

## Immigration, visas and family violence

The ASPIRE Project conducted research in Tasmania and Victoria in 2015-2016 with immigrant and refugee women, men, community groups and different service providers. The project explored issues related to family violence against immigrant and refugee women and their children. For more information visit: [www.anrows.org.au](http://www.anrows.org.au)

This fact sheet summarises the ASPIRE Project findings about the impact of immigration policy and visa status on women's experiences of family violence. The information includes some quotes from women who participated in the project. There are contact details on the next page about where to get help for family violence.

### Immigration to Australia

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. Almost half of the Australian population (46%) has a direct family link to the migration program. Immigration is an important part of Australia's history, identity and growing economy.

Like all immigrants, the women who participated in the ASPIRE Project came to Australia through different avenues and for many reasons including as:

- students or partners of students
- skilled, professional workers
- families looking for better opportunities, including for their children
- refugees seeking safety through the humanitarian entrant programme
- spouses or fiancés of Australians or permanent residents they met previously in their country, online or through an arranged marriage.

Some of the women experienced family violence before they came to Australia, including pressure to migrate.

*"At first I didn't want to [migrate] because I had a good job and I had a lot of issues with him...Then I said yes, but I didn't really want to come at the time...We had a lot of arguments and lots of fighting. He would beat me because I would say no. His family put a lot of pressure on me, 'if you really love our son you need to come here to Australia to get a better life'."*

Some women did not experience family violence until after they arrived and found out that their partner or his family members were abusive. This was especially the case for women who came here to marry Australians or permanent residents.

### Issues caused by visa status

Most immigrants to Australia generally start out on temporary visas for a few years before they become permanent residents or citizens.

The ASPIRE Project found that conditions on temporary visas have serious impacts for the safety of immigrant women experiencing family violence. Temporary visas holders face barriers to getting help because these visas have various conditions that can restrict access to income support, public housing, healthcare, and childcare services. These types of services are often essential for the ongoing safety of victims of family violence.

*"I spent two months in the shelter and I had to move because it's only available for six weeks. I moved and now they wanted me to move too because its available for three months and I spent five months there...we're not allowed to apply for housing because of my protection visa."*

Of the women on temporary visa that we interviewed, only those with partner visas where the perpetrator was their sponsor could apply for a special exception to their visa allowing them to continue with their application for permanent residency. Women on other types of temporary visas, such as students, had to apply for protection as a type of asylum seeker to stay here safely. These women were afraid that they might be harmed or killed if they went back to their country or origin.

*"Just sometimes I think if a decision doesn't come out on my side I don't know what will be happening for my life. My parents will kill me [if returned to country of origin]. My mum will kill me. My brother will kill me [because I left my husband]."*

## Immigration-related violence

Almost all of the women we interviewed talked about how perpetrators took advantage of the challenges caused by immigrating and temporary visa restrictions to threaten and control them. This included threats of deportation (often without their children), visa cancellation, and withholding passports and visa documents.

“Every time I said something that made him unhappy he asked, ‘Who is the person that has sponsored you?’ My children had to understand the same concept and that they couldn’t say anything against him.”

For many women this meant they stayed with the perpetrator for a long time. The women also talked about how the challenges with visas combined with many other barriers and this made it very difficult to reach out for help.

“The main drawback here is that you don’t have family. You don’t have anybody to tell, share your problems with. It’s only you two, husband and wife. Sometimes I think when you are only you two here, he is taking advantage that she can’t do anything. She can’t tell anybody. She has nowhere to go.”

These different challenges include:

- social isolation in unfamiliar places away from friends and family
- not being able or allowed to work, go to school or learn English
- difficulty getting information or asking for help because of language barriers
- lack of awareness about the laws and services in Australia that can help with family violence and address the worries about visas and immigration.

“When I left, I had to apply for my permanent residency...I didn’t know anything about Australia even in the year I spend with my husband. I was just at home and didn’t know how things were done. It was a big thing in my life, with the help of [family violence worker] and I got through it.”

## Impact on service providers

The challenges caused by visa restrictions make it difficult for family violence services and women’s refuges to provide support to immigrant women and their children. This is because of the high costs and intensive support needs that come with trying to help people on temporary visas.

“Because of policies and because of the way migrant and refugee women are treated, a lot of pressure is put on non-government services basically. We worked out I think it cost us probably a thousand dollars a week to have her [woman without permanent residency] here. We’re a very small organisation, that’s a lot of money...she was here ten weeks, that’s ten thousand dollars.”

There were also additional difficulties in regional places in Victoria and in Tasmania because there were often no specialist legal services to help with family violence related immigration issues.

## Strategies and solutions

Immigration policy needs to be changed to:

- recognise that family violence can be inflicted by any family member and not only sponsors
- expand access to the family violence exception to persons on non-partner visas
- allow any victim of family violence regardless of visa status to access the full range of Centrelink support and Medicare funded services.

Other strategies and solutions include:

- providing written and verbal information in multiple languages about family violence related rights and services, not only when people arrive but during the years after settlement
- updating family violence risk assessments to include information about visas and immigration-related violence
- ongoing training for workers in the family violence system about the experiences of immigrants and refugees and to build capacity to respond to the specific family violence risks and safety needs.

### Where can I get help for family violence?

#### 000 – Police emergency

#### 1 800 RESPECT - 1 800 737 732

24 hour phone line for family violence help.

#### Men’s Referral Service - 1300 766 491

Help for men who want to stop using violence.

#### Translating and Interpreting Service - 131 450

Find an interpreter for help with contacting services.

Always call ‘000’ for police in an emergency.

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