

MINISTERS URGED TO BETTER PROTECT WOMEN ON TEMPORARY VISAS EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

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A National Advocacy Group for Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence has renewed calls for women's safety ministers to better protect migrant and refugee women at additional risk of domestic and family violence.

The group is seeking government action to ensure women on temporary visas will have access to basic income and accommodation services when they seek safety from domestic and family violence.

Women's Safety NSW CEO Hayley Foster said no-one should be forced to choose between complete homelessness and abject poverty, and returning to violence and abuse, no matter what their visa status.

"This is not a statement as to whether anyone in particular should have entitlement to permanent visa status. This is just about being able to escape domestic, family and sexual violence," Ms Foster said.

The group has also recommended amending family violence provisions in migration regulations to create a new temporary visa for people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, and providing long term and sustainable funding for legal services.

"This will ensure people can access the support they need to be safe without the fear of being deported," Ms Foster said.

CEO of inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence, Michal Morris, said that many of their clients are even more vulnerable due to COVID-19, with a large number having lost their sources of income as a result of businesses being shut down or restricted.

"A significant portion of our clients are on temporary visas and are ineligible for Centrelink payments, or any of the government income support initiatives implemented in response to COVID-19. We are very concerned about these women. Not only are they experiencing family violence and trying to seek safety and stability during the current climate, but they are now also facing severe financial hardship, and for some, homelessness," Ms Morris said.

Interim CEO of DVNSW Delia Donovan said that every person suffering domestic and family violence should be able to access income, healthcare, housing, legal advice, counselling and other supports they need.

"Women on temporary visas and their children are not only victims to the crimes of the perpetrator but also to government policies and systems that exclude them from the critical supports they need to be safe," said Ms Donovan.

The renewed push follows an open letter to Australian and State and Territory governments in April urging ministers to act to ensure the safety of women on temporary visas experiencing violence and their children, whose lives are at risk.

More than 320 groups and individuals are signatories to the letter.

The Australian Institute of Criminology has found two-thirds of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former partner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic said the violence had started or escalated in frequency and severity in the three months prior to May 2020.

Foster said the COVID-19 crisis means these women and children who cannot access income, housing and healthcare now face even greater barriers to leaving a violent partner.

The group is seeking an update on a commitment by government at the federal and state level to better support women and action from the COAG Women's Safety Council on implementation.

The group has called for a number of measures to be implemented including:

- Social security and Medicare benefits so people can access food, other essentials and healthcare to stay safe, healthy and well during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Temporary, crisis, social and public housing, rental assistance and Safe at Home programs so people can socially isolate safely.
- Free legal advice and representation so people can understand how the law can help keep them and their children safe under migration law, family law and domestic and family violence law.
- Free interpreting services so people can understand how to stay safe and well during the COVID-19 crisis and access essential services.
- Roll out an equivalent of the Victorian flexible support packages across Australia so people can attend to their immediate material needs when escaping a violent perpetrator.

The measures align with an earlier announced blueprint for reform:

<https://awava.org.au/2019/10/02/research-and-reports/blueprint-for-reform>

Members of the National Advocacy Group for Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence who have endorsed the approach:

National

Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health

Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA)

Economic Justice Australia

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

Harmony Alliance

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia

Project Respect

Settlement Council of Australia

Settlement Services International

Women's Services Network (WESNET)

Australian Capital Territory

YWCA Canberra

New South Wales

Domestic Violence NSW

Domestic Violence Service Management

Immigrant Women's Speakout Association NSW

Immigration Advice and Rights Centre NSW

Open Support

Refugee Advice and Casework Service

Women's Legal Service NSW

Women's Safety NSW

Northern Territory

Central Australian Family Violence and Sexual Assault Network

Central Australian Women's Legal Service

Dawn House

Domestic and Family Violence Network Darwin

NT Council of Social Services (NTCOSS)

Women's Safety Services of Central Australia

Queensland

Ending Violence Against Women Queensland

Immigrant Women's Support Service

Women's House Shelta Collective

Women's Legal Service Qld

South Australia

Women's Legal Service SA

Tasmania

Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Warrawee Women's Shelter

Victoria

Associate Professor Marie Segrave, School of Social Sciences, Monash University

Domestic Violence Victoria

Federation of Community Legal Centres

inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence

Refugee Legal

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre

Western Australia

The Humanitarian Group

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AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW:

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Hayley Foster, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Safety NSW