

# Research exposes isolation and abuse among immigrant and refugee women

December 12 2016, by Jane Gardner

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A photograph of one of the women interviewed for the research. Credit: University of Melbourne

A two-year study with 46 family violence survivors from more than 20

countries has found common threads in how their abusers use cultural and physical isolation to prevent them from seeking help.

The University of Melbourne's Dr Cathy Vaughan, from the Centre for Health Equity, led the ASPIRE project, which is Australia's largest ever study into [family violence](#) against immigrant and refugee women.

Dr Vaughan said because of visa restrictions, many of the women could not work, or access social security or health services. In many cases their partners would socially and culturally isolate them by not allowing them to learn English or to drive, or physically isolate them by taking advantage of remote housing.

"We spoke to one woman who wasn't allowed to leave her home for three years. She didn't even know where she lived, let alone who to contact for help," Dr Vaughan said.

"Another woman, only two days after arriving in Australia, was taken away to a house in the outer suburbs. She didn't know where she lived. Within just two days she was already experiencing severe violence, including being choked, and the only people she knew were her partner and his family.

"Some women spoke of violence perpetrated by members of the extended family and threats made against family living overseas. They also reported extensive financial abuse.

"Visa restrictions on women's ability to work, study and no access to Centrelink or Medicare make them completely dependent on their partner and make it very difficult for many women to leave.

"Few were aware of family violence [prevention programs](#) or response services, but we discovered groups of immigrant women providing

grassroots, voluntary family violence support to women."

The team also interviewed 57 workers from family violence, settlement, and the law and justice sector, and ran 26 focus groups with 223 women and men as part of the study.

Dr Vaughan said they discovered the cultural backgrounds of abusers varied. In some cases, the perpetrators of violence were Anglo-Australians.

"These men entice women here with false promises and then expect what is essentially domestic servitude. Some women end up victims of extreme physical and [sexual violence](#) as well, they are essentially brought out here as slaves.

"Parliament has attempted to pass legislation to prevent Australian men who have been convicted of family violence from sponsoring a partner to come to Australia, but even if it is passed, given the under-reporting of family violence, there will still be women who come out on partner visas who are at risk."

Co-researcher Dr Adele Murdolo, Executive Director at the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, hopes that the findings will prompt community services and state and federal governments to act decisively.

"We need long-term, sustainable prevention of violence against women programs to ensure prevention programs are inclusive and appropriate for a broad diversity of Australians."

The [women](#) in the study were invited to take photographs for the touring exhibition, which will tour Victoria and Tasmania in the new year.

**More information:** The report is available online: [anrows.org.au/](https://anrows.org.au/)

Provided by University of Melbourne

Citation: Research exposes isolation and abuse among immigrant and refugee women (2016, December 12) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-exposes-isolation-abuse-immigrant-refugee.html>

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