



SHAKTI

## Challenges in responding to family violence during a Pandemic like COVID-19

On August 7, Shakti marked 25 years of service to New Zealand's migrant and refugee communities. We are categorised as a national, specialist family violence intervention and prevention provider for Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities. Shakti Community Council Inc., has 7 member organisation and 15 centres spread across, Auckland, Wellington, Tauranga, Christchurch and Dunedin. Our services include 24/7 crisis line 0800SHAKTI, 5 culturally specialist refuges, outreach and community-based support as well as life skills development programmes as pathways to self-reliance. Our primary client stakeholders are women, children and youth.

The communities we service have additional dynamics to well-known power and control mechanisms that lies at the centrality of family violence and how and why it is perpetrated as forms of gender-based violence. In addition to existing and often discussed tools of abuse as evidenced through the Duluth Power & Control Wheel, cultural dynamics steeped in patriarchal norms that target women and girls enforce practices like dowry, forced marriage, underage marriage and so-called honour-based violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought it with additional challenges for Shakti. We conducted a survey by phone and through Survey Monkey of clients ranging from current to two years ago to check their well-being, safety and their needs during the COVID crisis, especially during Lockdown period

Ethnic women do not leave marriages until and unless their lives or the lives of their children are under threat of death. Dependency on their husbands in every way, even if they are employed, happen to be by and large the norm. When the husband turns perpetrator their safety becomes highly compromised.

### **COVID-19 highlighted some extreme vulnerabilities for migrant and refugee women (ethnic) through our discussions with them:**

- Since a large number of women do not have proficiency in English and or do not drive, their vulnerability and susceptibility to abuse and violence heightened during the time, especially during lockdown.
- Access to phones become harder to make calls for help. Further, phone calls were being monitored. Perpetrator presence during lockdown and work-from-home options resulted in greater power and control being exercised on victims and children
- Loss of jobs for some had resulted in compromising situations for the victims who found themselves catering to every demand of those who perpetrated abuse
- Alcohol consumption increased during the time and since alcohol abuse is mainly perpetrated by the male members in such cultures, women victims have had to put up with alcohol fuelled abuse and violence.

- Inability to drive resulted in some victims being unable to access medical help. Bargains were made by perpetrators that abuse should not be disclosed if they would want to be taken to the doctor or hospital.
- Inability to drive and not able to take public transport rendered victims completely at the mercy of their perpetrators

#### **SINGLE MOTHERS with MINOR CHILDREN: INABILITY TO SHOP EVEN FOR GROCERIES**

Single mothers with minor children felt greatly stressed as they had to do the shopping without taking the children out and this in turn ended up with minor children being left at home on their own. This became harder during Lockdown. *(When Shakti heard of such situations, we did the shopping for them and got them medical attention if needed)*

#### **PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS: (Government Department: MOJ -- Police, Courts, Lawyers)**

Parenting arrangements were violated or taken advantage of on the pretext of COVID: During lockdown the mothers had to compromise in enabling access through video-chat, other social media apps etc; by having to link up their children through their own personal devices and had to face the perpetrator and talk to him. Further, access to their personal devices was compromised and this technically is a breach of Protection Orders on account of the COVID-19 circumstances. In one instance, the perpetrator who worked at the airport insisted that his children be dropped off and picked up from his house, even though the mother raised concerns about him being exposed to COVID-19 as an essential worker at the airport. Hence, besides being worried about her own safety, she was also extremely anxious about her children contracting COVID19. The lawyers in this case thought she would have to go through such a process as she did not want him to go to her house.

#### **HOUSING RENT / BILL PAYMENTS (Government Department: MSD /WINZ)**

At least two clients reported bill payments had become a huge problem as they could not go the post office or lost work and providers were unwilling to give a few extra days. Additional costs in stocking up provision without any increase in benefit (or jobs being suspended without pay) resulted in a few clients struggling to pay utility bills. *(Shakti had to pay some of bills of some clients to ensure that power and phone do not get cut off)*

#### **EDUCATION OF CHILDREN (Government Department: MoE)**

Mothers with minor children and unable to afford unlimited broadband or computers for their children found themselves at a loss in being able to facilitate their children's learning. Free laptops from schools could not be sourced on time particularly for those in the safehouses. Many other women in the community faced a similar predicament.

#### **HOUSING (Government Department: MSD/Kaingra Ora)**

During the crisis Shakti's safehouse (Kainga Ora house) in Tauranga had a fire in the kitchen as a result of which we had to shift all our clients to a motel before we could source an alternate house through Salvation Army. This process was particularly challenging for Shakti, navigating the journey with Kainga Ora/MSD right in the middle of the COVID-crisis and Lockdown. We noted a lack of clear communication between the various departments within MSD.

#### **COUNSELLING (Government Department: MOH)**

Anxiety, as one can imagine, was at a height both within our client groups and some staff. Additional funding should have been offered to support counsellors who worked almost round the clock during the crisis

## **What went well:**

**We sincerely appreciate the additional emergency funding that MSD provided agencies like Shakti to tide over additional financial expenses as an outcome of COVID-19. We also appreciate MOJ and MSD providing us regular guidelines on how to operate during the crisis. MOJ deciding to pay an average sum of Facilitation fees for three months during the crisis helped retain those on part-time contracts**

## **Some suggestions on what could be done better:**

- In the event of a second wave of COVID-19 a more collaborative approach would be required to expedite potential solutions to address challenges, anticipated and un-anticipated. This means crisis organisations such as Refuges will need to establish direct links with MOJ (police and courts), MoE, Kainga Ora, MOH and MSD to facilitate faster handling of crisis situations that may arise as a result of COVID.
- Pandemic / Disaster Management Contingency Fund to be developed for both Government Departments and NGOs on an ongoing basis.
- Transport network of Taxis or the likes of Uber to be vetted and encouraged; and asked to step in support transport needs of victims at short notice or drop off provisions. Services need to have a monitoring mechanism built in.
- MoE to guide Schools and Universities and other Tertiary Education Providers to develop protocols and guidelines for non-face-to-face study as a permanent option that can be exercised in times of disaster like the Pandemic.
- NGOs to incorporate non-face-face-face ways of working (assessing risks and ensuring safety of clients and staff) into their policies and procedures which could be used in the case of Disasters and Pandemic. This should also contain Pandemic Risk Assessment Policy for staff and clients engaging in such work (*Shakti developed a COVID Risk Assessment Policy and Guidelines*).
- Utility providers (Power, Phone, Broadband, Water) could be urged to have a policy to counteract impact of delayed bill payments and allow for some leniency in terms of consumers meeting payment deadlines. This would also require some relationship building between WINZ and such providers to support beneficiaries from not being cut off in terms of power and communication.
- Essential workers (like NGOs) to be given greater access to supermarkets, without queueing.