



Intersectionality, family violence and the pandemic: Perspectives from 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused upheaval across the world. Whilst maintaining relatively low levels of infections of the virus itself, Australia has experienced tremendous social impact in its implementation of a COVID suppression strategy. The closures of internal and external borders, nation-wide industry shutdowns, as well as the months-long residential lockdowns that took place in Victoria, have had significant impacts on employment and mental health of individuals and communities. After the difficult year people in Victoria have experienced, we are now able to reflect on the impacts of what occurred and discuss some important lessons.

Global disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic have varying impacts on populations and communities. There are some particular factors that play a role in the way that these disasters impact a person and their community – including gender and socio-economic status.¹ Researchers argue that in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, similar to other global disasters, women are “more likely to bear the brunt of the social and economic consequences.”²

“The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic.”³

This impact can be seen in places where the virus is more prominent, causing illness and death,⁴ as well as in places such as Australia where public health measures were taken to suppress the virus. Regardless of mortality and infection rates, the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities. Women, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, as well as people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have experienced more significant negative impacts than others throughout this difficult year.

In 2020, inTouch observed this inequality closely as we witnessed the impacts of the pandemic on our clients. The structural and systemic barriers that our clients faced under ‘normal’ circumstances became amplified and the marginalisation of particular members of our communities became more apparent than ever. For those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of oppression in our communities, the pandemic further highlighted their vulnerabilities in the Australian system.

Women on temporary visas experiencing family violence

inTouch is an active member of the National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Family Violence. This is a network of family violence services, settlement services, multicultural agencies, peak bodies and researchers that advocate for better support and services for women who are in Australia temporarily but who have experienced family violence here. At inTouch, we estimate that at any given time, 50-70 percent of our clients are temporary visa holders. When women on temporary visas experience family violence, they face multiple barriers to finding safety and stability.⁵

¹ E. Neumayer and T. Plumper, ‘The gendered nature of natural disasters: The impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981 – 2002’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97: 3 (2007) 551-566

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2007.00563.x>

² T. Burki, ‘The impact of COVID-19 on women’ *The Lancet* (Vol. 20, Iss. 8: 2010)

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30568-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30568-5/fulltext).

³ T. Burki, ‘The impact of COVID-19 on women’ *The Lancet* (Vol. 20, Iss. 8: 2010)

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30568-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30568-5/fulltext).

⁴ Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, Health equity considerations and racial and ethnic minority groups (NCIRD: July 2020)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>

⁵ inTouch, Position paper: Women on temporary visas experiencing family violence (March 2020) https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/inTouchPositionPaper_WomenOnTemporaryVisasExperiencingViolenceInAustralia_March2020_website.pdf;



The pandemic caused many of these women to experience even further hardship and marginalisation. Many temporary visa holders were excluded from the government's JobKeeper program, and many were already ineligible for JobSeeker. Many of our clients on temporary visas don't have working rights. Others work in casualised industries that were severely impacted by the pandemic and the public health measures taken to control outbreaks, including the beauty and hospitality industries, and subsequently lost their jobs.

As we documented in an issues paper in [April 2020](#)⁶ and again in [September 2020](#)⁷, our clients on temporary visas faced significant economic disadvantage, poverty and housing insecurity during the pandemic. As also found by a Monash University research project that analysed 100 files of inTouch clients on temporary visas during the first lockdown between March and May 2020, COVID-19 intensified "the impact of the exclusion of temporary visa holders experiencing family violence from safety and support mechanisms, at a time when they need it more than ever."⁸

Many temporary visa holders were unable to return to their home country due to the cost and/or availability of flights. As documented by the first interim report of The Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, the exclusion of temporary visa holders from financial support during the pandemic "meant that temporary visa holders were left without any options for financial support from the government, leaving them to rely on friends or charities to help them meet their living costs."⁹

inTouch case managers reported feelings of helplessness due to the limited ways in which they could support clients. Flexible Support Packages – which are funded by the Victorian government to provide essential and practical financial support for victim-survivors moving on from family violence – were essential in supporting inTouch clients and their children during this time. We commend the Victorian Government for responding to our calls for more support by increasing our funding for Flexible Support Packages and for providing our service with brokerage funding for temporary visa holders during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, inTouch also developed an emergency relief program through our inSpire initiative, delivering fresh food and pantry items to clients. In collaboration with Melbourne-based non-social enterprise café Sibling by Kinfolk, inTouch staff and volunteers delivered essentials to clients across the city.

The increase of such resources and funding are only short term solutions, however. Women on temporary visas who have experienced family violence in Australia deserve protection, support and access to safety – regardless of their visa status.¹⁰

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

⁶ inTouch, Issues paper: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our clients (April 2020) https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/inTouch_COVID19IssuesPaper_April2020_website.pdf.

⁷ inTouch, Issues paper: The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on inTouch and its clients (September 2020) https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/inTouch-issues-paper_The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-inTouch-and-its-clients_September-2020.pdf.

⁸ M. Segrave and N. Pfitzner, Family violence and temporary visa holders during COVID-19, (Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University: 2020) https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Family-Violence-and-Temporary-Visa-Holders-During-COVID-19_Monash-report_-Sept-2020.pdf p6.

⁹ The Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, First interim report (Parliament of Australia, 2020) https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024513/toc_pdf/Firstinterimreport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf, p77.

¹⁰ National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, Blueprint for reform: Removing barriers to safety for victim/survivors of domestic and family violence who are on temporary visas (2019) https://awava.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Blueprint-for-Reform_web_version.pdf; inTouch, Position paper: Women on temporary visas experiencing



Working with men from migrant and refugee communities experiencing family violence

Our Motivation for Change (MFC) program is designed to engage and work with men from migrant and refugee communities who use family violence. Using group work and case management, this program works with men using inTouch's inLanguage, inCulture service delivery model – and has a retention and completion rate of 90 percent.

During the lockdowns in Victoria, our case managers 'held' these clients for extended periods of time – much longer than what would normally be the case through the program. As the group work and formal components of the programs were postponed due to public health restrictions, many of the participants regularly contacted their case managers. They wanted to maintain their engagement with the program, and expressed their concerns and anxieties relating to their financial circumstances in the current climate. Many of the men were anxious about their lack of knowledge and understanding of public health 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 this cohort to adequately and effectively engage with mainstream men's behaviour change programs. Some of these participants were at risk of homelessness and without our continued engagement, may have been likely to disengage from services and breach obligations such as intervention orders.

Working with men to prevent and respond to family violence in our community is crucial. Programs such as Motivation for Change – that are trauma informed and provide cultural and language programs to hold men accountable for their violent actions and attitudes towards women – are more critical than ever and require ongoing support and funding.

Responding to larger caseloads, at the height of a pandemic

As the case for other workers across the family violence sector, inTouch case managers provided essential services to clients whilst also managing their own experiences of living through a pandemic. Demand for our services increased throughout the year, and our case managers had significantly larger caseloads. The needs of their clients were more complex than usual due to the pandemic and the lockdowns. Our case managers worked tirelessly to support clients through this difficult time, whilst working from home and managing their personal needs such as their mental health, as well as family obligations.

inTouch's inLanguage, inCulture service delivery provides culturally-responsive support to clients. All of our case managers – with the exception of three men from our Motivation for Change program – are women of migrant and refugee backgrounds themselves. They understand and can identify with the complexities that intersecting systemic barriers can generate, together with deep and nuanced understandings of cultural norms and community relationships. Such services as ours are crucial to provide holistic and effective support to victim-survivors of family violence, and must be better supported and funded by all levels of government.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the way in which the Australian migration system, welfare system and mainstream service provision excludes and marginalises many people. A high amount of inTouch clients were excluded from support and safety from the government during this



tumultuous and difficult period. As we reflect on this challenging year, we call on the government and policy makers to provide better access to support and safety for temporary visa holders, ongoing funding for specialist men's programs, and increased funding and capacity for specialist family violence services that work with migrant and refugee communities.