

## **Your submission**

*Please provide a brief summary of your experience and any relevant issues. Your submission should respond to one or more of the terms of reference.*

*You may also wish to include any solutions, suggestions, or recommendations you have corresponding to the terms of reference.*

*Please note that content from this page onwards may be published.*

Open Support is a designated social services ministry within Mary Aikenhead Ministries. As such, the organisation has a direct association with the Ministries' health and aged care ministry, St Vincent's Health Australia (SVHA), Australia's largest Catholic not-for-profit health and aged care provider. SVHA includes St Vincent's Clinic, St Vincent's Private Hospital and St Vincent's Public Hospital, Sydney. Open Support operates as part of St Vincent's Clinic; and has been at the forefront of addressing social need since it was established by Sisters of Charity Australia as part of St Vincent's Clinic in 1990.

Open Support, among other services, provides a specialised domestic and family violence (DFV) service. Our Strategy 2020 focusses on and prioritises women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and in particular those on temporary visas. All women experiencing DFV face a multitude of complex issues to finding safety, but CALD women on temporary visas face significantly more barriers. Our submission to the Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence is written on this basis.

## **The level and impact of coordination, accountability for, and access to services and policy responses across the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, local governments, non government and community organisations, and business.**

DFV is a complex and often subtle issue. It is difficult to identify a risk to life when it presents in so many ways and to an outsider can present in ways that seem insignificant. Women often find it difficult to prove the level of danger they are faced with in a way that others in society, particularly those in positions of authority and decision making, can understand and accept.

At a federal level women on temporary visas need to be granted eligibility to access essential things such as social security and medicare benefits. In turn this will provide them the ability to access services which can support housing options to be available, support to find employment, ability to access an income, access to medical care etc. All of these are essential to a person's wellbeing and survival. These issues are easily identifiable and the sector seems to share this view. However it is clear from a federal view these issues are highly complex and require both the Department of Home Affairs and the Department for Social Services to agree and accept their individual responsibility, in both the policy and legislative underpinings of the issue, and to work together to address this urgent matter.

Both legislative and policy changes are necessary to ensure visas that are granted are suitable for applicants and that in the event women on these visas experience DFV, the conditions of their visa such as sponsorship, demonstration of genuine relationship etc. do not become barriers that prevent them from seeking help or to accessing supports that will assist them to reach safety. Visa limitations that preclude women from accessing social security, housing, medicare etc when combined, form complex barriers that prevent women from becoming independent and self reliant. This in turn often results in women choosing unsafe environments. Further, such issues can have extreme consequences for women from CALD backgrounds. The breakdown of a marriage can, in some cultures be seen as shameful and such actions of these women to leave, can result in threats to women and children as well violence toward them, either in Australia or upon return to their country of origin, which can be a reason they fear return.

In order for these women to reach independence and safety, the broader system needs to support them and enable them to help themselves.

## **The way that health, housing, access to services including legal services, and women's economic independence impact on the ability of women to escape domestic violence.**

Visa types that preclude women access to social security and medicaid, including particular bridging visas, have proven to be problematic for these women not only in creating stability for themselves and their children if they leave, but in their ability to become independent. Without social security these women may have no source of income to pay for rent, food, medication, utilities, phone, schooling costs etc... These women, who often speak English as a second language, may not have recognised qualifications in Australia, or may not have had opportunity to consider any paid employment as an option available to them. Women who have experienced financial and economic abuse may also be in a position where they have no access to money or bank accounts and in choosing to leave a relationship are literally leaving with no ability to financially support themselves or their children. Even if able to access centrelink payments to support themselves and their families, they would need access to subsidised housing, which they are often ineligible for due to their residency status. Without any income, medical care, or housing, these women are unable to acquire any level of independence. Furthermore, their visa status and potential residential applications may be put at risk by leaving a sponsor or primary applicant, resulting in them either choosing to remain in abusive homes, or returning to a perpetrator.

Women on temporary visas who are leaving an abusive home need stability which includes, some level of guarantee to some stable income, stable accommodation and understanding of their visa status and a reasonable timeframe in resolution of their immigration. In addition these women need support in their application for residency when there is such a high risk of serious harm or death upon return to their country of origin.

In the current climate, not for profit organisations like Open Support, who choose to support these women, need to pay the extremely high cost of financially supporting these families for extended periods of time. This is neither a sustainable or practical approach and not for profit organisations need the assistance of Government to make the necessary changes to both policy and legislation underpinning immigration and visas so that these women can be supported to independence. By doing so they become less reliant on the system and more able to contribute to the economy and society in general, which is significantly more cost effective and sustainable for the long term.

**All forms of violence against women, including, but not limited to, coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse.**

Women from CALD backgrounds not only face additional complexities when seeking safety and independence, but the nature of abuse perpetrated against them is also more complex. Complex forms of violence including forced marriage, female genital mutilation and dowry abuse are all additional types of abuse with additional complexities that many women from CALD backgrounds face. These women also face a type of abuse that is perpetrated by not only direct husband or partner, but their family, in laws, extended family and broader community. Experiencing this level of abuse and violence from multiple sources adds additional strain to women and can make leaving unsafe environments extremely dangerous and extremely difficult.

With this consideration it is important to note these women need a service response framework that is able to identify them, identify the level or risk they are exposed to and understand the need for rapid and relevant interventions. In conservative and traditional CALD communities there is still a great deal of progress that needs to be made in simply acknowledging the true nature of DFV. With this issue comes the danger of women seeking to hide her experiences of violence. Therefore service providers need to be trained in identifying subtle behaviours indicating a need for help and how expressions of elevated risk will present for this cohort. The Fourth Action Plan under the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children acknowledges and supports these recommendations in its stipulated actions, number 10 and number 12. These are not unknown and despite implementation being challenging, the need to address this issue with aggression is crucial.

**The views and experiences of frontline services, advocacy groups and others throughout this unprecedented time.**

COVID-19 has provided an opportunity for increase in campaigning and raising awareness of the issue of DFV. DFV has been an issue long before the pandemic and will continue post pandemic.

The pandemic restrictions have increased the difficulty for women experiencing DFV to reach out for help and being trapped in a confined space with a violence perpetrator can result in increased severity of abuse to women and children.

The growing need for suitable, safe and accessible accommodation options for women on temporary visas who are choosing to leave abusive homes has also been highlighted during this time.

In addition, the pandemic has created an opportunity for service providers to be innovative and develop more diverse responses to addressing the issue and reaching more women. This is vital in addressing this issue and it is important that when services return to business as usual, that their innovative strategies remain in place and an ongoing part of their practice. For example Open Support will continue with the expanded model of service delivery to ensure not only do we provide crisis accommodation and transitional accommodation, but that we continue to reduce geographical barriers and broaden our eligibility criteria for our case management services, so that more women have access to help in their time of need.

**If there is insufficient room above to summarise your experience and relevant issues,  
please attach additional pages to this submission as required.**