

## Understanding the experiences for people on temporary visas experiencing Domestic and Family Violence

Over the past 18 months DVSM's Western Sydney services have experienced a high intake of women who are not citizens or Permanent Residents in Australia. As of June 2017 women on temporary visas and their children experiencing Domestic and Family Violence accounted for one third of our clients staying at the crisis accommodation. All of these families had sought refuge at ROAR after leaving abusive and violent partners. ROAR Domestic Violence after Hours Support (DVAHS) service is also experiencing high numbers of women with temporary visas through the after-hour's response service. Many of these women were on Tourist Visas giving them no rights to work or to access social services and limited access to crisis accommodation (maximum of 2 days).

DVSM ROAR is not alone in this experience as highlighted in a recent DVNSW issues paper which highlighted that *"The last twelve months we have been overwhelmed with stories from women who have no access to income and are experiencing domestic and family violence. This group of women are not entitled to Centrelink benefits or work rights, or are unable to find paid work. In our experience, this cohort primarily includes women who have arrived as spouses or partners of skilled migrants, NZ residents who arrived after 2001 and other visa categories that have restrictions."* (DVNSW, 2017)

### Understanding women's experience

The women that are supported at ROAR told us that their experience of Domestic Violence had resulted in serious physical, psychological, economic and emotional trauma. They have shared that their temporary visa status has meant that they have no access to income, housing and limited or no access to health services at a time when they need it most.

*"These women are incredibly vulnerable. In addition to the trauma resulting from domestic and family violence, women in this situation are often experiencing substantial distress due to language and cultural barriers, social isolation and, for some families, the impacts of post-traumatic stress disorder from events experienced in their country of origin."* (DVNSW, 2017)

Their circumstances and visa status have often been exploited by the perpetrator as means through which to continue to threaten and control these women and children. This has included:

- Using threats to report them to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection resulting in their visa cancellation and their being sent back to their country of origin without their children.
- Exploiting their vulnerability and lack of support as a way of coercing them to return to the perpetrator.
- Withholding information from the department as to the progress of their visa applications.
- Refusal to sign paper work required for their children to access education.

The women at ROAR have told us that they are trapped; they have no other accommodation options other than returning to the perpetrator. Many see returning to their country of origin as not possible due to the risks associated in their home country or having to return home without their children.

The result of this is that they are:

- Uncertain as to if their children are able to access education or child care.
- Not able to work as a result of their visa or if they do have rights to work they are not able to access or afford child care.
- Financially dependent on the support of services.
- Isolated from their family, community and do not have the financial independence to rebuild connections within the community.



- Psychologically impacted as a result of living in crisis accommodation for extended periods of time, where others are able to move on to independent living

*"I'm educated. I don't want the money. I want to work."  
"So much time. Time is going. Life is going."*

**ROAR Resident 2017**

### Navigating the systems

There are over 150 visa subclasses in Australia. ROAR has seen women with a range of visas including tourist, New Zealand special category, bridging visas (A-F), and partner and study visas. The entitlements that a woman can receive in NSW is dependent on their visa type, however there is not a publically available current list of entitlements for each visa type in NSW. This means that these women, social workers, case managers and government staff can be unclear about the entitlements available to them, particularly as their visa type changes throughout their immigration pathway.

The immigration system and welfare system can be complicated to navigate particularly when a person is transitioning visas as they may have different entitlements. This can cause frustration for people escaping abuse and can be a slow process. This 'waiting' can heighten a compounded sense of powerlessness, and diminish hope and wellbeing. For the women who are unable to access child care benefits or schooling for their child, it means taking children to appointments and services for several hours at a time.

*I have to educate each service about the other. It is so frustrating.*

**ROAR Resident 2017**

### The impact for DVSM and other Services

DVSM continues to have a strong commitment to working with women with visa limitations and is seeking to do so in a manner that helps to build on their resilience and wellbeing. The service does face challenges in doing so, including:

- Balancing the needs of a refuge for crisis support with the long-term accommodation needs for women and children who may be living there for longer than the crisis accommodation is designed for. A number of women have lived in the refuge for between six months and 2 years while their visa applications are processed or legal advice is sought.
- Support peoples' immigration cases through lengthy, complicated and bureaucratic processes. This requires staff to attend appointments, support their paperwork and navigate the complexity of services and benefits with limited advice and changing policies from agencies and departments.
- Financial cost of supporting women and their children without access to Centrelink benefits and over a longer duration than women who are permanent residents.
- Children see the refuge as their home for as long as two years. This brings additional challenges, such as the appropriateness of living for an extended period of time in a physical environment designed for short term crisis accommodation. How to create organisational policies and practices that are conducive to wellbeing of these children whilst also maintaining its core function of being a transition place for others.
- Reduces access to crisis support for additional women and children seeking crisis accommodation and supports.

*"While a client is waiting for the Department of Immigration to process a change in visa status, she has no access to income. During this period, while the woman has no access to income she must rely almost entirely on the support service for accommodation, food and other basic amenities. This places additional pressure on services that rarely have access to resources for this client cohort. In practice this means that crisis services have to make difficult decisions about the number of 'no*



*income families' that they are able to support and is often dependent on the homelessness service's access to transitional housing. It is a terrible situation to be in for our service providers."* (DVNSW, 2017)

### Key barriers to supporting women on temporary visas experiencing DFV

The following factors have been identified as critical barriers for women experiencing domestic and family violence on temporary visas.

- The waiting times associated with visa applications resulting in women being accommodated in crisis accommodation for long periods of time or having to return to perpetrators as a result of no options.
- The psychological and emotional impact of insecure housing, uncertainty about their future and diminished choice, whilst supporting their children during these same uncertainties.
- Limited or no access to Centrelink payments, Medicare and Housing for people experiencing DFV on temporary visas.
- Accessing culturally safe translation for women and children experiencing DFV.
- Lack of specific funding that enables services to provide the, social, emotional and material level of support required by these women and their children.
- Limited time available for people to appeal their visa decisions.

### What next?

DVSM's experience as a service provider is not unique. Any efforts we make to improve the lived experience and service experience of these families and others not supported, can be enriched by and sharing and collaborating with other services. This includes those who are currently working with these communities and those who have the capacity to support these women and children on temporary visas experiencing DFV to live free from violence and to build their wellbeing.

Our strategic intention is to contribute to local and systemic change.

Locally we aim to:

- Continue to explore the lived experience of the women we work with to identify areas we can better understand and where possible prevent or redress the obstacles.
- Collaborate with Legal and Welfare groups to support women to attain legal advice and to access services.
- Improve our understanding of the service system and how we can support these women to navigate it in order to live free from violence and to support their wellbeing.
- Co-develop resources to support people with lived experience and case managers to access up to date information about visa types and their rights in a user friendly format.

Systemically we aim to:

- Continue to work with the DVNSW Women with No Access to Income Working Group in order to:
  - Support better visibility across the system about the lived experiences of women and children in these circumstances
  - Engage in constructive dialogue with government as to how we can support women on temporary visas and their children experiencing DFV.

## DVNSW – Women with No Access to Income Working Group

For more information on the working group go to the DV NSW website  
<http://dvnsw.org.au/about/policy-papers/>.

## Works Cited

DVNSW. (2017). *DVNSW Policy Papers*. Retrieved 2017, from [dvnsw.org.au](http://dvnsw.org.au):  
<http://www.timelessthee.com/testing/tdev17/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Women-No-Income-Summary-of-Issues-DVNSW.pdf>

\*Domestic Violence NSW Service Management (DVSM) was created as a not for profit company registered under the Australian Charities Commission Act 2012.

### **Refuge Outreach Action Response (ROAR)**

Refuge Outreach Action Response (ROAR) supports people who are experiencing domestic and family violence and/or experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The service operates in Blacktown and Hills area and has these priority target groups:

- Women with children who are escaping or experiencing domestic and/or family violence
- Women with children who are leaving institutions
- Fathers with accompanying children
- Other family groups

ROAR provides crisis accommodation at the refuge, and supports people in transitional properties and provides mobile outreach support.

### **Domestic Violence After Hours Service (DVAHS)**

Domestic Violence After Hours Service (DVAHS) provides an afterhours response for women with or without children in Western Sydney who are escaping domestic and family violence.