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Domestic and Family Violence and the Safety and Security of Migrant and Refugee Women

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SUMMARY

This brief provides an overview of the key findings relating to domestic and family violence from the report *Migrant and Refugee Women in Australia: The Safety and Security Study* by Monash University. The key findings offer an important insight into migrant and refugee women's experiences of and attitudes towards domestic and family violence, issues that have been underexplored in existing literature. As migrant and refugee women are currently a national priority in the context of domestic and family violence, capturing quantitative data with this specificity of focus is of critical importance.

Introduction

This briefing paper draws on key findings from the *Migrant and refugee women in Australia: The safety and security study*, conducted in partnership between the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre and Harmony Alliance: Migrant and refugee women for change. We focus here on data surrounding domestic and family violence ('DFV'). In Australia, when addressing DFV migrant and refugee women are recognised as a national priority. Specific commitments to migrant and refugee women were set out in the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022* ('National Plan') and additional commitments have been made towards temporary visa holders, a sub group of migrant and refugee women (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). This group will continue to be a focus area for the successor *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*, currently in development at the time of writing. Despite this national recognition of migrant and refugee women as a group in focus, there is a lack of appropriate data on migrant and refugee women's attitudes to and experiences of DFV. This is the first national study that captures migrant and refugee women's diverse experiences and specifically asks questions about controlling behaviours related to the visa and migration status of women.

Current Understandings of Migrant and Refugee Women's Experiences of DFV

There is a lack of self-report victimisation data that appropriately captures the experiences of migrant and refugee women in relation to DFV. In the context of DFV and victimisation data we generally rely on two sources of information, police data and self-report data. Across Australia and internationally, limited data is captured in relation to migrant and refugee women within those data sources. In relation to police data, complex information regarding citizenship, visa status, language proficiency and ethnicity is not routinely collected or recorded by police. In relation to self-report studies, the focus is often on a single factor that captures diversity: whether the participant speaks a language other than English at home (for example, the COVID-19 domestic and family violence survey undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology, Boxall, Morgan & Brown, 2020). While language spoken at home may reveal differences across linguistically diverse groups, these analyses ultimately tell us very little about migrant and refugee women's attitudes to and experiences of DFV. Further, given there is

an underrepresentation of migrant and refugee individuals from national surveys, their voices and experiences are often excluded from focus.

Various studies have demonstrated the importance of specificity in the context of DFV both in terms of the experience of victimisation and in terms of access to support services and systems (McCulloch et al 2016). This is true for migrant and refugee women. As Vaughan et al. (2015: 15-16) establish in a review of international and national literature on migrant and refugee women's experiences of DFV, there is a lack of data that can determine whether DFV is more prevalent among women from non-English speaking backgrounds. Furthermore, it is clear that such a determination would require care. What Vaughan et al. (2015) establish is that there are a multitude of migration-related and other factors that compound migrant and refugee women's experiences of DFV, and limit their access to support services and systems. These findings are supported by rigorous qualitative research conducted in Australia that indicates migrant and refugee women face particular issues in the context of DFV which must be considered in prevention efforts (Fisher, 2009; Ghafournia, 2011; Rees & Pease, 2006; Satyen et al., 2018; Vaughan et al., 2015; Zannettino, 2012; Segrave 2017; Segrave & Pfitzner 2020). Capturing data that is specifically related to migrant and refugee women's attitudes towards, and experiences of, DFV is critical to informing tailored and responsive policy and practice.

The Migrant and Refugee Women Safety and Security Study

This is a self-report study of migrant and refugee women across Australia: it was broad ranging and the first of its kind nationally. Here we focus on the data on attitudes towards and experiences of DFV. As the survey was conducted during 2020 it also captures participant's experiences of DFV in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study presents findings from a survey that contained a total of 76 questions and was made available online in 11 languages¹. The final sample included 1392 survey responses from migrant and refugee women across Australia. Nearly all of the participants were born overseas (almost 98%) and of those not born in Australia over half had arrived within the last 10 years (55%). Over half of the participants were Australian citizens (56%) and of the non-citizens 27% were permanent residents and 17% were temporary visa holders. This proportion of temporary visa holders is higher than the proportion within the general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

1 For full details of the survey design please see: Segrave, M., Wickes, R., & Keel, C. (2021b). *Migrant and Refugee Women in Australia: The Safety and Security Study Technical Report*, Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/14794677>.

Key Findings

Three distinct components of DFV were examined specifically, physical and sexual violence, harm to others and property, and controlling behaviours. Controlling behaviours were categorised in this survey to include general controlling behaviours (such as social control and financial abuse) alongside migration-related controlling behaviours (such as threats related to visa status or deportation and the use of deception in border crossings). This is the first time migration-related controlling behaviours have been included in a self-report study of DFV.

In terms of victimisation, nearly a third of the survey respondents had experienced some form of DFV (33%) and of the respondents who had experienced DFV the most common type was controlling behaviours (91%) followed by violence to others and/or property (47%) and physical and/or sexual violence (42%) (Segrave, Wickes and Keel, 2021a: 30). Of the respondents who had experienced DFV more than half had experienced *at least* two types of harm across the three categories (54%) and a number had experienced all three types of harm (22%) (Segrave et al 2021a: 30). The respondents also reported changes in the severity and frequency of DFV during COVID-19. **Between March-November 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, of those who had experienced DFV 17% reported that this happened for the first time, 23% reported that the behaviour increased in frequency and 15% reported that the behaviour increased in severity** (Segrave et al 2021a: 34).

The majority of survey respondents reported that the main and only perpetrator of DFV was a former or current male partner. As it is known that some migrant and refugee women are abused by more than one perpetrator (Segrave, 2017), the survey also explored who the main perpetrator of harm or abuse had been in the past five years when participants did indicate that more than one perpetrator was involved. Thirty-five percent indicated that the main perpetrator was a family member, 23% reported an in-law, 17% reported a former partner and 7% indicated that it was their current partner (Segrave et al: 32). These findings highlight the importance of recognising that DFV and the range of abusive and controlling behaviours can be extensive and include or be predominantly enacted by family and in-law family members.

In capturing the specific experiences of temporary visa holders in this survey, consistently higher levels of DFV were reported among this group, including, controlling behaviours and migration-related abuse and threats. Forty percent of temporary visa holders reported DFV compared to 32% of Australian citizens and 28% of permanent visa holders (Segrave et al 2021a: 31). Temporary visa holders were also

most likely to experience controlling types of behaviours with 36% reporting at least one controlling behaviour compared to 29% of Australian citizens and 27% of permanent visa holders (Segrave et al, 2021a: 40). Although migration-related controlling behaviours were not exclusively reported by temporary visa holders, the majority of respondents who reported migration-related threats and abuse were temporary visa holders. 13% of temporary visa holders reported migration-specific controlling behaviours followed by 9% of permanent visa holders and 5% of Australian citizens (Segrave et al, 2021a: 40).

This survey also explored migrant and refugee women's help-seeking behaviour and their disclosure of experiences of DFV. **Just over half of the respondents (52%) indicated that they had reported their experiences of DFV to someone, most commonly a family member or friend (84%) and although a large proportion of the respondents identified as religious (75%) only a small proportion shared their experiences of DFV with a religious leader (12%)** (Segrave et al 2021a: 42-43). For the participants who chose not to disclose their experiences of DFV, half indicated that the reason was because the incident was a personal or private matter followed by 27% who feared that disclosing their experiences of DFV would make things worse (Segrave et al 2021a: 44).

There was general agreement among the survey participants in terms of their attitudes to DFV. For example, only 3% of women agreed that a man should be entitled to have sex with his wife when he wants to even if she does not want to (Segrave et al, 2021a: 28). However, an exception to this general agreement was participants' responses to whether a woman who does not leave a situation of DFV is partly responsible for the abuse continuing. While 34% of women agreed with this in the sample, women under the age of 30 years old were the least likely to agree (Segrave et al 2021a: 28).

Conclusion

The findings from this survey provide quantitative data of migrant and refugee women's experiences of DFV in Australia. While the sample is limited in number and not representative, the data offers important insights into how various structural and systemic issues, such as migration status, may be leveraged by perpetrators of DFV. More broadly this study highlights the need for ongoing data collection alongside the commitments to migrant and refugee women in the midst of national commitments to ending violence against women. As set out in the Full Report (Segrave et al, 2021a) and Technical Report (Segrave, Wickes and Keel, 2021b), this study represents the first step towards building this important quantitative evidence-base.

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