

## Interpreters 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 the impact of interpreting issues on women's experiences of family violence. The information includes some quotes from women and service providers who participated in the project. There are contact details on the next page about where to get help for family violence.

### Barriers to effective interpreting

The ASPIRE Project found many barriers to effective interpreting for women seeking assistance for family violence, including:

- limited availability of interpreters for newly arrived immigrants and for on-site interpreting in regional areas
- limited skills and capacities of some interpreters to understand and translate appropriately for family violence
- lack of female interpreters, which are often preferred by women who have experienced family violence and sexual assault
- concerns about some interpreters' unprofessional and dangerous behaviours

*"He [interpreter] told me 'Listen, she knows she cannot do this. In her culture she has to stay there and put up with it'. The interpreter is saying that to me. So imagine the things that he was saying to my client... I'm going 'I want you to interpret and tell her these things'. He said 'I'm happy to tell her but she knows this. She has to stay put and shut up'."*

- inconsistent use of interpreters by police, courts, women's refuges and family violence services
- contractual arrangements between services and different interpreting providers preventing the use of preferred interpreters
- cost cutting measures requiring the use of cheaper, lower quality interpreting companies
- lack of feedback and follow up procedures to report on interpreting problems.

### Interpreters' perspectives

We interviewed interpreters about their experiences translating for family violence to find out their perspectives on some of these barriers. Interpreters reported the following:

- lack of training in family violence issues or asking sensitive questions with vulnerable people
- difficulties interpreting while respecting cultural protocols for communicating with people of different ages and genders
- challenges of being called upon to interpret for people with whom they have community relationships in other social contexts
- pressures to act in capacities outside of their interpreting role to help people navigate services and the justice system
- worries about how their interpreting might have significant consequences for the safety of women and children, men's liberty, or their own standing and relationships within their community
- lack of structured supervision and counselling support to debrief and develop capacity to respond to family violence appropriately
- re-traumatisation of interpreters from refugee backgrounds when translating for violence related issues in authoritarian contexts

*"My experience as a refugee, standing in front of authority and giving evidence is a big thing. It triggers me. It feels bad to walk up in the court, it brings up what happened to me. And you know when the police go 'rattle, rattle' [walking with handcuffs], with all these things it triggers me. It feels like my mind goes back – flashback..."*

## Consequences of interpreting issues

Problems with interpreting add to the other communication barriers that immigrant and refugee women may experience. Communication barriers include being unable to go to English classes because of family violence and/or lack of childcare and accessible schedules; English-only information about family violence services and rights; and information in other languages only being in a written format, which means it is not accessible to women who are unable to read in their language.

Examples of the consequences of interpreting issues include:

- not being understood clearly in the justice system making it difficult to access full breadth of safety and protection measures
- difficulty getting appropriate treatment and referrals for family violence related issues when accessing healthcare services
- inadequate risk assessment and safety planning for family violence
- exposure of women's private information to family and community by unprofessional interpreters causing further safety risks
- police using perpetrators or children to interpret or relying only on the word of the perpetrator who spoke English.

*"The police came and the police called him [the perpetrator] too and then he said, "No. No. I didn't do anything. We just had a fight, an argument, and I grabbed her arms." He told them a lie. I said [in my language], 'He hit me very badly. He threatened me.' The police didn't call an interpreter, the police talked with him."*

## Strategies and solutions

Interviews with service providers and immigrant and refugee women who experienced family violence reported various strategies that help them minimise potential harm that may be caused by problems with interpreting including:

- observing body language and checking privately with the woman if the interpreter is okay
- creating a code word with the woman to end the call or appointment with the interpreter if there are concerns
- using out of state phone interpreters where possible and referring to the woman by an agreed pseudonym
- finding out if the woman speaks other languages (many do) and engaging an interpreter for a language that is less likely to be connected with her local community.

Although there were many negative experiences, we also found out about interpreters providing high quality services. This usually involved interpreters who:

- had significant experience translating family violence issues and awareness of the family violence system
- understood the gendered nature of family violence and the impacts on women and children
- demonstrated professionalism leading to a positive reputation where they were trusted by communities and services
- were respected as part of 'the team'. This was made easier when interpreters were funded to perform specialist family violence interpreting roles (e.g. at courts).

Such experienced and capable interpreters should serve as a model for future developments in the interpreting industry.

### 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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The authors of this fact sheet acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past, present and future.