

## Maria's story

Maria\* and her young son came to Australia on an extended tourist visa in 2017. They moved in with Phillippe\* who Maria had met when while on holiday in Bali. Maria was excited about their blossoming romance, however in a short time she discovered Phillippe was controlling with money as well as verbally, emotionally, psychologically and sexually abusive. Maria was frightened and distressed especially when she found out that she was pregnant. Initially, however, she had some hope that Phillippe would change as he promised to sponsor Maria as his partner and made plans for their wedding.

The couple returned overseas to visit Maria's family and discuss wedding plans, however sudden complications with Maria's pregnancy meant that she couldn't return to Australia with her son until she was five months pregnant. When Maria arrived, Phillippe was physically violent and she had to be rushed to hospital in an ambulance. When Maria contacted her family they told her that she was not welcome in their lives. Her older brother threatened to kill her as she had brought shame to the family by being pregnant and unmarried.

At the hospital Maria was linked to Safe Steps. Maria had also contacted her consulate, who referred Maria to inTouch. Maria had no idea about her rights, no money or ongoing accommodation and was very worried about her pregnancy. Maria's inTouch case manager was able to find accommodation for Maria and her son with the Missionaries of Charity in Fitzroy. Maria also received support from the Bolton Clarke homelessness outreach service who enabled Maria to attend appointments with the hospital, and settlement and migration services such as Refugee & Immigration Legal Centre Inc. (RILC) and Life Without Barriers (LWB). Refugee Legal assisted Maria to apply for a protection visa.

Maria was able to access antenatal care at the Royal Women's Hospital (RWH) without incurring any fees. The hospital linked Maria to Inner Melbourne Community Legal (IMCL), who made a referral to the Fitzroy Community Legal centre who helped Maria apply for a childbirth maintenance claim. As Maria had no family or friends to help, her young son had to go into foster care whilst Maria gave birth via Cesarean section. Born with Down's Syndrome and abdominal problems, the baby boy had to be transferred to the Royal Children's Hospital.

Maria and her sons were accommodated at Ronald McDonald House and assisted by the social work team. The baby was also diagnosed with a chronic disease and needed a stoma, which was devastating for Maria. During this time Maria had ongoing support from inTouch, Bolton Clarke, RILC, IMCL, LWB and RWH in the form of visits, phone contact and provision of clothes and other necessities. After two months the baby was in a stable condition but his medical complications meant that finding appropriate accommodation was very difficult. Working with LWB, Bolton Clarke and Unison, Maria was accommodated in a motel in East Melbourne, which meant she was close to the hospital. Melbourne City Mission then found longer term transitional housing for Maria. Stable accommodation meant Maria could get assistance from an Integrated Family Services worker from Caroline Chisholm.

Maria's two children are now doing very well. Her oldest is at kinder and after discussion between Maria, inTouch and Caroline Chisholm, is receiving counselling from Women's Health West. With the assistance of Fitzroy Legal Centre, Maria was able to get a DNA test proving Phillippe was the father of her baby. Phillippe subsequently signed the birth certificate. Fitzroy Legal assisted Maria to get a one-off childbirth maintenance payment of \$5,000 and inTouch applied for flexible support packages so Maria could access a car to take her baby to hospital easily.

Maria is currently on a bridging visa whilst she awaits the outcome of her application for protection. Her case highlights a cohesive co-case-management model, with a range of services working collaboratively with each other, and Maria to provide the necessary supports. The family are finally on the road to recovery and we believe will thrive in Australia.

\*Names changed