

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AND PEOPLE FROM IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

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Many people affected by domestic and family violence experience shame and fear which prevent them reporting abuse and are exposed to risks when they take action to end the violence. For victims from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, the situation can often be more complex. For these women, disclosure and help seeking can be complicated by factors relating to culture, religion, language, past refugee experiences, current settlement experiences, a lack of access to appropriate services and an absence of family or friends for support. This Fast Facts highlights key issues for immigrant and refugee victims and common recommendations from the literature on how to improve their access to justice, services and protection.

AUSTRALIA'S CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC

Australia's population is diverse and changing:

- Recent estimations suggest that more than a quarter (27%) of Australia's population were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012a, p. 1). Countries of origin for migrants are also diverse and changing. Migrants who arrived in Australia in 2010-2011 came from over 200 countries, predominantly from New Zealand (20.2%), China (11.5%), the United Kingdom (8.6%) and India (8.3%), followed by the Philippines, South Africa, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Iraq (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2012, p. 1).
- As of 2011, more than 200 languages, including Indigenous dialects, were spoken at home. The most common apart from English were Mandarin (1.7%), Italian (1.5%), Arabic (1.4%), Cantonese (1.3%) and Greek (1.3%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012b, p. 1).

With the changing cultural and linguistic composition of Australia, the proportion of victims of domestic and family violence from immigrant and refugee backgrounds is likely to increase, necessitating justice and service systems that are culturally appropriate and able to implement targeted responses.

KEY ISSUES

Research and reporting

There is a lack of information about the prevalence of domestic violence in immigrant and refugee communities:

- While a number of qualitative studies with immigrant and refugee communities have been conducted, there is limited quantitative data available about the prevalence of domestic violence in these communities, in comparison to Anglo-Saxon communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, p. 6; Cashmore, Higgins, Bromfield & Scott 2006).

- Prevalence is uncertain, however some cultural practices may expose immigrant and refugee women and girls to additional risks of violence. Trauma from previous experiences of violence, particularly for refugees who have fled persecution and who have spent time in refugee camps, urban areas or immigration detention in countries of asylum, may also leave women and girls vulnerable to further violence in the home (Allimant & Ostapiej-Piatkowski 2011; Pittaway & Rees 2006)

A lack of information about prevalence should not prevent services, justice agencies and advocates reaching out to families and individuals affected by violence.

Challenges to disclosure and help seeking for victims

Obtaining accurate data about domestic and family violence in immigrant and refugee communities is difficult as victims often experience additional challenges to disclosure and help seeking. These include:

- fear of retaliation by the perpetrator (InTouch Inc. Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence 2010)
- doubt that police will believe them (Carmody 2009) and/or fear of authorities (InTouch Inc. Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence 2010)
- cultural stigma and risks of experiencing shame from their families and rejection from their communities (Bhuyan & Senturia 2005)
- fear of a lack of cultural understanding in mainstream services about their specific circumstances (Pease & Rees 2007)
- language barriers restricting victims' capacity to find information about and access services, particularly those with interpreter/translator services (Family Violence Prevention Fund & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2009)
- a lack of awareness of legal, economic and social rights in Australia (Bhuyan & Senturia 2005)
- reliance on the abusive partner for a visa leading to victim concerns about their migration or refugee status and the possibility of being deported (Allimant & Ostapiej-Piatkowski 2011, p. 5)
- lack of access to public funds, health care, refuge or housing and other services that require a visa (Allimant & Anne 2008)
- lack of family or other social supports if a victim leaves her abusive partner (Braaf & Barrett Meyering 2011)
- risks of being forced to engage in survival sex for income and susceptibility to sexual abuse by strangers (Refugee Council 2009).

Improving service provision and justice

Due to the complex experiences of migrant and refugee survivors of violence, mainstream services may face challenges responding to their needs. Although specialist services exist, these are often under-resourced and overstretched. Women face many barriers to seeking and finding appropriate support. There have been a wide range of Australian reports identifying issues for service provision and developing recommendations to improve safety and service provision for immigrant and refugee victims of violence. These recommendations include:

- **Delivering cultural competency training** for both mainstream and specialist government and non-government services, including on the psychological impacts of experiencing or witnessing torture and trauma (Allimant & Ostapiej-Piatkowski 2011, p. 6; Blackburn 2005, p. 98; Brach & Fraser 2000). This knowledge is essential at all levels of service provision, in both direct and indirect practice by frontline social workers, community workers, case managers, counsellors, child protection workers, legal services, resource and research centres, and policy writers (Kaur 2012, p. 6).
- **Improving availability of translation and interpreting services** (Allimant & Ostapiej-Piatkowski 2011).
- **Developing audio and video resources and information** for immigrant and refugee women available in diverse languages, rather than only written form, to accommodate for illiteracy or low literacy in their own language(s) (Allimant 2005).

- **Using a variety of communication and social marketing strategies**, such as community forums, electronic media, social media, radio and television, printed communications and multimedia campaigns in English and other languages to raise awareness about domestic violence in immigrant and refugee communities (Poljski 2011).
- **Using cultural references** constructively to present positive images of healthy relationships, families and communities (Poljski 2011).
- **Building a solid evidence base** on prevention of violence against immigrant and refugee women (Poljski 2011) and placing an increased emphasis on people of diverse backgrounds in the design, conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of domestic violence research to inform policy and legislation (Bent-Goodley 2005, p. 199; Council of Australian Governments 2011, p. 3).
- **Instituting legal empowerment strategies** such as fostering community liaison officers, legal workshops and information sessions to promote immigrant and refugee knowledge of legal rights, services and processes (Dimopoulos 2010).
- **Providing information and advice** directly to victims through immigration advocacy and legal assistance (Braaf & Barrett Meyering 2011, p. 81).
- **Fostering genuine leadership** on this issue by influential and respected immigrant and refugee community leaders through networks and training (Poljski 2011).
- **Enhancing service integration** (Family Law Council 2012).

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