

Immigrant Women's Support Service

Domestic Violence Court Assistance Network Conference 2003

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Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Act to the Domestic and Family Violence Act (1989-2003)

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The changes to the legislation that include family relationships in particular are a welcome change for us. We have seen women who experience violence from extended family members or in informal carer relationships over the years. The changes to the domestic violence legislation have not impacted on the philosophical practices of the organisation. Immigrant Women's Support Service in its feminist framework has always recognised violence against women as fundamental to its service delivery. As a result IWSS has over its 14 year history maintained high quality services to all women from non-English speaking backgrounds and their children regardless of the "type" of violence they had been in. This approach of meeting the needs of NESB women experiencing violence other than spousal arises from an acknowledgment of IWSS being the only service of its kind in Queensland. The reality has been that women from NESB who take steps to break patterns of violence in their lives have had few options in relation to alternative cross-cultural services. Limited access to services is particularly difficult for women from NESB who reside in rural and remote areas of Queensland. Having said all that and as a result of the introduction of program policies and a constant increase on the workload IWSS has been forced to take a pragmatic approach in latter years and prioritised spousal forms of violence against women leaving the other form of violence as second priorities. I believe this is the central issue for women's services as we always stretched our abilities and resources to respond to women escaping domestic and family violence.

Now I would like to turn to "where has the legislation had an impact" for IWSS. The human resources available at IWSS have not seen an increase for at least the past 7 years; therefore this is an area of concern. Since the introduction of the legislation the service has received an increase of referrals from the new target groups. These appear to be women experiencing family violence. Not many, but nevertheless significant when it's over and above existing demands on limited resources. An example is that we have 166 on-going cases and received 57 new referrals over 5 weeks.

Some of you may be aware that IWSS did not receive any additional funding. Of course it is an unfortunate outcome considering the long history and experience the organisation has in the sector. Funds have been directed to generic services to meet the needs of women from NESB. It is not my intention to place any negative tag on this fact, but it is our experience that most women from NESB may not necessarily access mainstream services.

There are a number of reasons for this they may include: lack of knowledge about the existence of services, confidence that her language skills would not be minimised or ridicule and lack of cross-cultural sensitivity by generic services. Similarly it has been our experience,

at times, that services refuse or find it too difficult to work with women from NESB and usually end up referring them to IWSS.

Concerns for IWSS are in supporting our existing staff infrastructure for working with women from NESB in crisis. A management issue that has risen is the documenting and monitoring changing patterns and continue efforts to raise awareness of gaps in service delivery as we identify it.

In looking at collaborative partnerships in the sector we look forward to developing strategies to inform and support women from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who may access generic services funded to provide this direct service delivery.

In saying this there are a number of issues that need to be identified when working with NESB women experiencing violence.

Changes to the legislation to incorporate the "Informal Care Relationships" bring into discussions the impact on the individuals covered under this definition. It is our experience that isolation from immediate family, extended family and community often stops women from escaping violent situations. Women who are sponsored to come into the country on fiancée or spousal visas are often dependent on the financial support of their partners. Similar situations arise for elderly people who are newly arrived into the country or others who are more established but still sponsored by their children. They are rendered financially dependent on their immediate family and as a result would find it difficult to seek out protection from violence. The service delivery context of these situations places significant strain on resources and referrals to alternative services that are limited or non-existent.

Similarly the social and emotional support available for women from NESB is limited. This is particularly so in rural and remote areas. This has historically placed responsibility on IWSS to respond to isolated groups of women from NESB in practical terms. This has meant that IWSS has stretched its resources to provide phone contact to women from NESB in these areas that include referrals, counselling and appropriate information in relation to their situation. Another aspect of the work IWSS does is to provide cross-cultural information, debriefing and support to service providers in rural and remote areas.

Another important point that relates to the implementation of the extended legislation is the answer to "How are women, in this case NESB women going to be informed about this legislative option?". Information available to women in other languages is always beneficial and making it available to women from NESB acknowledges the inclusive approach to service provision and diversity in the community. I am aware that The Department of Families has engaged in developing and producing some information about the new legislation. The question here is will it be translated into other languages. This would be a welcomed strategy. However, from our experience it is important to acknowledge the limitations that written information may have as well and how it's distributed.

To further this point one needs to understand that women from NESB have a broad range of educational, social, political and religious backgrounds. Given this, some women from NESB may be illiterate in their own language. This places additional responsibility on the service provider to disseminate the information with the woman and the aid of a professional interpreter. We also need to be sensitive to the complexity of information that may not be easily understood. Therefore, how we utilise the written information is essential for women to further their understanding in making informed decisions.

It is our experience that community education is a strategy that works well with ethnically diverse communities. I must also add that such strategy needs to take into account creative practices that reflect on cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity to various communities and their dynamics. It demands that services be available to access communities within their context and social networks. This may require for strategies to be in place outside the normal 9-5 working hours of the organisation. It needs to take into consideration various opportunities that arise for dissemination of information. It must also encompass the use of ethnic media, bi-lingual and/or bi-cultural key people in the different communities. Of course I have to be biased here, but services engaging in community education may want to contact IWSS and consult the expertise of its workers in addressing community education. The sexual assault program at IWSS has had for a number of years an established program of community education.

Finally I would like to stress that it is concerning for the target group of women we work with that our service once again did not receive any additional funding from the State government after all these years of participation in the sector. IWSS historically has been an integral part of the provision of advice relating to programs and policies that may affect women and in particular women from NESB. The lack of acknowledgement in the form of funding is contrary to the documented evidence that IWSS has managed over the years. It gives us a very clear message that the issues for NESB women relating to legislative reform are not taken seriously and are not understood.