

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT FOR OLDER VICTORIANS FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

December 2021

Introduction

Women who are over the age of 60 and are from migrant and refugee backgrounds, face significant barriers to accessing appropriate support services when they experience family violence. There are often personal reasons why many don't seek assistance or disclose the abuse. For those that do seek help, it can be difficult to find support that is not only culturally appropriate, but also appropriate to the needs of their age group.

In this submission, we will outline and discuss the unique issues and challenges that our clients who are over the age of 60 can face when they experience family violence.

About inTouch

inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (inTouch) provides person-centred, integrated and culturally responsive family violence services to migrant and refugee communities across Victoria. We have assisted over 20,000 women and children experiencing family violence throughout our 37 years of operation, providing a holistic service that centres the experiences of victim-survivors in everything we do.

inTouch works across the family violence continuum, providing culturally-informed early intervention, case management, perpetrator programs, legal advice, crisis recovery and enhanced capacity-building across the sector and community. We are proud to provide high-level leadership and guidance to all levels of government with our evidence-based, victim-survivor informed advocacy and policy work.

Our services include:

- An accredited community legal centre working at the intersection of Family Law and Migration Law
- Learning and development program for family violence providers and multicultural organisations to build their knowledge and skills when supporting women from refugee and migrant communities
- Case management that encompasses a first-hand understanding of the migration journey and unique cultural barriers women may face when seeking assistance
- Post-recovery initiatives for victim-survivors, focusing on economic independence, social and family connection and emotional wellbeing
- Prevention projects and resource development for migrant and refugee communities
- Programs focusing on trauma and culturally-informed perpetrator intervention.

inTouch is a critical piece in Victoria’s family violence response system and an organisation that is growing in size, scope and capacity. We are a unique and vital service, with specialist expertise working with people of migrant and refugee backgrounds. This is reflected in our workforce, which is comprised primarily of people who are migrants and refugees themselves – the inTouch team is from over 20 different countries and communities globally.

This paper has been informed directly through ongoing discussions with our clients-facing case management team, our legal centre, staff from Motivation for Change – our perpetrator intervention program, as well as the views of NOOR, our survivor-advocate advisory group.

Older Victorians Experiencing Family Violence

In the 2020-2021 financial year, approximately 41 inTouch clients were aged 60 and over. This amounts to only 2.4 percent of our clients. Based on our observations through case managing clients that are aged 60 and over, we believe there is significant underreporting of family violence amongst this age group. It is our view that older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds who experience family violence, are less likely to report the violence and seek assistance. This is due to a number of factors, including their apprehension reporting against adult children who are perpetrators, feelings of isolation and helplessness among those who are on temporary visas in Australia, feelings of stigma or shame related to reporting the violence, and also the lack of financial and housing support if they want to leave the abusive situation.

Family violence perpetrated by adult children and children-in-law

Many inTouch clients who are over the age of 60 experience family violence perpetrated by their children or their children’s spouses. Multigenerational homes are normal in many migrant communities – it is commonplace for parents to live with their married children, their children’s spouse as well as any grandchildren. In some families, multiple family units share the one home. In some circumstances, clients have had their adult children move in with them. There have also been many instances in which the client has travelled to Australia on a temporary visa to visit her adult children and assist with domestic duties.

Case Study

Janan is 72 and came to Australia on a one-year visitor visa to live with her son Tolga, his wife Lila, and their new baby. Tolga had convinced Janan to come to Australia to spend time with them and help them with the baby. Lila is angry that Janan is living with them. She is abusive towards Janan, using emotional and physical violence. She is particularly harsh when Tolga is at work during the day.

Janan wants to go back to her home country, but she feels obliged to stay. Tolga spent a lot of money on her visa and flights. She also wants to be able to spend time with her granddaughter.

Clients in this age group from migrant and refugee communities can feel very reluctant to seek assistance and disclose the violence so as not to cause harm to their children. Feelings of shame and guilt are very common. There have also been many instances in which the client is fearful of bringing negative attention to their family's reputation in their community.

Case Study

Monica is 65, lives in public housing and is on a pension. Her son Tony who is 45, recently separated from his wife, is unemployed, and has moved back in with her. Tony is abusive towards Monica, belittling her, swearing at her, and he threatens to assault and harm her. He takes her pension and has also been using her name to apply for additional benefits through Centrelink.

Monica is very depressed and wants Tony to move out. But she does not report the violence or tell him to move out, because she is worried that he will become homeless.

Family violence perpetrated by partners

A number of our clients who are over the age of 60 have experienced family violence perpetrated by their partner. Sometimes, these clients have been in the relationship for many years before they seek help. In other situations, the client has recently entered a relationship, and experiences family violence whilst also navigating the complexities of a new family – with their partner having adult children from a previous relationship.

Case Study

Mia is 68 and has been married to John for 40 years. John has always been violent towards Mia. The violence was particularly severe when they had their children living with them. Now that their children are adults and have moved out, the violence occurs less frequently. She continues to be fearful of him.

Mia is resentful of John and the violence he has always subjected her to. She would leave him, but is on a pension and does not know where she could go or how she could establish her independence.

Barriers to seeking assistance

When older clients from migrant and refugee backgrounds experience family violence, they can face several unique barriers and challenges. Some clients may be pressured by their community or other members of their family to stay in the relationship or to maintain the existing domestic arrangements. These clients sometimes feel that their loyalty to their children and their family comes first, even at the expense of their own safety and wellbeing. These views can be deeply held by the client, as a result of religious beliefs or simply the crucial role their family plays in their social life and identity. These feelings of obligation and need can make it very difficult to report family violence and seek assistance.

Many clients in this age group from migrant and refugee backgrounds can also face financial insecurity. Older women have been recognised as the fastest growing group of homeless people in Australia.¹ Ageism in the job market, lack of formal qualifications, and language barriers contribute to the challenges our clients face when they are seeking independence. Without stable and sufficient income, clients can be more dependant on their families, making them more vulnerable to abuse.

Some of our clients who are over 60 are in Australia on temporary visas. These clients may be in Australia to visit their adult children, grandchildren or in some cases, may have been brought to Australia to care for their adult children's families. Temporary visa holders can face significant barriers to accessing services, as visa status determines what health services, welfare services, working rights, and social security people are eligible for. This compounds other barriers. For example, due to limited space, refugees may be reluctant to accept referrals for a woman on a temporary visa knowing she may have an extended stay there due to the lack of stable housing options for her to go to. There are many women on temporary visas who are ineligible for Centrelink payments and have to pay for hospital and other medical costs. These have been documented in detail elsewhere.² These barriers further compound

¹ Debbie Faulkner and Laurence Lester (2020), "400,000 women over 45 are at risk of homelessness in Australia" *The Conversation*, at <https://theconversation.com/400-000-women-over-45-are-at-risk-of-homelessness-in-australia-142906>.

² inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (2019), Position paper: Women on temporary visas experiencing family violence, inTouch: Melbourne, at < <https://intouch.org.au/wp->

for women who are in this older age bracket. Language barriers, social isolation, and very limited access to income due to a lack of employment options, can make these clients very dependant on their abuser/s.

Lack of age appropriate and culturally appropriate services

When we provide case management support to clients over the age of 60, it is challenging finding services that are suitable to their emotional needs at the time. Crisis accommodation is not always age or culturally appropriate. For example, a client who was in Australia on a tourist visa visiting her children, was placed in shared crisis accommodation. The client spoke no English and struggled considerably in this environment.

Our service has also found there to be limited information available for this group of victim-survivors. Information provided in the client's language, that is relevant to their age group is scarce. Whilst there may be translated materials on family violence and services available in various languages, the issues and supports are not specific to the needs of this age group.

Recommendations

Increased skills and capacity of specialist family violence services to work with migrant and refugees women who are over the age of 60.

The family violence sector in Victoria has grown rapidly and has been heavily resourced to better meet the needs of the community. There is also a vast understanding of the specific manifestations of family violence in migrant and refugee communities, as well as the barriers that many victim-survivors from these communities face. As we build the capacity of family violence services to better meet the needs of diverse communities, we must also build the ability of specialist services to work with migrant and refugee victim-survivors who are over the age of 60.

Adequately consulting and resourcing culturally-responsive services to respond to family violence in this cohort of the community is crucial to provide the best support for victim-survivors. Specialist family violence services should be trained to recognise and respond to the specific circumstances and needs of this section of our community.

Culturally appropriate and age appropriate housing options.

Consultations with our client services team highlighted the lack of suitable housing options for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are over 60 years old. Housing instability is a critical barrier for victim-survivors of family violence who are trying to leave their abuser. This is particularly compounded for those who are over the age of 60 and from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Government resourcing into both crisis and longer-term housing options that suit the specific needs of older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds could potentially give victim-survivors the confidence to leave their abusive situation.

[content/uploads/2020/03/inTouchPositionPaper_WomenOnTemporaryVisasExperiencingViolenceInAustralia_Marc_h2020_website.pdf](https://www.in-touch.org.au/content/uploads/2020/03/inTouchPositionPaper_WomenOnTemporaryVisasExperiencingViolenceInAustralia_Marc_h2020_website.pdf)

A new visa subclass for temporary visa holders who have experienced family violence in Australia, with access to social security and free public health.

Migration status “creates additional leverage for violence and control” alongside the “acknowledged levers of financial, emotional, technological, physical and sexual abuse that occur across situations of family violence.”³ We believe a new visa subclass for temporary visa holders who have experienced family violence in Australia is crucial. The current family violence provisions which are part of the Migration Regulations provide victim-survivors who have experienced family violence perpetrated by their sponsor partner with a pathway to leave the abusive relationship and remain in the country. We believe that similar opportunities should be provided to recipients of other visa streams – including older family members such as parents. This new visa subclass should provide services including access to free public health, working rights, and housing. At the conclusion of this visa period, the client should have the right to apply for a different visa type in Australia in accordance with her needs and eligibility.⁴

More information and resources that are specific to the issues and needs of migrant and refugees in this age group, that experience family violence.

More research and resources must be produced to help guide and support this cohort of our community who are experiencing family violence. Such resources should highlight what supports are available and how to access them. These resources should be published in community languages and distributed across in consultation with cultural and faith organisations. These resources should also be provided to those who are migrating in Australia.

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³ Marie Segrave (2017), Temporary Migration and Family Violence: An Analysis of Victimisation, Vulnerability and Support, Melbourne: School of Social Sciences, Monash University, p1.

⁴ See inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (2019), Position paper: Women on temporary visas experiencing family violence, inTouch: Melbourne, at < https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/inTouchPositionPaper_WomenOnTemporaryVisasExperiencingViolenceInAustralia_Marc_h2020_website.pdf; See National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2019), Blueprint for Reform: Removing barriers to safety for victim/survivors of domestic and family violence who are on temporary visas, Australia.

If you are experiencing family violence and need immediate support, please call 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 328