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Monash study amplifies inequalities faced by women on temporary visas

inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (inTouch) was proud to partner with Monash University for the first Victorian study documenting violence against women on temporary visas during COVID-19 - Family Violence and Temporary Visa Holders during COVID-19. The study looks at 100 of inTouch's client cases during the first lockdown in Victoria, from 16 March to 31 May 2020.

During this period, 72 percent of women in the study who sought assistance from inTouch indicated that violence had increased in severity or frequency just prior to making contact. CEO of inTouch, Ms Michal Morris, said that case managers have experienced increased requests for help, as well as an increase in the number of contacts made with clients due to the complexity of their needs during COVID-19. Ms Morris said that the report has demonstrated the existing intrinsic inequalities that women on temporary visas face.

"All individuals, regardless of visa status, deserve to be able to access the safety and support services they need when they are experiencing family violence. More than 50 per cent of inTouch clients are on temporary visas and have been left behind, trying to keep themselves safe during a pandemic without any financial assistance as they are ineligible for government income support, including stimulus initiatives implemented in response to COVID-19".

"Economic independence is critical for women who are trying to seek safety and move past family violence. For women on temporary visas, the lack of access to services such as housing is impacting their decisions on safety. For many women, they have no other option but to stay with the perpetrator of violence. They have no alternative accommodation, they have no money and they don't have any friends or family to support them as their social network is completely dependent on the perpetrator", said Ms Morris.

Of the 100 women in the study, only 30 were employed. 70% of those lost their job and 30% had reduced hours due to COVID-19 restrictions. The report states that 57 women were financially supported by inTouch during the period captured in the study.

"A lot of our clients are in low paid jobs or part of the casualised workforce which are part of the industries that have been hardest hit by COVID-19 and the shut downs. We have provided over \$100,000 to these women during this period through Victoria's State Government Flexible Support Packages. These payments provide temporary relief, and without it these women wouldn't be able to afford paying for essentials such as food, rent and bills", said Ms Morris.

The study's report lead author Associate Professor Marie Segrave from Monash University said that they found that over three quarters of the women in the study feared harm/death at the hands of their perpetrator, and 20 percent specifically feared deportation.

"When capturing migration-related threats, the data points to both the threat to withdraw sponsorship, threats to comply or risk deportation, or general threats regarding visa status and deportation. These are, in fact, all part of the same broad threat: that women are powerless because of their migration status and the perpetrator wields control", said Associate Professor Segrave.

"Over a quarter of the women in this study feared returning to their country of origin. Their concerns included exclusion and shame in the community, others feared violent outcomes, for some the issue is destitution", said report co-author Dr Naomi Pfitzner.

"For many of inTouch's clients returning to their home country is not an option. Not only are flights expensive, but for many the shame and fear of being ostracised from their family back home is unfathomable, and many of them have had children who they do not want to be separated from", said Ms Morris.

Ms Morris added that pressures on the legal system have also further impacted women on temporary visas who are eligible to access the family violence provisions.

"Many of our clients are waiting on final intervention orders to be issued, which have been delayed due to the impact of COVID-19 on the courts. For these women, it means they are in a longer period of uncertainty. They may need to find additional funding for other documentation from health professionals to support their application for permanent residency".

Researchers of the report have suggested a number of recommendations to better support women on temporary visas experiencing family violence. Largely focused on Commonwealth support, they include a review and expansion of family violence provisions, a broadening of the definition of family violence, and the establishment of a single subclass bridging visa for all temporary visa holders to access in the event that they experience family violence.

Ms Morris said that the data in the report is going to be critical in helping to advocate for change to government policy, the migration and service system.

“Before COVID-19 hit, Australia had about two million temporary visa holders. This country has always needed migrants to support many industries such as hospitality and agriculture, and there is no doubt that this will continue in the future. We need to look at our migration system with a holistic lens, looking at secure and long-term support and services needed to support migrants and refugees, particularly if their safety is at risk”.

ENDS

Read the Monash University report ‘Family Violence and Temporary Visa Holders during COVID-19’ at https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/online_resource/Family_violence_and_temporary_visa_holders_during_COVID-19/12987938

For media and interview inquiries, contact Sonia Morabito, Communications Coordinator, 03 9413 6568 or email soniam@intouch.org.au

Excerpts of stories of inTouch clients taken from the report

Note that names and some details have been changed to de-identify clients.

Tasneem arrived in Australia in 2019. She requires an interpreter as she has a poor understanding of English. She first contacted inTouch at the end of March. Tasneem’s husband and visa sponsor has been perpetrating verbal, emotional and financial abuse. He controls all the finances, Tasneem contacted inTouch because she was worried that the abuse will escalate to physical violence. She is also extremely concerned that her abusive partner will force her to return to [country of origin] where he will hurt and/or kill her. Tasneem has separated from him, but they remain legally married and she is dependent on him for her visa. She is not entitled to Centrelink payments and has no source of income. She has no friends or family in Australia and the perpetrator refuses to provide her credit to allow her to contact her family back home.

Thi holds a bridging visa, she lost her job due to COVID, and now has no income or work and no savings. The perpetrator’s behaviour had escalated from verbal to physical during the COVID period, and her situation was challenging because he had financially abused her demanding a financial payment for the promise of a visa, even though they were married. In the most recent incident the perpetrator told her “if you call 000, you will finish here, that is it, I am calling immigration and sending you back to your country”. He has told her she must keep paying him \$1500 a month if she wants him to sponsor her. His mother also involved and when she left she called woman and told her that she (mother-in-law) will have Thi (victim-survivor) deported if she doesn’t return to him.

inTouch provides person-centred, integrated, culturally responsive family violence services to migrant and refugee communities across Victoria. We specialise in culturally tailored support and programs for both victim-survivors and perpetrators.

For over 35 years, inTouch has assisted more than 20,000 women from refugee and migrant backgrounds whose lives are devastated by family violence.

For more information see intouch.org.au