

Communication barriers 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

This fact sheet summarises the ASPIRE Project findings about the impact of communication barriers 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.

Language barriers

Many women interviewed during the ASPIRE project said that not knowing English was their biggest barrier to getting information about family violence, services and their rights in Australia.

"I have so many challenges and difficulties; the main is language problem. I do not have education well and I can't speak English, I do not understand the law and regulations. Even they gave us the information [about family violence and the law] but it is only written in English, so it is not useful for us."

Even services that have information in other languages are sometimes hard or confusing for women to use if they don't speak English. This was noted by people working in family violence and legal services.

"Nearly every government department says that if you don't speak English, you can get the information in other languages, but it's clunky [difficult] to access that. For a start, the choices [on the telephone] are given to you in English."

Both the women and service providers we interviewed agreed that barriers to communication results in many immigrant and refugee women looking for other ways to get help. This includes relying on family, friends, community and religious leaders. Sometimes people are helpful, but in other instances women are shamed or forced to stay with violent partners and families.

Barriers to written information

Service providers agreed that written information is sometimes helpful, but not always. People who do not read English are often not able to understand official documents or letters about legal information and intervention orders. Even if information is available in a language other than English, some people do not know how to read in their own language.

Service providers also said that using online and mobile phone technologies to reach immigrant and refugee women is not always effective and can create more barriers for women to get support.

"You get a person from a refugee background coming in and you're telling them to do things online and they have a language barrier. What's wrong with this picture?"

Some of the women we interviewed used social media, mobile apps and other online platforms to communicate. However, some women did not know how to use, or had no access to, a computer. Many of the women we interviewed who had experienced family violence told us that their emails and phone calls were limited or controlled by perpetrators.

"He watched everything. All passwords were with him. He'd check my Facebook like I was a little girl. Every comment I wrote. When I write in my language, which he doesn't understand, I had to translate every comment I did on Facebook every night."

Consequences of communication barriers

Some of the consequences of communication barriers for immigrant and refugee women experiencing family violence included:

- not knowing about their rights or services and not being understood clearly in the justice system making it difficult to access full breadth of safety and protection measures

“So I’ve just seen people being given their [intervention] order in English. I think [legal aid] does have it in other languages, but a lot of clients that I work with aren’t even literate in their own language. So, I think written information has, in some cases limited sort of usefulness.”

- social isolation with no contacts outside of the family unit
- staying longer with perpetrators of violence, increasing the negative health and safety consequences for women and their children
- not being understood or believed by police in situations of immediate danger

“I think it’s particularly hard when it comes to police, because the number of clients who have said to me that the police have attended an incident and they didn’t have an interpreter.”

- not being provided with an interpreter or not being able to find an interpreter that spoke their language or dialect
- interpreters not being able to appropriately translate for family violence or not keeping the woman’s information private from the community
- police using perpetrators or children to interpret or relying only on the word of the perpetrator who spoke English.

Learning English

Our research found that English classes play an important role in women’s access to safety and support. Within migrant families, men often access English class before women because families and services prioritise men getting employment. The schedule and lack of childcare at some English classes is also a barrier for women. In family violence situations this increases the perpetrator’s capacity to isolate victims. Increasing access to English classes would assist women to connect into support services and social networks.

“I’ve had two particular clients who have been at English school together and have talked; one rang the police for the other, and vice versa.”

Strategies and solutions

Service providers reported strategies they use to improve communication when there are language barriers. This includes:

- talking face-to-face rather than on the phone
- making appointments in familiar, safe spaces such as schools or local health centres
- using out-of-state phone interpreters (including in face-to-face meetings) and checking that the woman is happy with the interpreter’s practice
- employing bi-lingual workers with family violence training
- building relationships with local immigrant and refugee communities.

“It’s difficult because a lot of trust that you need to build with the community for a project like that to work...it needs time really... Their appointments and things do take longer when you have an interpreter, it is more resource intensive and it does take longer to explain things.”

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.