



Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant and Refugee Women and Children Experiencing DFV

Women's Safety NSW acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.

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Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant and Refugee Women Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence

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"[Migrant and refugee] women [experiencing violence] require advocates who are able to source support for them. Without that, it would be a disaster in this difficult time."

- Inner Metropolitan WDVCS worker

INTRODUCTION

Whilst research on the prevalence of violence against migrant and refugee women is limited, what is known is that cultural, language and systemic barriers serve to reduce access to safety and support for this group of women, and they are at higher risk of domestic homicide. (AIC 2020) This also corresponds with lower rates of reporting amongst migrant and refugee women experiencing domestic and family violence, as distrust for authorities, limited knowledge of rights and services and concerns about both material and cultural ramifications can serve as insurmountable barriers to accessing the supports needed. (AIFS 2018)

A number of research pieces have now been released, revealing a devastating impact of the COVID-19 social isolation measures on victims of domestic and family violence. Notable reports include Women's Safety NSW, Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Service Network and Monash University's surveys of frontline domestic and family violence specialist experiences in NSW, Queensland and Victoria, respectively, and most recently the Australian Institute of Criminology report which captured the experiences of 15,000 Australian women through the pandemic.

What has not yet been investigated, however, is the specific impact of COVID-19 on migrant and refugee women experiencing domestic and family violence. This report from Women's Safety NSW offers the experiences and professional observations of multicultural domestic and family violence specialists supporting hundreds of these very women at this critical time. What they've reported is that migrant and refugee women who are experiencing domestic and family violence are at higher risk than they have ever been before and that urgent action is needed if we are going to save lives.

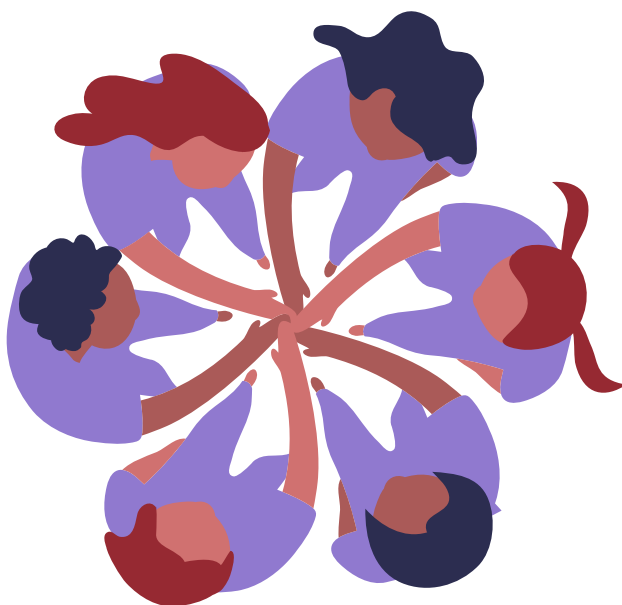


METHODOLOGY

Last year, Women's Safety NSW's full members, Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service, supported close to 9,000 multicultural women across NSW after a police incident, offering them information, support, safety planning, court advocacy, case coordination and referral to other legal and social supports. Just 14 multicultural domestic and family violence specialists are employed across NSW to ensure these services are culturally safe and accessible.

In order to compile this report, Women's Safety NSW undertook extensive consultation with these frontline multicultural domestic and family violence specialists through online surveys and discussion forums to ascertain how the COVID-19 outbreak was affecting their clients who are migrant and refugee women experience domestic and family violence (DFV).

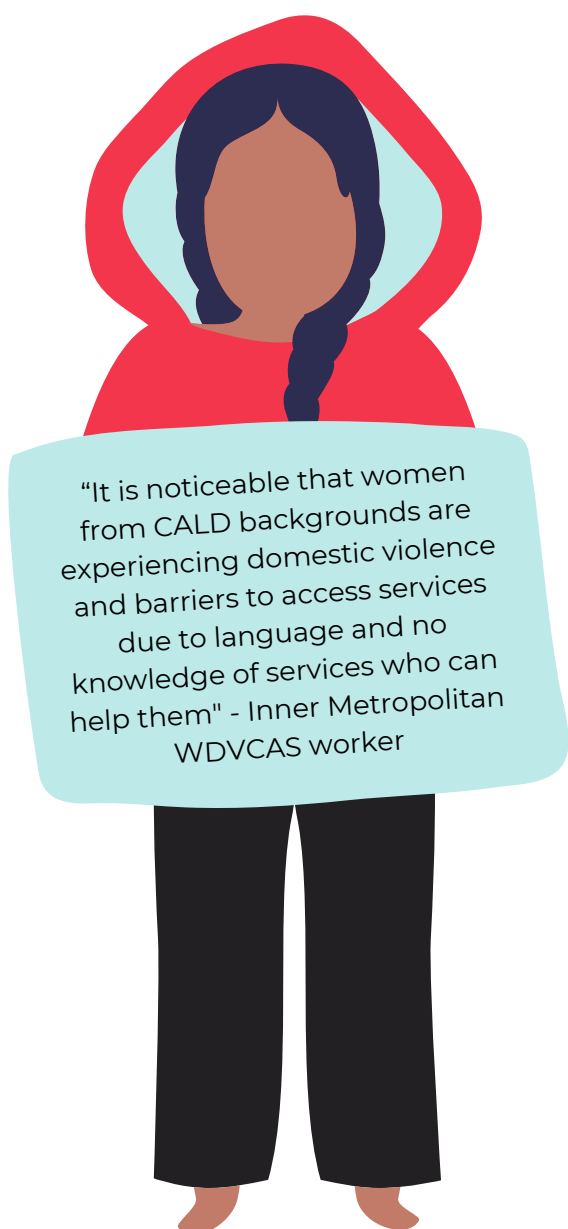
Whilst the survey sample size is small (10 of these 14 specialists statewide), the findings capture the views and perspectives of a majority of these specialists across the state, supporting high volumes of multicultural women throughout the pandemic. They also capture the experience of multicultural women impacted by domestic and family violence across a range of geographical locations, with two being based in inner metropolitan locations, five being based in outer metropolitan locations and two being located in regional/rural centres.



KEY POINTS

Multicultural domestic and family violence specialists identified the following as being key issues affecting migrant and refugee women experiencing violence during COVID-19:

- 6 out of 10 reported an increase in migrant and refugee women clients since the outbreak of the pandemic.
- 5 from 10 reported an escalation or worsening of violence experienced by migrant and refugee women during the pandemic.



- 2 from 10 reported an increase in violence and abuse being experienced by migrant and refugee women for the very first time.
- 5 from 10 reported an increase in violence and abuse experienced by migrant and refugee women from different family members other than their partner or ex-partner.
- 7 from 10 reported migrant and refugee women prioritising basic needs and concerns for themselves and their families over their own safety during this time.
- 7 from 10 identified a lack of service options to refer migrant and refugee women to for social and legal supports.
- 6 from 10 identified that migrant and refugee women were reporting violence and abuse specifically related to the COVID-19 crisis (such as financial pressures, having children at home, or other stresses which served as triggers for the abuse).
- 4 from 10 reported an increase in migrant and refugee women experiencing escalating violence in the context of sharing child care arrangements with an abusive partner during the lockdown.



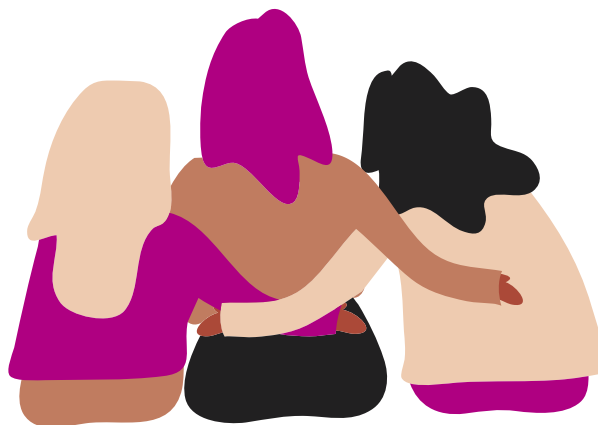
CULTURALLY-SPECIFIC ISSUES

Multicultural domestic and family violence specialist reported an overall increase in the complexity migrant and refugee client needs since the outbreak, highlighting a number of culturally, linguistically and systemic barriers facing this client group in addition to that which non-immigrant women face:

- 5 out of 10 reported noticed their clients fear of deportation increase due to visa insecurity during the pandemic
- 5 from 10 reported that migrant and refugee women were experiencing a fear and distrust of authority as a barrier to accessing safety and supports
- 3 from 10 identified inability to attend cultural support groups as being an additional barrier to migrant and refugee women linking in with safety and support networks

Other issues identified by specialists:

- The added administrative barriers in trying to access victims services, housing, Centrelink, women's refuges and emergency relief for migrant and refugee women, particularly women on temporary visas or women who cannot access their identification documents make it almost impossible for such women and their children to achieve safety.
- Furthermore, the complete lack of services surrounding healthcare support for clients without Medicare, such as women on temporary visas put lasting safety and recovery out of reach for many women and their children experiencing domestic and family violence.



KEY SERVICE GAPS

Multicultural domestic and family violence specialists reported on the most urgent service gaps preventing migrant and refugee women experiencing violence from accessing safety during the COVID-19 crisis:



- 8 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to temporary accommodation whilst 7 from 10 identified a lack of access to ongoing accommodation.
- 8 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to crisis payments for immediate needs such as food, toiletries, medicine and transport.
- 7 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to case management to support for women with complex needs.
- 7 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to immigration legal services.
- 6 from 10 specialists identified inconsistent police responses.
- 4 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to safe technology, such as a safe phone with credit.
- 4 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to legal services to assist with child recovery where there are concerns for child safety.
- 4 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to support through online means where it is not safe to make phone calls, such as through online chat forums.
- 4 from 10 specialists identified a lack of access to in language trauma counselling.
- 3 from 10 specialists identified lack of access to childcare.
- 2 from 10 identified a lack of access to appropriate interpreter services.

LACK OF ACCESS TO TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Refugee and migrant women who are victims of domestic and family violence are potentially being trapped in dangerous situations because they are unable to safely access temporary accommodation. Perpetrators commonly use victim's migration status as a weapon of coercion preventing them from seeking assistance. As well as this, immense cultural norms and pressure mean many feel intimidated to remain in violent relationships.

One of the key service gaps identified in the survey was a lack of access to temporary accommodation. Due to no income and insecure visa status these issues rate higher than the mainstream cohort at with 8 out of 10 frontline specialists recognising this as a gap within the service that has further exacerbated due to the COVID-19 crisis.

This issue echoes previously found results that were identified by Women's Safety NSW in a Briefing Paper on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence. In that briefing paper 78% of respondents identified a lack of emergency and support accommodation as a significant barrier for women on temporary visas to accessing safety and support.

In addition to this, 91% of respondents in that briefing paper believed that eligibility for women on temporary visas to access emergency and supported accommodation beyond the cursory two days would assist women in accessing safety and support 'a great deal' or 'a lot'. Women's Safety NSW members highlighted in this briefing that "there is insufficient [and] often no emergency and supported accommodation" resulting in "[m]any [women] return[ing] to abusive relationships due to homelessness".

Recommendations:

- Make persons on temporary visas experiencing domestic and family violence eligible for specialist homelessness services and community housing and provide the necessary funding to providers so that they can accept individuals that don't have access to government income support payments.
- Extend eligibility to income support for persons on temporary visas experiencing domestic and family violence whilst their civil, criminal, family law and migration matters are being resolved.



NEED FOR MORE INTERPRETER SERVICES

Although only 2 out of the 10 frontline domestic and family violence specialists identified a lack of access to interpreter services as a particular barrier facing migrant and refugee women throughout the pandemic, the qualitative feedback shows that where access is compromised, the implications can be severe.

Indeed, in a statewide online forum of multicultural domestic and family violence specialists, this service gap was identified as one of the three most significant systemic issues facing migrant and refugee women experiencing violence.

The lack of consistency in the provision of trauma-informed interpreter services has also previously documented by Women's Safety NSW in our briefing paper: 'Interpreter Services in Domestic and Family Violence Matters'. This paper identified that 78% of frontline domestic and family violence specialist regarded barriers to clients from non-English speaking backgrounds in accessing telephone interpreter services as being either an 'extremely' or 'very' concerning issue at the present time.

"Many clients with little or no English do not know how to access interpreter services without assistance... they do not know how to communicate with the worker on the other end that they need an interpreter as they cannot say this in English, and as a result it is hard to get them to call these services" - Regional WDVCS Worker



Recommendations:

- It should be a legislative requirement for police, courts and other government agencies to offer telephone services for all persons of a non-English speaking background.
- These services need to have specialist translators who are trauma informed so that the victims feels safe speaking with them.
- TIS must be funded to provide free interpreter services for victim-survivors of DFV.
- Victim-survivors must have access to interpreters who identify as a woman as part of a trauma-informed response.

CASE MANAGEMENT

7 out of 10 frontline multicultural domestic and family violence specialist regarded a lack of case management services as being an urgent service sector gap preventing migrant and refugee women from achieving safety.

Case management services are vitally important for migrant and refugee woman as they require wraparound services, warm referrals and ongoing support. Case management ensures a consistent and reliable point of contact for vulnerable women who may feel as though they have been passed from person to person or from service to service, and reduces the need for her to retell her story, thus minimising re-traumatisation.

Case management also improves relationships and enhances trust building and client-specific cultural awareness, facilitating safe disclosure of violence and abuse experienced, particularly where there is distrust of authorities. Further, case management enables effective client advocacy through the provision of warm referral pathways for women who are unfamiliar with the services that are available to them, and to access their rights, and navigate complex legal and social service systems.

"Case management support is essential for any woman escaping domestic and family violence. However, add in the additional layers of language and cultural barriers and a lack of access to basic supports for migrant women, such as accommodation and income, and case management support becomes a literal lifeline." - Multicultural DFV Specialist, Regional Metropolitan WDVCS

Recommendations:

- Funding of specialist multicultural domestic and family violence case workers in every geographical centre
- Greater referrals to government funded services to ensure women are made aware of what is available and accessible to them
- These services must be culturally informed to increase feelings of safety and minimise re-traumatisation for the individual
- Wrap around services and warm referrals



URGENT RESPONSE NEEDED

The COVID-19 social restrictions have had serious impacts upon the safety of women experiencing domestic and family violence. However, for some women, including migrant and refugee women, the impacts have been even more severe. Not only have frontline multicultural domestic and family violence specialists observed an escalation of violence and abuse being experienced by this group of women, they have also reported worsening service sector gaps hindering their ability to access safety and support due to culture, language and visas status.

Frontline multicultural domestic and family violence specialist supporting migrant and refugee women across NSW have singled out three key priorities for reform:

- Increasing access to temporary and ongoing accommodation and income supports for women on temporary visas experiencing violence
- Increasing the availability of free trauma-informed interpreter services for victims of domestic and family violence from a non-English speaking background
- Increasing the availability of specialist multicultural domestic and family violence case workers to support migrant and refugee women experiencing violence to obtain safety

Women's Safety NSW seeks an urgent response from governments in addressing these reform priorities so that migrant and refugee women experiencing domestic and family violence are able access to the safety and wellbeing that they deserve. Migration, visa and language status must not be a barrier to safety and freedom from violence.





Women's Safety NSW

Advocating for Freedom from Violence

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Women's Safety NSW honours the strength, wisdom and resilience of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and communities leading the work to end violence against women, children and families throughout the institutions in our society.

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