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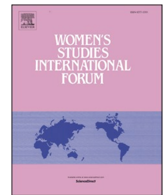

'I felt I had no-one to depend on but myself': Examining how women with insecure migration status respond to domestic and family violence in Australia☆

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A B S T R A C T

Feminist research that takes an intersectional approach has highlighted how a woman's migration status can influence their ability to disclose domestic and family violence (DFV) and access formal support in the countries where they live, work and study. In recent years, research in Western multicultural societies such as Australia has shed light on the ways that restrictive state policies work against victim-survivors and can result in women delaying formal help-seeking, withstanding violence for longer periods and presenting at frontline services at a point of crisis. While important findings have been generated, very few Australian studies have documented responses to violence among women with insecure migration status, including the strategies they rely on to resist different forms of control and to keep themselves safe during a relationship with a violent partner.

This article draws on data from a study with 18 victim-survivors who experienced DFV when they were living in Victoria, Australia, and their migration status was 'insecure', and 23 professional stakeholders. It explores how women drew on personal strategies to resist, cope with, put a stop to and survive DFV. The article uses 'citizenship' as a lens to interpret women's experiences and in doing so draws attention to the ways that women's options for responding to DFV were impacted by the conditional nature of their migration status. It also highlights women's expressions of agency and explores the actions victim-survivors took, which influenced their lived experiences in different ways in the weeks, months and years following their move to the country. The article seeks to contribute to scholarship that challenges assumptions of passivity in research on DFV with migrant women and draws attention to the ways that women worked to ensure their safety and survival despite the limited recognition of their experiences in state policies that address gendered violence.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, feminist researchers have diversified understanding of migrant women's lived experiences of domestic and family violence (DFV) in national receiving contexts, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Erez et al., 2009; Ghafournia & Easteal, 2019a). Research that takes an intersectional approach has highlighted how structural inequalities produce barriers that influence women's help-seeking in the countries where they live, work and study (e.g. Anitha, 2008; Voolma, 2018). While research in contexts including Australia has generated important findings, very few studies have so far been undertaken with victim-survivors whose migration status is 'insecure' to explore their strategies for responding to violence during a relationship with a violent partner.

This article seeks to build on current understanding by drawing from the accounts of 18 women who experienced DFV while their migration status was insecure and they were living in Victoria, Australia, and the expertise of 23 professional stakeholders who support them. It explores the ways in which women drew on personal strategies to resist, cope with, put a stop to and survive DFV following the move to the country. To do so, I follow Abraham (2000) who emphasises the need to examine women's strategies of resistance in the context of DFV and non-citizenship and how they use personal strategies, as well as informal and formal sources of help. I use 'citizenship' as a lens to interpret women's experiences and in doing so draw attention to the ways that women's options for responding to violence were impacted by their migration status, which influenced the decisions they made and the actions they took. The article offers insight into international debates that focus on the role of restrictive state policies in shaping women's options in DFV situations, however, also seeks to contribute to intersectional feminist scholarship that challenges gender and cultural essentialism and assumptions of passivity in research on DFV against migrant women. This includes characterizations of migrant women as a

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'unitary class' of victims (Crenshaw, 1991; Kapur, 2002) who are unwilling to seek external support and assistance (Abraham, 2000; Anitha, 2008; Maher & Segrave, 2018). I seek to counter these depictions in this article by highlighting the diverse ways in which women in the present study drew on strategies to resist different forms of control and to ensure their safety and survival from a violent partner over time and in the context of migrant precarity (see Vasil 2023a).

The article is structured in six parts. Part 1 explains how the concept of citizenship provides a useful lens to analyse migrant women's experiences, including the myriad challenges they confronted as precariously situated subjects with conditional membership. Part 2 provides an overview of the Australian policy context, while Part 3 examines the literature that qualitatively explores migrant women's responses to DFV with a focus on studies that bring issues regarding legal status to the fore. Part 4 sets out the research design from which this article draws. Part 5 presents the key research findings. Part 6 examines victim-survivor responses to violence through a citizenship lens and in doing so considers women's efforts to ensure their safety and survival despite their limited legal, social and economic rights. The final section discusses the implications of the findings for policy and practice. I consider how national efforts to address gendered violence can be enhanced by attending to the ways that migration processes, policies and practices not only limit the support options that are available to women, but create conditions that undermine women's significant efforts to resist and respond to men's violence following the move.

Citizenship

'Citizenship' is traditionally associated with membership in a national political community (Bosniak, 2000). It encompasses a range of elements (e.g. legal status, rights, participation and belonging) (Bosniak, 2000) and reflects 'competing political traditions' (Lister, 2003: 13). Mainstream debates have tended to centre on what citizenship is (e.g. a concept, legal or other ideal) and what it involves (e.g. rights, responsibilities and obligations) (Kivisto & Faist, 2007). While citizenship in social and political thought has come to signify 'the highest fulfilment of democratic and egalitarian aspiration' (Bosniak 2009: 127), contemporary understandings that position it as 'a state of democratic belonging or inclusion' fail to attend to its exclusionary face, including the ways that the regulation of the national border determines who belongs in a political community. Increasingly, theorists have questioned 'who' citizenship can apply to and have examined how dominant conceptions tend to employ an inward-looking framework, relying on 'a conception of a community that is both bounded and exclusive' (Bosniak, 2006: 11).

Citizenship as a status

In the migration context, the 'status' that is bestowed on individuals by the state can range from relatively secure to conditional (Lister, 2003). While at one level, 'migration status' is used as an instrument to classify between migrants, it is also a matter of legal recognition, as it plays a role in the ways that migrants are able to exercise their rights and impacts the quality of their experiences of belonging (Bosniak, 2006). It can also operate as a distinct form of subordination. Bosniak (2006: 17) argues that it is the 'status' of *alienage* that brings citizenship's 'exclusionary attributes' into view. 'Alienage' is a form of 'liminality' that is assigned to individuals and groups who live in the polity yet retain a formal 'outsider status' (Bosniak, 2006: 14, 17). It delimits the availability of rights and 'shapes [a person's] experience and identity within the community' (Bosniak, 2006: 17–18). Migrant women's *status* as non-citizens has been shown to operate as a form of exclusion, owing to the ways that state policies reinforce 'boundaries' on rights and belonging. These shape experiences and opportunities in 'profound' and 'usually disadvantaging' ways (Bosniak, 2006: 17, 18) and contribute to the production of 'new forms of social inequalities' (Abraham et al., 2010: 6).

Citizenship as a practice

In addition to definitions that position citizenship as a 'status' are process-oriented approaches that view it as a 'practice' (e.g. Isin, 2009). Isin (2009: 370) has pointed to the emergence of 'new actors, sites and scales of citizenship', which have 'complicate[d] the ways in which citizenship is enacted'. It is because of the ways that these individuals and groups – including migrants – engage in citizenship 'acts' and 'enact political subjectivities' that they are able to 'transform themselves … from subjects into citizens as claimants of rights' (Isin, 2009: 368). Viewed in this way, citizenship is more than a status. It is a process that subjects enact through rights-based claims and is contingent on human agency (Isin, 2009; Isin & Ruppert, 2015). Lister (2003: 38) takes a similar approach and argues that citizenship is reliant on the actions people take, which is premised on the belief that they *can* act. Lister (2003: 38) suggests that 'acting' as a citizen not only engenders a 'sense of agency' but that 'agency, at both the personal and political level, is crucial to women's breaking of the chains of victim-hood'. Viewing women as 'active agents' (Williams et al. 1992: 2 cited in Lister, 2003: 39) involves considering how they are disadvantaged by intersecting structures of inequality in public and private spheres, as well as the ways they act as subversive subjects, engaging in what Collins (1990: 223) describes as 'creative acts of resistance'. When understood in this way, citizenship is as 'an ongoing practice of contestation for social actors vis-à-vis the state', which involves individuals being 'constantly on … guard for risks of infringement of violation', as well as seeking to 'further expand and redefine rights' (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016: 524).

In this article, I view citizenship as a status, a practice and an intersubjective experience ('what it means to occupy the outside, inside, or liminal space of citizenship') (Henry et al., 2021: 1). I seek to highlight the ways that women's lived experiences were influenced by their status as non-citizens, as well as the strategies they relied on to resist different forms of control and ensure their survival in the absence of social support and protection. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the migration policy context in Australia and consider what uncertain residency status and limits on access to social citizenship mean in practice for migrant women experiencing DFV.

The policy context: migration, DFV and the state

Gaining entry to Australia is a selective process. In its current form, the Migration Program allocates a limited number of places each year to people who wish to move permanently under the Skill and Family streams, while the Temporary Migration Program enables migrants to visit, work or study in Australia for a specified period and under strict conditions. The Australian state confers upon migrants a range of statuses that range from relatively secure to precarious (see Vasil 2023a). Each status is associated with a specific configuration of rights and entitlements, such as the right to permanency and to access formal citizenship, access to the labour market, as well as access to public goods and services, including public healthcare, disability support and education, legal, housing and settlement support and social security.(1) The nature of these limits on migrant rights has specific implications for women, including those who are already experiencing or are at risk of experiencing DFV (see Vasil 2023a).

In Victoria, victim-survivors are not currently required to disclose their migration status when they seek help from frontline services or police, however, state policies reduce the type and degree of support that women can receive in practice. The services and systems that provide responses to DFV rely on victim-survivors having access to the status of permanent residency and by extension, safety nets related to income, housing and healthcare, in order to access formal services. As a result of their limited rights, migrant women are often reliant on refuges accommodating them without the funding they need to adequately

support them (VRCFV, 2016). Community legal centres also assist victim-survivors on a range of visas without adequate funding (National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence 2022). Victim-survivors who have no long-term rights to stay in Australia (e.g. temporary visa holders) are at significant disadvantage – even if their child is a citizen – as restrictions on access to social security and other services, as well as limits on work rights for some migrants, leave them with very few support options in Australia (Segrave, 2017). Thus, for many migrant women, the breakdown of their relationship heightens the very real risk of removal from the country.(2)

Literature review: migration status and DFV

Feminist research has examined how the social location of 'immigration' and its intersections with gender and other structural inequalities, influences the nature of women's experiences of DFV in Western multicultural societies, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States (e.g. Erez et al., 2009). Migration produces gendered insecurities, the impacts of which are borne disproportionately by women and their children (Freedman, 2012). While many of these insecurities are produced by the state as a consequence of efforts to control permanent migration, they also contribute to the difficulties women confront in the settlement phase, with migrant women and their families more likely to be affected by limited access to basic social services, exploitation in the workplace and racist attitudes (Erez et al., 2009; Freedman, 2012).

Feminist research that takes an intersectional approach has examined how women's 'specific position as immigrants is exacerbated by the socially structured systems of inequality through which they must navigate their lives as individuals and members of communities' (Sokoloff, 2008: 237; see also Erez et al., 2009; Pearce & Sokoloff, 2013). A growing body of intersectional feminist scholarship has in recent years sought to document how issues regarding women's legal or 'migration status' shape the nature of DFV, contributing to specific forms, such as migration-related controlling behaviours, enforced social isolation and economic abuse, and impact how migrant women seek help and access the supports available to victim-survivors who are citizens (Anitha, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2019; Anitha et al., 2018; Bhuyan, 2012; Bhuyan & Bragg, 2019; Bhuyan & Velagapudi, 2013; Parson & Heckert, 2014; Segrave, 2017; Segrave et al., 2021; Voolma, 2018).

Within this body of research, scholars have qualitatively explored how state policies and relevant laws can influence the ways that migrant women are able to respond to violence as disclosing could result in a woman being forced to leave the country if a relationship breaks down (e.g. Vaughan et al., 2016; Voolma, 2018; Zadnik et al., 2016).(3) This is often compounded by other factors, such as fear of being isolated from the communities in which women live and work, ongoing safety concerns and fear of being separated from children (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019; Segrave, 2018). Studies have also shown that victim-survivors who seek formal help can be disadvantaged by the ways that state policies restrict their eligibility for public benefits, social entitlements and services (e.g. income, housing and legal support, healthcare and settlement and migration support) that could assist them in securing the support they need for DFV (Bhuyan, 2012; Segrave, 2017; Voolma, 2018). In her case file analysis, Segrave (2017: 2, 3) argues that women with temporary migration status in Australia confront many of the same challenges as permanent immigrants and refugees who are experiencing violence, however, she suggests that the insecurity of migration status 'adds a layer of complexity and … uncertainty, for women' who are disadvantaged by service responses that prioritise their legal status 'over and above the experience of DFV'. Segrave (2018: 137) argues that there needs to be greater recognition of the ways that migration status is used as leverage for violence and control and how the current operation of the migration system creates an 'institutional layer of vulnerability' for women who have limited guarantees of access to support. In their study, Vaughan et al. (2016: 29) found that migration status plays a central role in women's ability to access support after they have left a relationship and that: 'differences in visa type construct women's experiences and impact on how they are able to seek assistance for family violence and remain safely in Australia'. More broadly, research that qualitatively explores help-seeking in the migration context has emphasized the importance of understanding victim-survivor responses and agency within an intersectional framework, which includes recognition of the impact of differences related to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic position and insecure migration status on the availability of support systems and the decisions women make (e.g., Parson et al., 2016; Reina et al., 2014).

While a focus on the barriers migrant women can confront when seeking formal assistance has enhanced understandings of the limits of service and legislative responses (e.g., Colucci et al., 2013; Crock, 2010; Ghafournia, 2011; Segrave, 2017), a smaller body of qualitative research has also focused on the decisions women make during a relationship with a violent partner, the strategies they rely on and how they negotiate cultural and structural barriers to keep themselves safe in difficult situations. Studies have shown that victim-survivors with diverse migration statuses employ *active* and *passive* strategies to resist, cope with and prevent men's violence. These include placating techniques, avoiding the perpetrator, fighting back verbally or physically and engaging in other subversive acts to challenge men's dominance (Abraham, 2000; Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2013; Ghafournia, 2017; Satyen et al., 2018; Vaughan et al., 2016). A part of their study, Vaughan et al. (2016: 58; see also Lemma et al., 2021) documented women's strategies for 'resisting and responding' to violence in Australia, noting that this took place 'in the phases before, during and after seeking informal or formal assistance for their safety and protection'. Women in their study who were citizens, permanent residents and temporary migrants, engaged in: 'direct resistance during or following incidents of violence, subtle protective and coping strategies' and 'attempt[ed] to get help for the perpetrator to change his behaviour' (Vaughan et al., 2016: 58).

Research has shown that women draw on personal strategies to confront men's violence and seek help multiple times from informal and formal sources, however, there is often a turning point (e.g. escalation of violence) that results in the decision to leave an abuser (Ghafournia & Easteal, 2019b). While important findings have been generated, little Australian research has explored how women with a range of 'insecure migration statuses' utilise strategies to resist and respond to different forms of control and secure their safety from a violent partner.

Methodology

This article reports on findings from a larger study that investigated how women with *insecure migration status* living in Victoria, Australia, experience, seek help and access support for their experience of DFV. I adopted a staged design to this research. The first stage involved semi-structured interviews with 23 stakeholders and the second stage involved interviews with 18 victim-survivors.(4) The first stage provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of stakeholders who work across the family violence system and support women with insecure status. This stage facilitated important insights into the experiences of women with a diverse range of insecure statuses, including the challenges victim-survivors encounter as non-citizens, the complex factors that influence decision making and responses to DFV, as well as the operation of the migration and family violence systems, which limits support options (e.g. Segrave, 2017). By extension, stage two provided an opportunity to examine the impact of these systems, policies and practices by focusing on women's direct, everyday accounts of violence and abuse and their strategies for responding to this.

The research was informed by the work of feminist standpoint scholars (Collins, 2000) who view knowledge as socially situated and maintain 'that it is a woman's oppressed location within society that provides fuller insights into society as a whole' (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 11). By centring migrant women's narratives as well as stakeholder accounts, the research sought to shed light on the complexities of the migration

and DFV experience and make sense of the ways that vulnerability to violence is produced by intersecting cultural and structural inequalities that impact women's responses at a range of levels (Abraham, 2000).

Formal approval from a university Human Ethics Committee was obtained to conduct both stages of this research. Purposive sampling was used in stage one. Stakeholders were recruited through the researcher's networks and cold calling. In total, 13 interviews were conducted with 21 stakeholders from the following services: frontline DFV services, women's refuge, community legal centre, ethno-specific women's organization, homelessness service, settlement/migration services, migrant women's organization and the courts. The remaining two stakeholders worked independently as a psychologist and as a teacher and both were engaged in community advocacy. In stage one, questions focused on the nature and dynamics of women's experiences of DFV (see Vasil 2023a, 2023b), the nature of women's help-seeking, women's support pathways and the challenges encountered when seeking formal support and services.

In stage two, 10 victim-survivors were recruited through connections with stakeholders. Four of these women were involved in formal advocacy on this issue. A further five found out about the study via a project flyer, which I sought permission to disseminate at targeted locations across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. A further three women found out about the research from a friend of theirs who also took part. All victim-survivors who participated in the research were over the age of 18, living in Victoria and had experienced DFV in Australia when their migration status was 'insecure'. While 'insecure migration status' is a legal term in jurisdictions such as the UK (Voolma, 2018) it was used in the present study to refer to a diverse range of impermanent statuses that limit rights to membership, the labour market and social entitlements (Goldring & Landolt, 2013). More specifically, it referred to women who were living in Australia and had a form of status that was: *dependent* (e.g. sponsored partners and prospective marriage visa holders; these visas can lead to permanence if certain conditions are met) or *temporary* (e.g. primary and secondary holders of student, work, tourist and other visas that expire after a specific time). Also included were women who were *waiting on the outcome of a visa application* (e.g. bridging visa holders), those *without a valid visa* (e.g. due to expiry or cancellation) and women, including permanent residents, who were *unaware of their migration status* (believed their status was *dependent*).(5) In total, sixteen women were married, engaged or partnered prior to migrating for the first time.

During stage two, after a potential participant contacted me, which was usually by phone, text message or email, I arranged a time to speak with them to discuss the project and the nature of participation. In the interest of participant safety, this call was also designed to ascertain if a woman met the inclusion criteria and importantly, to determine if they were in a violent relationship. If so, it would provide an opportunity to pass on information about available support services. None of the women indicated that they were currently experiencing DFV and the calls instead provided an opportunity to discuss the project with women and establish rapport. This involved providing further detail about the project and its aims, as well as the sensitive nature of the questions. I took time to explain my approach to protecting women's privacy and how I would handle their interview data and personal information (including if they elected not to proceed with an interview). None of the women declined the interview.

Interviews were conducted at a pre-arranged location that was safe, quiet and private. Before each interview, information about the project and women's rights as participants were discussed. I opened with questions about women's experiences in countries of origin and their motivations for migrating, as well as women's initial experiences of life in Australia, which then frequently moved into a discussion about the experience of DFV. Questions also explored how women sought help and whether they were able to access the support they needed. Interviews ended with future-focused questions. Participants discussed the impacts of the violence and reflected on their experiences. A distress protocol was implemented, and women were also given the option to debrief with the researcher after and in the days following the interview.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and this was followed by two rounds of coding using NVivo software. The transcripts were de-identified and each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings relating to women's strategies for responding to DFV are discussed in the next section. While nearly all victim-survivors in the present study ($n =$ 17) went on to seek formal help and assistance from frontline DFV services, this tended to coincide with women exiting the relationship at a point of crisis.(6) My focus in this article is to examine the personal strategies women drew on to resist and respond to DFV while they were in the relationship (see also Vaughan et al., 2016) and to highlight their searches for safety from violence in the context of non-citizenship.

Limitations

It is important to note some of the limitations of the study. First, as the study involved a small number of interviews, its findings are not representative of the experiences of all migrant women experiencing DFV whose status is insecure. Moreover, and given the complexity of the Migration Program, the categories migrants arrive under and the ways they move across visas over time, findings cannot be seen to be generalisable. Skilled migrants, for example, are underrepresented as participants in stage two. While this may stem from weaknesses in the recruitment method, it is also important to note some of the systemic factors that may have played a role: women continue to be underrepresented as holders of skilled visas. Additionally, many skilled migrants on provisional visas are required to reside in regional areas. While I sought to recruit women from both urban and regional areas, most resided in metropolitan Melbourne. Despite this, I was able to interview stakeholders from a wide range of services, which provided important insights into the experiences of a broader cohort.

While I attempted to diversify my recruitment strategies, most of the women who participated in stage two were identified through stakeholders at frontline family violence services. This was an effective method, however, it also meant that it did not include women who had limited contact with formal support services. Another cohort whose perspectives are not present are victim-survivors who continue to live with violent partners. As I decided to recruit in English owing to the diversity of languages spoken across the Victorian community, this meant that I excluded women who may have been interested in participating but were prevented from doing so due to the language barrier.

Finally, bringing legal status to the fore in this study (see also Segrave, 2017) meant that I sought to interview women with a range of 'insecure statuses' and, as such, it is possible that my findings do not convey the specificity of women's experiences in the way that controlling for the effects of ethnicity or race would.

Findings: responding to violence in the context of (non) citizenship

Women's strategic decision-making: accessing information and disclosing violence

The 'precarity' associated with women's migration status (see Vasil 2023a) shaped their experiences of belonging in Australia in specific ways. This influenced how they engaged with actors who were perceived to be associated with the state. Many women in the present study expressed hesitance when it came to approaching state services and other institutional actors about their experiences. This was compounded by a general mistrust of the state and the belief that they were unable to exercise their rights in the same way as other victim-survivors in the community. Most women explained that their engagement with institutional actors, such as immigration officials, police, healthcare

practitioners and social workers, was limited and/or regulated by male perpetrators and other family members. Cristina, who was on a student visa, was also in a relationship with an Australian citizen. She explained that she knew she was ineligible for government support even though she was experiencing violence. She reflected that she didn't think to ask for external help and was focused on finding work and securing a place in a share house:

> I just felt like I had more important things to worry about other than get counselling during that time – I felt like it was like the least of my concerns. I had to look for a house, find a job … because at that time I felt I had no one to depend on but myself … I just felt like, if I didn't do anything, nothing would happen.

Cristina's account shows how insecure migration status impacts women's decision-making in DFV situations. Not only did this determine the options that were accessible to her, but it also meant that in the absence of social support, she was forced to engage in additional work to ensure her basic needs were met.

Stakeholders also discussed how women's perceptions of their ineligibility for government-funded services influenced how they responded to and sought help for DFV in Australia, as evidenced in the following account:

> [Women] on tourist visas, student visas, [think] that they have no rights. That is common to them because they thought that they are just coming into study – so anything that happens to them, it is up to them to go out of the country.
>
> (Grassroots activist)

These experiences were compounded by the fact that, at the time of the interviews, the Federal Government had announced changes to social welfare provision for migrants, which impacted access to social security and supports for some migrants on bridging visas. Stakeholders, including settlement support providers, described these changes as having flow-on effects for women in DFV situations. One service provider pointed to the ways that punitive policies impact all migrant women's feelings of safety and can serve as a disincentive to come forward about their experiences:

> When government keeps creating these policies that says, 'we don't want you here, we're going to find a way for you not to be here' … they're not going to do that [report to authorities about family violence] because they'll be in fear of their own status … Some of the women they just want the violence to stop in the home, they don't want their partner to be deported, they might not want to leave that partner … they just won't do that out of fear of being deported or how Immigration would respond … nothing in their life is private.
>
> (Social worker, settlement service)

It was in this context that victim-survivors also described a sense of apprehension about seeking out help or information and were careful not to reveal 'too much' about what they were experiencing. The nature of anti-immigrant sentiment in Australia was also seen to have an impact on women's decision-making:

> I think the stigma around temporary visas and … discrimination and the negative reporting about people on temporary migrant visas … is also a barrier to women wanting to approach any kind of authority and expect to be … taken seriously. I think that that's a massive deterrent for women regardless of which visa that they are on … that feeling that you're not really valued and that you don't really count, and you're not really wanted are all reasons why women would not feel confident that if they asked for help that someone would listen.
>
> (Researcher, migrant women's organization)

These accounts highlight how the social and political conditions in countries of arrival have an impact on women's experiences of migration and the extent to which they were able or willing to disclose what they were experiencing at home.

Processes for seeking information about DFV supports and eligibility were often interrupted, informal or protracted. Rita expressed that over time, she confided in a social worker who passed on information about her rights as a partner visa holder. She was able to draw on this information months later when her situation at home became untenable. While some women were able to get the information they needed, others described that they had received incorrect information about their eligibility for Centrelink payments and other forms of DFV support. Sahar had lived in the country as a temporary resident for close to a decade. She confided in a friend about the abuse she was experiencing, however, she received the wrong information:

> One of my friends, [I] discuss with her … she said … to contact the domestic violence women … the 1800 number … they will help you. I said, 'I'm not resident here. I look online, google it but it said that it's for the resident women or spousal women'. She said – no, they help everybody. … I didn't listen, and I was just bearing everything.

A similar account was conveyed by a grassroots activist:

> They [temporary migrants] think that they cannot access services at all. But that's the thing also, in my mind I am like, am I really supposed to explain to her and then suddenly, when she goes to the service, she's being told that 'you know, because of your visa, you're … the service that we can offer you is basically very limited to referral'. That's all. And then, some other workers would even go to the length of, 'oh, well you came to Australia to study … you should have the resources'.
>
> (Grassroots activist)

It was in this context of isolation and precarity that victim-survivors looked externally for support, drawing on online networks to equip themselves with specific information regarding their migration status.

Many women explained that they were able to establish connections with other victim-survivors, which helped them gather the information they needed about their rights as victim-survivors. Ananya, who was a secondary applicant on a permanent visa, expressed that owing to her husband's control tactics, she believed her status was dependent and thus, less secure than it was in practice. She was able to establish a friendship with another victim-survivor who helped her gain access to the practical support she needed:

> I was so lucky that I find that friend and she was very smart because she … was [an] interpreter. … she know Centrelink, everything here. So even Centrelink – my payment not started, I don't know what is Centrelink … Then my friend, [she] take me everywhere … helped me to start my payment, she done everything … help me a lot.

Some women used social media to connect with other victim-survivors. Waan, who was on a partner visa, reflected on the emotional and practical support she received after reaching out to a local women's group who had an online presence:

> I find [a friend]. She helped me [with] everything … before she support me, I have no one at that time to talk. … I'm very stress, thinking too much, I'm crying … and I talk to her, every day I talk to her … [the organization] helping me.

Members from the group also put Waan in contact with a specialist service who provided free migration support, which enabled Waan and her children to exercise their rights under the Provisions. Establishing a connection to networks of this kind was a further way in which women in the present study challenged different forms of control and isolation.

It was in the context of system gaps, unfamiliarity with institutional systems and distrust of state services that women drew on other strategies to cope with and protect themselves from violence, which included seeking help from informal networks of support.

The role of transnational support networks in women's searches for safety

Women in the present study were most likely to seek help from informal sources of support in the first instance, disclosing the violence they were experiencing to family and friends in Australia and/or overseas. Most victim-survivors explained that they remained close with family following the move, however, most lived near or with members of their husband's family in Australia. Women on temporary visas, including those who migrated *with* a husband or partner, were less likely to have established family networks in Australia. This was often because women, including their husband or partner and any children, were the first in the wider family network to move to the country with the intention of working and/or settling permanently. Few women also stated that they had close ties with the local ethnic community where they were living when they moved and, in many instances, women were deliberately isolated from these networks by the perpetrator and other members of his family. Victim-survivors such as Mei, who was holding a partner visa, expressed that they had sought help from their in-laws with the hope that they would intervene and put a stop to the violence, however, their efforts were not always successful. Mei explained that she was left feeling disappointed:

> I didn't tell anyone about my husband [and that he] was hitting me, but I tell my mother-in-law because I hope … she can stop [him] because my husband, whatever his mum said, he will listen …. She was still [overseas], I talked to her every day because I hope she will help me, she said, 'okay I will tell him' – 'I will tell him don't hit you so hard'.

Prisha, who was also on a partner visa, explained that she asked her parents-in-law for help over the phone while they were in India and continued to do so after they arrived in Australia for a holiday. She expressed that she felt she was owed more support because her marriage was arranged and that her in-laws would understand and take some action. She also said that when they visited and stayed with the couple, her husband would alter his behaviour and was less likely to be physically violent:

> If they stay here, he not do anything … he stay good, behave good. … I speak to his family, his mother, she said, 'do what you want to do, don't involve us'. I said, 'I did not marry him like run off with him, I marry with all of – together, arranged marriage, not – this is not a love marriage, I don't decide or choose him to myself, this is not like that'. But she said, 'don't disturb us'. After that I did not call.

While some victim-survivors explained that family on their partner's side was unsupportive, others reported that their family in Australia and overseas were a vital source of practical and emotional support in the years following their migration to the country.

Victim-survivors were most likely to receive support from members of their own side of the family. Having extended family in Australia was a great source of security for Mina, who had arrived on a prospective marriage visa and had attempted to leave her violent partner multiple times as his violence escalated in the months following her migration. On one of these occasions, she was able to stay with her cousins who encouraged her to call the police and assisted her to access the support she needed to begin to rebuild her life. Other women said that supportive family members tended to reside in the country of origin. Women on temporary visas were less likely than other migrants – including those on partner or prospective marriage visas – to say that they had established family networks in Australia. For women who did have family networks, this was most likely to be a member of their permanent resident or citizen partner's family. Some women on temporary and provisional visas explained that their parents came to visit them in Australia and while this was a way of coping with the violence, it also enabled women to exert further control over their situations. Ananya, who was a secondary applicant on a skilled visa, explained that having her parents visit put a temporary stop to the violence as her husband altered his behaviour in front of them. It also helped her cope as their presence lessened his control over her and meant that she was able to continue to work, despite his insistence that she quit her job:

> [He] was so difficult and my parents said they will come to Australia to look after my daughter, because as a casual you have to [be] flexible, then they trust you then they offer you full-time and that is what I want, a permanent job. That is my goal because this man, I know him, he'll keep me out any of the – he [won't] let me do anything. So, my parents came over here and then they helped me to settle so I do as many shifts as I can.

Ananya also explained that it was because of the support she received from her parents that she was able to exit the relationship. Jayani, who was on a student visa, explained that her parents were supportive and encouraged her to leave: "my mum and everyone told me, 'don't go back to him'". Jayani's family also suggested that she try to continue living in Australia. She explained that they suggested she: 'stay here because they … have financial difficulties, they can't help me at this moment with money'. Jayani stated that returning to Sri Lanka was a possibility, however, she thought:

> If I go back to Sri Lanka, what I do with child there? It's very difficult because they have some cultural barriers … my neighbours and relatives their thinking is very bad. They think I'm alone with child and don't have father and I divorce, it's very bad in our culture. I decide I stay here, and I find work.

While Jayani's family supported her decision to leave her violent husband, the structural constraints produced by her migration status created significant barriers, which reduced the likelihood that she would be able to support herself and her young child, remain in the country on her student visa and receive the support she needed for DFV.

In addition to asking family members for support, victim-survivors employed other strategies to resist and respond to men's violence and keep themselves safe. One such strategy was returning to countries of origin. Many women explained that migrating to Australia often meant moving away from family members who were their main source of support. While returning home permanently due to separation or divorce would have resulted in mixed responses from family and other relatives, many women explained that they travelled to the country of origin for a holiday. For some, returning home to stay with family provided a reprieve from the violence. Prisha explained that she was able to use her trips to India to visit family as leverage against her husband, expressing that she would not return to Australia if he continued to be violent towards her. While this was a way for Prisha to assert her power, it also intensified the violence to some degree, as she was harassed by her husband and his parents over the phone, which caused her family to ask questions about why she was reluctant to return.

Not all travel to the country of origin was viewed positively by the women interviewed. Tammy explained that she returned to her family a couple of times to see if she could make things work as a single parent in Thailand. In our interview, she reflected that she found it difficult to cope with the ways that her family tried to control her and any decisions she made when it came to raising her young child. This resulted in her travelling back and forth between countries to escape different forms of control. Unlike Tammy, Jasveen explained that she was forced to return home as her visa was due to expire. She didn't want to travel back to India after she was married, however, her husband refused to sponsor her and she was forced to make trips between Australia and the country of origin to renew her tourist visa. Jasveen explained that returning home complicated her situation, as she felt she was no longer welcome. She moved out of her house before relocating to Australia and expressed that she felt she didn't belong anywhere:

> I'm crying by myself in my room because I think, 'where can I go? I'm in between, where can I go?' I'm thinking I can't go to my brother's

house because I'm a widow and when I go to my brother's house, my sister-in-law, if they fight each other, they [blame me]. There's no scope [for me to] live there. If I'm going to my sister's house, her husband … they tell me, 'Why she go here, she need to go there' … I'm just standing at the airport and I'm thinking to myself, 'where are you going? There is no room, where you can go?'

The sense of being 'in between' – not belonging in Australia and no longer belonging to family in the country of origin – highlights the complex set of dynamics that factor into women's decision-making and searches for safety. Jasveen, who felt pressured to re-marry after her first husband passed away, had put all her savings towards her second marriage and subsequent move to Australia. She stated that after her last trip to India, she decided: 'Melbourne is now my city because I'm married with him, because he is my husband [but] it's very, very difficult when he threatened me – I spend all my savings to come here'. Jasveen felt she had no other choice but to remain in the relationship and try to ensure her safety, however, this was complicated by the fact that her husband refused to lodge the partner visa. Like Jasveen, victim-survivors who were subjected to DFV by multiple perpetrators, were unable to rely on their husband's family for support. Being geographically distant from family and friends overseas meant that the perpetrator was able to gain '*momentum* in power and control' (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002: 904, emphasis added) and women also expressed that they felt isolated when they were surrounded by the perpetrator's family. This resulted in a loss of status, with some women reporting that there was less gender equity in their relationships following the move to Australia.

Discussion

Migrant women in the present study made repeated attempts to respond to DFV despite a myriad of personal and institutional challenges. Many said that they did everything possible to cope with the violence, including making attempts to change their own behaviour, in the hope that the situation would improve (see also Vaughan et al., 2016). Some women explained that they sought out informal support from family and friends in the first instance, which meant calling upon extended family in Australia and overseas to intervene and put a stop to the violence. Their accounts highlight differences in the type and degree of informal support women were able to draw on and the ways in which the support received was dependent on a woman's personal history, including the values and beliefs systems of parents and other family members (see also Vaughan et al., 2016). Often women explained that they didn't seek advice from family and friends, instead deciding to gather as much information as they could and, where possible, accumulate the resources they needed to make a planned departure by themselves. Women also employed both strategies, seeking informal support from friends and family, while also seeking out information about their rights from formal and informal sources. Women's accounts evidence the complex ways in which their migration status constrained and enabled the decisions they made and the actions they took following the move to the country and in response to men's violence (Segrave, 2017, 2021). This had implications for women's safety as it limited the options that were available to them and compounded the impacts of DFV (Maher & Segrave, 2018; Vasil 2023a).

As citizenship scholars such as Lister (2003: 10) argue, 'in its role as regulator' of rights, the state has the capacity to both 'support' and 'undercut' the citizenship of diverse groups of women. Findings from the present study demonstrate how state policies and rules that regulate who has access to the legal status of citizenship can impact how women engage with the services and systems that provide responses to DFV (Abraham, 2000; Anitha, 2008, 2010, 2011; Segrave, 2017). Women expressed hesitancy when it came to approaching formal services and other institutional actors that were seen to be associated with the state about their experiences; this was compounded by the belief that as migrants, they were unable to exercise their rights in the same way as women who were citizens. Their accounts highlight the ways in which the technology of 'everyday bordering' – what Yuval-Davis et al. (2018) describe as acts of control taken by the state to keep 'others' out – can reinforce a sense of exclusion that combines with other factors (e.g. women's limited resources and relative social isolation) to shape a victim-survivor's decision-making and their searches for safety in Australia. These 'acts' serve to undermine migrants' sense of safety and security in the community and are also responsible for 'raising a sense of precarity' (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018: 230). Women's first-hand accounts of experiencing violence and negotiating visa insecurities draw attention to the ways that state policies restricted their entitlements, intersecting with other structural inequalities – including but not limited to gender inequality – to influence the actions they took, the options that were available to them and how they were able to seek assistance and access support they needed.

Not only did migrant women's exclusion from the formal status of citizenship reinforce their 'lesser' status in the home, but the experience of DFV also impacted how women were able to enact their citizenship in practice. The uneven distribution of public benefits and services limited the ways that women were able to meet their basic needs, heightening their susceptibility to harm, exploitation and to further violence (Gilson, 2014). As Segrave (2018: 126) has argued, the state participates in men's violence as policies 'restrict and limit women', which, in turn, 'empowers perpetrators'. Women in the present study were faced with a precarious set of circumstances, as many ran the risk of losing their right to continue living in the country if they came forward about their experiences. They also described how they were disadvantaged by the material conditions of life in Australia, which limited their resources and heightened their dependency on male perpetrators and other family members. As Boucher (2014: 377) has argued, restrictive welfare policies can result in the family becoming the 'default welfare provider'. This contrasts with feminist perspectives on the welfare state, which tend to view 'people's capacity to live independently of both the market and the family' as a 'central criterion' (Boucher, 2014: 369). Women's experiences also shed light on the ways that responses to DFV have shifted under neoliberalism, which has emphasized 'notions of personal responsibility' and weakened essential rights (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016: 574). These shifts have limited the accessibility of social support, which plays out 'in complicated and problematic ways' in the lives of migrant women, with social safety nets – including the Family Violence Provisions – limited to "selected 'victims'" only (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016: 574, 576; Bhuyan, 2012). It was in this context that women drew on various strategies to protect themselves and their children.

Migrant women in the present study employed personal and collective strategies to resist and respond to men's violence and to keep themselves safe (see also Vaughan et al., 2016) in the absence of social support. These findings build on existing research in other national contexts, which has shown that women with insecure status experiencing violence seek help and assistance multiple times and from different sources (Anitha, 2008). The migrant women interviewed exercised their agency in the face of persistent challenges and looked for opportunities where they didn't previously exist. Some did this on their own, while others did so with the assistance of other survivors, as well as family members. By drawing on different protective strategies, women challenged men's violence as well as the exclusionary practices of non-citizenship, which restricted their access to different forms of social support and created additional 'leverage' for control (Segrave, 2017, 2018). Women's accounts highlight that the effects of these strategies were inconsistent; there were differences in the type and extent of informal support they were able to receive (see also Vaughan et al., 2016), as well as the formal support they were eligible for.

Conclusion

Intersectional feminist research has drawn attention to the need to challenge assumptions about migrant women's vulnerability to violence

by highlighting how they are disadvantaged by cultural and structural barriers that heighten their insecurity and impact how they are able to seek out help and support. By drawing from women's direct accounts of violence and the accounts of the stakeholders who support them, this article has sought to highlight the diversity of women's responses to DFV, including the actions they took to resist men's violence and negotiate safety despite their conditional membership. The article demonstrates how women's perceptions of precarity impacted the nature of their engagement with state services and actors while they were in violent relationships. It also highlights the varying ways in which women sought out help and assistance from informal networks of support in Australia and in other countries despite perpetrators' considerable efforts to control and isolate them.

The present study supports existing Australian and international research, which evidences that greater recognition of how migration processes, policies and practices can entrap women in violence and restrict access to essential support is required at the policy level to support their help-seeking (Ghafournia & Easteal, 2017; Maher & Segrave, 2018; Segrave, 2021). Findings also reinforce the importance of undertaking research with migrant women about their experiences of responding to, resisting and securing safety from violence, as this can contribute to understandings of the risks they encounter as non-citizens and how these can be exacerbated by inadequate policy formation (Maher & Segrave, 2018). Women's accounts also raise important questions about the nature and extent of political responsibility when responding to violence in the migration context. Findings from the present study indicate that this involves accounting for the ways that the normative rules governing access to support continue to exclude a significant proportion of victim-survivors in the community. As others have argued, there is a need to ensure that migrant women are afforded the same rights as citizens so that they are supported in their efforts to respond to violence (Jelinic, 2020; Maher & Segrave, 2018) and have a way to transition their status if leaving the country is not a safe or practical option. In the current political climate, this requires policy makers to consider how efforts to reinforce the integrity of the border and restrict access to social welfare undermine the work undertaken to date to enhance women's security by addressing gender inequality at a range of levels.

Notes

(1) Eligibility for payments, concessions and allowances differs depending on a migrant's visa class and is also dependent on accrued residency (Boucher, 2014).

(2) Despite these challenges, migrant women have continued to advocate for their inclusion on a range of issues including family violence, which is one area where collective action is particularly visible (Murdolo, 2014). The special provisions relating to family violence (the Family Violence Provisions), for example, came into effect following a successful campaign by grassroots activists, which gave voice to community concerns about migrant women's safety and the ways it was compromised by laws that made a woman's right to remain in the country dependent on their relationship status. The Provisions provide an alternate pathway to permanent residency for migrants on specific visas who would have obtained a permanent visa had their relationship not broken down due to family violence. Currently, the Provisions are only available to holders of partner and prospective marriage visas, with other temporary migrants excluded from access (see Segrave, 2017).

(3) The ways in which migration status is a factor that influences women's ability to access formal support for DFV, including specific provisions in migration law for sponsored migrants (e.g. Ghafournia, 2011), has been explored in the broader literature on domestic and family violence and immigration in Australia (e.g. Australian Law Reform Commission, 2011; Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000; Easteal, 1996).

(4) This research also included observations at events, community meetings and information sessions which took place across the family violence sector following the state government's royal commission in 2016, though this aspect of the data set is not drawn out for the purposes of the analysis offered here (see for further detail Vasil 2023a).

(5) The definition of 'insecure migration status' adopted for this research didn't extend to include the specific experiences of refugees. Instead, the focus was on the experiences of women who arrived on a range of visas for different reasons under the planned and temporary migration programs, including for family (e.g., to reunite or live with a partner), to work or to study (see Vasil 2023a for further detail).

(6) Only one woman, Cristina, explained that she didn't contact formal services and was able to make a planned exit by securing her visa status and the resources she needed to leave her violent partner.

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