Experiences of Victimisation among Migrant and Refugee Women in Australia

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SUMMARY

This briefing paper draws on findings from a major study focusing on experiences of safety and security among migrant and refugee women in Australia. We focus here on findings relating to participants' experiences of victimisation and race-related crime violence. Policy responses to both gender and race-based discrimination need to be cognizant of the particular experiences of migrant and refugee women. The findings from this study offer an evidence base to better inform policies and strategies to support safe and secure livelihoods for migrant and refugee women in Australia.

What we know

To understand rates of victimisation, research relies on police data and self-reported survey data. Across Australia and internationally there are limited studies that focus on migrant and refugee women specifically. Police data does not include information regarding citizenship, visa status, language proficiency, and ethnicity. While self-report studies often capture the breadth of migrant and refugee women's experiences, they may rely on only one or two determinants of cultural or linguistic diversity, such as the main language spoken at home (e.g. Boxall & Morgan, 2021). The consequence is that there is limited data on the breadth of migrant and refugee women's experiences of victimisation in Australia (Bowling & Phillips, 2002; Collins, 2007).

Apart from the Crime Victimisation Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (which focuses on crime, rather than victim, characteristics), there are few victimisation surveys that track experiences across the population. Nearly twenty years ago, the Australian results in the International Crime Victimisation Survey indicated that those who speak a language other than English at home were at a *lower* risk of assault and threatening behaviours (Johnson, 2005). The *Australia@2015* study surveyed both Australian born and immigrants to Australia (Markus, 2016) and found that migrant and refugee participants reported high levels of discrimination in the past 12 months compared to third generation Australians, however, there were no insights into women's experiences of victimisation. It is critical to attend to the specificity of victimisation for migrant and refugee women in order to best map women's safety and security and to provide and evidence base for more targeted policy and support in the future.

The Migrant and Refugee Women's Safety and Security survey

We draw here on data from the Migrant and Refugee Women's Safety and Security Study conducted by the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre in partnership with Harmony Alliance: migrant and refugee women for change. The survey asked questions about domestic and family violence, trust in institutions and attitudes towards police, general victimisation and employment and financial security[1]. The final report was based on responses from 1392 migrant and refugee women across Australia. While the definition of 'women from migrant and refugee backgrounds' was designed to be broad, 98% of the sample comprised women who were born overseas, with country of birth comprising 125 countries. The majority (55%) of respondents had arrived in Australia within the last ten years. The sample had a relatively high level of educational attainment, which is reflective of the relative socio-economic advantage of the sample. While the survey is not a representative sample, and cannot provide a comprehensive account of the experiences of all women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, it offers a unique snapshot of a diverse sample of women from across Australia who were willing to share their experiences with us. Understanding the diverse needs and experiences of migrant and refugee women and catering to them appropriately is critical to building safer and more secure livelihoods for migrant and refugee women in Australia.

Key findings

Victimisation and race-related crime

The survey included a detailed focus on domestic and family violence, however at a later point in the survey we asked questions more generally about four types of victimisation: threatening behaviour, theft, burglary and vandalism. We discuss findings related to victimisation below, that do not include domestic and family violence unless specified.

Twenty-eight percent of the sample reported experiencing one of these forms of victimisation in the last five years. Notably, this was lower than the proportion (30%) who reported experiencing some form of domestic and family violence. When those who had experienced victimisation were asked about their most recent experience, threatening behaviour (45%) was the most commonly reported, followed by theft (21%), burglary (21%) and vandalism (13%). A unique feature of these victimisation experiences was that a significant number of participants perceived the incidents as motivated by bias and/or prejudice. 40% of those who had experienced such victimisation believed bias to be a motivating factor, with an additional 20% reporting they were uncertain if the incident was motivated by bias. The figure is considerably higher than figures from other studies in which migrant and refugee women are underrepresented (Markus, 2021; Wickes et al., 2020).

Migrant and refugee women who experienced a bias-motivated incident were more likely to be between 30 and 44 years old, of North African, Middle Eastern or South East Asian descent, and to live in areas characterised by greater advantage.

The most common type of incident perceived to be motivated by bias or discrimination was the experience of threatening behaviour, with 60% of those reporting this indicating the incident was bias-motivated. As found in other national surveys, participants born in North Africa and the Middle East were the most likely to perceive their victimisation to be bias-motivated (21%), followed by those from South-East Asia (19%). This aligns with recent surveys that reveal the COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in anti-Asian racism and discrimination (Asian Australian Alliance & Chiu, 2020; Markus, 2021).

Migrant and refugee women who experienced victimisation reported lower levels of procedural justice, police legitimacy and accessibility, and were less willing to cooperate with police.

Women in our sample who had experienced DFV and general victimisation viewed the police as less procedurally just than the rest of the sample. While the majority of respondents viewed the police as legitimate and accessible, and would likely cooperate with police, the rates were lower among those with an experience of victimisation. Women who had experienced non-DFV victimisation reported lower levels of procedural justice (45%) than those without a victimisation experience (33%). Similarly, just over a third of respondents with no victimisation experience viewed the police as legitimate. This dropped to 20% in those that had experienced victimisation.

An experience of victimisation also affected attitudes towards the accessibility of police, and attitudes towards cooperating with police. 71% of respondents with no victimisation experience perceived the police to be accessible. This dropped slightly among those with an experience of DFV (68%), further among those with a general victimisation experience (60%), and to 57% among those with both a DFV and general victimisation experience. While the majority of respondents were likely to cooperate with police, those with an experience of victimisation were less willing to cooperate with police compared to those with no victimisation experience. Similarly, just under half of respondents with no victimisation experience (46%) agreed that the police made an effort with people in their community, compared to 35% with a general victimisation and/or DFV experience.

Our findings suggest that the victimisation experience diminishes the potential for developing strong, trusting relationships with police and lowers the likelihood of cooperation[2]. This is true for victims of both DFV and non-DFV crime. Given crime data forms the basis of many conclusions of the extent and character of victimisation and the characteristics of victims, and informs public policy, our survey reveals the importance of investigating the experience and attitudes of a group that is often overlooked or underrepresented in national studies, and may be unlikely to approach or cooperate with police (and are therefore not captured in official crime statistics).

Conclusion

We found that 40 per cent of survey respondents who experienced victimisation believed their victimisation to be motivated by bias and/or prejudice. The survey also found that women who had experienced victimisation were less likely to cooperate with police and reported lower levels of police legitimacy and procedural fairness than those with no victimisation experience. This points to the importance of understanding the diverse experience and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and specifically centres the experience of migrant and refugee women, who are often overlooked or underrepresented in national surveys on safety and security.

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2   Findings on institutional and community trust are covered in greater detail in our research brief on 'Institutional trust and mistrust among migrant and refugee women in Australia'.

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