



## Issues Paper April 2020

### The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inTouch clients

inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (inTouch) provides integrated, culturally appropriate services to migrant and refugee communities in Victoria experiencing family violence. Over the past 35 years, we have helped over 18,000 women. In the 2018–19 financial year, inTouch provided services to over 1400 women from 101 different countries, and over 1350 of their children.

This paper highlights some critical trends and concerns that inTouch is seeing emerge from our service delivery programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we observe the 'Stay at Home' and social distancing directives, women and children in abusive homes are extremely vulnerable. Whilst some other family violence services are reporting a reduced number of calls for assistance, we are receiving a higher volume. This is not only from new clients but also ex-clients who have either had another recent experience of family violence, or are facing tremendous financial hardship as a result of the current climate.

Our clients' situation is further complicated as many of them are on temporary visas and are unable to access support services. We are deeply concerned and want to be able to do as much as possible to keep these women and their children safe during this time. We also believe that now more than ever, we need to continue to hold men accountable, keep them engaged and seeking help to change their behaviour.

#### Weaponisation of COVID-19 by abusers

We are aware of accounts where the coronavirus, the government restrictions, and other aspects of the current pandemic are being used by abusive partners to control women. Our clients have reported that their current or ex-partners have used elements of the pandemic to generate and exacerbate fear or have put them at risk by breaching social distancing laws. Clients have reported that their partner has invited friends in to their home and later told the woman that the friends were infected with COVID-19, only to generate fear and emotional distress in the woman. Another client advised our case manager that her ex-partner had threatened to infect her with the virus.

#### 'There's no safe time to call' – the clients we can't reach

We have had a number of our clients express that there is no longer a safe time to talk to their case manager and they have subsequently disengaged from our service. Social distancing laws and shut downs have meant that many of these women are isolated at home with their abuser who is no longer attending work. We are gravely concerned for the emotional and physical safety of these women and their children.

#### Women on temporary visas unable to access financial support

We estimate that somewhere between 50–70 percent of our clients at inTouch are women who are on temporary visas. This includes women who are on spousal/partner visas, skilled workers or dependents of those on skilled worker visas, student visas, and tourist/visitor visas. When these women experience family violence in Australia, they face multiple and varying layers of

disadvantage, as well as significant barriers to accessing support services. This has been documented at length in a position paper written by inTouch in March 2020 (prior to the pandemic).<sup>1</sup>

Many of our clients who are temporary visa holders are facing significant financial hardship in the current climate. We have been contacted by a large number of women who have lost their sources of income as a result of businesses being shut down or restricted. A significant portion of our clients that are on temporary visas are ineligible for Centrelink payments, including recent government initiatives and income support in response to COVID-19. We are very concerned about these clients as they are facing severe financial hardship and some are facing homelessness.

The case studies below highlight the complex issues being faced by these clients:

Client B is on a Skilled Migrant visa. She was renting a home with her partner who has since been excluded from the home because of his violent behaviour. She was looking for a more affordable property however given the current situation with COVID-19, she is unable to attend any housing inspections and there aren't many rental properties in her area. Her hours of employment have been drastically reduced due to social distancing requirements and she is unable to pay her rent. She is afraid she will be homeless soon.

Client J has been separated from her ex-partner and there is a full IVO in place. She and her son have been living with one of her relatives rent-free. inTouch referred her to a community organisation that provides employment support. Unfortunately, due to the current COVID-19 shut downs, she has been unable to secure any employment. She has been advised by Centrelink that she is not eligible for any support.

A number of our clients experiencing such disadvantage have young babies and children. Many of these clients require basic necessities such as food for themselves and their children, rent, transport funds, and funds for medical assistance.

### Increased demand for Flexible Support Packages

Flexible Support Packages (FSP) are a Victorian state-government initiative that provide a personalised response to victim-survivors of family violence. Support can be provided to assist in moving out of crisis, stabilising and improving safety, well-being, and independence into recovery.

FSPs have provided immense support to countless inTouch clients, assisting them and their children with important necessities. In the past month, the need for funds from FSPs has increased significantly. We are currently receiving 44 percent more applications for FSPs than we would usually, and we are seeing a 50 percent increase in applications specifically for vouchers for food and other daily essential needs. From the beginning of March 2020 until 13 April 2020, 72 percent of FSP applications to our service have been for women on temporary visas. In the week beginning 13 April 2020, temporary visa holders made up 92 percent of FSP applications at our service. Our FSP budget has restricted our ability to meet the increased need, despite our efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence, [Women on temporary visas experiencing family violence Position Paper March 2020](#), Melbourne.

## Parenting Orders

A number of our clients have advised their case managers that they are fearful of meeting the obligations of existing Parenting Orders due to potential risk of exposure to COVID-19. Clients have advised us that whilst they themselves have been practicing social isolation, they are fearful that their ex-partner has not. Many of our clients don't drive and/or don't have their own cars. Together with their children, these women are having to use public transport and rideshare/taxi services to fulfil the obligations of the Parenting Order. This is proving to be costly at a time in which income is a concern for so many and is exacerbating emotional distress.

## Changing and limited referral pathways

As a result of the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our existing referral pathways to support services have changed or become restricted. Many services that have previously provided access and support for our clients are either limiting what they can offer clients, or they are not providing services at all. This is further disadvantaging our most vulnerable clients.

## Motivation for Change Program – keeping men who use violence accountable

Our Motivation for Change (MFC) provides both group work and one-on-one case management to men from migrant and refugee communities who use violence, and has been operating since 2018 with a 90 percent completion rate. The majority of the group work is provided using inTouch's inLanguage, inCulture model with experienced facilitators.

Due to COVID-19, inTouch has suspended the group work but we continue to provide case management remotely. We are also encouraging the partners of MFC participants to engage with our case managers through our partner support program.

Many of the men in this program are regularly contacting our MFC team. They want to maintain their engagement with the program, and are also voicing concerns around their own financial circumstances in the current climate. Many of the men have expressed their lack of knowledge and understanding of current social distancing directives from the government, due to low levels of language and systemic literacy. The challenges with language and literacy is also a barrier for many of these men to adequately and effectively engage with mainstream men's behaviour change programs. Some of these participants are also at risk of homelessness and without our continued engagement, may be likely to disengage from services and breach current obligations such as intervention orders.

We believe that it is now more important than ever to maintain our program engagement with men who use family violence as it's crucial to supporting women and children's safety. We need to continue to engage with these men to help them understand the current environment, as well as their obligations to comply with social distancing laws, and existing obligations such as compliance with intervention orders.

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