travels—that kind of experience, should I say, travels in that community.

In this context, participants' accounts reveal awareness that negative police encounters circulate widely within immigrant communities and victims' decisions are often influenced by experiences and interpretations of the law recounted by those around them. Carolina explains:

...if they hear from other people, “look, you’re going to get deported. Stay with them.” Some do this if their support network isn’t helpful in that way to help them seek help and go against the abuser. That’s also another challenge that they faced.

The circulation of such narratives explains why victims may feel discouraged from seeking legal protection, as the shared stories often reinforce a sense of inevitability or powerlessness in the face of legal authority (Young, 2014). Even when these accounts are based on inaccurate information or misinformation, they can significantly affect how victims perceive their options and their rights. As Bhuyan et al. (2018) discuss, the fear of deportation and misunderstandings about legal processes contribute to the underreporting of abuse among immigrant communities. For NGO workers, these collective narratives reflect a broader legal consciousness within immigrant communities, where the legal system is perceived as untrustworthy or harmful. Participants actively engage with this distrust as part of their decision-making processes, using their legal knowledge to counteract misconceptions and help clients navigate the legal system. This relational dynamic reflects second-order legal consciousness, as described by Young (2014), where workers’ legal consciousness is informed not only by their own interactions with the legal system but also by their clients’ experiences and the collective perceptions within the community. By working to address these fears, participants demonstrate how their work is shaped by an awareness of systemic barriers and community dynamics.

As NGO workers, participants are also aware that managing fear and uncertainty is an ongoing process that involves continually reassessing and refining their strategies. The legal consciousness of NGO staff is informed by their awareness of the limitations and scope of their role, shaping their strategies and decisions about when and how to engage with legal mechanisms like police intervention. By doing so, they challenge the hegemonic narrative that the law is always aligned with state authority and instead position it as a tool that can be utilized

by marginalized communities. As Chua and Engel (2019) suggest, legal consciousness is shaped through ongoing interactions and is influenced by the narratives and interpretations offered by social actors. By translating legal information, NGO workers are not just correcting misinformation but actively reshaping their clients' understanding of the law by projecting their own legal consciousness, positioning it as a potential source of protection rather than fear. Acknowledging the fears and biases that shape their clients' perceptions of the law allows participants to facilitate conversations that empower clients to express their concerns and seek help without fear of repercussions. This approach aligns with the idea that legal consciousness is a dynamic process influenced by social interactions and collective experiences (Young, 2014).

4.2.3 Mediating Between Clients and Law Enforcement

In addition to translating legal knowledge, NGO workers often act as mediators between clients and law enforcement agencies. Many clients, particularly immigrant women, approach interactions with law enforcement with deep-seated mistrust. As noted by Hailey, "there can be a lot of hesitation around police involvement... [stemming from] their country of origin and police corruption." This distrust can be deep-seated and is often shaped by systemic issues such as gender bias, corruption, and institutional failures that individuals encounter before migrating (Merken et al., 2023). However, while participants frequently linked this mistrust to clients' prior experiences with corrupt or dismissive law enforcement in their home countries, this is not the full story. Amir noted how negative experiences can reinforce mistrust for "those who have negative experiences with police back home or even [in Canada]." Literature on police responses in Canada reveals that systemic issues such as racial profiling, lack of cultural sensitivity, and institutional unresponsiveness negatively shape immigrant and racialized communities' perceptions of law enforcement (Ibrahim, 2020; Chu & Song, 2008; Spratt & Doob, 2014).

To address mistrust of police, NGO staff choose to work on establishing trust with their clients while gradually introducing the possibility of involving law enforcement when necessary. In many cases, NGO workers support clients throughout the process of making a police report, ensuring they understand their rights and the implications of such action. Carolina described how her staff maintain a line of communication with police when assisting clients:

[Staff are] often in touch with police when they're helping a client make a 911 call. Or, when the client is already involved with police and we're doing a follow up to get further information about charges, the case, and where that process is because the client doesn't fully understand, doesn't speak the language and we're trying to facilitate the access to the detective, to figure out what is happening.

Carolina's account highlights the importance of NGO workers' role as mediators, especially when language barriers prevent effective communication between victims and law enforcement. By facilitating access to detectives and staying in constant contact with police, NGO staff help ensure that the client's voice is heard, and their concerns are adequately addressed. Such mediation is important in preventing misunderstandings that can arise from language differences and ensures that their client's rights are protected and that they are kept informed of any developments in their case. Similarly, Hailey explained in her interview alongside Aaliyah:

The client may come to us and hasn't made a report, and we can support them with volunteers to go help them do that and start that process. It doesn't necessarily bar them from receiving resources from us. We continue working with that client but when it comes to making the report, or reporting on behalf of a client, really the only confidentiality requirements essentially are any limits to that, at least, are that if there's any harm to self or others, or harm to a minor or, someone who's elderly. In anything outside of that, we have to maintain confidentiality unless the client requested or consented to be able to provide that information.

This indicates that NGO staff will often act as liaisons between their clients and law enforcement, ensuring that clients are informed about the status of their cases and that their rights and needs are adequately represented.

Despite challenges in mediation, participants emphasized their organizations' efforts to work with the police to address these language barriers and improve communication. This collaboration reflects a legal consciousness among NGO workers that, while critical of the systemic flaws in policing, recognizes the police as a necessary component of their broader strategy to support immigrant victims. For instance, Mary described how her organization is "consciously working with the police" to address these issues, indicating an understanding that reform and improved practices must come from within existing structures. She notes that the police have access to her NGO's 24-hour interpretation service when they need language interpretation to respond to victims. The ability to access interpretation services is crucial given that language barriers are one of the biggest challenges that service providers face (Giesbrecht et al. 2023; Merken et al. 2023). Mary's description of her organization providing interpretation services to the police demonstrates a strategic engagement with law enforcement, where NGO workers act as liaisons between their clients and legal authorities. This could be described as legal consciousness *with the law* and shows that NGOs are not simply passive observers of the law but active participants who shape and influence how law enforcement operates in practice. This is also reflected by Carolina who explains:

What I gather from staff is they're often in touch with police when they're helping a client make a 911 call. Or, when the client is already involved with police and we're doing a follow up to get further information about charges, the case, and where that process is because the client doesn't fully understand, doesn't speak the language.

By facilitating communication between non-English-speaking clients and law enforcement, Mary and Carolina's respective NGOs play a role in making the legal system more accessible to those who might otherwise be excluded due to language barriers. By offering interpretation services, NGO workers challenging the cultural hegemony of the legal system, ensuring that non-English-speaking individuals are not excluded from participating in legal processes. This form of legal

consciousness involves resisting the exclusionary aspects of the legal system by providing a service that facilitates greater inclusivity and equity.

Participants also acknowledged the limitations of their mediation role especially when clients have already been in contact with police prior to seeking out NGO services which is a common occurrence for participants, as Amir noted, “It is not that often that police would actually be contacting myself really. I’d hear it a second hand from the client.” This implies that much of the NGO’s mediation work involves reacting to client experiences rather than directly influencing police actions. Hailey and Aaliyah also pointed out that clients “may have already gone to the police, made a report, who then...receive a referral, for supports” such as their NGO’s services. This reflects how the NGOs may need to work within the context of decisions or actions already taken by law enforcement as highlighted by Bhuyan (2012) who discusses how service providers in VAW shelters operate within the constraints of existing legal and institutional frameworks. As also demonstrated by the quote above from Carolina’s, the NGO’s role becomes one of following up on and supporting clients through the legal processes they are already engaged in, rather than directly influencing those processes. Thus, NGO workers must navigate their role in advocating for their clients while recognizing that their influence over law enforcement practices can be limited (Bhuyan, 2012). Charlotte also speaks to this when she notes that in her organization, when contacting police, they “advocate on women’s behalf in cases where detective follow-up is required.” Taking on an advocacy role illustrates how NGO workers facilitate interactions with law enforcement and ensure that victims receive continued attention and protection from the police, particularly when follow-up is necessary.

Nevertheless, the NGO workers’ mediation efforts are not entirely limited to direct interactions but also involve educating both parties to facilitate smoother communication and

understanding. As previously mentioned, participants had discussed efforts to “humanize” police officers. They explained the importance of bringing police officers to community sessions, creating opportunities for immigrant women to interact with law enforcement in a non-threatening environment. When discussing how responses to immigrant victims of D/IPV are being improved Mary explains:

We are trying to do that by bringing in the police to our information sessions, humanizing them, you know, bringing them to talk about, let's say, fraud or something and having them interact with the women so that we break that power imbalance.

These efforts aim to diminish misconceptions and foster trust between the community and law enforcement. However, the persistence of systemic issues in Canada such as racial bias, cultural insensitivity, and a lack of diversity complicate the work of NGO workers. Indeed, for participants, this demonstrates the need for broader institutional reforms to improve police-community relations and highlights the complexity of their roles as NGO workers: they must navigate their clients’ resistance to engaging with law enforcement while also recognizing and validating the underlying fears that shape their decisions.

4.3 Understandings of Culture and Cultural Sensitivity

When addressing the complex and varied needs of immigrant victims of D/IPV, NGO staff often mindfully engage with the cultural values and differences that shape their clients’ experiences. As discussed in section 4.1.2, participants expressed that such cultural sensitivity is lacking among police services in their responses to immigrant victims. In this section, I delve deeper into why participants found cultural sensitivity to be so important when engaging with clients. They often emphasized that police officers need to be trained to understand the cultural nuances that influence victims’ behavior and (lack of) communication. In their recognition of clients’ diverse cultural backgrounds, participants acknowledged how structural barriers, such as

lack of access to legal aid and financial instability, intersect with community pressures to influence victims' decisions remain with their abusive spouses, especially if children were involved. For participants, such awareness is important in the development of effective legal intervention strategies and support systems. Thus, the legal consciousness of these workers is significantly informed by an understanding of the cultural contexts from which their clients come from and how hegemonic legal norms.

4.3.1 Recognition of Cultural Differences

One of the key issues highlighted in the interviews is the suggestion that there is an overarching influence of cultural norms on the decisions and behaviors of immigrant victims. For instance, Amir discusses the difference between individualistic and collectivist cultures, noting that this distinction can profoundly affect how clients approach issues like D/IPV and seeking help. Rana points this out as well when she discusses how collective cultures, such as those in the Middle East, prioritize family and community over individual needs: "So because we are the Middle Eastern, like women or families, we work as a collective... But [in Canada] that's different, it's individual." This aligns with Holtmann and Rickards (2018) who suggest immigrant women often "come from cultures in which collectivist values are supported by state, religious, and ethnic ideologies" (p. 269). They argue that to navigate the complex intersection of cultural values and D/IPV, NGO workers must be attuned to the ways in which cultural norms shape the experiences and responses of victims (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). By recognizing such differences, participants such as Amir and Rana, demonstrate an ability to embrace a better understanding of their clients' circumstances while also having to navigate tensions between hegemonic Canadian culture and an immigrant's culture.

When discussing how an immigrant's culture might be factored in regarding police interventions, Mary mentions how "there are all these cultural pressures, that police need to be aware of" such as the "stigma attached to violence," which can prevent victims from seeking help. This aligns with findings by Giesbrecht et al. (2023), that these pressures can make it difficult for victims to leave abusive situations, and by Merken et al. (2023) that there is a strong stigma attached to experiencing and disclosing violence. There is also the added pressure to conform to gender roles, where, as both Carolina and Mary describe in their respective interviews, a "good wife" is expected to endure suffering without complaint. As Mary explains:

There's a lot of pressure on survivors to stay in the violence, from community members and family members, because it's not a good wife's place to leave or tell someone about the violence that you are experiencing... That could be someone who is in a really bad situation, but she's fearful of being ostracized by her community, her cultural community, because it's a taboo to do that.

Mary's quote highlights her observation that, for immigrant women, the consequences of seeking legal help go beyond the immediate fear of retaliation from their abusers to encompass the broader fear of losing their social standing within their respective communities. Participants like Mary point out that this creates a form of social control that further limits immigrant women's ability to access legal protections. The community pressures they describe intersect with patriarchal expectations that transcend cultural boundaries. This suggests that while these dynamics may manifest differently in various cultural contexts, they reflect values that align with dominant and hegemonic patriarchal structures. Gendered power relations that intersect with culture reflect this, as analyzed by Holtmann and Rickards (2018), suggesting that immigrant women are expected to conform to stricter gender roles in which reporting abuse is seen as a violation of cultural and familial expectations. In such cases, it is not just cultural norms that

constrain immigrant women but also the broader societal reinforcement of patriarchy affecting all women, which remains a dominant structure across cultures (Shirwadkar, 2004).

Similar to what Mary discusses, Rana explains:

Most of the families that came here to Canada and my clients, most of the women—the wife or the woman or the mother—because they are my clients, they have like, this is like a contradiction in their life: “Do I have to report that my husband did that for me, harm me or abuse me, abuse the children? Or I have to keep silent?” ...[about] the culture? Maybe there is a stigma.

As Mary and Rana’s quotes illustrate, the concern with violating gendered norms creates significant barriers to seeking help, especially in communities that emphasise family reputation and heteronormative gender roles. Indeed, for many immigrant women, reporting abuse or leaving a violent relationship is not just a personal decision but one that involves the risk of losing their social support networks and facing judgment or rejection from their community (Liao, 2006). In this context, NGO workers like Mary and Rana understand that their clients’ reluctance to report abuse is deeply embedded in social and cultural dynamics. Thus, as NGO workers, participants’ legal consciousness is informed by an understanding of how they perceive immigrant women navigating intersecting patriarchal systems within both their communities and Canada’s exclusionary immigration policies and racialized policing practices. While immigrant cultures may be non-dominant within Canada, the patriarchal values they uphold resonate with hegemonic systems that also operate within Canada’s legal and social frameworks. This demonstrates a culturally informed form of legal consciousness, where the legal system and its interventions (such as police involvement) are seen as potential disruptors of non-dominant/non-hegemonic culture, rather than protectors of the individual. The claim that police interventions disrupt such systems is important for us to consider here: It is not necessarily that the police challenge patriarchal values directly but rather that their involvement can create tensions within

cultural and familial frameworks (Kulwicki et al., 2010). As Mary suggests, immigrant women may perceive police as external actors who worsen the stigma and isolation they face by making their struggles visible to the community. This visibility disrupts the implicit cultural and patriarchal expectation of silence but does not dismantle the structures themselves. Instead, it reinforces potential alienation from the community and mistrust of the legal system.

There is also the concern carried by clients, as Hailey highlights, that engaging with the police could lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes or generalizations about their community adding another layer of anxiety and hesitance to seek help:

There could be fear surrounding, being misunderstood, not wanting to, perpetuate any stereotypes or generalizations, you know, kind of that, that weird dynamic of feeling that “okay, well, would I perpetuate a stereotype or generalization against that community?”

Hailey’s discussion of victims’ concerns about reinforcing negative stereotypes by involving the police reflects an understanding that law enforcement operates within racialized power structures that often misinterpret or generalize the behaviors of immigrants. This aligns with work by Liao, (2006) who notes that immigrant communities feel pressured “to deny the existence of such social problems in an effort to maintain the model minority status and avoid increased hostility” (p. 28). This concern reflects a broader issue of stigmatization, where the fear of being misunderstood by dominant institutions, like the police, inhibits victims from accessing support services (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002). Aaliyah validates this when pointing out how police may already believe in “stereotypes of like the submissive woman who’s following, you know, their husbands and things like that...” Aaliyah’s observations about stereotypes of immigrant women held by officers illustrate how stigmatization plays a central role in shaping victims’ reluctance to engage with legal institutions. Nagra (2018) discusses how this perception invalidates immigrant women’s experiences by diminishing their agency and reducing their abuse to a

cultural norm. Hailey speaks to this when she adds that there may be beliefs of victims “being oppressed because of her culture, and she can’t make decisions for herself—those sorts of stereotypes.” Menjívar and Salcido (2002) similarly discuss how in the American context, police have considered reports of domestic violence by immigrants to be a “waste of time” because it is seen as these women’s “way of life” (p. 901). Hailey and Aaliyah’s concerns reflect their legal consciousness, shaped by an understanding that immigrant victims navigate a complex intersection of cultural bias, institutional racism, and gendered power dynamics. Thus, the legal system is seen not as a neutral force but as an extension of the societal structures that perpetuate stereotypes and reduce the experiences of racialized groups to cultural generalizations.

In her interview, Rana was careful to emphasize the distinction between understanding the roots of violence and excusing it as a part of cultural norms. When asked about at point she believed police intervention is necessary she said it was necessary in the case of newcomers if there were repeated instances of abuse:

Necessary, I think if there is a repetitive [incident] or like the violence repeated many times, but the first time I see it, maybe there’s a newcomer—I’m talking about newcomers’ violence.

Here, her legal consciousness is shaped by belief that immediate police intervention may not always be the best course of action, particularly for immigrant families who are adjusting to the new legal and cultural environment of Canada. This reflects her understanding that legal systems are often rigid and do not allow for the flexibility required to address the unique experiences of immigrant communities (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Calling for a more nuanced response, she made sure to clarify her stance by advocating for mediation as a first step and suggesting a more culturally sensitive approach that respects the family unit while addressing the issue of D/IPV:

There is no excuse for violence. I know, violence, there is no excuse. But, for me, we can maybe discuss the matter with the family before taking the children or, I don’t know,

médiation familiale [family mediation] or do something like this before taking action and take the children away from their parents...because they are suffering, they came from their country after they deal with this war, culture, and they came here. They don't know how to manage.

Rana's aim was to express that it is important to understand the context in which the violence occurs by taking the time to sit down with newcomer families and hold some form of mediation before having police involved. This is not to excuse violence, but rather to express the importance of knowing why violence is occurring in the first place. Similar to Amir who expressed that "[the] perpetrator sometimes might have been also a victim too," this can be attributed to their line of work as clinical counsellors.

For Rana and Amir, understanding and contextualizing clients' behaviors, regardless of if they are intentionally violent, is key for assessing interventions, especially police involvement. Citing physician Dr. Gabor Maté's works on trauma and early childhood experiences, Amir explained that whether it is abusers being violent or victims who "might be thinking more of the surroundings before themselves," such behaviors "are usually ways of them trying to cope, of actual pains that are inside." Rana exemplifies this too when she suggested that speaking loudly is also considered somewhat of a norm in Middle Eastern households. When outlining the impacts of war on Middle Eastern communities, Abi-Hashem (2006) explains how "it is not uncommon to hear yelling, shouting, complaining, and cursing in public, even from ladies" which was something "non-existent prior to war conditions" (p. 473). Thus, some clients from conflict-ridden regions, including parts of the Middle East, may exhibit communication styles shaped by trauma, reflecting diverse individual experiences rather than monolithic cultural traits. This, along with (non)violent behavior, in general, can be attributed to the impact of war and prolonged trauma on Middle Eastern communities, as Rana suggests in the quote above. Indeed, her and Amir's perspectives on the need to contextualize (non)violent behavior in cases of D/IPV

among immigrant communities, especially newcomers, reflects a race-informed and trauma-sensitive legal consciousness, where they stress the importance of considering the root causes of violence, such as war and forced migration, before involving police and taking drastic legal measures.

4.3.2 Staff Perspectives on Family Integrity and Child Placement Concerns

Interviews also often highlighted the importance of understanding how fears related to child separation shape their interactions with clients. These fears are recognized and mediated by NGO staff as they navigate complex institutional frameworks, including those of child protection services. For many of their clients, the potential of losing their children is so frightening that it outweighs needing to escape the abuse they endure as Mary pointed out, “that is another huge piece that immigrant women stay behind...they stay in an abusive relationship because they are afraid of losing their children.” This recognition reflects how NGO workers’ legal consciousness is shaped by awareness of the cultural and institutional dynamics that their clients often face when making difficult choices between their personal safety and the preservation of their families. Participants consistently discussed the need to account for such fears in their decision-making process when engaging with legal or social systems. As Hailey also explained, there is “definitely a lot of fear... from women around, involvement of Children’s Aid Society” because they are primarily concerned with keeping their children safe but also fear that the system might remove the children from their care instead of helping them. She elaborates:

They’re trying to keep their children safe from the violence and abuse but then, what often happens is that the system will come in and try to remove the children from the mother. And so that’s really problematic for all, like, our marginalized, racialized, communities that we’re dealing with.

Hailey’s comment reflects how NGO workers perceive systemic inequalities within institutions like CAS as disproportionately affecting marginalized and racialized communities. Child

protection systems, shaped by racialized surveillance practices, disproportionately target Indigenous as well as immigrant and racialized families, exacerbating fears of family separation and further deterring survivors from seeking help (Merken et al. 2023; Stefanick & Tait, 2024). While the participants did not directly frame their concerns in terms of systemic racism, their discussions of the fears and challenges faced by immigrant women suggest an implicit recognition of structural inequalities that impact their clients' access to support. This reflects a second-order legal consciousness, where participants not only understand law enforcement through their own experiences but also through their clients' experiences perceptions of law enforcement (Young, 2014); they understand how racialized women perceive child protection services not as allies but as institutions that may cause further harm by separating families.

Participants like Mary and Hailey demonstrate an awareness that the fear of losing children is not just a personal concern but is rooted in a collective experience of racialized power dynamics that shape how immigrant women interact with child protection services. More broadly put, the legal consciousness of NGO staff like Mary and Hailey is shaped by an understanding of how racialized power structures affect the experiences of immigrant women in relation to institutions such as child protection services. Thus, the potential for disrupting preservation of the family unit by involving authorities is seen by clients as highly problematic and becomes a challenge for participants as Amir notes,

...it's the challenge that comes in there is—when it comes to working with equity immigrant populations—the case that when both the victim and the perpetrator are related. That's what makes it very, very difficult. They can't really break that bond easily.

He acknowledges the pressures that many immigrants face when they are related to their abuser. His statement also aligns with Giesbrecht et al. (2023), who state, “It is challenging for service providers to determine the most effective ways of working with newcomers...because of the

diversity of newcomer women's and children's experiences" (p. 141). This understanding goes beyond a purely legal framework and considers how social, cultural, and racialized power dynamics shape immigrant women's decisions. Informed by this, NGO workers like Amir are tasked with navigating these complex cultural dynamics, understanding that legal interventions (such as involving child protection services or police services) can have negative social consequences for immigrant families. In other words, Amir's legal consciousness recognizes that immigrant women's reluctance to seek help is not just about fear of legal consequences but is deeply embedded in the cultural and racialized contexts that shape their experiences (Hernández, 2010). This allows NGO staff to approach D/IPV cases with greater cultural sensitivity, aiming to address not only legal factors but also the underlying cultural pressures.

Fleeing an abusive relationship also carries the weight of societal and familial expectations. When discussing this, Aaliyah speaks to Hailey's point about how there is the stereotype that immigrant women remain in abusive relationships simply because they lack autonomy and clarifies, "When really, in reality, it's them carrying the entire mental load of the family, you know, trying to keep it together and keep it moving forward, so." As Shirwadkar (2004) and Liao (2006) had noted, this pressure creates a significant barrier for survivors who fear being ostracized by their communities, as leaving could bring shame not only to themselves but also to their families. The complexity of such cases is also highlighted by the fact that many victims do not necessarily want their partners to face criminal charges, as Aaliyah points out,

they just want [their abuser] to change and be present to the family and not necessarily be arrested for fear of what that could look like to the family, could look like to the community. So, and in many cases, you know, they're not really wanting them to be arrested. They still need them around.

The victims' desire for non-criminal solutions reflects an alternative legal consciousness that values restorative approaches over punitive ones. However, the structural power of the law, as

part of the hegemonic system, dictates that D/IPV be treated as a criminal issue, thereby overriding the victims' preferences (Silbey, 2005). Instead of this, victims want the violence to stop without the family being torn apart as Hailey explained, "it's about wanting the violence to stop but not, necessarily wanting the partner to be taken away, arrested to have, like, legal criminal consequences." This reflects a culturally mediated form of legal consciousness, where participants will help victims navigate the legal system with an awareness of the community's views on family integrity and public shame.

4.3.3 Addressing the Need for Cultural Responsiveness

A recurring theme in the interviews is the importance of cultural sensitivity training for police officers. Calling for police to have more training rather than considering other alternatives to police intervention reflects what was discussed in Section 4.1.3 about police services being necessary despite systemic flaws. As Mary mentioned, "police need to have cultural sensitivity training. They need to know the trauma, and how people deal with it because of the culture that they live." Here, she highlights the need for police to be aware of how cultural backgrounds can affect individuals' responses to trauma and stress. In this context, participants' legal consciousness is shaped by their understanding of the cultural barriers that immigrant clients face and of how systemic issues within law enforcement perpetuate these challenges. Participants acknowledged that law enforcement often operates within a hegemonic framework that fails to fully account for the diversity of experiences and responses to trauma. This reflects their own legal consciousness, which is informed by their professional experiences advocating for cultural sensitivity in legal and institutional responses. By emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity training, participants reveal their beliefs that systemic improvements within police services are essential for better serving immigrant communities.

A stark example that reveals how cultural insensitivity negatively impacts the way police interact with victims is shared by Mary, when she discusses an incident involving a woman who wears the hijab:

...the woman is a hijabi. She wears a hijab. So, when there was conflict in the home—that I think there was shouting...the police knocked on the door, and at the time, the only thing that she saw near the door was her coat. So, she quickly grabbed that to cover her hair. And the police came in and of course again talked to the male and made the assumption that this woman had mental health issues because she had used the coat...

This assumption led to a misunderstanding and mishandling of the situation, which could have been avoided with proper cultural understanding according to Mary. She stressed that “assumptions should never be made,” especially in situations involving immigrant women, and highlighted the need for the police to take the time to “hear from both sides” before making decisions. Indeed, the police’s assumption that a woman had mental health issues because she covered her head with a coat reflects systemic biases within law enforcement where certain behaviors are misunderstood and pathologized due to a lack of accountability for cultural competency, and institutional practices rooted in hegemonic legal norms of law enforcement. Mary’s critiques remained directed at police services as she avoided singling out any specific police officer in sharing this incident by refraining from using singular pronouns and asserting that “**they** didn’t do **their** due diligence [emphasis added].” This is important to consider as Silbey (2005) emphasizes the need to consider broader social structures and power relations that shape individual perceptions. Thus, the assumptions about the woman in the hijab are not merely individual biases but are reflective of systemic issues within law enforcement that are informed by cultural hegemony and racial stereotypes. The officers’ assumptions in this case are not simply reduced to personal biases but indicate a systemic failure to recognize and respect cultural differences.

This incident nevertheless demonstrates how the police, as legal actors, can impose harmful assumptions on visible minorities shaping NGO workers' legal consciousness in a way that deems law enforcement as a mechanism that others visible minorities and renders them unworthy of fair treatment. In other words, experiences such as the one above teach NGO workers that law enforcement, is not a neutral or protective but rather, can be dismissive and harmful towards marginalized individuals. While Mary refrained from accusing individual officers of overt Islamophobia, her account reflects a broader issue of inadequate cultural competency within the institutional framework of policing. Such systemic flaws are seen as representative of the broader issues within the police services, rather than the failings of individual officers. This distinction is important within the framework of legal consciousness, as it reveals a dual perception of police (as representatives of the law): while individual officers might be seen as trustworthy and helpful, the institution they represent can be viewed as flawed or even hostile (Silbey, 2005).

Misinterpretations such as the one discussed by Mary about the hijabi woman being mistaken for having mental health issues, are rooted in a lack of understanding of the cultural and religious practices related to modesty, demonstrating the critical need for police officers to be educated about such practices to avoid harmful assumptions. Similarly, Hailey and Aaliyah's observations about police assuming that immigrant women are "submissive" and oppressed" speak to Nagra's (2018) argument that, when discussing gender-based violence in immigrant communities, there is the tendency to find cultural explanations for such violence. Sprott and Doob (2014) similarly argue that broad generalizations about visible minorities obscure the nuanced differences in attitudes that exist across various groups and regions, suggesting that police services must adapt their approaches to effectively engage with these communities.

To address cultural insensitivity, Mary stressed the importance of having a diverse police force that reflects the communities they serve, stating, “there should be more diversity in the police force too.” For participants such as Mary, diversity within the police force could bring valuable cultural perspectives needed for building trust and improving relations with culturally diverse communities. Thus, Mary’s view suggests that greater diversity among the police could encourage immigrants to see law enforcement as more protective. Giwa et al. (2014) similarly suggest that “integrating diversity and race-related content into police officers’ training” can “enable police to work across cultures different from the dominant White cultural group,” potentially addressing mistrust as well (p. 238). When comparing approaches to cultural sensitivity, Amir noted how in his line of work, he and his colleagues would be more “attuned and culturally responsive” with clients but if police were involved, he stated that “at times it’s like that’s where I’m not too sure as to how guaranteed [cultural responsiveness] would be.” Amir’s concerns reflect a critique of cultural hegemony within policing, where dominant cultural norms often dictate how law enforcement responds to marginalized groups. As Hall (1986) argues, cultural hegemony involves the acceptance of dominant values and norms as “common sense,” often marginalizing other cultural perspectives (p. 20).

Amir’s uncertainty about the police’s ability to be culturally responsive points to the hegemonic nature of policing, where law enforcement may operate based on dominant cultural assumptions that do not align with the lived experiences of immigrants. The concern that police operate based on dominant cultural assumptions is supported by the literature that discusses how policing practices often reflect historical and colonial attitudes towards marginalized groups, including immigrants (Faller et al., 2018; Giwa, 2018; Syed et al., 2020). Thus, the uncertainty that police services are capable of being culturally responsive becomes a point of tension for

Amir as he goes on to question, “What beliefs, what assumptions are there do the police officers have about what might make newcomers and immigrants actually feel safe?” Here, he is skeptical that the police, as an institution, can truly engage with immigrants in a way that respects their cultural backgrounds because it is often shaped by hegemonic cultural practices that prioritize dominant norms over those of marginalized communities (Giwa, 2018). This reflects a legal consciousness, where there is recognition that law enforcement, as embodied by the police, may fail to protect immigrant communities due to the persistence of cultural insensitivity and institutional biases (Hernández, 2010).

Given the diversity of cultural backgrounds among immigrant clients, the notion of cultural humility was also discussed as an important aspect of cultural responsiveness. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that, for participants, cultural competence is not about knowing everything but rather being open to learning from clients. As mentioned by Carolina, staff should be transparent about what they do not know and be willing to ask clients for guidance in understanding cultural nuances:

...also across cultures, if I see someone that's from a different culture or race or language, I'm, going to be as transparent as I can be about my role and what I can do for them and what I can't do with them, remembering not to make promises I can't keep—that there's something I don't know. If they're saying a word I don't understand, I let them know, 'No, I don't know. Can you help me out?' I don't have to know everything. The client is the expert about their life and what works for them.

This aligns with the emphasis Giesbrecht et al. (2023) put on service providers working towards cultural humility as it allows them to engage with clients as partners in a learning process, empowering clients to share their experiences and ensuring that their voices are heard. Amir expressed a similar sentiment noting the importance of “the willingness for the police officers to learn from different immigrant communities” while recognizing that “each person’s experience

would be quite different.” For participants, this approach fosters trust and allows for more effective communication, ensuring that the support provided is responsive to the client’s needs.

In their joint interviews, Hailey and Aaliyah both highlight the ongoing process of cultural humility as well, where staff should continually reflect on their own biases and knowledge gaps. As Hailey discusses,

...that’s the commitment—culturally—to cultural humility, is that it’s ongoing work, self-reflection and self-awareness, and constantly assessing how you’re responding, and reevaluating the tools that you have in your skillset and the organization as a whole. So, it really needs top-down and bottom-up change over there.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of cultural competence in providing services, particularly in ensuring that marginalized and vulnerable populations, such as immigrants, receive responsive and culturally appropriate care (Shirwadkar, 2004; Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). In the same discussion on cultural competency, Aaliyah added:

...people freeze a little bit when they hear that term. It’s like, “oh, there’s so much I have to learn” or “so much I have to know.” And really, like [Hailey] said, it’s an ongoing process. So, a process of learning and so, humility is just that awareness of that, okay, there are several, various cultural ways in which people can approach situations or experience things and learning how we respond to them in the best way possible. It’s just helpful for us to know. So, having just that humility and knowing that I may not know everything, but it’s necessary, and being able to approach this situation with that humanistic approach and understanding that that person is human and needs help...

This approach mirrors the notion of working towards cultural humility emphasized by Giesbrecht et al. (2023) and aligns with the broader understanding of cultural humility as a framework for addressing power dynamics and enhancing service delivery for immigrant populations. By incorporating these perspectives, participants found that they, and their colleagues as NGO staff, are able to better address the complexities of each client’s experience, shaped not only by cultural background but also by the individual’s unique circumstances.

Participants believed that such training would make police more adaptable to victims' needs by teaching them to recognize how having a deep understanding of cultural differences can

improve the ways in which they respond to victims such that they may address systemic inequalities barring them from accessing justice. Hailey explains:

I think just like us, the police service employees need to have ongoing training on culturally responsive service, using a humble approach to cultural issues and just coming with that humanistic, compassionate approach, helping approach, the victim-centered approach.

This represents interventions that highlight the structurally informed legal consciousness of NGO workers. Participants recognize a structural gap between community-based organizations like NGOs, which often adopt a more flexible and culturally sensitive framework, and the police, who may lack the training or institutional frameworks to prioritize cultural responsiveness. Such recognition reflects how legal consciousness is mediated by structural realities. This can create a divide in how immigrants perceive the law, as NGO workers represent a more approachable, culturally attuned interpretation of legal norms, whereas the police are seen as representing a hegemonic, rigid approach that does not always account for cultural differences (Bhuyan, 2012).

While all participants stressed the importance of increasing cultural sensitivity training, some suggested building institutional networks with local immigrant service providers. Charlotte emphasized not only having “increased culture sensitivity training” but also “connecting with immigrant services within the [local] area to find out what is offered and what services might be available.” This extends the conversation about cultural sensitivity into the realm of institutional collaboration, demonstrating a more structurally informed legal consciousness which recognizes the importance of community input and participation in shaping legal practices and policies (Chua & Engel, 2019). Given that culture is often a core part of an immigrant’s identity, Liao (2006) argues that “if a battered minority woman feels that the service is not respectful of her culture, she does not seek such services or uses them only briefly” (p. 31). Charlotte’s suggestion that police work closely with immigrant services indicates that cultural sensitivity alone is not

enough; police must also be able to refer clients to trusted community services. By suggesting that police connect with immigrant services, Charlotte is advocating for an approach that addresses the systemic challenges immigrants face. She recognizes that collaboration with community services could allow police to better understand the needs of immigrant populations and refer victims to appropriate resources, improving responses to D/IPV.

Amir also pointed out that the constant focus on needing to train police officers might not be addressing the bigger picture. He too suggested a need for a more holistic and collaborative approach that involved closer collaboration with NGO workers, particularly those in the field of psychology, would be more beneficial:

We'd treat it like it could be so much attached to trainings that we'd forget that maybe trainings might not be the actual case...At which point might we actually benefit from police having, you know, like actual interactions with either counselors or with psychotherapists? ...if they have actual relationships—that connect with them or even in like interactions, collaborations, it would help them perhaps again, gain further perspectives...the perspective from a mental health professionals also would be quite helpful for them because at times, the usual policing answer is increase more police presence, increase more surveillance, increase more pieces.

Here, his comments emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and critique the current hegemonic policing model that prioritizes increased presence and surveillance over deeper cultural and psychological understanding. Indeed, Amir's statement reflects a legal consciousness that challenges the dominant model of policing, which relies heavily on training as a solution to systemic issues. Specifically, Amir's critique of the "usual policing answer" of increasing police presence and surveillance reflects a resistance to the hegemonic practices of law enforcement that often emphasize control and punishment rather than collaboration and understanding. Hall (1986) argues that cultural hegemony operates by normalizing certain practices as common sense, making them difficult to challenge. In this case, the focus on more police training and increased police surveillance represents the hegemonic norm of policing,

where solutions are framed around maintaining order and control rather than addressing the psychological and cultural dimensions of the issues at hand.

Amir advocating for a more human-centered approach that considers both the mental health of victims and well-being of the communities being served may suggest a break from these hegemonic norms. However, his call for closer collaboration between police and mental health professionals still represents a legal consciousness that aligns with hegemonic norms as it demonstrates a perspective that can only imagine alternatives to particular policing styles rather than alternatives to policing in general. By suggesting that police officers could benefit from working closely with counselors and psychotherapists, Amir is highlighting the need to shift the focus from merely increasing police presence to building meaningful relationships with professionals who can provide psychological insights that guide policing practices. Giwa (2018) echoes this sentiment when discussing how imposing a clear separation between police and mental health practitioners “may increase police officers’ emotional distance from the people they took an oath to protect and serve” (p. 723). The resistance to hegemonic styles of policing, but not to policing in general reflects a legal consciousness that seeks to challenge and reshape how law enforcement engages with marginalized communities.

Amir’s suggestion that interactions with counselors and psychotherapists could highlight the need for a shift in how police are trained to handle complex situations involving trauma, mental health, and cultural sensitivity. This perspective reflects a growing critique that policing solutions often default to institutional fixes, such as increasing police presence and surveillance, rather than addressing the root causes of social issues by collaborating with experts in fields like psychology and mental health (Giwa, 2018; Syed et al., 2018). Considering how his view challenges the hegemonic assumption that police training can solve problems with more policing

and suggesting that a greater interdisciplinary approach is needed, Amir, like other participants, is calling for a more reformist approach that seeks to reshape the law such that it is more inclusive (Chua & Engel, 2019).

Evidently, participants have stressed that interventions must be flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of each client. For instance, Rana's call for mediation also suggests that immigrant families may need more time and resources to adapt to the legal and cultural expectations of their new environment. This reflects an understanding that the racialized power structures embedded within legal systems often fail to account for the unique experiences of immigrants. In suggesting that family mediation take place before immediately having police involved in cases of D/IPV, Rana expressed, "This is my idea. I don't know if it's applicable in Canada. I know it's not, but because sometimes I feel bad for them." By suggesting that legal interventions should consider the cultural and historical contexts of these families, Rana's legal consciousness advocates for a more compassionate and informed approach. Rana's hesitation, "I know it's not [applicable in Canada]," demonstrates her awareness of the racialized power structures embedded within the Canadian legal system. Silbey (2005) discusses how racialized power structures within the legal system perpetuate inequality by imposing dominant cultural norms onto marginalized groups. In this case, the legal system's default response to D/IPV often involves immediate police intervention, which may be alienating for immigrant families. Rana's advocacy for mediation reflects a critique of this hegemonic structure, highlighting how gaps in the legal system fail to provide trauma-informed, linguistically accessible alternatives to punitive interventions, which disproportionately harm immigrant families navigating precarious legal statuses. Indeed, such structures often fail to recognize the diverse cultural needs of immigrant

families and instead prioritize a one-size-fits-all approach to justice, particularly in cases of D/IPV (Merken et al. 2023; Hill Collins, 2000).

4.4 Safety Planning and Helping Clients Navigate the Justice System

As part of their service to immigrant victims, NGO workers often engage in safety planning which typically involves preparing clients for the potential outcomes of involving law enforcement and helping them develop safety plans that account for the legal implications of their actions. This section explores the ways in which NGO workers assist clients with safety planning in anticipation of police involvement, which may also include preparation for navigating the criminal justice system. The participants' discussions about creating safety plans for victims of D/IPV reveal the importance of consent and limits of confidentiality, especially when it comes to considering the police as a tool. Similar to their critiques of police shortcoming, participants also expressed disappointment in the lack of trauma-informed responses provided by legal actors such as lawyers and questioned the (in)ability of courts to account for the unique circumstances of immigrants. As will be discussed, there is an interplay between legal consciousness, cultural sensitivities, and structural constraints to consider here.

4.4.1 Working Towards a Safety Plan

Safety planning for participants often begins with some form of assessment. For example, Mary explained how her organization conducts risk assessments to understand the level of safety planning needed for clients. The way safety planning is conducted through their respective organizations demonstrates how participants' legal consciousness is informed by their recognition of the structural power the legal system holds in providing protection through police intervention, legal support, and shelter services. Understanding the intersection of law and safety planning becomes a practical tool in managing the risks faced by their clients. In Rana's case,

being a clinical counselor who also partakes in social work, she explains, “as a social worker, I have to do psycho-social assessment and visit the client at their houses.” The assessments she conducts involve not just assessing the mental health of clients but also their settlement needs which reveal to her “how much they have a problem” immigrating to a new country, especially regarding issues such as religion and raising children. This demonstrates how Rana navigates tensions between the hegemonic cultural norms of Canada and the cultural expectations of her clients. Rana’s safety planning reflects an attempt to bridge these cultural divides, ensuring that her clients’ legal and social needs are met while being sensitive to their cultural identities. By centering safety planning practices on understanding immediate risks and broader systemic challenges, participants revealed how their roles involve mediating between legal structures and cultural contexts. Their legal consciousness, in this sense, reflects an awareness of the limitations and opportunities presented by the legal system.

In outlining how safety planning unfolds, participants emphasized the flexibility and adaptability of safety plans, noting how they often require multiple sessions to fully develop, reflecting the complexity of these situations. Carolina explains that, at her organization:

Clients go through a pre-screening process with our intake workers, and then after that, they could be directed to a counseling staff member, which would include myself. So at the intake level, they try to identify if there’s domestic violence or intimate partner violence, to see how well the person is willing to talk about that and what safety concerns need to be addressed, including giving them the number for 911 and giving them a brief overview of what that looks like and what they could do...and we again go to safety planning, go a bit more in depth, provide them with paper copies for customized safety plans and look at how there is the option to call 911.

Ensuring that clients have a clear plan in place to protect themselves from further harm is shown to be a priority for all participants, especially when immediate legal intervention is not sought or desired by clients. NGOs often take a survivor-driven approach, as Hailey mentioned, “We really try to ensure that it’s survivor-driven, right? So, we give them the autonomy. We can present

options, but they really need to lead on what they feel comfortable with.” This approach is important to workers like Hailey, as it allows clients to maintain control over their situation and comfortably make decisions that align with their needs. The interviewees in the article by Merken et al. (2023) expressed similar sentiment when discussing guidelines for supporting immigrant women explaining, “*letting the client lead* sometimes meant letting them decide whether or not to involve the authorities” (p. 157). Carolina discusses the importance of this too:

...there might be concerns about calling police because maybe your experiences and safety planning could happen over several sessions, not just one, because the first session you might be just getting a little bit of information. Sometimes they give you lots of information depending on how comfortable they feel with the person they're talking to, how much they want to open up, and how much they can share with the time that they have because there's a time limit. So, what can be done and spoken about in that session? And sometimes things will come up in future sessions and you go back to revisiting the safety plan and what does that look like?

Here, Carolina reveals that the safety planning process is an ongoing effort that may require multiple sessions to address the needs of the victim who may be hesitant to disclose certain information at first. This ongoing process highlights the importance of individualized approaches to safety planning, where victims' circumstances evolve over time. As Carolina notes above, it allows for adjustments to be made as new information comes to light, ensuring that the safety plan remains relevant and effective.

Nevertheless, participants frequently considered that it is necessary to involve the police in high-risk cases. This reflects a practical form of legal consciousness, where despite skepticism about law enforcement, the police are seen as critical actors when there is immediate danger. As Mary stated, “If a woman is assessed as being high risk and her safety is compromised, we would call the police.” This highlights the role of law enforcement that participants consider in situations where immediate intervention is required to prevent further abuse. Carolina similarly expresses, “The worst case is, call the police and have them intervene and hopefully have a

positive outcome.” For Mary and Carolina, the practical realities of ensuring the client’s safety, are shaped by their legal consciousness, even when other concerns about the police’s cultural competence or previous negative experiences with law enforcement might be present. Indeed, participants have demonstrated that even if they present a legal consciousness that is critical of police interventions, they may still make the decision to call police. Legal consciousness, instead, informs how NGO workers navigate these decisions, balancing the practicalities of immediate risk prevention with their broader critiques of systemic flaws.

When it came to the stage of police involvement, participants noted the meaningful impact that facilitating contact with the police had for clients. “We support the women in reaching out to the police to file a statement” as Charlotte noted suggesting that for women navigating the complexities of the legal system, the advocacy provided by NGO workers helps bridge the gap between victims and the often-intimidating legal processes they engage with. Mary stated that when contacting the police, staff at her organization “usually do it with the client,” highlighting the importance of first obtaining consent from the client, which will be elaborated on in a later section, The approaches of letting clients “lead on” as Hailey describes and supporting them in contacting police as described by Charlotte and Mary reflect legal consciousness *with the law* which assumes there is participation and agency when engaging with law enforcement. Indeed, their approaches emphasize the strategic use of legal processes and collaborative engagement with legal authorities. Their advocacy helps bridge the gap between clients and the legal system, while Mary’s emphasis on consent ensures that clients maintain autonomy even as they work with law enforcement. Hailey’s emphasis on letting clients lead their own legal engagement speaks to the notion that the law, as embodied by law enforcement, can be used as a tool for protection when clients feel ready to engage with it.

Empowering clients to understand and utilize legal resources becomes a significant focus of NGOs during safety planning. Hailey emphasized the role of NGOs in providing legal education and support to their clients, which is crucial in preventing further harm:

We prevent revictimization a lot when we intervene because we can educate the client and empower them. They'll often not be revictimized by the same offender, which is great. You know, they might be empowered to decide to leave all of that.

Rana expressed something similar when discussing the importance of educating clients about Canadian laws stating, “They have to be aware about all these things to prevent, what will happen later as a domestic violence.” Charlotte had also mentioned that immigrants having an “awareness of legal rights” was important to consider when police intervention becomes an option. In these instances, participants’ role is not just about providing information but also about empowering clients to make informed decisions in a legal context that often seems alien and intimidating. In their respective articles, Liao (2006) and Bhuyan (2012) discuss how such empowerment involves presenting victims with options and giving them the ability to make a choice on how they wish to proceed with their case. Participants are thus working within the existing legal structures and using the law as a means of securing protection and justice for their clients (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). By providing clients with the knowledge and tools to navigate the legal system, participants felt that they were able to help them to regain a sense of control and agency in their lives, not challenging the legal system’s authority but rather allowing clients to work within it on their own terms.

4.4.2 Limitations of Consent and Confidentiality

The indispensability of police was emphasized further when participants discussed the tension between wanting to maintain confidentiality with victims and the legal duty to report. While participants work to support clients who choose to report incidents to the police, they also

respect the client's autonomy and legal rights. They also mediate with an awareness of confidentiality rules and legal obligations, as Amir explained:

At the beginning of each intake, like each client, what we would let them know, like that this is the absolute necessity...And so, we tell them, in confidence, everything we talk about would be confidential. And we'd let them know that there are exceptions. There are limits of confidentiality.

Balancing confidentiality and legal obligations, such as mandatory reporting, is crucial in mediating effectively between clients and the legal system. Confidentiality is the foundation for trust between clients and service providers, as emphasized by Amir who stated, "Confidentiality is key." However, participants note that this confidentiality has explicit limits when there is a threat to the safety of the client or others, such as harm to oneself or others. These limits of confidentiality reflect a hegemonic view that vulnerable individuals (e.g., children, seniors) need state protection, even when families or community leaders might prefer to resolve issues privately as suggested by Aaliyah who states that victims "just want [their abusers] to change and be present to the family and not necessarily be arrested for fear of what that could look like to the family, and could look like to the community." Liao (2006) also suggests this when discussing how "Taking marital violence out of the domestic sphere" is considered problematic for women in the Indian community (p. 29). This further illustrates how the legal system's dominant approach to interventions may conflict with cultural practices prioritizing family integrity and community resolution over formal legal involvement. Thus, the role of NGO workers entails balancing the clients' needs for safety and privacy with the legal requirements to report. This reflects Bhuyan's (2012) analysis when she describes how in her research "service providers spoke of their commitment to protect women on the one hand, while not wanting to 'break the law,' on the other" when it came to dealing with the CBSA in cases of non-status women seeking refuge in VAW shelters (p. 228).

The legal requirement to act when a person's safety is at risk, even if it means violating the client's confidentiality, reflects an institutional legal culture that enforces mandatory reporting. Participants' decisions to comply with these requirements suggest a pragmatic approach to law, where NGO workers navigate the tension between their legal obligations and their commitment to client trust. For instance, Mary mentioned, "if the risk is high, and we feel that this client is in imminent danger, we will call the police. That is our duty." In this context, the workers' legal consciousness is shaped by their respect for the law enforcement's authority, specifically regarding their duty to report immediate or potential harm, even when it may conflict with a client's desire for confidentiality or autonomy. This practical engagement with law enforcement reflects a tension between upholding legal duties and respecting the client's autonomy and desire for privacy. Amir explains, however, "we let [clients] know the limits of confidentiality would be if there's any risk of harm towards themselves or somebody else," demonstrating how NGO workers proactively communicate the boundaries of confidentiality to clients. This approach shows how legal consciousness is enacted in practice, as the workers engage with legal requirements in a professional setting while also trying to preserve trust and transparency with their clients. They provide clients with clear information about when police intervention might occur, indicating that while they operate within the legal system, they also aim to foster understanding and cooperation from their clients.

The tension between client autonomy and legal obligations is a recurring theme in the interviews. NGO workers are aware of the power dynamics inherent in their roles as liaisons between the legal system and their clients. For example, Carolina acknowledges that "our legal obligation is when there are children... we have a duty to report," but also notes that with adult clients, "I can't force them to call, and I can't call for them." Amir also cites that clients'

willingness to cooperate can vary when required to call the police and explains, “we try as much as we can to have them involved in the process, but if they are not cooperative and there is need for escalation, we try to de-escalate.” This reflects a nuanced understanding of law enforcement, where workers recognize the limits of their own authority and navigate the complexities of complying with legal requirements while at the same time, strive to respect the autonomy of their adult clients and fostering a collaborative relationship with them.

The cultural hegemony embedded within the legal system often dictates that certain forms of violence and harm are to be reported to authorities, regardless of the victim’s unique circumstances. The mandatory reporting laws reflect hegemonic norms around safety and protection, which are imposed on immigrant communities, who may have different perceptions of family, confidentiality, and intervention. Rana reflects on this dynamic by acknowledging that “there is the law here and... they have to obey the law,” even though clients may not understand or agree with it. This highlights the cultural tension NGO workers may face, as immigrant clients are required to conform to hegemonic legal norms that may conflict with their values regarding family privacy and community-based solutions to D/IPV.

The involvement of a minor further complicates this. As Mary mentioned, “if we hear that a child is in danger, we would call—or we will call CAS.” This action being taken is meant to ensure that both the client and any involved children are protected from harm. Despite the legal obligation of involving law enforcement, there is a noticeable tension between the need for protection and the fears surrounding seeking help. As Rana noted, “some are afraid to inform the police about the situation... they don’t want to lose their children.” This legal obligation, while essential for the protection of the child, can create significant anxiety for clients who fear the involvement of authorities, particularly due to the potential of losing custody. This reflects a

tension in the work of NGOs, where limits to consent and confidentiality are being balanced against clients' fears. NGO workers are thus placed in the position of mediating between law enforcement and their clients' expectations, ensuring that legal obligations are met while trying to maintain trust and rapport with clients who may be skeptical of police involvement.

4.4.3 The Rigidity of the Canadian Criminal Justice System

In this subsection, I explore the complexities that participants, as NGO workers, must face when navigating the rigidity of the Canadian criminal justice system with their clients. When witnessing their clients attempting navigate such a system, participants recognized that the criminal justice system as whole fails to adequately account for the unique and individualized/multi-faceted experiences of immigrants. The critiques presented towards the broader Canadian criminal justice system are also important to consider as they reflect a structurally informed legal consciousness that extends beyond hegemonic understandings of just the written law and is inclusive of legal institutions and legal actors.

When discussing the need to for police services to be “more flexible to meet the mixed demands,” Carolina points out how this is also needed for lawyers and the legal system when she recounts her and her clients' experiences interacting with legal actors:

They've shared with me some of the challenges working with lawyers or working with a judge and I've experienced it myself where [they're] not coming from a client-centered or trauma-informed perspective. They're being very much “chop, chop, this is it, do it, don't whatever, whatever...” You don't have to be the most compassionate person on earth, but you have to provide folks a bit of respect and dignity so that they can feel heard, they can feel validated and attended to and know that their needs will be met...If they can't get it from their lawyer, how could they feel going to court to do something?

Her frustration with lawyers and judges who operate from a rigid, impersonal perspective reflects a structural critique of the legal system's inability to accommodate the emotional and psychological realities of trauma survivors. Holtmann and Rickards (2018) note how important it

is among service workers for collaboration with other agencies to be done in a trauma-informed way, something that will be expanded on in a later section. The legal system's insistence on rigid deadlines and rapid processing reflects hegemonic norms that prioritize bureaucratic efficiency over human needs. Carolina goes on to explain what the system's inability to accommodate looks like:

I have a couple of clients in court right now. They're with lawyers dealing with the court system where it's being very traumatic for them—the whole court process. So, some clients need more time to process emotionally, to be able to deal with the legal system. And unfortunately, sometimes what happens is there are deadlines to do things. Deadlines, to apply for subsidized housing. The client isn't ready to do the paperwork yet. Deadlines sometimes to apply for benefits. The client isn't ready to do it. They're feeling overwhelmed emotionally. They're anxious.

Here, Carolina's legal consciousness is about recognizing how the legal system fails to account for the needs of those who are emotionally overwhelmed and not yet prepared to navigate its complexities. Her call for a more flexible legal system resonates with Silbey's (2005) notion of structurally informed legal consciousness, which acknowledges the power imbalances between individuals and institutions. In this case, the power of the legal system is reinforced by its structural rigidity, which does not consider the realities of trauma or varying capacities of individuals to engage with legal processes. By advocating for a more flexible and respectful legal process, Carolina challenges the hegemonic norms of efficiency and bureaucratic control, pushing for a legal system that is better at supporting victims as they seek justice.

Amir also cites complications with the criminal justice system when describing cases of victims testifying in favor of their abusers, wanting them to remain in the home:

Even cases of when the victim would actually go to court and have the case. Say there has been domestic abuse and then a couple days later, when there is a court case against that partner, that victim would be there saying, "I'm going to be there to actually sponsor him." They would actually testify for them, not against them, so they would be able to have them stay at their house because that person has no other place... These are cases where it's very complicated to read and I think it would not do justice to go there

and just put in the law of drawing lines. It will not do the full justice for them...they'd say, "Okay, they did go to court, they did go through the whole process for domestic abuse," and still at the same time that they are willing to have that person stay at home, for example, living in the basement, however, still at home. So, this is almost like the case. It's that in the policing element that it might not make sense for them.

This complexity challenges the binary legal framework that assumes a clear division between victim and perpetrator, reinforcing the idea that legal systems often fail to account for the nuances of D/IPV situations, where victims may prioritize maintaining family cohesion over legal protection (Earner, 2010). Similar to Carolina's, Amir's critique of the legal system's "law of drawing lines" highlights how hegemonic legal structures fail to account for the emotional and cultural intricacies of D/IPV cases, particularly within immigrant communities. For participants, the disconnect between legal hegemony and cultural practices highlights the need for a more culturally responsive legal system that understands and respects the complexities of family dynamics in marginalized communities.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (as discussed by Hall, 1986) suggests that dominant cultural norms and practices become so normalized that they shape legal institutions and frameworks, often marginalizing alternative perspectives. In the context of D/IPV, the hegemonic legal framework assumes that law enforcement can deliver justice through clear-cut resolutions, such as separation of the victim from the abuser and punitive measures like imprisonment. The legal system, operating within this hegemonic framework, often assumes that victims of domestic violence will seek protection from their abusers through punitive legal measures (Gomes & Avellaneda, 2020). However, Amir is arguing that these hegemonic assumptions do not capture the complexity of many D/IPV cases.

The legal system's rigid imposition of norms around separation and punishment may conflict with the lived realities of these victims, who may feel culturally or emotionally obligated

to maintain ties with their abusers and may prioritize social and emotional needs over strict legal outcomes. This reflects a resistance to hegemonic legal norms, where victims' legal consciousness is shaped by their cultural and emotional ties, rather than by the legal system's assumption that the best course of action is complete separation from the abuser. Amir's critique of the legal system's inflexibility reflects a structurally informed legal consciousness (Silbey, 2005). He recognizes that the legal system often fails to adapt to the social and cultural realities of the individuals it serves, particularly in cases of D/IPV, where the victims may be unwilling to fully cooperate with the law's expectations.

Rana's comments also reveal how immigrants from Muslim and Arabic-speaking communities in particular experience legal hegemony as an additional burden on top of the trauma they have already endured:

Some are afraid to inform the police about the situation or the social worker. So, they keep silent because they don't want to lose their children. I think most of the immigrants, like the Muslim people or the immigrants that came from Arabic [speaking countries], they face all this problem with domestic violence and the legal rights here in Canada. So, [the laws] want to protect the women but at the same time, the family is destroyed...they suffer and on top of that, there is the law here and they have to obey the law.

Here, she emphasizes that while the law aims to protect women, it can also contribute to the destruction of the family unit, which she explains is particularly problematic for immigrant communities that highly value family cohesion. This reflects the tension between legal protection and cultural preservation. Silbey (2005) notes that structurally informed legal consciousness recognizes the broader power dynamics at play in legal systems, particularly how racialized and marginalized communities are often forced to navigate legal structures that do not align with their cultural practices. Rana recognizes how immigrant families may feel alienated and overburdened by a legal system that does not fully understand or respect their cultural context. Her statement that clients must "obey the law," reflects a legal consciousness shaped by cultural

hegemony, where the legal system imposes its norms and expectations regardless of differing cultural understandings of family, gender roles, and authority.

As participants recognized the protective intent of the law, they critiqued its inability to adapt to the complexities of immigrant experiences, often exacerbating the challenges they faced. These critiques are not just individual frustrations but a reflection of a structurally informed legal consciousness that acknowledges the legal system's lack of flexibility and cultural sensitivity, as well as the need for trauma-informed approaches recognizing the complexities of D/IPV in immigrant communities. The imposition of legal norms and expectations on immigrant communities is intertwined with the structural constraints under which NGO workers operate. Participants' critiques of the legal system reveal a tension between recognizing the limitations of law enforcement and relying on it as a default response to crises. This reliance stems from the structural realities of how NGO operations are funded and supported. Reliance on government resources highlights the hegemonic dynamics that position police as the primary solution in moments of immediate threat. Looking ahead, these insights set the stage for a broader discussion in the conclusion, where I revisit the role of NGO workers within these structural constraints and explore the practical and systemic factors that underpin their reliance on police interventions.

Conclusion: Beyond Police Interventions?

This thesis sought to explore the challenges NGO workers in Ontario face as they navigate police interventions in cases of D/IPV involving immigrants. The research question driving this study focused on understanding how these workers' legal consciousness and professional practices shape their interactions with the legal system, particularly law enforcement. Initially, I expected to uncover critical perspectives from NGO workers that would point to a clear desire to develop alternatives to police interventions, based on skepticism or mistrust of law enforcement's ability to meet the needs of marginalized communities. However, the findings presented a more nuanced and complex picture. The analysis reveals that while participants were often critical of systemic shortcomings in policing, such as a lack of cultural sensitivity, trauma-informed approaches, and training, they simultaneously relied on police interventions in moments of immediate crisis. This reliance does not indicate an acceptance of the police without criticisms but rather reflects structural and resource-based constraints that shape their decision-making processes.

When asked about the nature of their work, participants characterized the current landscape of NGOs providing immigrant and anti-VAW services in Ontario by the lack of funding and resources needed to expand operations. Notably, the participants work for organizations that are often at the frontline of addressing the needs of marginalized communities, offering services that range from counseling and legal aid to housing and employment support. The interviews have demonstrated that the landscape in which these NGOs operate is marked by a range of challenges, including limited resources, complex funding structures, and varying degrees of collaboration with law enforcement agencies. Their responses indicated that NGOs tend to rely on police services because of the current NGO landscape. For example, Hailey

noted, “we don’t have the money to do that prevention work that we should be doing,” and highlighted the need to fund ongoing training for staff. Amir also noted that his organization’s capacity to provide services is heavily influenced by the availability of funding, which often comes from government sources: “And even when it comes to accessing counseling, there is limited sessions that they can actually go to. That’s just what’s available for free, what’s funded by the city.” This reflects a legal consciousness in which workers recognize that the ability of their organization to operate is dependent on external financial structures. As a result, the hegemonic reliance on law enforcement, rather than a deliberate preference for policing, emerged as a practical engagement with the resources at their disposal. Indeed, it is structural power dynamics that shape the experiences and actions of NGO workers as they navigate the legal and social systems that govern their work.

By recognizing systemic inadequacies, participants challenged the legitimacy of the state’s role as a provider of social welfare, demonstrating the limitations of the law in addressing the root causes of social issues. For instance, Hailey questioned, “What work is the government really doing to tackle [this] problem?” However, given that participants struggled to conceptualize interventions that did not require police involvement, perhaps it is this reliance that indicates why participants deem police interventions necessary. I argue that the police are seen as the default solution in moments of immediate threat, not because they are ideal, but because hegemonic norms dictate that law enforcement intervenes reactively. Where participants could reflect on considerations for alternatives varied. Some criticized the option of community interventions that exclude police involvement while others suggested collaboration with community leaders and organizations. Whether police were involved or not, participants

emphasized that all interventions in cases of immigrants experiencing D/IPV must not only be culturally sensitive but also trauma informed.

The reliance on government funding illustrates how hegemonic state power controls the availability of social services, thereby influencing how NGO workers engage with the legal system and the broader social welfare structure. This dynamic is exacerbated by the systemic overfunding of police departments at the expense of social services. Notably, in 2019, Ontario had the highest spending on policing of all provinces, with an amount totalling \$5.8 billion according to data from Statistics Canada's Police Administration Survey (Conor et al., 2020). Later, in 2023, the Ontario government reported that it was “investing more than \$4 million” to help support victims of D/IPV by granting funds to police services across the province (Solicitor General, 2023). Meanwhile, according to The Public Accounts of Ontario 2023-24 (2024), total spending on support to victims of violence and violence prevention initiatives amounted to \$267 million which is merely a fraction of the amount spent on policing in 2019. Cultural hegemony explains how dominant institutions, like the state, control the distribution of resources and reinforce power hierarchies that marginalize certain groups (Hall, 1986). It is important to emphasize that this marginalization is not a reflection of cultural deficiencies within immigrant communities, but rather the result of exclusionary practices and systems that perpetuate legal precarity. In this context, the state’s control over funding creates a situation where NGOs are forced to operate within the constraints set by the government, limiting their ability to fully meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Many NGOs rely on government funding, which often requires cooperation with legal authorities, such as the police, to ensure that services like shelters and counseling are accessible (Bhuyan, 2012). The prioritization of law enforcement budgets perpetuates a cycle in which

NGOs, lacking sources for preventative interventions, default to police reliance during crises. This cycle reinforces the perception of police as indispensable further justifying funding priority while marginalizing alternative interventions. Hailey had also mentioned her NGO's partnership with the victim support unit of local police services in which police officers may refer victims to her NGO's services and provide access to victims' case files. Amir's concerns about limited counseling sessions described earlier, the awareness that they are unable to engage in essential prevention work due to financial constraints mentioned earlier, and having to partner with the victim support unit of local police services suggests that the legal and social systems prioritize police intervention over preventative measures, reflecting a hegemonic approach that values reactive solutions rather than proactive interventions.

As discussed in section 4.1, collaboration with police services is not always smooth or beneficial for the NGO workers. Within the constraints of their funding structures, they would consider the potential for police involvement as they help immigrants navigate the demands of the legal system. The tension between collaboration and resource dependency reflects the hegemonic power dynamics that influence NGO operations. The reliance on state funding forces NGOs to engage with the law on the state's terms, even when the law does not align with their goals or values. This highlights the complexities NGOs face in navigating their roles as advocates for marginalized communities while engaging with institutions that may contribute to systemic inequalities. By translating legal knowledge into understandable terms and explaining not only the specifics of legal protections but also the broader context of how the legal system operates in Canada, NGO workers aim to correct misinformation and empower clients to make informed decisions. As Hernández (2010) notes, making the law more accessible and relatable

“can lead to greater legal awareness and empowerment” (p. 109). Thus, NGO workers’ role in mediating and translating legal knowledge becomes important.

Participants’ reflections on alternatives to current policing practices demonstrate a legal consciousness that advocates for trauma-informed, community-centered approaches, while also recognizing that in moments of immediate danger, police hold the necessary power to deter further violence. They expressed the importance of police intervention because victims in dire situations recognize that law enforcement may be the only entity able to provide immediate protection as Mary stated, “...if someone is in dire need, for someone to protect their safety or to be safe, they’re not going to call us. They would need to call that the police who are able to do something in that moment.” Mary’s statement reflects an understanding that while NGO workers play an important role in facilitating safety planning, the structural power of the legal system, as embodied by the police, holds the authority and resources to ensure protection in urgent situations. At times, participants would go as far as to suggest that there should be more police involvement and an increase in community policing. For them, increasing physical presence of police officers in communities is seen as a deterrent to crime and a reassuring sign of safety. In this case, the police become an indispensable tool, one that transcends the bureaucratic strains of the justice system. This perspective reflects a practical understanding of the law’s role as both a reactive mechanism in crisis situations and a potential source of structural change through community collaboration and legal reform. There is an understanding that community-based approaches must be coordinated with law enforcement, especially in high-risk situations, as the community alone may not have the resources or expertise to handle such cases but can still account for cultural awareness. This further reflects a legal consciousness that understands the structural power of the police to provide immediate protection, even if community-based

interventions are seen as preferable in less dangerous situations. The view that the police are indispensable in maintaining safety, despite the recognition that the community has a role to play demonstrates a legal consciousness that recognizes this hegemonic power of the police as the default authority in crisis situations, thus limiting the participants' ability to fully conceptualize alternative models of intervention.

At the same time, participants would advocate for better approaches to mental health and legal reform that would make the legal system more trauma-informed and survivor-driven. Indeed, participants acknowledge the challenges in willingness to report abuse or leave abusive environments, suggesting that a trauma-informed approach would better meet the needs of survivors by addressing their psychological barriers rather than relying solely on police intervention. This demonstrates a forward-thinking legal consciousness that seeks to expand the scope of the law to be more responsive to the psychological needs of survivors. By considering alternatives, participants' advocacy for trauma-informed approaches reveals a legal consciousness that is critical of the limitations of the current system and seeks to expand the scope of legal and social responses beyond mere law enforcement. Ewick and Silbey (1998) discuss how legal consciousness is not only about accepting or resisting the law but also about negotiating and transforming how the law is understood and applied. In the case of participants advocating for trauma-informed, survivor-driven approaches, their perspective is informed by their work with victims of D/IPV who have faced trauma both within their abusive relationships and in their interactions with legal institutions. When describing the nature of legal institutions as traumatizing, participants account for systemic failures by recognizing that survivors are not only navigating abuse but also a legal system that often exacerbates their precarity through language barriers, inadequate protections, and fear of deportation. These are not innate characteristics of

immigrants but are instead the structural consequences that shape interactions with law enforcement.

Considering the reliance on police services by NGOs due to underfunding, alternatives to policing, for participants, meant putting funding into other sources since the reliance indicates that police services alone are well-funded institutions. This suggests that reliance on police is not a reflection of their preference for policing, but rather a practical engagement with the law based on what resources are available and how the system is structured. Thus, participants conceptualize policing as necessary due to the practical limitations of their resources. The participants' legal consciousness reflects a system where police are structurally positioned as well resourced due to state priorities that allow for the disproportionate allocation of funding to law enforcement over community-driven services. This forces NGOs to depend on police and undermines their capacity to develop preventative measures needed to reduce policing altogether. As a result, participants' struggle to imagine alternatives to policing, reflecting the hegemonic power of police intervention within the legal and social systems.

Like all research, this thesis has limits and weaknesses. A central one is that while this thesis centered on the responses of NGO workers, it may have inadvertently contributed to reproducing the assumption that immigrants and immigrant survivors of D/IPV are a homogenous group, neglecting critical intersections of race, gender, class, and cultural backgrounds. As discussed in the literature review, systemic racism such as the issue of racial profiling by police greatly shapes interactions between racialized and immigrant communities and law enforcement (Giwa, 2018; Syed et al., 2018; Epp et al., 2014). Racialized immigrants, especially Black individuals, are more likely to face police violence due to anti-Blackness and racial profiling unlike white immigrants who may benefit from their proximity to whiteness

(Syed et al., 2018). There were very few instances in which race was discussed by participants, which was likely due to the interview design in which questions did not explicitly probe for racialized experiences. When discussions did emerge, they were either brief or did not delve as deeply as they could have to account for racial disparities in experiences and treatment.

Inadvertently again, this allowed participants to default to a broader categorization of immigrants and mirrors broader systemic erasures where immigration is discussed in isolation from race. By not distinguishing how racialized experiences vary among immigrants, this thesis risks reinforcing a colorblind narrative that overlooks the unique risks racialized groups face. Future research must intentionally integrate race into interview questions to uncover how racial hierarchies shape access to safety and justice.

Ultimately, this thesis looked at the challenges NGO workers in Ontario face when navigating police interventions in D/IPV cases involving immigrants and revealed a complex interplay between NGO workers' legal consciousness, structural constraints, and their reliance on police interventions in such cases. Considering the workers' critiques of systemic failures in policing, I argued that this reliance is not necessarily a preference, but a consequence of structural constraints which include a hegemonic legal framework that prioritizes policing at the expense of preventative measures and limits the capacity to envision alternatives. By centering the voices of NGO workers, this thesis contributes a critical lens to debates about institutional power and survivor-centered justice, analyzing how the hegemonic prioritization of policing forces NGOs to rely on law enforcement despite its limitations, while highlighting the urgent need to reallocate resources toward preventative, community-driven interventions that address root causes of violence and prioritize immigrant survivors' safety and autonomy.

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