

Housing pathways for women and children without permanent residency in the context of family violence

About safe steps

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre is Victoria's statewide first response service for women, young people and children experiencing family violence. Established over 40 years ago and one of the first specialist family violence services of its kind, **safe steps** continues to grow and evolve in response to the needs of those we support. We are committed to ensuring that all women and children are able to escape and live free from violence and abuse. Our ultimate goal is the elimination of family violence.

safe steps is a member of the National Advocacy Group for Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, whose central priorities are advocating to the Australian Government to expand the family violence provisions under the *Migration Act 1958* to include all dependent visa categories, and improving access to welfare payments and support services for women and children on temporary visas.

Acknowledgments

safe steps would like to thank the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation for funding this project.

We are also grateful to everyone who participated in and contributed to this research, especially to the victim-survivors of family violence who shared their stories with us.

In particular, **safe steps** would like to thank the following organisations for their support and input:

- African Family Services
- inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence
- Family Safety Victoria
- Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA)
- The National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence

safe steps respectfully acknowledges and celebrates the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Victoria and pays respect to the Elders, children and young people of past, current and future generations.

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Executive summary

Women without permanent residency and their children, who experience family violence face, numerable and compounding barriers to safety in Australia, including access to safe and secure housing. Women without permanent residency (including those on temporary, tourist, working, spousal and student visas) are impacted by immigration and visa policies which restrict their access to health, employment and social services, directly increasing their dependency on the perpetrators of violence, who are usually male partners. Perpetrators of family violence may also deliberately exploit their partner's insecure residency status as a tactic of control.

Women in this situation are much less likely to formally report family violence or seek help from friends and family due to factors such as limited family and social networks in Australia, stigma associated with relationship breakdown, lack of access to culturally sensitive services including interpreters, and possible threats to their safety from extended family and other community members.

A critical lack of safe, ongoing accommodation increases women's dependence on, and inability to leave, violent partners, ex-partners or family members. The significant shortfall in crisis accommodation results in a heavy reliance by the family violence and homelessness sectors on 'ad hoc' accommodation, such as motels. Demand for crisis accommodation is compounded by a lack of affordable long-term housing options for victim-survivors and their dependents to safely exit into.

In addition to immigration and visa policies, these systemic housing issues intensify the predicament of women and children without permanent residency attempting to escape family violence. Creating more sustainable and suitable housing options for this cohort of women and their dependents will require a concerted effort across a number of different policy areas including migration, housing, family violence and income support.

This project has involved interviewing family violence workers from **safe steps** and other services about their experiences working with women without permanent residency, and speaking directly to victim-survivors. Our interviews explored the specific barriers encountered by women escaping family violence in this context, and the impact this has on women's recovery, their children, and their support workers.

Key themes raised by the research include:

1. Perpetrators (from whatever cultural background) may exploit their partner's insecure residency status as a deliberate tactic of coercion and control. This form of abuse is specific to women without permanent residency and is known as 'immigration-related abuse'
2. Migration regulations act to prevent women from seeking help for fear that they will lose their visa or be deported, drawing lines between those who are eligible for support and protection and those who are not based on which visa they hold, rather than on their need for support in the context of family violence.
3. Many women on temporary visas are ineligible for income support, or payments are attached to the perpetrator or their Australian-born children. These women and their children are often unable to access refuge accommodation due to lack of income and are often placed in unsuitable motel accommodation as there is nowhere else for them to go.
4. Responding to the needs of women without permanent residency and their children requires specialist expertise and resourcing. Family violence practitioners, interpreters and other support workers have varied knowledge and understanding of how to work with women and children from migrant and refugee backgrounds who have experienced family violence, particularly those without permanent residency.

Part 1: Family violence against women from migrant and refugee backgrounds

Family violence affects all communities and cultures in Australia and takes many forms, including physical and sexual violence, emotional and spiritual abuse, and psychological and financial abuse. It can affect and be perpetrated by all people of all genders, however it is usually characterised by a male partner exerting dominance and control over a female partner or ex-partner.¹

Barriers and stressors related to the migration process itself can increase the risk of family violence by limiting women’s independence and ability to safely and confidently report the violence, due to fear of negatively impacting her and her children’s visa status. Perpetrators may also exploit their partner’s insecure residency status as a deliberate tactic of coercion and control. This form of abuse is specific to women without permanent residency and is known as ‘immigration-related abuse’.

Immigration-related abuse can occur when the abuser, who may be the only source of information, misguides their partner and controls their legal immigration status. For example, ‘Abusers of immigrant victims may use threats of deportation to prevent their abused spouses and children from seeking help or reporting the abuse.’² Other forms of discrimination such as ableism, ageism and homophobia intersect with gender inequality and racism to shape the experiences of many women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

It is often assumed that violence against women from migrant and refugee backgrounds is always perpetrated by men from the same culture or community, which is not the case.³ Such explanations infer that ‘cultural factors’ are responsible for violence against these women, without naming or exploring these factors,⁴ or engaging with how dominant cultural values in Australia contribute to the high rates of family violence Australian-born women experience.

The ‘culturalisation’ explanation, has the potential to exacerbate the marginalisation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women by focusing on the immigrant culture’s role and mores in perpetuating violence while ignoring the results of racism and the other consequences of the intersection of different social categories.⁵ For example, men from CALD communities have less opportunity to participate in culturally specific behaviour change programs which are in their language.⁶

Many of the nuances concerning violence against immigrant and refugee women and their vulnerability are neglected in Australian domestic violence policy despite the presence of growing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse people. The failure to engage with the complexities of the

¹ We refer to ‘women without permanent residency’, or ‘women on temporary visas’ to encompass both women on partner visas who are on the path to permanent residency and those on ‘non-partner’ temporary visas such as fiancée, tourist, 457, student, and bridging visas. We use the term ‘victim-survivor’ primarily to refer to women who have been subject to family violence in the context of an intimate partner relationship, but also to those in domestic settings who experience violence at the hands of an extended family member, sibling, carer, or adult child. We use the term ‘perpetrator’ to refer to those who use violence against others within the broad definition of the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic).

All personal information has been de-identified and names changed to protect the safety of victim survivors.

² Ghafournia, N. and Easteal, P. (2018) Are Immigrant Women Visible in Australian Domestic Violence Reports that Potentially Influence Policy? *Laws* 2018 (7): P 4 of 16.

³ One study looking at intimate partner violence in Australian refugee communities emphasised that while some intimate partner violence is perpetrated by men from migrant and refugee backgrounds, many women from these communities experience violence at the hands of Australian-born partners. The report notes that “more research into the characteristics of individuals who use violence against women from refugee backgrounds is needed to better understand this finding”. El-Murr, A. (2018) *Intimate partner violence in Australian refugee communities: Scoping review of issues and service responses*, Child Family Community Australia Paper No. 50. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). P 13.

⁴ Ghafournia and Easteal (2018). P 11 of 16.

⁵ Ghafournia and Easteal (2018). P 12 of 16.

⁶ Ghafournia and Easteal (2018). P 8 of 16.

*intersection of gender with race, ethnicity and immigration status in these women's experiences of domestic violence contributes to their exclusion and invisibility and damages their right to protection.*⁷

Prevalence and forms of violence perpetrated against women without permanent residency

Many studies have tried to establish the prevalence of family violence within migrant and refugee communities in Australia, and how this differs from Australian-born communities. However, the research is often incomplete or inconclusive.⁸

Recent studies do not indicate that the overall incidence of family violence is higher for those from culturally diverse and migrant communities.⁹ However, under-reporting of family violence in migrant and refugee communities is suspected to be very high,¹⁰ and has been attributed to a range of factors.¹¹ Barriers to help-seeking for women from refugee communities can be result from a lack of cultural safety, fear and distrust of authorities, as well as fear of social isolation.¹²

Under-reporting is also exacerbated by the unavailability of family violence protections under migration law for many women on temporary visas, meaning that there are few official channels via which the experiences of women without permanent residency (and in particular, women who speak languages other than English) are being accurately recorded in Australia.

Specific forms of abuse experienced by women from migrant and refugee backgrounds include dowry abuse and immigration-related violence such as the withholding of vital information about visa status, deportation threats, refusing access to passports and other documentation, and threats to take custody of children.¹³ Women with temporary visas may also be subject to economic abuse, and to violence perpetrated by multiple family members,¹⁴ including extended family. Intimate partner violence can also intersect with forced or arranged marriage, human trafficking and situations akin to slavery,¹⁵ as well as cultural or spiritual abuse and reproductive coercion.

The issue of dowry abuse is raised frequently by clients of **safe steps** as part of their experience of family violence. Even if there is technically no 'dowry' payment, pressure or expectation by male partners or extended

⁷ Ghafournia and Easteal (2018). P 1.

⁸ According to Ghafournia and Easteal, although the Personal Safety Survey found that immigrant women experience domestic violence at a lower rate than Australian born women, other Australian research suggests that the risk of domestic and family violence for immigrant women is actually higher. Ghafournia and Easteal (2018). P 16. See also: Vaughan, C., Davis E., Murdolo, A., Chen, J., Murray, L., Block, K., Quiazon, R., & Warr, D. (2015). Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia: The ASPIRE Project: State of knowledge paper (ANROWS Landscapes, 12/2015). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS. P 10. See also, Riveroll, S. (May 2016) 'An insight into the family homelessness experience of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women and children with no permanent residency living in refuge as a result of family violence', *Parity* 29(4): 34-35.

⁹ Segrave, M. (2017) *Temporary migration and family violence: An analysis of victimisation, vulnerability and support*. Melbourne: Monash University. P 9.

¹⁰ Riveroll, S. (May 2016) 'An insight into the family homelessness experience of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women and children with no permanent residency living in refuge as a result of family violence', *Parity* 29(4): 34-35.

¹¹ Pittaway and Rees (2006). 18-25; Rees and Pease (2007). 1-19; Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service (2006) *The right to be safe from domestic violence: Immigrant and refugee women in rural Victoria*. P III.

¹² El-Murr (2018). P 9.

¹³ Vaughan, C., Davis E., Murdolo, A., Chen, J., Murray, L., Block, K., Quiazon, R., & Warr, D. (2015). *Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia: The ASPIRE Project: State of knowledge paper* (ANROWS Landscapes, 12/2015). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS. P 5.

¹⁴ El-Murr, (2018). P 5.

¹⁵ Segrave, (2017). P 5.; Vaughan et al, (2015) P 5.

families to repay the significant costs associated with the migration process (such as visa processing costs and air fares, etc.) is sometimes used as an excuse to, for example, confiscate a woman's passport until "she pays him back".¹⁶

Insecure visa status and family violence provisions

Temporary visa status is a major factor influencing women's experiences of violence.¹⁷ 'Women with precarious migration status are less willing to seek help for intimate partner violence and engage with services than those with permanent residency'.¹⁸

*Uncertain visa status can be used by abusive partners or other family members to threaten and control women: a considerable power differential arises when a woman's partner has permanent residency and she does not.*¹⁹

Certain visa classes render women particularly susceptible to different types of abuse and also shape their experiences of seeking help and accessing services.²⁰ Segrave notes that there is no data on the prevalence of family violence according to visa status²¹ and identifies that building the evidence base surrounding these issues is critical to better understand migration-specific risk.²²

The family violence provisions in the Migration Regulations are designed to provide a pathway to permanent residency for some temporary visa holders to 'ensure victims of domestic violence are not forced to remain in abusive relationships to stay in the country'.²³ However, as the law stands, 'migrants who are not on a specific partner visa – a visa sponsored by an Australian citizen or permanent resident – have no rights or protections when it comes to domestic violence'.²⁴

This system creates two categories of family violence victim-survivors, based on their visa status.²⁵ Family violence provisions in the Migration Regulations do not extend to women who have not married their sponsor, or those who are on other temporary visas, such as tourist, student and working visas, or those who experience violence perpetrated by a family member other than their sponsors.

According to the Department of Home Affairs ('Immigration'), on average, approximately 500 people apply under the family violence provisions in the Migration Regulations every year.²⁶ Accessing these provisions is onerous, however, requiring applicants to provide evidence of a 'genuine relationship' and the history of violence. As many women may only have been in the relationship for a short time prior to the violence occurring, providing evidence of the relationship (such as a joint lease, bank account, or even photographs) can

¹⁶ For more information, see **safe steps'** submission to the dowry abuse inquiry: **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre, Submission 14, *Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Inquiry into the practice of dowry and the incidence of dowry abuse in Australia* (August 2018).

¹⁷ El-Murr (2018). P 9.

¹⁸ El-Murr (2018). P 9.

¹⁹ State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Vol IV ('RCFV Vol IV'), Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16): P 109.

²⁰ Australian Migrant Resource Centre (2018) *Working with New and Establishing Communities to Prevent Family and Domestic Violence A Good-Practice Resource*. P 29.

²¹ Segrave (2017). P 50.

²² Segrave (2017). P 50.

²³ Segrave (2018).

²⁴ Segrave (2018).

²⁵ Singh, M.K. *These visas are excluded from family violence protection under current Australian law* SBS (26 Jan 2018).

²⁶ Richards, S. *Caught between domestic violence and a visa: the suffering of migrant women*. InDaily (6 July 2018).

be impossible, and many women will not have family violence protection orders or other evidence of the violence due to barriers in reporting.

Based on national statistics regarding rates of intimate partner violence, the total number of applications under the family violence provisions (529) is low and 'requires urgent review', as it indicates that there are 'gaps in knowledge about and access to the family violence provision'.²⁷

The consequences of women not receiving permanent residency can be grave, resulting in harm or separation from their Australian-born children. This was recognised by a Department of Social Services report in 2015, which stated that:

*For some CALD women, returning to their countries of origin carries the threat of strong disapproval and even violence from their families and communities. Others fear having to leave Australia will result in losing custody of their children.*²⁸

Barriers to income, housing and support

Many women without permanent residency are ineligible for social security or the right to work due to their migration status, limiting their financial independence and creating a further barrier to leaving a perpetrator. Furthermore, administrative complications often arise due to the fact that visa status is determined at the federal level, whereas the provision of support services such as housing support happens at a state level.²⁹ Consequently, even where state policies may enable women to be eligible for housing services, their lack of access to other services increases the costs (and consequently limits the capacity) of refuges and crisis accommodation services to accommodate women without permanent residency and their children, who tend to need accommodation support for more prolonged periods of time than other clients.³⁰

*Government policies and legislation are some of the main structural causes of family homelessness for women and children with no permanent residency escaping family violence.*³¹

Victoria's Royal Commission found that although they are eligible for refuge accommodation, women without permanent residency face significant barriers in accessing it. This is, in large part, due to the fact that there is often no longer-term accommodation options available for them, and refuges are reluctant to accept women without a safe exit option in place:

*[T]he Commission was consistently informed in consultations and submissions that women without permanent residency or who are otherwise ineligible for social security benefits face difficulty obtaining refuge and crisis accommodation: 'The women we see often have no income. We have had to impose a limit that we can only have two people who are on no income at the refuge at any one time.'*³²

In its submission to the Royal Commission, inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence noted other challenges for women from migrant or refugee backgrounds seeking access to refuge accommodation include

²⁷ Segrave (2017). P 50.

²⁸ Department of Social Services (2015) Hearing her voice: Kitchen table conversations on violence against culturally and linguistically diverse women and their children. Canberra: DSS. P 25.

²⁹ Kate Thomas, Marie Segrave and InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (2018) *Research brief: Support options for migrant women on temporary visas experiencing family violence in Australia*.

³⁰ Thomas, Segrave and InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (2018).

³¹ Riveroll (2016). P 34.

³² State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Vol II ('RCFV Vol II'), Parliamentary Paper No 132 (2014–16). P 52.

that they often have multiple children who also need to be accommodated, and/or that the requirement for refuge residents to cease working and studying conflicts with their visa requirements.³³

safe steps and other family violence and homelessness services do not turn clients away on the basis of visa status, opting instead to accommodate them in motels or hotels until such time as a refuge place or more permanent bed becomes available. However, this comes at significant financial expense to the organisation.

'Ad hoc' accommodation is defined by the Royal Commission as including hotels, motels, caravan parks and rooming houses. As noted in **safe steps'** submission to the Royal Commission, women without permanent residency and their children usually stay in this type of accommodation for much longer than those clients with permanent residency or citizenship.³⁴

*Having no exit option from refuge further means... the refuge sector experiences blockage [which] prevents other women and children from leaving motels and emergency accommodation, due to no refuge vacancies. The latter might be a push factor leading women to return to violent relationships and perpetuate the cycle of violence.*³⁵

The Royal Commission examined some of the challenges posed by hotels and motels as default crisis accommodation for all women and children escaping family violence. It noted that families are forced to live for days or weeks in a state of limbo, within a confined space, often with only minimal support from services, which can compound their trauma and leave them feeling further isolated and vulnerable.³⁶

³³ inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (2015) *Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence*.

³⁴ RCFV Vol II (2014–16). P 52.

³⁵ Riveroll (2016). P 35.

³⁶ RCFV Vol II (2014–16). P 49.

Lee Wan's story

I am a migrant woman from South East Asia and I settled in Melbourne with my then Australian husband. We had two children, a boy and a girl. From the outside we looked like a perfect, happy family. We were educated and in good professions. But things inside the house were far from perfect and happy.

My then husband would often suddenly explode and hurt me physically and emotionally. He would apologise afterwards but the abuse would happen again and again. Each time he asked for forgiveness and promised to seek help. [He said] It was my fault and I was to blame for his behaviour. I endured my sufferings because he was the sole breadwinner, he looked after the family and he told me if I leave, I will be deported and will never see my children again. I escaped with my children one morning because the night before he tried to kill me by strangulation.

*My mother-in-law gave me a phone number for a local community centre and said maybe we need to see marriage counsellor. I called and they told me to leave right away as my life, and the life of my children, were in danger.³⁷ **safe steps** helped us to find temporary accommodation, a refuge somewhere in Victoria that kept us safe. I had a worker for the first time and the refuge also organised legal aid, counselling and linked me with a bi-cultural worker. I began my recovery journey and was able to rebuild my shattered life.*

*A few years later (2007) I answered an ad placed in local newspaper about a media advocate training program. I turned up to the meeting and the organisation was **safe steps**. I participated and have been a media advocate since. Being an advocate allowed me to speak up about family violence against women and related issues such as homelessness. It gave me confidence and each time I spoke I became stronger. I feel blessed to have this opportunity to speak to a wide range of audiences and get to know other women whose stories have inspired me. **safe steps** gave me my voice back, empowered me and inspired me to overcome a devastating chapter of my life.*

³⁷ Strangulation is assessed as a high-risk factor for intimate partner homicide.

Part 2: Findings

A range of issues impact the ability of women and children without permanent residency to access safe, secure accommodation following family violence. Such issues include social isolation, conditional and punitive visa policies, culturally inappropriate services and a lack of access to crisis accommodation.

Confirming the findings of other studies, the challenges and stress caused by temporary migration status and the associated lack of access to social security emerged as a central theme in our interviews with victim-survivors and family violence workers.

The victim-survivors we interviewed told of having no one to confide in about the violence they were experiencing, and of feeling unable to attend social events held by their communities because they were concerned people would notice that “something was going on”. These women also described their hesitancy to speak to family in their home country about the violence they were experiencing:

“I didn’t want to talk to my mum about it because she’s at home, and she has high blood pressure. I’m worried if I tell her, what she’s going to think? I don’t want to put this burden on her, of me being so far, and now I have issues, and she can’t be here to help me. So sometimes you just keep quiet and just pretend everything is ok, but it’s not ok.”

Victim-survivors were particularly concerned about the implications for their visa status if they reported family violence to police or other services.

“[T]he main part is not... what I need to do to be safe. For me it’s my visa... If I choose to go, that means I’m just letting my application go – a lot of money that I’ve spent for the application....And that means the immigration have to be notified our relationship is not there and that means my visa is not valid anymore. And I didn’t want that to happen to me. So however much I knew what I needed to do I had to stay – I would say I didn’t have a choice, because I’m doing it for my visa.”

Victim-survivors conveyed some of the ways in which family violence and uncertainty about their migration status combined to intensify their experiences and prevent them from leaving violent partners:

“I explained to them the conditions of my partner visa: that if I’m placed in a refuge...that means I’m not living with my partner, and I’m supposed to report back to...Immigration, and if I report that, then that will mean they will look into reviewing my visa... I didn’t want to create any attention or any negative feedback that would make them think maybe... my relationship and my partner is struggling... so I [stayed with my partner to] do what I could do for the sake of my visa”.

“The stress level has doubled...Now everything is out, and now he knows that I’ve reported him, and I ran away with my kids, and I don’t know what Immigration will say...Sometimes I don’t sleep at night.”

A victim-survivor explained that she was unable to report the violence or to flee to her home country because:

“He has threatened me if I say something he will kill me, now I can’t go back, I don’t know what to do – I’m stuck in the middle...If he was from here – if he was an Australian – then I could run away because I am from Africa, but he is from Africa too... even if I run away and go back to Africa to where I came from... he will definitely make sure that I’m dead.”

A family violence case manager we interviewed summarised the irony of women’s situation upon experiencing family violence in Australia:

“In their home countries, domestic violence is often normalised and there are few services or support, so women may not even identify abuse as such. And then they come here, where there are laws against it and they are punished for voicing it”.

Lack of income

Lack of income has an enormous impact on housing options and outcomes for women without permanent residency and their children. Family violence workers we interviewed explained some of the difficulties that women had in accessing social security and other income support, noting that:

“If a woman arrives in Australia and her child is born in Australia and both parents have international passports, then the mother is not eligible for any payment. The child will have a Medicare card, and access to a GP etc. but no payment. If the father is a permanent resident and the mother is on a partner visa, and the child was born in Australia, the father can claim Family Tax Benefit for the child but the mother will not get Family Tax Benefit once they’ve separated because it’s attached to the father as permanent resident... so you’re opening up opportunities for financial abuse.”

Workers we consulted recommended that eligibility for Centrelink payments should be expanded to ensure that women without permanent residency would receive financial support upon separating from a violent partner, in order to help them secure housing, recover and care for their children.

Role of Flexible Support Packages

Flexible Support Packages (FSPs) are funding packages intended to assist all victim-survivors of family violence in Victoria ‘to access support, move out of crisis, stabilise and improve their safety, well-being and independence into recovery’.³⁸

Although FSPs are crucial for many women in crisis and recovery from family violence, they are usually unable to provide the long-term financial security women on temporary visas require to stabilise and recover. FSPs were viewed by the workers we spoke to as a temporary solution for this cohort of women, allowing them “some breathing space and a break from the violence” but unable to solve their lack of access to income and social security.

Meeting the needs of women without permanent residency

Crisis Case Managers at **safe steps** stated that they spend considerable time responding to the needs of women without permanent residency because of the complexity visa requirements involved, the time required to communicate via an interpreter, and the fact that the service system is not well-designed to support these women and their children, and in fact, often works against them.

safe steps workers check a woman’s visa status as a priority once they arrive at the **safe steps** Safehouse, as many “will be unaware of their own visa status”. The workers noted that women are usually unable to complete immigration forms themselves due to language barriers and/or the impacts of the violence and trauma they have experienced. Assisting women to complete visa application forms can take days due to the amount and nature of the information required, and often requires calling family members overseas to gather information, as well as long telephone conversations with Immigration.

“We can provide that intensive case management support [but] because we are a short term crisis service, we’re not supposed to have women sitting here for six, eight weeks while we’re working out their visa status...”

The family violence workers we spoke with described the complexity of these intersecting challenges:

³⁸ Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria) (DHHS) (August 2017) *Program requirements for the delivery of Family Violence Flexible Support Packages* (‘FSP Guidelines’) Melbourne: DHHS. P 2.

“When I was in case management, the last thing I was thinking about when I got a new file was ‘what’s her visa status?’. I was thinking about does she have clothes? Does she have injuries? Does she need to get to a motel?... It’s not even something that’s necessarily front of mind for people.”

All women and their children have the right to be safe from all forms of violence in Australia, regardless of their visa status. African Family Services was part of the Expert Reference Group for this research project. Their outreach and family violence support service offers an ‘authentic understanding of the African cultural complexities and needs that exist; thereby bridging the gaps between the community and existing mainstream services.’³⁹

African Family Services and **safe steps** are considering how we can best work together to provide more holistic cultural and emotional supports to women and children from African heritage experiencing family violence, as part of our joint crisis response. Potential strategies include increasing the emotional and cultural support provided to women without permanent residency placed in motels via partnerships with specialist outreach services, partnerships with real estate agencies to facilitate rapid referral pathways to the private rental market, and engaging African Family Services to deliver cultural awareness training to all staff at **safe steps**.

safe steps’ Safehouse: Intensive face-to-face case management model

*The **safe steps** Safehouse provides supported, communal living accommodation for women escaping family violence and can accommodate up to three families at a time on a short-term basis, for a period of 5 to 10 days while they are awaiting refuge or if they are unable to be accommodated elsewhere. The Safehouse provides intensive, face-to-face transitional case management and is well-equipped to support women with complex case management needs, including women without permanent residency.*

In 2018, 75% of all women accommodated at the Safehouse were from a migrant or refugee background and spoke languages other than English. 47% of the women placed in the Safehouse did not hold permanent residency.

A substantial number of women on temporary visas exiting the Safehouse in 2018 were accepted into refuge (68%), suggesting the value of the intensive case management model offered by the Safehouse.

Many women without permanent residency are in urgent need of financial support and often have trauma and/or mental health problems as a result of their experiences, which increases risk and requires a more intensive case management approach. In addition to negotiating immigration and visa processes, family violence practitioners spend a significant amount of time helping women with complex Centrelink claims.

“What they need is help with reams and reams of paperwork, or support to go to Centrelink for the day and fill out forms. The workload is doubled.”

Use of Interpreters

The use of interpreters is often critical in responding to women from migrant and refugee background without permanent residency in the context of family violence. Whether reporting violence, accessing support, completing risk assessments, or communicating with children, interpreters play a crucial role translating complex and sensitive information between family violence support workers and women.

³⁹ African Family Services, *About us*.

Because of the heavy reliance on interpreter services, the family violence workers we interviewed emphasised the importance of trust and shared understandings of family violence between the family violence specialist sector and interpreting services. Family violence workers were keen to see investment in creating a pool of interpreters with expertise in family violence and who are able to provide a trauma-informed response

As recommended by the ASPIRE project, interpreters should be recognized as *'as an integral part of the family violence system'*:

*The interpreting industry should be reformed to ensure high-quality family violence interpreting through development of interpreter capacity, with recognition and remuneration for specific expertise in relation to family violence; development of mechanisms for maintenance of interpreter standards; and provision of debriefing and other support to interpreters.*⁴⁰

Crisis accommodation

The lack of affordable, sustainable and supported accommodation available to women without permanent residency and their children experiencing family violence has created a problematic reliance on ad hoc and crisis accommodation such as motels.

A 2019 report by the Northern and Western Homelessness Network (NWHN) entitled *A Crisis in Crisis* found that feedback from service users about purchased emergency accommodation was overwhelmingly negative in regard to the level of amenity, lack of cleanliness, high costs, and, most importantly, a perceived lack of safety and security: 'What consumers clearly stated they wanted was safe, secure, self-contained accommodation, with support available when needed.'⁴¹

*Despite reporting more positive experiences in government funded crisis facilities than in purchased emergency accommodation, 85% of consumers surveyed said they would prefer their own self-contained space that could be securely locked, even if it was small. Women identified that their ideal emergency accommodation would be homely, private, with good facilities including a clean kitchen. They stated they would like accommodation that was safe and secure for children, with some support available.*⁴²

Women with permanent residency are often placed in motels while they are awaiting a refuge vacancy. If they are then able to access refuge accommodation they may be able to stay for up to 6 weeks, after which they may be placed in transitional housing, moving on to private rental where available. However, women without permanent residency often experience prolonged stays in motels as they are often unable to access refuge accommodation.

After a motel, some women without permanent residency may be provided with supported accommodation offered by **safe steps** (the Safehouse), the homelessness sector, or religious-based, charitable organisations. These women are often at high risk of homelessness or returning to the perpetrator as transitional housing, private rental and public housing are unavailable due to their lack of income.

⁴⁰ Vaughan et al, (2016). P 6.

⁴¹ Northern and Western Homelessness Networks (NWHN) (February 2019) *A Crisis in Crisis: The appalling state of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's north and west*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx> page 3

⁴² NWHN (2019). P 6.

Use of motels to house victim-survivors of family violence

“We don’t like putting them in a motel, but what other options do we have? At least for her to feel safe for a little while.”

Due to a lack of crisis accommodation, women without permanent residency and their children are often placed in emergency accommodation, such as hotels or motels⁴³ while they are awaiting a refuge vacancy or other accommodation to become available.

When people have nowhere to live, they often look to the homelessness service system for urgent support. Unfortunately, the Homelessness Service System across Victoria only has access to 423 government funded crisis beds. To make up a significant shortfall in crisis accommodation homelessness services utilise low end hotels and private rooming houses. This accommodation is extremely unsafe and typically of a very poor standard.⁴⁴

The family violence sector’s reliance on motels is unavoidable given the current demand for refuge and the lack of other options, but it is costly and presents particular challenges for women without permanent residency and their children.

Victim-survivors and family violence workers we consulted raised several concerns in regard to the appropriateness of motels for safely accommodating women and children without permanent residency escaping family violence. For example:

- Many motels have small rooms, which are inadequate for families with multiple children.
- Many motels used by the family violence sector do not cater for the cultural needs of women and children. Motel restaurants may not have halal food options, or serve meals that are unfamiliar to women. Many of the motel rooms do not contain cooking facilities.
- Most women receive financial support in the form of vouchers or material aid, meaning there is no flexibility for them to spend money on things that they need or want.

We were consistently told by family violence practitioners that working with women on temporary visas, particularly those from migrant and refugee backgrounds, may take twice as long or more as working with other clients due to the complexity and nature of issues to be addressed.

As stated in *A Crisis in Crisis*, ‘This is clearly demoralising and potentially damaging for the consumers of the system. It also takes a toll on the front- line workforce, who enter this work with the intention of helping people, and who are aware that they are potentially contributing to harm’.⁴⁵

Refuge

As a form of crisis supported accommodation for people at risk of homelessness, refuges in Victoria are funded to take a certain number of women per year, with the expectation being that they stay for a short duration of time (up to six weeks).⁴⁶ In accordance with their funding agreements, refuges must meet two key performance measures, one of which is the number of new support periods provided. This measure is designed to maximise the availability of crisis accommodation, for which there is a growing demand.

⁴³ ‘Motels’ will be used to refer to the range of hotel, motel and serviced units that the family violence sector uses to accommodate women.

⁴⁴ NWHN (2019). P 2.

⁴⁵ NWHN (2019). P 7.

⁴⁶ Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria) (2018) *Crisis supported accommodation 2018, Volume 3: Human Services Policy and Funding Plan 2015-19, update 2017-18, Chapter 4: Activity descriptions.*

Most refuges require women to contribute to rent and some request a service fee to contribute to accommodation costs. Refuges that do accept women without permanent residency without income are placed in a difficult position. These women often stay for far longer than the refuge has funding to accommodate them, which prevents them from housing other women in need and from meeting key performance measures under their funding agreements.

Lack of income was cited as a primary obstacle for women without permanent residency attempting to access crisis accommodation. Refuges often have individual policies on the maximum number of women without permanent residency they are able to accept at any one time due to the associated costs and lack of viable and safe exit options. The additional time required to support women on temporary visas with complex immigration, social security and mental health issues also impacts on service capacity.

Family violence practitioners told us that victim-survivors' experiences in refuge vary depending on the training and experience of the workers they have contact with. Children are often unable to attend school while staying in crisis accommodation due to safety concerns. This is upsetting for children and mothers alike, particularly as education is often considered very important and may be one of the reasons they have moved to Australia.

“if we were permanent residents, it would have been easier for me and my kids. We would have got the help that we needed, my daughter would have gone back to school sooner.”

Furthermore, not all refuges have specialist children's workers, meaning children may not receive targeted therapy to address their trauma.

For women and children recently arrived from countries with a history of conflict or persecution of minorities, and those who have experienced displacement first-hand, the precarity of refuge and other crisis or ad hoc accommodation can compound pre-arrival trauma. One worker noted that sometimes when services mention refuge to women, “they think refugee camp”.

The isolation experienced by all women placed in refuge – usually caused by physical distance from friends and family and the secrecy surrounding their location – is intensified for women without permanent residency, who often have fewer supports, as many of their friends and family are overseas. Some may not have had the opportunity to establish social networks outside of the family because the perpetrator restricted their independence.

Distinct challenges face women and their children placed in rural refuges. Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds may elect to return home rather than take up a place in a rural refuge as they are concerned about the level of isolation. Isolation can be exacerbated in rural towns by limited public transport options, lack of access to English classes, and the need to maintain anonymity. Family violence workers have reported that women placed in regional refuges have reported experiencing racism directed at themselves or their children by the local community.

Transitional housing

Transitional housing in short to medium term supported accommodation is offered for approximately three to 12 months as a stepping-stone to securing social housing or private rental, and usually has a 30% income requirement. One victim-survivor we consulted stated that she was refused transitional housing on the basis that the \$500 a fortnight she received from Centrelink in Family Tax Benefits for her son was insufficient to meet the income eligibility criteria. In the end, two different family violence services banded together to increase her combined income with supermarket vouchers, which she could use to purchase food. This was accepted in this case as additional income and she was provided with a property. While services do their best to work around income restrictions, these arrangements are ad hoc and not possible in every case.

Private rental

Barriers to private rental are even greater for women on temporary visas, given the inflexibility of most private rental agreements, which require proof of regular and ongoing income. Even women who have some independent source of income may not have pay slips requested by real estate agents for rental applications.

Part 3: Removing barriers, improving responses and prioritising the safety of women and children

Upon leaving a violent relationship, women without permanent residency are often placed in motels or other ad hoc accommodation for lengthy periods, unable to access the refuge system due to lack of income and other factors. Insecure or inappropriate crisis accommodation puts women and children without permanent residency at increased risk of compounded trauma, homelessness, and of returning to the perpetrator. Returning to their country of origin is often not an option either, as it can carry the risk of ostracism or violence from their family and community. If women share children with the perpetrator, they may face additional barriers to leaving the country or relocating.

Although the significant barriers faced by women on temporary visas were addressed by the Royal Commission in its report and recommendations⁴⁷, improving services and outcomes for these women and their children has been slow, and the complexity of their issues continues to place a huge demand upon already overstretched specialist family violence and legal services.

This project has significantly contributed to the evidence base regarding the housing needs of women on temporary visas escaping family violence by capturing the lived experience of victim survivors and specialist family violence practitioners in Victoria. We hope it generates increased momentum for policy reform at a state and federal level, resulting in more just and equitable access to safe and culturally appropriate and sustainable housing options and responses for this cohort of women and their children.

The breadth of the proposed reforms reflects the numerous areas of public policy and service provision that impact women without permanent residency in the context of escaping family violence. Solving these issues requires a focussed, long-term strategy whose starting point must be the safety of women and children.

1. Reforms to migration law

Australia's current immigration laws fail to protect women without permanent residency experiencing family violence and their children, decreasing women's independence and increasing their dependence on perpetrators. **Migration regulations act to prevent women from seeking help for fear that they will lose their visa status or be deported, drawing lines between those who are eligible for support and protection and those who are not based on which visa they hold, rather than on their need for support in the context of family violence.**

Victim-survivors interviewed for this project were asked what aspects of the immigration law framework they thought could be changed to make their plight less difficult:

"Honestly, if I didn't have to... worry about my visa, if I had an option – like, oh you're going through DV, you will need to be on this visa for now – I could easily travel back home and talk to my mum and say something, but now with my visa I can't even go home. I need to apply for another visa to go. It's hard."

"They could make the policies...much [more] flexible for people facing DV. If they could be more understanding of this person who is vulnerable.... Instead of saying you have to stay with this person, if you break the relationship that means your visa is terminated. They should...give them, even [if] it's not direct permanent residency, give them an optional visa".

Priority actions:

⁴⁷ State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Vol V ('RCFV Vol 5'), Parliamentary Paper No 132 (2014–16): P 109.

- Improve the migration system so that all women on temporary visas who experience domestic, family and sexual violence, and their dependants, can access family violence provisions. Ensure eligibility and access to services is based on a woman's need for safety, regardless of their migration status.⁴⁸
- Amend the Migration Regulations 1994 to:
 - Determine whether there is sexual, domestic and family violence prior to assessing for a 'genuine relationship' and ensure the evidence required can reasonably be provided in the context of a violent relationship. (For example, financial abuse or social isolation must not be used against a person who has experienced violence when assessing the genuineness of the relationship).⁴⁹
- Introduce a visa pathway for people on temporary visas with Australian citizen or permanent resident children, who are unable to leave Australia with their children.⁵⁰
- Prioritise visa and permanent residency applications made by women on temporary visas experiencing family violence by:
 - Giving greater weight to Foreign States' inability to provide effective protection from domestic, family and sexual violence.⁵¹
 - Establishing safeguards to ensure the visa applicant knows about a visa application in their name, knows how they can update their contact details, and knows whether they are legally represented and how they can change or remove their authorised recipient.⁵²

2. Improving access to income and social security

As recommended in the National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence's recent *Blueprint for Reform*, Australian Government and State and Territory governments must ensure that:

*women on temporary visas experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence and their dependents are given equal access, without any restrictions relating to migration status, to specialist organisations who are fully trained and resourced to provide support and meet women's accommodation, legal, counselling, health, case management and domestic, family and sexual violence education needs.*⁵³

We support the Blueprint's recommendations and the following actions to increase the independence of women without permanent residency experiencing family violence and enable them to rebuild their lives and care for their children in safety.

Priority actions:

- Expand eligibility for Centrelink, Medicare and other government support services to ensure women without permanent residency can access financial support and all necessary health services.
- Encourage COAG to support changes to the Migration Regulations 1994 to ensure that all people seeking to escape family violence are eligible for crisis payments, regardless of their visa status.

⁴⁸ National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2019) *Blueprint for Reform: Removing Barriers to Safety for Victims/Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence who are on Temporary Visas*. P 2.

⁴⁹ National Advocacy Group (2018) P 6.

⁵⁰ Recommendation 3, National Advocacy Group (2018).

⁵¹ National Advocacy Group (2019). P 5.

⁵² National Advocacy Group (2019). P 6

⁵³ National Advocacy Group (2019). P 9

3. Safer and more accessible housing pathways

As a result of the Royal Commission, reforms are underway in Victoria which are intended to address 'bottlenecks' at entry points into crisis accommodation, transitional housing and social housing.⁵⁴ We welcome these reforms while recognising that the complexity of the systemic issues at play mean that it may take a long time for improvements to be felt by victim survivors.

On a national level, we support the recommendation of the National Advocacy Group that state and territory governments expand the eligibility for temporary accommodation, crisis accommodation, rental assistance and public housing to ensure that people on temporary visas experiencing violence and their children and dependants can have a safe place to live.⁵⁵ We note that this will necessitate increased investment in service infrastructure to fund services managing accommodation and providing support to clients.⁵⁶

Motels

"When we try to develop something from scratch, it takes forever. In the meantime, in the short and medium term, we should look at what is currently happening and make it work better."

In an ideal world, ad hoc emergency accommodation would not be necessary; however, given the current blockages in the crisis accommodation system, it is likely that increasing demand for support will mean that use of ad hoc accommodation will remain into the foreseeable future.

The family violence workers we interviewed suggested ideas for reforming to the use of motels as emergency accommodation for women escaping family violence:

- Establish formal protocols with motels to ensure consistency and quality of service and mandate training in family violence for motel workers and managers.
- Fund dedicated workers to act as liaisons between family violence services and motels and provide face-to-face support in motels via more specialist outreach workers.

We make the following recommendations regarding motels and other ad hoc accommodation:⁵⁷

Priority action:

- The Victorian Government should continue to prioritise reducing the family violence and homelessness sector's reliance on 'ad hoc' accommodation such as hotels, motels and caravan parks to house women and children escaping violence.
- Family violence response services in partnership with the Victorian Government should work together to develop minimum standards for purchased accommodation which takes account of the needs of women without permanent residency and their children.
- The Victorian Government should increase funding for local and statewide specialist family violence services, to support the additional needs and challenges faced by women and children without permanent residency who are accommodated in motels.

Refuge

⁵⁴ RCFV Summary and recommendations (2014–16). See recommendations 16, 18, 19 & 20

⁵⁵ National Advocacy Group (2018). P 7.

⁵⁶ This is particularly important in states where investment in family violence services lags behind Victoria.

⁵⁷ Our recommendations support those made by the NWHN, who called for an increase in HEF funding to allow for the purchase of safe and appropriate emergency accommodation, increased scrutiny and regulation of private accommodation providers, and construction of safe temporary accommodation options, as well as sufficient social housing to eliminate reliance on private motels and rooming houses for emergency accommodation: NWHN (2019)P 4.

Our discussions with the sector revealed some of the innovative ways that refugees attempt to navigate the challenges they experience in supporting women without permanent residency. For example, one refuge we consulted orders in boxes of halal food, and one has a dedicated crisis bed for women without permanent residency.

While these examples illustrate the sector's willingness to assist this cohort of women and their children, these short-term adaptations have significant resourcing implications for already stretched and time poor services.

Priority actions:

- The Victorian Government should take account of additional funds required for refugees to support the additional costs of accommodating women without permanent residency with no income.
- The Victorian Government should consider the impact that the new Core and Cluster refugees might have on women from migrant and refugee backgrounds on temporary visas. One approach could be to fund one or more dedicated crisis beds for women without permanent residency per refuge (or up to 2-3 units in each new Core and Cluster refuge).

Private rental and other long-term housing options

Several interviewees and our expert advisory group suggested the following strategies to increase access to private rental and other long-term housing options:

- Family violence and housing workers could have access to a pool of registered private landlords, who would allow a private rental lease to be in the name of the service, rather than the client.
- Vacant State government owned housing stock could be utilised to house women without permanent residency on a temporary basis.

Priority action:

That the Victorian Government explore the potential of using acquired or owned vacant housing stock to house women without permanent residency escaping family violence on a temporary basis.

4. Improving service responses

We endorse the recommendation of Vaughan et al regarding development of a 'robust bilingual, bicultural family violence services workforce that is trained and supported to respond to the needs of immigrant and refugee families'.⁵⁸ Formal training and increased support for family violence services in working with this client cohort would improve service delivery and outcomes for women and their children, reduce stress on staff, and increase system efficiency and consistency.

Family violence workers we interviewed made the following comments and suggestions with respect to improving the responsiveness of the family violence sector to meeting the needs of women without permanent residency:

"If you had a specialist case manager or a couple of case managers who were specifically dealing with clients without permanent residency, that might go some way to speeding the process up or at least making those women feel a bit more supported because the threat of deportation is huge in the minds of all these women, and that's just another layer of trauma on top of the family violence, especially if you're going to get sent back to a country where your life is at risk."

⁵⁸ Vaughan et al, (2016). P 6.

Priority actions:

- Women on temporary visas who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence and their dependants should have immediate and full access to safety, protection, justice and fully funded specialist support with demonstrated gender expertise and cultural competency.⁵⁹
- Workers in all relevant agencies who come in contact with women on temporary visas who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence, including interpreters, have undertaken training in regard to:
 - the nature and dynamics of domestic, family and sexual violence,
 - intersections between domestic, family and sexual violence, immigration issues and family law for women on temporary visas,
 - how to respond and make referrals in a culturally safe and trauma-informed way with women on temporary visas experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, and
 - gender-based claims for protection.⁶⁰
- Ensure that Government policies and programs targeting women on temporary visas escaping family violence, immigrant and refugee women are informed by people with lived experience of family violence and developed using co-design principles. This should include engagement with multicultural women's services and women leaders from immigrant and refugee communities.⁶¹

Priority actions:

- In regard to interpreters, the Government should implement targeted strategies which ensure:
 - Adequate numbers of interpreters are trained and available for every language spoken in Australia, particularly emerging language groups.
 - That there are sufficient female interpreters to meet demand in a timely manner, and the risk that victim-survivors are known to interpreters are minimised. This may require recruiting and training more interpreters in small communities or providing access to interpreters overseas.
 - That a family violence debriefing support service is available for interpreters who work with victim-survivors.
 - That sufficient interpreters are specifically trained to work with children, to ensure their voices are being heard.

5. Data improvements

Increasing and improving data collection with respect to the experiences of women without permanent residency and their children is integral to making sound, evidence-based policy decisions, enhancing advocacy efforts and better targeting service responses. The intersections of family violence and migration status are 'only just beginning to be considered'⁶² and 'there is no data on the prevalence of family violence according to

⁵⁹ National Advocacy Group (2019). P 2.

⁶⁰ National Advocacy Group (2019). P 9

⁶¹ This supports a recommendation made by the ASPIRE project in relation to prevention programs: Vaughan et al, (2016): P 6. For examples of how to meaningfully and effectively engage immigrant and refugee communities, see Chen, J. (2017) *Intersectionality matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women*. Melbourne: Multicultural Centre for Women's Health.

⁶² Segrave (2017). P 74.

visa status.⁶³ Building the evidence base surrounding these issues is critical to better understand migration-specific risk.⁶⁴

Conducting more quantitative research nationally about this cohort of women and children would be particularly valuable, given that much of the current evidence is qualitative.

safe steps is currently implementing improvements to its internal data protocols to create greater consistency and quality in data collection regarding clients without permanent residency.

Priority action:

- Improve data collection nationally on the engagement of women on temporary visas escaping family violence with specialist family violence and homelessness services, including their access to ad hoc and crisis accommodation, as well as exit outcomes.

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⁶³ Segrave (2017). P 50.

⁶⁴ Segrave (2017). P 50.

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