

# WOMEN'S SAFETY NSW

## Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence

### Briefing Paper: Statewide Survey Results

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Prepared by:

Hayley Foster, Chief Executive Officer

Vivian Nguyen, Research Assistant

Chelsea Boyle, Research Assistant

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*“I just don’t understand why the government doesn’t seem to care about these women and their babies. Don’t they understand that we’re forcing them back into what can only be described as a living hell? No-one would agree with this if they actually met one of these families... It’s exhausting.” - WDVCS Worker – Outer Metropolitan*

## 1. Introduction

Women's Safety NSW has recently conducted a survey of our members regarding women on temporary visas. This survey supports our recent [briefing paper](#) on the heightened need for both the NSW Government and the Federal Government to provide support to women on temporary visas experiencing violence during COVID-19.

On 22 April 2020, the Tasmanian Government unveiled a [\\$3 million support package](#) for around 26,000 temporary visa holders trapped within the state due to the COVID-19 ongoing social isolation and social distancing policies, increasingly infrequent flights and strict travel restrictions. Every vulnerable individual is eligible for a \$250 payment while every vulnerable family unit is eligible for a \$1000 payment.

In NSW, we have yet to achieve any substantial means for supporting our temporary visa holders, let alone women on temporary visas experiencing violence. This paper will briefly analyse the responses from our survey to highlight the urgency of this issue as reported from 53 frontline domestic violence workers and service providers from every metropolitan, regional, rural and remote centre of NSW, including each of the 29 women’s domestic violence court advocacy services (WDVCAS) in addition to a number of Women’s Safety NSW’s associate member services.

## 2. Key Issues

### 2.1. Some Increase in Client Numbers

Our survey indicates that **39.62%** of respondents perceived an increase in the number of women on temporary visas experiencing violence utilising services while **60.38%** of respondents perceived no increase. One of our members highlighted: *“it is not that there is less violence among the group, rather the*

*same issues of violence but less accessibility to support [in order] to leave”* and this results in lower reports. The below table outlines that temporary visa holders account for around 80 of the 4,250 clients WDVCS supports on an average monthly basis (equivalent to 1.9%). This figure increases to around 110 with the inclusion of associate member services who completed the survey.

**Table 2.1 Survey results: Approximate number of women on temporary visas supported per month for each service/ local area**

Service/ Local Area	Approx. no. of women on temporary visas supported per month
<b>Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services</b>	
Albury	2.5
Blue Mountains	3
Burwood	5
Castlereagh	0
Hunter	3
Illawarra	5.5
Macquarie	1
Macarthur	1
New England	2
North Coast	1
Far South Coast	0.5
North West	0
North West Sydney	10
Northern Rivers	1.5
Northern Sydney	10
Far West	0.2

Western	0.5
Parramatta	5
Penrith	6
Riverina	0
Southern	1
South Coast	1.5
South Eastern	0.5
South West Sydney	3
Sydney	15
Wagga Wagga	2
Western Sydney	3
Central Coast	1
Mid Coast	0.25
<b>Sub-Total</b>	<b>82.45</b>
<b>Associate Members</b>	
Albury- Women's Centre for Health & Wellbeing	2.5
Western Sydney - Women's Community Shelters	1
Eastern Sydney- Baptist Care Women's CALD Worker	25
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>110.95</b>

## 2.2. Increasing Complexity of Client Needs

The majority of survey respondents (58.49%) identified an increase in the complexity of client needs of women on temporary visas due to COVID-19. Workers described some of the significant complexities to include the loss of work with no eligibility to receive income support, the limited housing options

with no eligibility to access crisis accommodation services, the language barrier and associated limited understanding of the legal system and law enforcement, and the inability to change visas or return home during the pandemic.

### 2.3. Significant Barriers to Accessing Safety and Support

Ninety-six per cent (96%) of respondents identify a lack of access to income or financial support as a significant barrier for women on temporary visas and their children in accessing safety and support. Meanwhile, 78.4% of respondents identified a lack of emergency and supported accommodation as a significant barrier. Similarly, 78.4% identified fear of deportation and losing children due to visa insecurity as significant.

### 2.4. The Need for a Support Package

Almost all survey respondents (**98%**) agreed that a support package for women on temporary visas experiencing violence, similar to that of Tasmania's, is necessary. **Seventy one percent (71.6%)** of members believe that such a support package would assist women on temporary visas in accessing safety and support 'a great deal' or 'a lot'. One worker stated: *"it would be everything to them"*. Another said *"[These victims currently have "no financial incomes as their partners cut them off completely and the system deems them ineligible for assistance"]"*.

However, other workers acknowledged that *"[i]t would assist a lot initially for basics such as food, transport money"* but *"[t]hey need ongoing financial assistance"*. Members also highlighted that *"access to housing and medicare is also essential"* and *"support needs to be tailored to the needs of the person"*.

### 2.5. The Need for Emergency and Supported Accommodation

Ninety Percent (**90.5%**) of members believe that eligibility for women on temporary visas to access emergency and supported accommodation beyond the cursory two (2) days would assist women in accessing safety and support 'a great deal' or 'a lot'. Our members have highlighted that *"there is insufficient [and] often no emergency and supported accommodation"* resulting in *"[m]any [women] return[ing] to abusive relationships due to homelessness"*.

## 2.6. The Strain on the Service System

Whilst women on temporary visas and their children only represent a minute proportion (estimated 1.9%), the strain on the service system in attempting to offer the necessary safety and supports to this group is substantial. Workers report hitting constant brick walls when attempting to assist women and their children to navigate a pathway to safety, simply because the government support is just not there. Specialist accommodation service providers may assist for very short periods but are reluctant because they receive no assistance towards the cost of the accommodation and have little if any options for exit points. The whole service system gets effectively consumed with these complex cases which often result in unjust and unsafe outcomes for the women and children concerned, and a demoralised workforce.

*“I just don’t understand why the government doesn’t seem to care about these women and children...”* says one WDVCS worker. *“Don’t they understand that we’re forcing them back into what can only be described as a living hell? No-one would agree with this if they actually met one of these families.”*

## 3. Case Studies

Below are some of the specific case studies we have received from our members this week:

### 3.1. Amara\* – Outer Metropolitan WDVCS client

***Amara\* arrived from Pakistan\* on a Tourist Visa 2018 and is now on Partner Visa 319. She is 28\* years old. She doesn't have an income as her then partner did not allow her to work. Amara disclosed that her partner would give her an allowance once a month for personal hygiene products etc... She had a mobile which was on a contract which her partner paid for. Amara disclosed that her partner had spyware on her phone and laptop, so he monitored her calls and activities. There are no children from relationship. Her partner has been incarcerated due to a domestic violence incident for a twelve-month sentence, however, could serve a lesser period with good behaviour. The domestic violence incident in question lasted several hours.. Amara was taken to the local hospital due to the injuries she sustained during the DV incident. Police applied for an AVO and charges. Since her partner has been incarcerated, Amara has no income. She is unable to pay for essential needs and [the] mortgage. Amara has been referred to Legal Aid - Immigration and I have been advised by them they are***

*unable to assist / advocate for her to receive assistance from Centrelink. I have reached out to numerous other services however keep being told the same thing. Amara has reached out to her family overseas however they are not able to assist her long term. **She has reached out to the Mortgage provider in regard to [her] change of circumstance however she is looking at losing her home and becoming homeless.***

### 3.2. Sara\*- Regional Domestic Violence Service client

*"[Sara\* is] a young mum with one child, [she] left her partner for a second time due to domestic violence. Sara\* and her partner are on subclass 790 visas. She doesn't have any income aside from the FTB [Family Tax Benefit]. [Sara\*] was advised by the ACT Legal Aid Migration Unit that if she applied for Centrelink payments it might affect their chances of applying for a permanent visa pathway. Sara\* was in such a dilemma that she ended up going back to her partner because of the poor prospect of being financially independent from him."*

### 3.3. Helen\*- Outer Metropolitan Specialist Homelessness Service client

*"Helen\*, a New Zealand lady with 3 children, was working for her husband [who was violent and abusive towards her]. [H]e has left her [and] she is not entitled to any payments from [C]entrelink or housing options. [He] will rent her a house and is in charge of giving her money for food but she has to live the way he wants her to and she cannot work due the current situation and has the children in her care. [Helen would have] no support from him to help her if she [was to] get a job."*

### 3.4. Benita\*- Outer-Metropolitan WDVCS client

*"Benita\* travelled to Australia on a permanent partner visa but [it] was cancelled by [her] first husband. [She] applied for a working visa with [her] second husband and ha[d] two children. Benita wasn't able to access Centrelink or [h]ousing. [She is] currently homeless but assisted by his family member providing accommodation. Legal Aid Immigration provided advice and told Benita to contact Immigration herself to sort out her visa situation. Centrelink just yesterday is looking at [a] Special Benefit for the children as they are citizens. [The] father was receiving FTB [Family Tax Benefit] but refused to provide them with money. [There are] serious charges against [the] husband including for non-fatal strangulation and an apprehended domestic violence order."*

## 4. Concluding Comments

There is an urgent need to provide access to safety and support for women on temporary visas and their children experiencing violence. Without adequate support, particularly income and housing support, these families will be left the unacceptable choice of either staying with their abuser or fleeing into homelessness and abject poverty. Within the COVID-19 crisis, the consequences of such are even more horrendous.

As can be seen, this client group represents only a very small proportion of clients in the service system at any one time. However, the impacts of failing to extend these basic supports are severe, and the knock-on effects to the domestic violence sector more broadly is apparent.

Women's Safety NSW reiterates our initial sentiments and urge the NSW and Federal Governments to immediately close this critical service gap. Women on temporary visas experiencing violence require safety and support and this support should be forthcoming regardless of visa status.

\* Any identifying information has been changed.