

‘SAFER WHEN, SAFER HOW?’

HOW COMMUNITIES FEEL ABOUT RESPONDING TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

2024

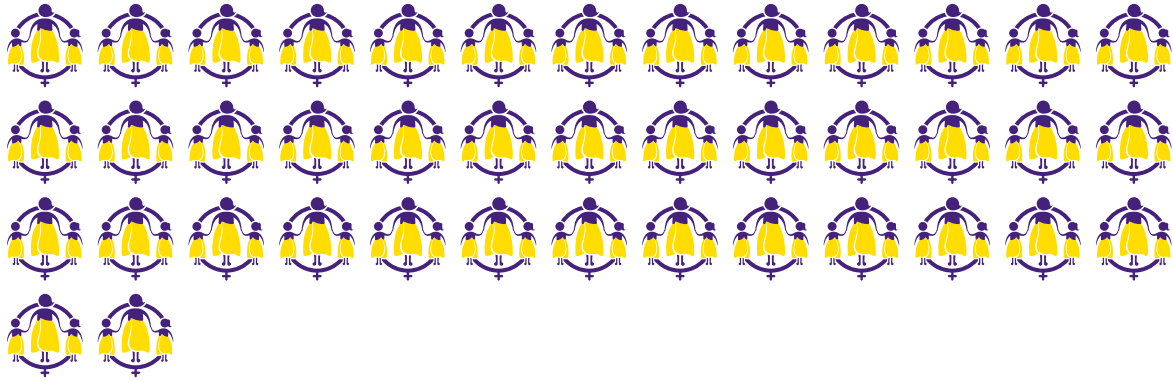


WOMEN'S REFUGE

Women's Refuge

The National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges - Ngā Whare Whakaruruhau o Aotearoa (NCIWR), has been providing support to women, children, and whānau impacted by family violence for over 50 years.

Our vision is for all women and children in Aotearoa to live free from family violence.



NCIWR comprises **41** affiliated Women's Refuges and is the largest nationwide organisation providing immediate crisis and long-term family violence specialist advocacy to women in Aotearoa.

Thank you

A huge thank you to everyone who took part in this research. Women's Refuge appreciate the input, feedback, and opinions of the community, and extend our gratitude for sharing your experiences of helping others in need. Thank you for everything you have done, and will continue to do, for victims of family violence in Aotearoa.

We would also like to acknowledge the input of the Women's Refuge Research Advisory Group, the Statistical and Data Ethics Advisor, and Te Roopū Whakawhanake Māori, we truly appreciate your knowledge and insight.



**Ki te kotahi te kākoho, ka whati
ki te kāpuia e kore e whati.**

*When we stand alone, we are vulnerable,
but together we are unbreakable.*

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Ngā Whare Whakaruruhau o Aotearoa

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Contents

Women's Refuge	2
About the study	4
Research at Refuge	5
Signalling change	5
Key messages	6
Framing family violence for research in Aotearoa	7
Why look at community responses to family violence?	8
Data collection and analysis	9
Findings	10
How comfortable are communities?	11
What makes communities likely to help?	14
What discourages communities from helping?	16
What do communities think a woman needs to feel safe?	20
Myths about safety from violence	24
Myth 1 - Women need to 'just leave' their abusive partners	26
Myth 2 - If she doesn't leave, it is only because she lacks self-esteem, confidence, or courage	27
Myth 3 - Good Mums separate if they want to keep their kids safe	28
Myth 4 - If she reaches out for help, the system will ensure she is safe	29
Myth 5 - Offering support is about ending of 'fixing' the violence	30
Myth 6 - Family violence is caused by social and psychological issues like substance use, financial stress, mental health, troubled childhoods, or a family history of violence	31
What does this mean?	32
How are communities already given support?	33
Finding the right information	41
What do people want to know more about?	42
What do these findings show?	44
References	46



About the study

This report sets out the findings from a 2024
questionnaire of 2,010 people in Aotearoa.



Research at Refuge

This research is part of a wider project on family violence that Women's Refuge is carrying out with the generous support of Contact Energy, titled **'Safer When, Safer How?'**. The project aims to build on knowledge about the risks associated with family violence, and how different people, organisations, and systems can support genuine, sustained safety for those impacted by it. In this report, the roles that communities can play in shaping what safety is possible for people impacted by violence are explored. It outlines the types of support that women get from their communities and what that support looks like.

Signalling change

A 2008 study in Aotearoa found that people generally felt communities had a role in supporting people to be violence-free.¹ A survey conducted in the same year reported similar community attitudes and beliefs. However, it also showed that some people still felt that "what happens in the home is a private issue" with one fifth of respondents agreeing that "how a man treats his partner in the privacy of his own home is his own business", in other words, none of their business.²

Respondents in the current study, conducted in 2024, overwhelmingly felt it was 'their business' – that they could, and should, actively support women's safety from a partner's abuse. Less than two percent of the community commented that they felt it was none of their business, and so would not offer support. In addition, respondents were rarely passive in their responses to the questionnaire. They expressed strong sentiments about what had already happened to people they knew, what they believed could happen, and what they wanted to happen, including what steps they could take themselves to improve the lives of those impacted by family violence.

This research focused only on violence against a woman partner because women are the primary clients of Women's Refuge. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most common form of violence Women's Refuge responds to and works with.

Women's Refuge works with women (including transgender, takatāpui, and queer women) and non-binary clients who are seeking safety from a partner of any gender.

Throughout the report, the words 'community' and 'communities' are used to refer to informal networks – meaning people who are in a position to support women who are experiencing (or have experienced) abuse from a partner. These communities may include whānau, family, friends, social contacts, acquaintances, neighbours, and individuals or groups whose lives overlap in some way with the lives of victims.

At the same time, people's willingness to help was limited by their expectations that women experiencing abuse should first help themselves, their fear that getting involved would put either the woman or themselves at greater risk, and not knowing where they could

go for help. These reasons for not offering support are consistent with those found in the 2008 study, indicating that some myths and misconceptions about family violence remain pervasive in the community. Examples of these include people's beliefs about what women can and should do when their partners abuse them, assumptions about what causes someone to use violence or to stay with an abusive partner, and beliefs about what kind of support people should have or be given.

However, despite this continued adherence to some myths and misconceptions, the community's perception that it is their role to help, and the proportion of people who have already helped a woman being abused by a partner, indicates a positive cultural shift in how they perceive their collective responsibility to actively help those most harmed by family violence. Unpacking unhelpful assumptions about family violence and safety may support this positive shift, and this is explored later in the report.

People really want to help – even though sometimes gaps in how family violence is understood get in the way.



Key messages

There were
2,010
respondents

Communities want to help victims, and many already have. **Almost half (49%)** had supported a woman experiencing abuse from a partner.

Communities are **more comfortable** being told about abuse than asking about it.

Confidence is high when communities know where to go for support.

Communities are **least comfortable** 'being the only one who knows about the abuse'.

There were many great examples of support that had been given to victims of abuse.

Māori respondents and those with experience of family violence (as a support person or victim), are **more comfortable** with, offering support to women who are being abused.

"I comforted them, talked things out and made sure they're alright and that they know I'm always here."

18-24, Man, Māori

"I listened to them, comforted them, let them know they were not alone. I looked after their children and supported them with visits to hospital, doctors, and counsellor. I was always available whenever they needed me no matter what time of day or night."

31-40, Woman, Māori

"I took them in and gave them food and comfort away from the abuse. I did not talk about it until they wanted to share. We looked for options to move out of their situation and what could happen in the future. I listened when they talked about the fears of repercussions. We looked for sanctuary and the police should she need to go further."

41-50, Woman, Pākehā

Both **emotional and practical support** were given and spoken about.

Communities want to **know more about where to go for help**, and government's response to family violence.

Community responses reflected common **myths about family violence** and victimisation.

Communities sometimes feel uncertain about how to help, especially if a woman is not able to leave the abusive relationship.

Barriers to supporting women include **fear of making things worse, and not knowing enough** about family violence.



Framing family violence for research in Aotearoa

Family violence is a common, chronic, and costly issue within Aotearoa. It violates the rights of those it is perpetrated against, and there is never any excuse for perpetrating it. Women and gender minorities are most commonly the victims of family violence, and men are most often the perpetrators, especially of severe or life-threatening kinds of abuse.³ Family violence can be defined as “a broad range of controlling behaviours, commonly of a physical, sexual and/or psychological nature, which may involve fear, intimidation and emotional deprivation”.⁴

Individuals are always responsible for their own decisions to perpetrate violence. At the same time, these decisions are also influenced by how family violence is collectively understood, thought about, and responded to. In other words, the systems that people are part of ultimately create the conditions for family violence to continue.⁵ For Māori in Aotearoa, defining family violence solely as a set of individual acts is insufficient, as the victimisation of Māori is collectively, systemically, and socially perpetuated and reinforced.⁶

Colonisation and gender inequality (which is also a byproduct of colonisation) are drivers of family violence in Aotearoa.⁷ Colonisation is not only historic, but also ongoing: it is embedded into, and fostered by, the institutions, systems, and social fabric of Aotearoa.⁸ Colonial violence and gender inequality also play out through (and in conjunction with) other kinds of oppression, like racism, ableism, and queerphobia.

When whole groups are treated as lesser, our society puts members of those groups at high risk of mistreatment by others. Perpetrators of abuse often target people with less social power than themselves as victims, because they think (often correctly) that other people will look the other way. While anyone can experience and be victimised by family violence, it has the most severe and long-lasting impacts on those whose social and structural power is already undermined by systemic inequalities that attach a lesser value to certain groups (like Māori, women, disabled people, and sexual or gender minorities).⁹

Wāhine (and tamariki) Māori can often be entrapped and harmed by both family violence and ongoing state



Colonisation and gender inequality (which is also a byproduct of colonisation) are drivers of family violence in Aotearoa.

violence; two forms of violence that each reinforce the harms of the other.¹⁰ Colonisation strips women of their traditional status and social power and undermines their protective connections to community and whenua.¹¹ It sets into motion a cycle of intergenerational disadvantage, putting wāhine and tamariki Māori at increased risk of family violence and decreasing their access to pathways to safety (and the resources that make safety possible).

In addition to recognising colonisation and gendered inequality as key drivers of family violence prevalence, Women's Refuge's understanding of family violence is informed by the concepts of coercive control¹² and social entrapment.¹³ These ultimately explain family violence as an operation of power: how perpetrators accrue it and misuse it, and how in doing so they weaponise the unequal distribution of power and privilege in households, communities, and systems more broadly.

Women's Refuge acknowledge that the use of terms 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are contested within family violence research, and that many people may not identify with these terms. However, when talking about the dynamics of family violence, these terms quickly identify who is responsible for the violence and who is suffering because of it. Obscuring who is causing harm negatively influences both how people perceive victims and their willingness to support them, which adds to the harm they already suffer. This report therefore uses the terms 'victim' and 'perpetrator' at times to distinguish who plays what role in the family violence: those victimised by it, and those perpetrating it.



“A positive first experience talking about the abuse can make the difference between safety and increased isolation and entrapment for a loved one.”¹⁷

Why look at community responses to family violence?

Wāhine who have experienced abuse from a partner and are now safer from their abusive partners often credit the support of their friends, family, whānau, and others with how they were able to survive, cope with, and become free from abuse. Others talk about what a difference that support could have made for them if it had been there when they needed it.

It is well known that women reach out for help whenever it is safe to do so. Women typically ask for, and receive, support from the people around them (their community) long before they seek support from organisations.¹⁴ Pihama et al. investigated individual and collective experiences of (lifetime) family violence for Māori in Aotearoa.¹⁵ The majority of their respondents sought support from friends (40%) and family (42%), with fewer seeking formal avenues of support. An Aotearoa population-based study by Fanslow and Robinson found that 58.3% of women only told family or friends about their partners' violence.¹⁶ However, they found that around one third of women who disclosed to an informal support felt that the person had not tried to help them.

Communities may not proactively offer support to women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) for a range of reasons. They may not view what is happening as abuse, especially if it does not align with prevailing stereotypes about IPV and about victims.¹⁸ They may feel afraid for their own safety, uncertain about what they should do, and uncomfortable raising the topic,¹⁹ especially if they have not yet been explicitly told (in full) about the violence.²⁰ When attempting to help, they may do so in unhelpful ways, like by minimising the violence, disbelieving, judging, or blaming the victim.²¹

The way that communities consider and respond to IPV shapes victims' access to support and resources, connectedness, their sense of worth and dignity, and their opportunities to navigate, cope with, and heal from the violence.²² Accordingly, there is untapped potential for communities to play a vital role in making women safer. However, little research asks communities themselves about how comfortable, confident, and ready they are to respond to victims of family violence.

This report sets out the responses gathered through a questionnaire that asked 2,010 people in Aotearoa about:

How comfortable they would be supporting a woman experiencing abuse from a partner

What would make them more or less likely to offer support

What they thought a woman experiencing violence from a partner would need

Whether they have supported someone experiencing violence from a partner, and if so, what support they provided



2,010
questionnaires
were completed by individuals over
18 years of age in April 2024

Data collection and analysis

An online questionnaire, available in both te reo Māori and English, was open for three weeks in April 2024 to individuals over the age of 18.ⁱ There was a total of 2,010 completed questionnaires, and these were completed by a representative sample of the Aotearoa New Zealand population.

The questionnaire was informed by a literature review and developed in conjunction with the NCIWR research advisory group. This group consists of Māori and Tauiwi managers and kaimahi (advocates) from each of the four Refuge regions (Northern, Central, Lower North, Southern).

An external research companyⁱⁱ was contracted to disseminate the questionnaire, to ensure a representative sample was achieved and that respondents included those who were unfamiliar with Women's Refuge. They provided the raw data and a summary of findings. The Women's Refuge Research Team, alongside a Statistical and Data Ethics Advisor, used only the raw data and analysed all responses.

The Women's Refuge Research Team prioritised and contextualised the family violence data. At the same time, the Statistical and Data Ethics Advisor prioritised the analysis and presentation of Māori respondents' data to highlight the specific contributions of Māori respondents and to support equivalent analytical and explanatory power of Māori and non-Māori data.

Analysis of the dataset as a whole offered a general snapshot of how communities across Aotearoa think about and respond to women who are experiencing abuse from a partner. A second layer of analysis then compared trends and frequencies amongst and between different groups. The statistical findings and the themes in people's comments were largely consistent across all regions, age cohorts, and employment types.

This report therefore looks principally at:

- community responses as a whole, and
- the responses of the 985 respondents who had previously supported someone being abused by a partner.

It looks secondarily at the significant distinctions between:

- the responses of Māori and non-Māori respondents, and
- the responses from the 1140 respondents with experience of family violence and those without personal experience.

Personal experience of family violence was categorised here as having previously supported someone being abused by a partner or having personal experience of family violence victimisation. Respondents with personal experience of family violence traversed most demographic fields (ethnicity, region, employment type, and age). At times additional findings related to specific gender or ethnicity are also included.

ⁱ TransNational Ltd Te Whakawhiti provided translation services

ⁱⁱ Yabble©

Findings

The responses of the 2,010 people who answered the questionnaire offered new insights into the roles communities play in supporting victims of family violence. Their responses highlight how comfortable they are to respond in a range of different ways, the circumstances in which they are most or least willing to offer their support, what gets in the way of their willingness and confidence to support someone experiencing abuse, and what they believe makes a woman safer when she is experiencing abuse from her partner.



How comfortable are communities?

Communities might find out that a woman is experiencing abuse from a partner in a variety of ways. They might see the abuse, make a guess based on what they have observed, hear about it from her or others, or ask her about it directly.

Communities were asked



Pohewatia kei te tūkinohia tō hoa e tana hoa patui. Tēnā, i ā koe e tū nei hei pou tautoko, ka hāneanea rānei koe ki te: “kōrero tētahi hoa ki a koe kei te tūkino tana hoa patui i a ia?” and “patai ki tētahi hoa mehemea e tūkinotia ana ia e tana hoa patui?”

Imagine your friend is being abused by her partner.

“How comfortable would you feel about a friend *telling* you her partner is abusing her?” and “How comfortable would you feel about *asking* a friend if her partner is abusing her?”



In general, communities reported feeling more comfortable having someone tell them about abuse (62%) than asking about it themselves, with just over half (51%) stating they felt comfortable asking someone if they were experiencing abuse.

A friend *telling* you her partner is abusing her

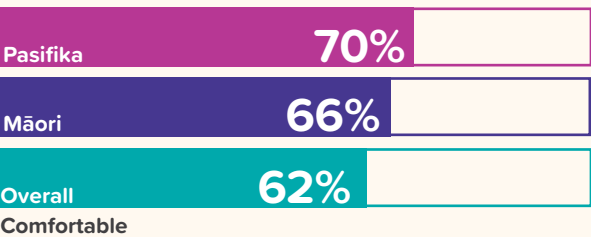


Asking a friend if her partner is abusing her

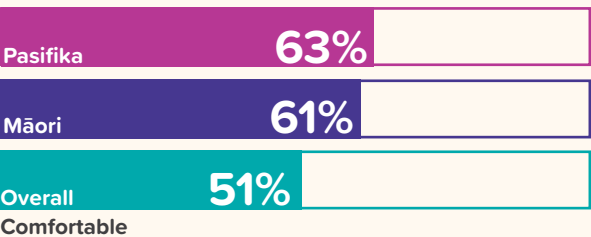


Pasifika and Māori respondents were more likely to feel comfortable with both asking about and being told about abuse.

A friend *telling* you her partner is abusing her



Asking a friend if her partner is abusing her



Some of us are more comfortable hearing about and asking about family violence than others.



Communities were asked

Pohewatia kei te tūkinohia tō hoa e tana hoa patui. Tēnā, i ā koe e tū nei hei pou tautoko, ka hāneanea rānei koe ki te:

‘Imagine your friend is being abused by her partner. As a support person, how comfortable would you feel about:’

- Helping a friend experiencing abuse get in touch with agencies or services (e.g. Police, Refuge, GP etc)
- Asking a friend experiencing abuse how she feels and what she needs
- Staying in touch with a friend when she stays with her abusive partner
- Supporting a friend when they don’t want to tell Police or family violence services
- Being the only one who knows about the abuse



From a list of scenarios, respondents said:



We would be **most comfortable** with helping someone access services and asking her how she feels and what she needs.

We would be **least comfortable** being the only one who knew about the abuse.

We would also **feel uncomfortable** supporting someone who does not want to tell Police or a family violence service and staying in touch with a friend when she stays with her abusive partner.



Some of us are **more comfortable** knowing about family violence, acting on it, and supporting victims’ own choices about their safety than others.

Helping a friend experiencing abuse get in touch with agencies or services (e.g. Police, Refuge, GP etc)

85%

Comfortable

15%

Uncomfortable

Asking a friend experiencing abuse how she feels and what she needs

78%

Comfortable

22%

Uncomfortable

Staying in touch with a friend when she stays with her abusive partner

55%

Comfortable

45%

Uncomfortable

Supporting a friend when they don’t want to tell Police or family violence services

53%

Comfortable

47%

Uncomfortable

Being the only one who knows about the abuse

35%

Comfortable

65%

Uncomfortable

People with experience of family violence (of supporting someone being abused by a partner or being abused by a partner) are much more comfortable supporting a woman who has been abused than overall respondents. Of the 2,010 respondents, 1140 have supported someone experiencing violence from a partner and/or been a victim of partner abuse themselves.

56.7%

have experience of family violence
(supporting someone being abused by a partner or being abused by a partner).



People with experience of family violence are:

- Over 10 percent more likely to feel comfortable with a friend telling them her partner is abusing her, and
- More comfortable across all scenarios of supporting someone.

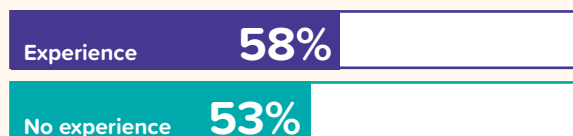
Helping a friend experiencing abuse get in touch with agencies or services (e.g. Police, Refuge, GP etc)



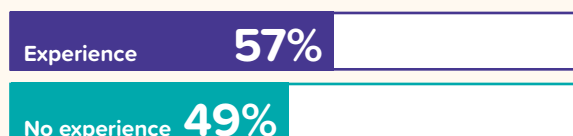
Asking a friend experiencing abuse how she feels and what she needs



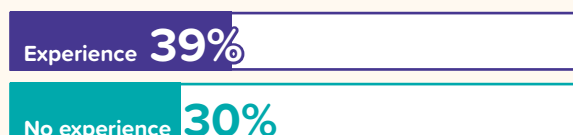
Staying in touch with a friend when she stays with her abusive partner



Supporting a friend when they don't want to tell Police or family violence services



Being the only one who knows about the abuse



Māori respondents are more comfortable with offering almost every kind of support than overall respondents.

Māori respondents are more comfortable 'staying in touch with a friend when she stays with her partner', 'Supporting a friend when they don't want to tell Police or family violence services', and 'Being the only one who knows about the abuse'.

Their relative comfort in situations that make many people uncomfortable is likely to give rise to support that honours the validity of women's decision-making about their safety, and which is beneficial for them when they are unable to separate from their abusive partners.

What makes communities likely to help?

Many people find the topic of family violence confronting. They may feel worried or feel out of their depth when responding to it – even if they really want to help. Different people have different levels of comfort, or are comfortable with different kinds of support roles, when supporting a woman who is experiencing abuse.



Communities were asked

‘Ka kaha ake pea koe ki te tautoko i tētahi wahine e tūkinohia ana e tana hoa patui mēnā:’

‘Would you be more or less likely to support a woman whose partner is abusing her if:’

- She has children
- You know what support services to go to for help
- Other people know about the abuse too
- She doesn’t want to report the abuse
- She often doesn’t answer your messages or calls
- She seems to be dealing with it okay at the moment
- She has issues with drugs or alcohol
- She hasn’t asked you for help yet
- She doesn’t seem to want to leave her partner
- You’ve helped her before and nothing has changed
- She doesn’t want me support



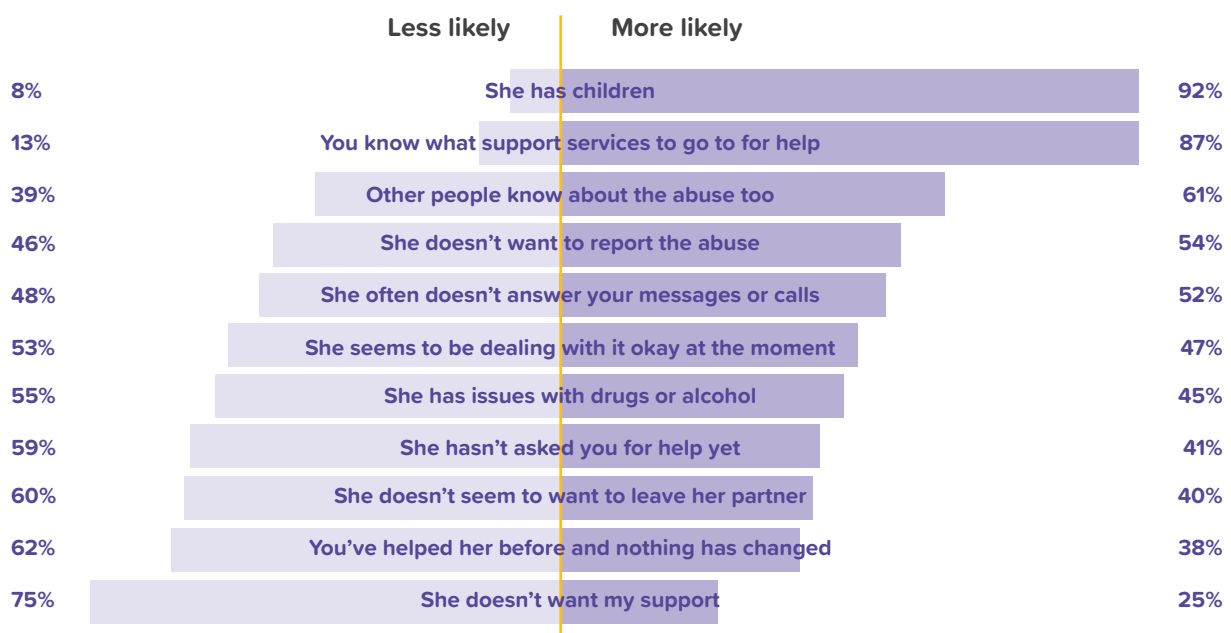
From a list of scenarios, respondents said:



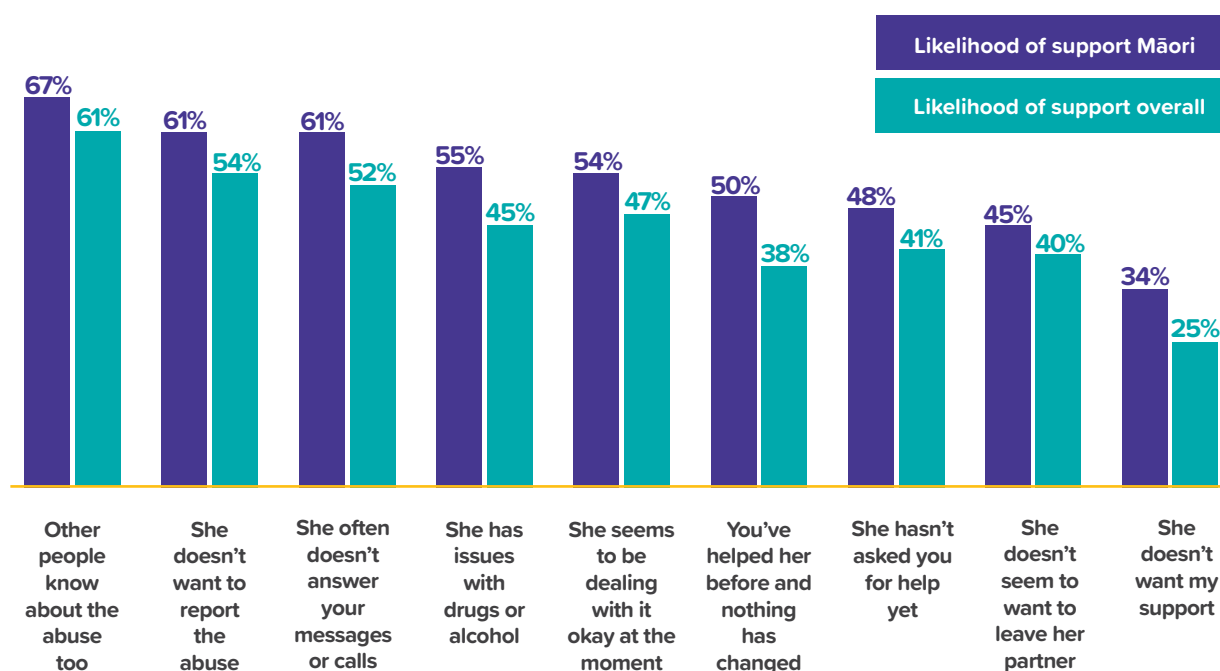
We are **most likely** to step in and offer support if the woman has children, and if we know which services to go to for help.

We are **least likely** to offer support if she does not want it, if we’ve helped before and nothing has changed, or if she hasn’t asked for help.

The graph suggests that overall, respondents are less likely to support women experiencing abuse when women do not take what they may perceive as ‘proactive’ steps toward safety (such as changing their circumstances or explicitly asking for help). Their willingness to continue offering support may be influenced by their assumptions about what a victim ‘should’ do when experiencing abuse.



Compared to the community as a whole, women, Māori and Pasifika respondents, and people with experience of family violence are more likely to say they would offer support to the woman in most of the circumstances.



Māori respondents are significantly more likely than overall respondents to say they would offer support. Compared to the community as a whole, they are more likely to say they would offer support when the woman being abused:

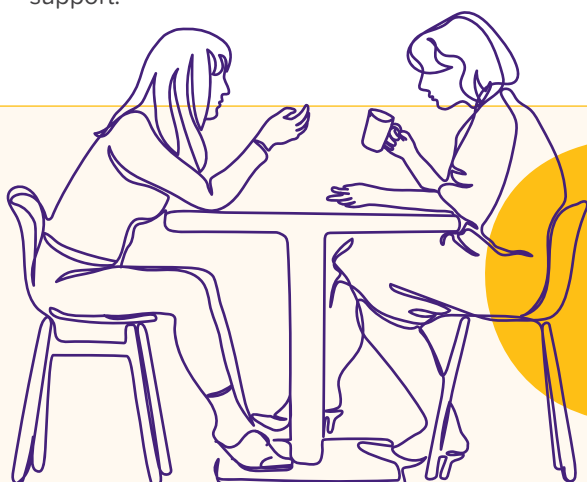
- Has had help before but nothing has changed;
- Often doesn't answer messages or phone calls;
- Has issues with drugs or alcohol; or
- Does not want support.

The likelihood of giving support in these circumstances may be particularly influential for women's safety: difficulty maintaining contact and substance use are often the result of the family violence and signal the woman's ongoing need for support.

Similarly, people with experience of family violence are also much more likely than people without experience to say they would offer support, even when the victim:

- Seems to be dealing with it okay at the moment;
- Does not want to report the abuse;
- Seems like she does not want to leave her partner; or
- Has had help before but nothing has changed.

Their willingness to help even in these situations may be testament to their knowledge of what women who are victims of family violence have to cope with, and their awareness of how a victim's partner may limit how safe and free she is to reach out for support.



Māori respondents and those with experience with family violence are both more comfortable and more likely to offer support.

What discourages communities from helping?

People typically do want to help. At the same time, wanting to help and knowing how to help may not always align, and many people worry that getting it wrong could be worse than not helping at all. Family violence can be complex – it can be difficult to live with, difficult to see or name, difficult to know about and people can feel powerless to act to prevent it.

Communities were asked

‘Mēnā ka whakaaro koe e mōhio ana koe ki tētahi tangata e tūkinohia ana e tana hoa patui, he aha ngā mea ka whakapāhunu i a koe i te tuku tautoko?’

‘If you thought that someone you know was being abused by her partner, what would discourage you from offering support?’

- **Worry about violence escalation**
 - Worry that getting involved might make things worse for her
 - Worry that it might put me or my family in danger
 - Worry that involving Police or other government agencies will make it worse for her
- **Not knowing enough**
 - Feeling out of my depth and not knowing what to say or do
 - Not having any proof of what was happening or how serious it was
 - Not knowing her well enough to get involved
 - Thinking that someone else is in a better place to support her



From a list of scenarios, respondents said:



Some of us **worry** that the family violence could get worse if we step in and try to help.

Some of us feel like **we don't know enough** about family violence, and that we wouldn't know what to say or do.

Worry about violence escalation

Worry that getting involved might make things worse for her

58%

Worry that it might put me or my family in danger

38%

Worry that involving Police or other government agencies will make it worse for her

33%

Not knowing enough

Feeling out of my depth and not knowing what to say or do

37%

Not having any proof of what was happening or how serious it was

28%

Not knowing her well enough to get involved

27%

Thinking that someone else is in a better place to support her

20%

There were some differences in what people believed would get in the way of them offering support. 'Feeling out of my depth and not knowing what to do or say' was less commonly named as a barrier for people with experience of family violence (of supporting someone being abused by a partner or being abused by a partner), and Māori respondents were less likely to say that 'not knowing her well enough to get involved' was a barrier to them offering support.

However, people with experience of family violence were significantly more likely to name 'worry that involving Police or other governmental agencies will make it worse for her' as a barrier than others were. Their perceptions of this as a barrier seem linked to their firsthand experiences of navigating the risks associated with accessing these systems, or finding these to be ineffective at making someone safer.



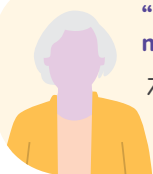
Communities were asked to think of

'Ērā he tauārai anō?

'Any other barriers?' that would discourage them from offering support, and many of them shared their ideas in a comment box.



Most of us said **nothing would get in the way or stop us from offering our support.**



"I would support her no matter what."

71 or older, Woman, Māori



"Nothing would stop me as I've been in that position myself."

25-30, Woman, Pākehā



"Nothing would discourage me. If I can't support her, I would find someone who could."

41-50, Woman, Māori



"Circumstances would apply here, but I would feel that doing nothing is not an option."

61-70, Man, Pākehā



"Nothing would discourage me because I have lived through domestic violence."

41-50, Woman, Māori



Worry and fear about not being able to help effectively are barriers for some of us.

Many people explained what worried them or stopped them from feeling able to offer support. A lot of their comments reflected the barriers listed above. Many of these focused on their “concern about inadvertently making the situation worse” and their “fear of not knowing how to help effectively”. Their comments showed that while they wanted to help, they were held back by their fear that doing so could increase the risk of the woman being hurt or killed by the abuser.



“I might worry that my involvement or instructions to ‘get out’ might get her killed.”

51-60, Woman, European



“If it put her life in danger.”

51-60, Woman, Pasifika



We can feel discouraged if a victim does not leave her abuser, the relationship, or the violent situation.

Many also reflected that they would be discouraged from supporting a victim if they felt she was ‘unwilling’ to leave her abusive partner (and get free of the violence).



“Is not willing to leave their repeated abuse from partner.”

25-30, Woman, Pākehā



“I’m worried she will not leave and continue the cycle, increasing in abuse.”

18-24, Man, European



“Her own non-commitment to taking actions.”

31-40, Man, Pākehā



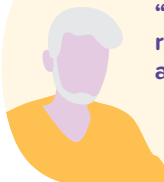
We know that **every**
situation is **different**.

Others explained that they would not want to intervene in a way that was unhelpful for a woman's individual situation, or in a way that took away her right to make decisions for herself. They explained that:



"The actions that might help her feel safer in one situation, might have the opposite effect in another."

71 or older, Man, Pākehā



"I would not want to remove her sense of agency."

51-60, Man, Pākehā

People also commented on how organisations' responses to women being abused by their partners may change what support is useful to them, and mentioned barriers like:



"Not getting the support from agencies that she requires."

61-70, Man, Pākehā



"Knowing that support staff and police are understaffed and overworked so they couldn't access help immediately."

41-50, Woman, Pākehā

Respondents' comments about what they think would discourage them show that many people are committed to helping the victim, no matter what is going on for her.

It also shows that a lot of people want to help, but do not know how to do so safely; that many people expect victims to be able to change their own circumstances (and these expectations do not account for the risks and hardships associated with family violence); and that many people are aware that to be useful, their support needs to be tailored to the individual situation, which may be made harder by the limitations of helping services.

What do communities think a woman needs to be safe?

Communities were asked

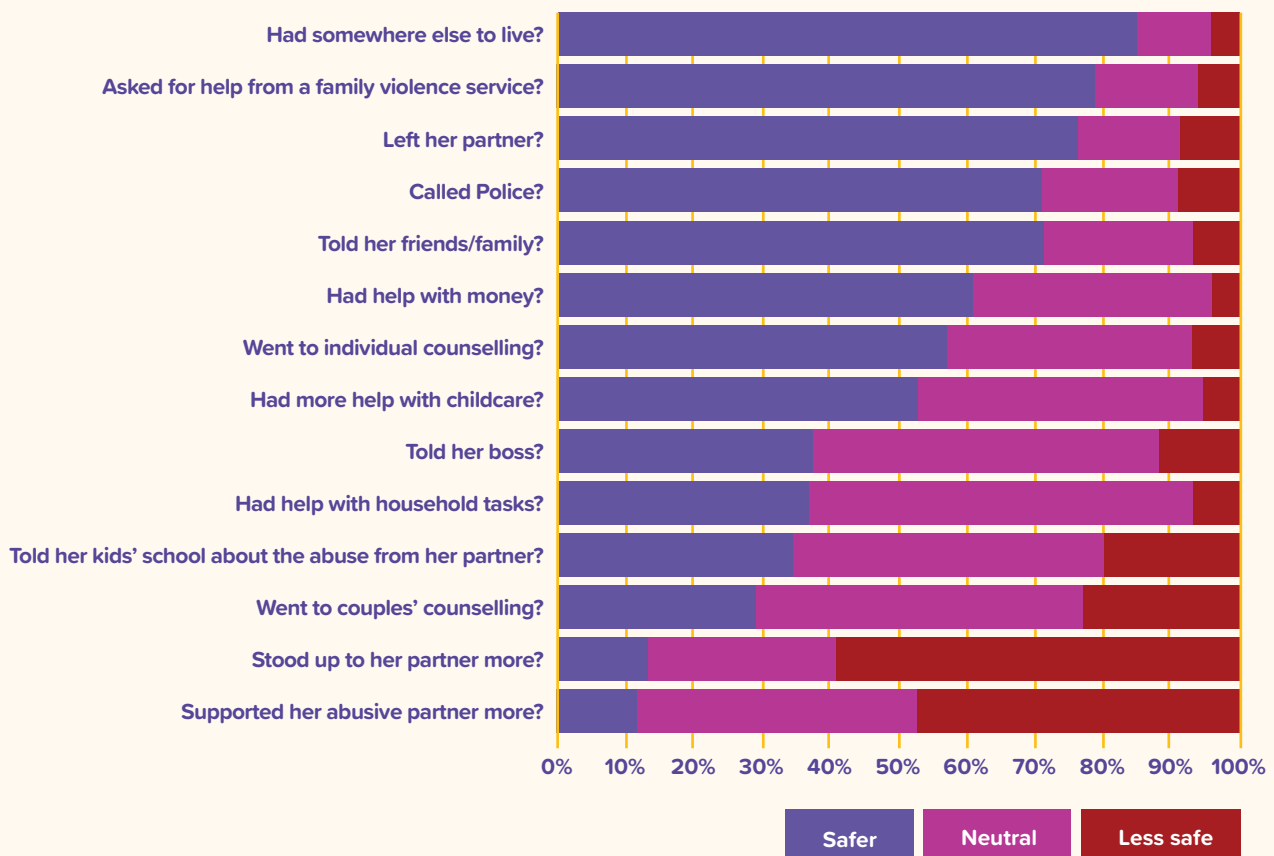
‘Mēnā kei te tūkinō te hoa patui o te wahine i a ia, ki tō whakaaro ka nui ake, ka iti iho rānei tōna haumarū mehemea:’

‘If a woman’s partner is abusing her, do you think she would be more or less safe if she:’

- Had somewhere else to live?
- Asked for help from a family violence service?
- Left her partner?
- Called Police?
- Told her friends/family?
- Had help with money?
- Went to individual counselling?
- Had more help with childcare?
- Told her boss?
- Had help with household tasks?
- Told her kids’ school about the abuse from her partner?
- Went to couples’ counselling?
- Stood up to her partner more?
- Supported her abusive partner more?



Respondents were asked to choose whether they thought a woman whose partner is abusing her would be ‘more safe’, ‘less safe’, or ‘neutral (neither safer nor less safe)’ in each of the below scenarios.





We think women would be **safer** if they had somewhere else to live, got help from a family violence service, or left their abusive partner.

We think they would be **less safe** if they stood up to their partner or supported their partner more.

Interestingly, people felt the things that would make her safest were the ones associated with separating from an abusive partner (such as finding somewhere else to live or leaving her partner). These answers align with what respondents think women experiencing abuse would need.



Communities were asked

‘Ki tō whakaaro he aha ngā matea o te wahine e tūkinotia ana e tōna hoa patui?’
‘What do you think a woman whose partner is abusing them would need?’



“A whole lot of support.”

31-40, Man, Māori/Pasifika

People’s comments overwhelmingly focused on ‘safety’ and on ‘wrap-around support’.

Women in particular focused on the need for all support to be safe. When describing the kinds of support needed (for example, accommodation or contacting services) they emphasised safety: “as safely as possible”, “a safe space”, “in a safe way”, and “only when it is safe.” Women also frequently made links between practical and material forms of support and how these could ultimately make women safer.

People answered in ways that covered both:

- What they thought a woman would need from others, and
- What they thought a woman would need to do herself to be safer.

The main themes in people’s explanations of both kinds of ‘need’ are shown next.

What support people thought a woman would need from others

Generic help and support



Somewhere to stay



Empathy, compassion, and the chance to talk



Financial assistance



Advice and guidance



Safety and strategies specific to her



Intervention for the perpetrator



Physical protection





We had lots of ideas about what a woman would need from us, like 'help and support', 'somewhere to stay', and '**empathy, compassion, and the chance to talk**'.



"Love, kindness, and unconditional acceptance."

71 or older, Woman, Māori

"Support, to know they are not alone, a safe place to either live or to have time to herself to collect her thoughts and feelings."

31-40, Woman, Māori



"A good friend who will listen to them, support them with their decisions, and offer a safe place to go."

61-70, Woman, Māori



"Care. Company. Compassion."

18-24, Man, Māori



"Understanding and support. Definitely not a lecture."

31-40, Man, European



"To be listened to and not judged. For me to be steadfastly loyal. [She] needs someone to listen to her and encourage her to be positive, and to suggest a solution for when they are ready to leave the partner."

61-70, Man, Pākehā

What people thought a woman would need to do herself to be safer

She needs to leave her partner



She needs to call the Police



She needs to involve specialist agencies



She needs to get counselling



She needs to do more/do the right thing



She needs to get more self-esteem/courage



She needs to go to court



Our number one idea was for her '**to leave** the abusive partner'.

These themes about what a woman would need focused on the choices people thought a victim 'should' make, and the actions they thought she 'should' take. For instance, many people felt a victim 'should' leave her partner and report the violence to the police, while others thought she 'should' access different agencies for support, engage in counselling, improve her self-esteem, or stand up for herself more and refuse to tolerate any more abuse.

Overall, the majority of answers demonstrated that most people have a lot of empathy for women being abused by their partners, see the perpetration of family violence as unacceptable, and want women to have the support they need to be safer.

At the same time, their answers showed how myths and misconceptions about family violence influenced people's assumptions about what would make the woman safer, what power she has to make herself safer, and what role they could play in her safety.

When people become aware that a woman is being abused and is afraid, it is a normal and understandable response to want them out of that situation and away from the person abusing them. Very few people would want someone they care about to just 'tolerate' abuse, or to stay in harm's way. However, nobody chooses to be a victim of violence, and the only person who can choose to end the violence is the person inflicting it. The links between people's assumptions about safety and common myths about family violence (and victims) are explored in the next section.



"She needs to leave the man."

31-40, Man, Pākehā

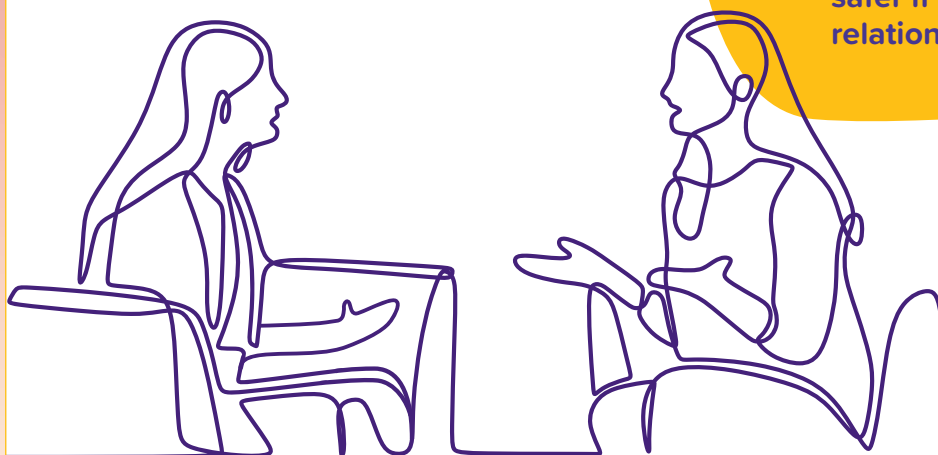


"They need the police to visit the house to assess, and possibly remove one of the adults from the situation."

61-70, Woman, Pākehā

Often, these forms of support were based on getting to a point where the woman leaves her abusive partner. Very few responses talked about:

- **What a woman would need beyond the point of leaving the relationship, or**
- **What could help her to be safer if she stayed in the relationship.**



Myths about safety from violence

Myths about family violence impact how communities offer and prioritise support, and how accessible community support is to victims when it is most needed.



Many people's thoughtful, compassionate, and well-intentioned answers simultaneously showed some adherence to family violence myths, highlighting how frequently (if subtly) these feed into what support people believe they should offer, and what outcomes they believe will be achieved through their support.

People rarely have a blueprint handy for how to support a woman whose partner is abusing her. Respondents who had supported a woman before reflected on what had worked well, and on what they wish they had known at the time. Many of their insights demonstrate how sharing information about the realities of supporting victims may help to combat misconceptions about family violence within communities, and make it easier for people to give good support.

This section focuses on **six common myths** that were identified from the comments and explanations people gave in response to the questionnaire. These myths relate to common misconceptions about:

- **Family violence** (where it comes from and what it looks like),
- **Victims** (who they are, what power is taken from them, and what it means for their lives), and
- **Safety** (what it can be, how it is reached, and who is involved in it)

Each myth is identified and then contrasted with what is known about the realities of family violence, followed by a discussion of the potential harm the myth causes. Each concludes with respondents' reflections of what they learned through (and would have liked to have known before) supporting someone.



Women become victims because of somebody else's decision to use violence against them. Nobody chooses to become a victim.

Myth 1 – Women need to ‘just leave’ their abusive partners

“[She needs to] break their relationship off.”

25-30, Man, European

“I told her to leave, and I’d help her.”

41-50, Woman, Pākehā

“[She needs] to break up straight away and get out of whoever she was being abused by.”

18-24, Man, Pākehā

This myth assumes that: leaving the violence is simple, safe, and possible, and that if a woman leaves her partner, the violence will end, and she will be safe thereafter.

Reality: A woman may be able to end the relationship, yet be unable to end the violence. Leaving an abusive partner is not always safer than staying, and is often the time when the risk of severe violence or homicide is highest.²³ Abuse can continue for years after separation.²⁴

In other words: Women who are victims of abuse by a partner constantly weigh up different options – big and small – to be as safe as possible. Leaving may only seem possible if it brings fewer or lesser risks, personal costs, and burdens than if they stayed.

When most of the risks of family violence are unknown and unseen by anyone other than the victim herself, her community may arrive at a simple solution: leave, and be safer. But to the victim, who alone sees and lives the reality of that danger, that ‘solution’ may seem neither simple nor safe. What might appear to someone looking in from outside the relationship as a woman ‘choosing to stay’ is in fact a decision based on what she knows is safest for her (and her children).

What does this mean for people supporting women: Over-focusing on leaving as the end goal may make the support that people offer less useful, and leave the people offering it frustrated when their desired outcome is not achieved.

What could this mean for women experiencing abuse: She may be unfairly judged and blamed for staying with an abusive partner, even when leaving is not a viable or safe possibility for her. Negative judgement may leave her worse off than she was before.



When I was supporting someone, I wish I’d known...



“That you can’t “just leave him”, it’s very complicated.”

41-50, Woman, Māori



“It’s complicated. People return to relationships for lots of reasons, many that are outside of their control.”

51-60, Woman, Māori



“That it’s not as easy as you think to just avoid family violence once it’s started.”

41-50, Man, Māori



“Leaving takes time. I helped her leave him. Twice.”

51-60, Man, European

Putting it into practice

Assume that women living with abuse from a partner are doing everything they can do to be as safe as possible.

Offer support without expecting them to be able to do more than they are already doing to be safe.

Myth 2 – If she doesn't leave, it is only because she lacks self-esteem, confidence, or courage

"She should improve self-confidence through counselling, self-affirmation training and so on."

31-40, Woman, Māori

"They need courage to speak out and get help."

18-24, Man, Pākehā

"They would need confidence to do whatever it takes to stop this."

31-40, Man, Pasifika

This myth assumes that: if victims work hard enough at developing self-esteem, they will not tolerate violence and will be able to leave.

Reality: Family violence can and often does erode victims' self-esteem and self-confidence, along with other kinds of personal resources (like time, energy, health, and dignity) as well as damaging their financial stability, reputations, relationships, and opportunities.²⁵ Leaving often requires all of these personal resources, not just self-esteem – and often the barriers to leaving are practical or material, not just emotional.

In other words: Victims do not cause their own victimisation. There are countless reasons why a woman may remain in a relationship with an abuser. Separating, like other actions that defy what an abuser wants, is rarely a simple or costless process, and may require more resources and support than what a victim has available to her at any given time. Victims seldom lack courage - both leaving abuse and living with abuse demand daily courage.

What does this mean for people supporting women: Focusing on building women up and validating what they are capable of is always safety-promoting. At the same time, assuming that ongoing victimisation is caused by a deficit of self-esteem or confidence overlooks the risks and harms that only exist because of the perpetrator's violence. It also underestimates women's courage. When support people do not see all of the ways that family violence makes victims' lives (and the opportunities for safety) difficult, the support they give is less likely to replenish the personal resources that are stripped back by the violence.

What could this mean for women experiencing abuse: Women may feel devalued, patronised, or judged when support people assume that self-esteem or personal growth will protect against someone else's use of violence. They may then feel reluctant to seek help again.



When I was supporting someone, I wish I'd known...



"About the need for power as the main driving force behind abuse. It's not about her, it's about him."

61-70, Man, European



"Violence is everywhere and comes in different forms, it is so dangerous that it can make you feel unwanted not worthy of yourself. It takes from everywhere."

41-50, Man, Māori



"More about the various forms [violence] can take, and the impact it has on individuals and families."

25-30, Woman, Asian

Putting it into practice

Recognise and validate what victims are coping with daily and support them in ways that boost their self-esteem and confidence.

Maintain relationships with them regardless of whether they stay or leave.

Myth 3 – Good Mums separate if they want to keep their kids safe



“She needs a plan to leave, a place to go which is safe for her and her children and pets.”

51-60, Woman, Pākehā



“She and the kids have to leave, she needs to put the kids first.”

61-70, Woman, Pākehā

This myth assumes that: the only way for Mums to act protectively for their kids is to leave and live separately. After that, her children will be safer and better off.

Reality: Even though Mums are usually the main sources of protection and care for their kids, they are often (and unfairly) blamed and judged for ‘failing to protect’ their kids from abuse.²⁶ In reality, they generally make the decisions that are safest for themselves and their children. Mothers resist abuse and protect their children every day in many unseen ways.²⁷ They do an incredible amount of mental labour to manage risks to their children, and to protect their children’s wellbeing from the impacts of violence.²⁸

In other words: Staying close to the abuser may help Mums feel like they can gauge the abuser’s risk and predict when it is escalating, so they can respond accordingly to keep the kids safe. As soon as they are separated they lose that oversight, and are less able to see a violent escalation coming. In addition, if they manage to separate safely, they may still have to share custody of the children – meaning the children will be alone with a known abuser for periods of time.²⁹ Finally, many of the resources they rely on to care for and support their kids may be in jeopardy if they leave. Starting again from scratch is difficult when resources that may be necessary to survival (like housing or money) are tied to the perpetrator.

What does this mean for people supporting women: Support people may overlook the risks of violence (to Mums and kids) and other hardships and losses associated with leaving an abuser. If they assume a Mum is at fault for her partner’s use of violence around her children, they may also overlook the ways they can help her and the children with simple acts of support.

What could this mean for women experiencing abuse: Women may face blame from multiple people for violence that is not her fault. They may even face unwanted or unhelpful intervention that puts them and their children at greater risk, making them feel like they need to conceal the abuse from others to avoid the situation getting worse. Alternatively, they may be urged to leave, and later find that their children are much less safe when alone with the abuser.



When I was supporting someone, I wish I’d known...



“That there are many, many factors involved in leaving. Like childcare and pet care. Finances. Financial illiteracy like not knowing how to use a bank account. There are also strong emotional ties pulling them back.”

31-40, Woman, Pasifika



“That domestic violence is a long-term problem, so I will need to provide long-term attention and support to both the victim and the children to ensure that they receive the necessary help and care.”

31-40, Man, Māori



“The family court in New Zealand is very expensive when family violence is involved. The fact that a mother is trying to protect her children but costs thousands to do this is wrong. It costs so much to get a lawyer to go to court to protect your children!!”

41-50, Woman, European

Putting it into practice

Name the problem as the abuser’s use of violence, not the victim’s responses to violence.

See all the ways they are actively protecting their kids.

Help Mums in practical ways based on whatever they need most right now.

Myth 4 – If she reaches out for help, the system will ensure she is safe



“She would need encouragement to speak up and tell the relevant authorities.”

41-50, Man, Pākehā



“[She needs] police supervision in case of escalation or retribution.”

51-61, Man, Other ethnicity

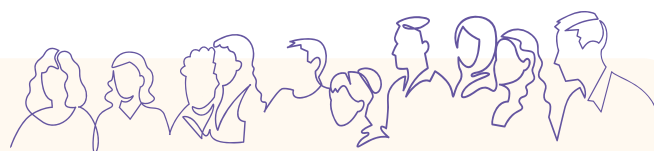
This myth assumes that: Every woman who reports abuse will be met with a supportive and non-judgemental response that will guarantee their safety and wellbeing.

Reality: Women may be harmed by both abusive partners and unhelpful, dismissive, harmful, or unsafe responses from people, organisations, and systems.³⁰

In other words: No organisation or system is guaranteed to be able to stop their abusive partner from continuing their violence. Some may actively put women at greater risk, or harm them more. In contrast, some organisations may help a lot, but may not have all of the knowledge, skills, power, and resources to bring about sustained safety in victims' lives. Finally, they may set into motion processes that end up taking more of women's time and energy without any real benefit.³¹ Whether women decide to report and seek help or not, these decisions are valid and purposeful.

What does this mean for people supporting women: When support hinges on women taking specific actions (like reporting the abuse or seeking intervention), that support may feel less safe, less accessible, and less helpful to them. Accessing formal support can be instrumental in improving things for women, as long as it is what they want and what they choose.

What could this mean for women experiencing abuse: As well as coping with violence, women may feel they have to manage others' expectations of them, justify their decisions not to take this advice, or feel they cannot be truthful with the people supporting them.



When I was supporting someone, I wish I'd known...



“How much or how little the police can do.”

51-60, Woman, Pākehā



“How difficult the court makes it to prove control and coercion and manipulation.”

51-60, Woman, Māori



“When kids are involved, the mother is less likely to want to get help from police etc because OT [Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children] get involved then.”

41-50, Woman, Māori/Pākehā



“I wish that the police could be more than a last resort in a critical time. It shouldn't need to reach a severe incident for authority to step in.”

51-60, Woman, Pākehā



“Calling the police is great in theory - but if the person is on your doorstep already threatening you or your family or has threatened your friend - well they still have to get there in time. It can be a super complicated situation.”

41-50, Woman, Māori

Putting it into practice

Assume that victims are the experts in what is safest or riskiest for them and that they have the most insight into the way the perpetrator uses violence.

Validate what they are doing and what they have already done to stay as safe as they possibly can.

Myth 5 – Offering support is about ending or ‘fixing’ the violence



“I helped before and she didn’t leave, I felt hopeless.”

31-40, Woman, Pākehā



“I want to know how I can help someone that is not prepared to leave.”

71 or older, Woman, European

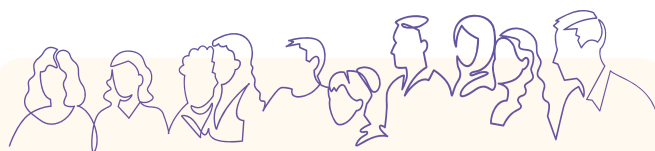
This myth assumes that: there is only one way to effectively support a woman and help her to become safer – by making sure she gets out of the situation.

Reality: When a woman is supported by her community, she does not expect them to provide a magic fix for the violence. Equally, she cannot ‘fix’ the problem of family violence herself, no matter how much people expect that of her. Only the abusive partner (or occasionally the intense efforts of the justice system) can stop the violence and eliminate the risks to a victim. Meanwhile, she is never ‘doing nothing’ about it – every woman experiencing violence carries a significant, invisible workload made up of actions, tasks, strategies, and efforts that keep her safer than she would otherwise be.

In other words: Support will look different for different people, but support that contributes to unburdening women and making their lives easier is both meaningful and worthwhile. This still has a positive impact on their safety. Women’s lives are made easier when they have help with day to day tasks, such as with childcare, groceries and finances; when they have company and someone who listens; and when others take on some of the safety-related tasks like looking up information, understanding what the options are, and helping them access what they need.³²

What does this mean for people supporting women: The support people offer does not need to entail ‘fixing’ the violence, and it does not need to be limited to periods of crisis. It can be as simple as finding a way to relieve her of everyday burdens and make her life easier.

What could this mean for women experiencing abuse: If people only offer support in ways that are conditional on her leaving or the violence ending, women might miss out on the kinds of safety that is established through the kinds of support that are quiet, subtle, and unremarkable.



When I was supporting someone, I wish I’d known...



“To find out what specific help the victim wants, such as legal support, counselling, shelter, etc., and what expectations and plans they have for the future.”

31-40, Man, Māori



“Ahakoa te iti he nui te aroha (small gestures of love mean a huge amount).”

18-24, Woman, Māori



“The extent to which it can affect people afterwards. Meaning they may not be on a linear path to healing but it can be a back and forth.”

18-24, woman, Māori/Pasifika



“Do not try to fix it!”

51-60, Man, Māori

Putting it into practice

Respect her choices about what to do (or not do) to protect herself.

Acknowledge that she may not have the power to ensure complete safety from the perpetrator.

Unburden her by helping out with all the responsibilities she is juggling.

Myth 6 – Family violence is caused by social and psychological issues like substance use, financial stress, mental health, troubled childhoods, or a family history of violence



“Anger management issues, stress, alcohol and drugs, mental health issues.”

41-50, Woman, Pākehā



“A broad range of matters, from financial stress, mental health, family history, drug or alcohol issues etc.”

51-61, Man, Pākehā

This myth assumes that: family violence happens because of perpetrators' personal struggles, such as unemployment, substance use, mental illness, financial stress, adversity in childhood, or exposure to violence.

Reality: Most people facing those same struggles do not use violence against their partners. Many people living in Aotearoa experience substance use issues, financial stress, mental health issues, behavioural issues, and adversity in childhood without ever choosing to perpetrate any kind of abuse.³³ Attributing someone's violence to their own experiences of hardship or of being harmed overlooks their choices to use violence and their potential to choose differently and behave differently.

In other words: While things like alcohol and drug use may amplify the perpetrator's violence and the corresponding extent of risk to their victim, these issues are seldom the underlying cause of abusive behaviour.³⁴ Most episodes of family violence do not involve substance use, and most people experiencing mental health challenges or financial stress never use violence. Nothing can justify the choice to use violence; it is always possible to make a different choice.

What does this mean for people supporting women: When people inadvertently excuse the violence misattributing it to issues like stress or hardship, they may embolden the abusive partner to continue the abuse. Meanwhile, they may overlook the pattern of harm that the woman and her children suffer because of the perpetrator's abuse.

What could this mean for women experiencing abuse: People tend to help with what they see as the 'main' issue. When perpetrators' circumstances or difficulties are seen as the primary problem, people's efforts to help may be unsafe for the woman, or may even add to the perpetrator's own justifications for using violence. Talking to people about it and asking for help may be a lot less safe for her as a result.



When I was supporting someone, I wish I'd known...



“Is it just me, or when we think of family violence do we conjure a fairly specific image in our minds? A woman, probably poor, with children, unable to leave her abusive partner, possibly drugs and alcohol are involved, when actually, it could be literally anyone. I think a lot of us experience it when we are younger, and just chalk it up to poor choices in men and inexperience - but who do these young men grow up to become?”

31-40, Woman, European



“It's not just a certain demographic, it's throughout society. I was surprised when I found that out as it was not obvious to me at the time.”

41-50, Man, Pākehā



“Rich people and poor people can be abusive. It can affect anyone.”

31-40, Woman, Māori



“It can be from the least expected person.”

61-70, Woman, Pākehā



“More about getting help for him and someone he would respect enough to admit issues and take advice on board. There was more help for the female side which kept her safe but wasn't fixing the underlying problems.”

51-60, Woman, Pākehā

Putting it into practice

Avoid holding her responsible for the perpetrator's violence or for the impacts of violence on her life.

Hold the perpetrator responsible for their decisions to use violence against their partner and give no weight to their excuses for using violence.

What does this mean?

These findings suggest that when people do not fully understand how women's options are restricted by their abusive partners, or how seeking help or seeking safety may increase the risk of the perpetrator's violence, they are more likely to hold unrealistic expectations of victims: like that they should leave, report the violence, and simply 'choose safety'.

The premise that safety is there for the taking is a comforting one. It is also usually false. For women in these situations, the 'right' choices are determined by what options are available to them.³⁵

They usually know (or will find out) what the benefits of each option might be, and how each option might put them at risk, sometimes catastrophically. In other words, they are likely already making the choices that are safest to them, and may see a much more nuanced, accurate, and complex picture of risk than those who are outside of the violence.

When people expect a victim to make a big and tangible change (like leaving her abusive partner), she has to choose between two risky options. She could choose to try and fulfil their expectations, knowing that it could increase the risk of further violence or hardship, or she could do what she knows is safest and most viable for herself at that time – and risk people judging her for it and withdrawing their support.

Because most support people focus mainly on what they see as the ultimate solution (i.e. 'leaving for good'), most of the help and support they offer revolves around that massive (and often risky) life change. As a result, they tend to overlook the wide range of other ways they could help. The value of people simply offering support, rather than attempting to solve the problem of family violence entirely, is emphasised by what respondents with experience of family violence (of supporting someone being abused by a partner or being abused by a partner) felt would make a woman safer.

For instance, people with experience of violence were much less likely than people without experience to think

that leaving or calling the police would make the woman safer, and much more likely to think she would be safer if she had 'help with money' or 'help with household tasks'. Their perceptions of safety are presumably informed by their experience of trying to stay safe, or of helping someone else stay safe, and the value of practical, non-prescriptive kinds of support in making safety possible.

By combating the myths and misconceptions that drive these expectations of victims, communities can prevent women feeling like they have to choose between what is safest for them and what is expected of them. The best kind of support is driven by what the victim needs most and what the support person is most able to give. A lot of the time that support will not (by itself) bring about an immediate end to the risk of family violence, but it can restore some of what a woman has lost as a result of the violence.

The next section showcases what respondents who have previously supported someone experiencing violence from a partner did to help them. They detail their experiences, and the different kinds of emotional, practical, and tangible support they gave to victims of abuse.

It can be helpful to ask **“how will she be safer and better off (from her perspective) because of this support?”**

- What does she need most right now?
- What support am I able to offer?
- What areas of her life are made difficult because of the abuse?
- How might this support help her or put her at more risk?

Women need good options – you can't make good choices unless you have good options.



How are communities already giving support?





How are communities already giving support?

Those who had already helped a woman experiencing violence were asked

‘He aha ngā pēheatanga i tautoko ai koe i ā ia?’
‘In what way(s) did you support them?’



This was an open-ended question, and respondents, especially women, gave heartwarming examples that covered a huge variety of thoughtful, proactive, and caring support.

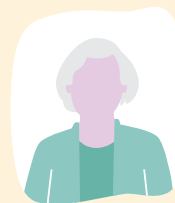
They discussed emotional, practical, and tangible support that would make an immediate positive difference to a woman no matter what she chose to do.



We gave **holistic** wrap-around support.

For example, they:

- “Offered them a place to stay”,
- “Helped with childcare” and “household chores”,
- “Offered to go with them to support services”,
- “Helped them get into counselling”,
- “Took them to doctor’s appointments”,
- “Physically helped them move”.



“Stayed with her. Helped her financially. Made sure she was aware of supporting agencies. Looked after her tamariki while she went to appointments.”

71 or older, Woman, Māori



“A listening ear and a safe place to stay.”

41-50, Woman, Māori



We gave **emotional support** like being there for them, moral support, validation, empathy, and encouragement.



“Was there for them to talk to and they stayed with me for a few nights. Talked about my own experiences and offered advice when asked.”

41-50, Woman, Pākehā



“No judgment calls. Just being there for them when needed.”

61-70, Woman, Māori/Pākehā



We helped with **housing** or somewhere safe to stay in lots of different ways.

Responses showed kindness, generosity and flexibility. For example, they:

- “I took her and the kids in”,
- “took them into my home”,
- “gave them a roof for as long as needed”,
- “got them in touch with family to stay with”,
- “paid for them to stay somewhere safe away from him”,
- “found her somewhere to go”.



“Helped her and her baby get away by moving [them] to her hometown, away from him.”

31-40, Woman, Māori



“Her husband knew where the refuge houses were, so we found her a place outside the system.”

61-70, Woman, Māori



“Helping them escape to another town and providing furniture and other items for the home, as well as being a listening ear and helping look after the children when required.”

61-70, Woman, Pākehā



We also helped with **money and finances** where we could...

They also researched the availability of services, discussed these with victims, and connected them with a wide range, including lawyers, refuges, counselling, medical providers, and community centres.

Others offered financial assistance, like covering the victim's accommodation costs, paying for food and shelter, or offering financial resources to help them live separately.



...and **connected women to services** who could help.



We often **took on tasks** to help make things easier for victims.

Respondents covered many ways they made decisions alongside women and then took on the role of making phone calls, filling in forms, looking up information, making appointments, waiting with them at appointments, and generally relieving some of the difficulty of living with violence. Common terms they used included, "accompanied them", "called for them", "companionship", and doing tasks "on their behalf".



"I called the police and Women's Refuge *for them* and got information."

41-50, Man, Māori



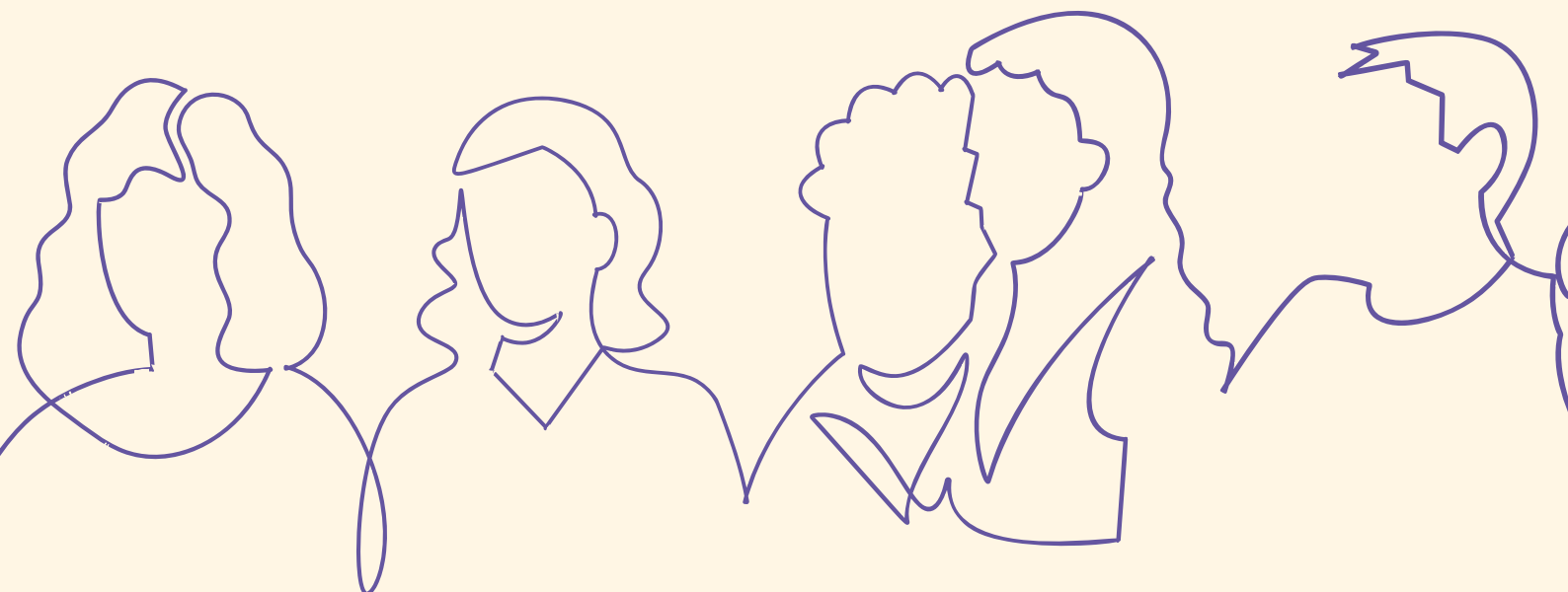
"I *took her* to Women's Refuge."

51-60, Man, Māori



"*Together* looked into options of what to do in the future."

41-50, Woman, Pākehā





We talked about **safety plans** with victims and were actively part of these plans.

Some respondents also supported victims to develop safety plans that covered both their physical safety and their wellbeing.

These involved discussing strategies to stay safe, such as:

- “Checking in with her regularly,”
- “Providing a place for her children to go to if partner showed up”,
- Identifying potential risks (such as “if her partner gets in”), and
- “Creating a plan of action” in case of emergency.



“Developed a safety plan until she could be moved out of her house.”

51-60, Woman, Māori



“Held their passport for them so they could leave.”

31-40, Woman, Māori



“I was able to organise and help pay for things so they could leave their partner without having evidence of what we were planning.”

31-40, Woman, Māori



“I listened, found out information and passed it on, arranged counselling, and helped a woman and her children create an escape plan and escape safely.”

71 or older, Woman, Pākehā





**We supported victims
who were Mums and their
children too.**

For women with children, specific support was given that prioritised the children's wellbeing and took into consideration the ways that mothers' lives are impacted by violence. Communities offered emotional support to both Mums and their children, helped with childcare so Mum was free to focus on legal issues or appointments, helped financially to provide for the children's needs, found out about the impacts on children and what support they might need, and gave the children somewhere to stay.



"Stayed with her. Helped her financially. Made sure she was aware of supporting agencies. Looked after her tamariki while she went to appointments."

*71 or older, Woman, Māori/
Pākehā*



"Practical support for the kids and money."

51-60, Man, Māori



"Provided care for the tamariki and helped with changing schools."

51-60, Woman, Māori



"I offered to look after her kids when she needed to go to court or counselling. I picked them up from school, fed them, and made sure they were safe."

51-60, Woman, European



"Helped with childcare, food, and school trips."

31-40, Woman, Pasifika



"I organised many play dates for our children as a safe space."

31-40, Woman, Pākehā



**We responded
differently because of
the children.**



"Because of the kids I just gave as much support as possible."

25-30, Man, Māori



"I was more aware of the kids, so we didn't speak about the domestic violence when they were around."

41-50, Woman, Māori



"I acted faster because of the kids."

25-30, Woman, Pākehā



**We know our tāne play
a really important role in
combating family violence.**

Many men shared their experiences and detailed the steps they took to support women who were being abused. Most of these steps were positive and safety-promoting. Many detailed their active role in helping victims report the violence, and emphasised reporting to police or taking legal action. They frequently described advising the woman “to call the police” or “calling emergency services”, and “helping her report it”, “reporting the abuse”, or “taking her to the police station”.

They also listed the ways they offered emotional and practical support, gave advice, connected women to further support, and walked alongside them in the process. Their examples illustrate the importance of men’s roles in enabling safety for women who are victims of family violence, and the potential for men to assist with a diverse range of needs that victims are left with in the wake of family violence.



**“Helped them realise it was
not their fault.”**

61-70, Man, Māori



**“I was there to listen. I helped
to care for their children. I
gave some financial support.”**

41-50, Man, Māori



**“Kept their secret while I
looked for places to support
them through the process of
leaving.”**

18-24, Man, Pākehā



**“I took them in and then
referred them to counselling.
From there she got the help
she needed.”**

41-50, Man, Māori



**“I listened and validated
their feelings and
experiences, assuring them
that it is not their fault. I
offered to find professional
services to help them
recover and understand
their mental wellbeing, and
I respected their decisions
and autonomy.”**

25-30, Man, Asian



**“Being available for support,
open discussions, and
providing options.”**

*51-60, Man, Māori/Pākehā/
Pasifika*



**“Provided them with
somewhere to stay and went
to their appointments as
support.”**

51-60, Man, Māori/Pākehā



Sometimes we **worked together as a community** to provide support.

Many respondents discussed working with others including whānau, extended family, friends, neighbours, workplaces, wider communities, and other informal networks, to help create safety for women and children.



“Spoke amongst family to see if we can come up with a plan.”

25-30, Man, Māori



“Listening for escalation next door, then advising 2 other neighbours further down when to be on alert (one of whom was a woman, had a more open relationship with the victim). Calling police if [there were] major escalations or if we could hear it had got physical. Check-ins when her partner wasn’t present. My back door was always left unlocked if she needed to bolt in an emergency. Making sure they knew they had support nearby. We tried to be a support team - one of the neighbours took her to community legal services.”

31-40, Man, European



“Got the agencies involved. To help protect my friend and her kids. Informed close family members of what was happening. We all came together to help her and make her, and her kids feel safe and loved.”

41-50, Woman, Pasifika



“Encouraged community members to participate in anti-domestic violence activities, raised social awareness and attention to the problem of domestic violence, and created a good atmosphere to support victims of domestic violence.”

31-40, Man, Māori



“It was emotional abuse, which I am familiar with from experience. I was supporting them online along with a lot of other people so between us we had all the necessary information.”

51-60, Woman, Pākehā



A few of us talked about **supporting the abuser** to get help too.

Very few spoke about intervening with the perpetrator. Those who did mentioned getting the perpetrator to temporarily leave the property or house they shared with victims. Others described telling the perpetrator to get help or, more rarely, helping the abusive partner to get support for their behaviour and choices.



“I called in immediate family to keep a watchful eye on the family two or three times a day. We got help for abusive partner who volunteered to move out of family home and with counselling was able to move back after a year.”

71 or older, Woman, Pākehā



“I had a good talk with her partner and encouraged him to meet someone who specialised in that matter.”

41-50, Man, Asian

Finding the right information



We are comfortable supporting someone to get in touch with helping services, and we are more likely to help a victim if we know which services to go to for help. But we couldn't all **find information** when we needed it.

Those who had supported a woman before were asked

‘I taea e koe te rapu pārongo pai hei tautoko i a ia?’

‘Were you able to find good information about how to support them?’



83% of us tried to find information about how to help.

Most people could find some information; **75% of people** said they were either fully or partially able to find good information.

Only 27% were able to find all the information they needed to support someone.

People aged 18-30 were most likely to say they could find all the information they needed.

The impacts of family violence spill over into so many areas of victims' lives. Many people went out of their way to find specific information to help victims. They researched options, learnt what was available, understood how to engage with services, figured out how to navigate tricky systems, and found specific ways of making victims' day to day lives easier and safer.



“I found information on how to terminate a lease because she was experiencing abuse and needed to leave.”

31-40, Woman, Māori



“I learnt about and applied for various benefits and assistance offered by the government or community to reduce financial stress.”

31-40, Man, Māori



“I researched legal options - researched how to file a protection order, researched how to report family violence.”

51-60, Woman, Pākehā



“I helped her look into legal issues related to custody.”

71 or older, Woman, Pākehā

What do people want to know more about?

Communities were asked



‘He aha tētahi āhuatanga o te patu tūkino whānau e hiahia ana koe ki te mōhio ki te roanga atu?’

‘What’s one thing about family violence that you’d like to know more about?’



We want to understand what family violence can look like and what the long-lasting impacts are.

Respondents expressed a desire to know more about various aspects of family violence. Many people wanted to understand more about the different types of abuse and their prevalence, including “invisible” forms of abuse and “more about control and manipulation” as “there is more to family violence than just physical abuse”. Some mentioned wanting to know more about indicators of violence, saying “I wish I knew what signs to look for.”

They were interested in understanding the reasons people use family violence, and “the long-term impacts” of family violence on women and children, specifically “how bad it can get”, and “the toll it takes on peoples’ lives and lives of their kids”.



“Understanding the uniqueness and complexity of domestic violence in different cultures and communities.”

31-40, Man, Māori



We want to be able to support victims in the best way possible.

They wanted information on “how to best respond to family violence” and “support victims”, why it is “hard to get people to see it”, and how to “understand why victims may return to their abuser”. They wanted to understand the unseen challenges faced by women trying to get safer from violence, such as how victims may find themselves having to “lie about the situation while they are in it” and why “society says one thing and then finds ways to punish women leaving abusive relationships, rather than support them”.



“Signs and how to help them while keeping them and me safe.”

31-40, Woman, Pākehā



We would like more information about **where to go for help** and **how we can help someone**.

They were interested in “where to get help” especially “how to keep families safe when there are very few options” in certain areas, “where the local family violence services are” and “what they do”, the “resources available for victims and perpetrators”, and “different prevention strategies” and “the effectiveness of intervention strategies”.



“Agencies that can provide more help.”

41-50, Man, Māori



We know family violence is a problem, and we want to know **what the government is doing** about it.

The last significant area of interest related to “what the government is doing about family violence”, “what the government approach is moving forward”, their “policies to counter it” or “to help eliminate it” and what they were planning to do in order to “better support victims”. Others wanted to understand “the ongoing funding for family violence” and any initiatives relating to “government funding for counselling and psychotherapy” as well as their plans for other services designed to address the long-term and “costly impacts of family violence”.

“He mea nui ki te mōhio ki te āhuatanga o te patu tūkinu whānau, me te pēhea e ārahi ana i te mate, te wero, me te āhua o te whakapāho a te kāwanatanga ki te kawake i te ture. He āhuatanga e āhua ana i ngā momo tūkinu whānau e pā ana ki te kaha, te whakapae, te whakapōrearea, me ērā atu. He mea nui hoki ki te whakamahi i ngā rongoā, ngā tohutohu, me ngā rauemi tautoko mō ngā whānau e pā ana ki te pāngia e te tūkinu. Ko te whakaaro nui, ko te whakapai me te whakatinana i ngā tikanga e hāngai ana ki te tiakitanga me te tautoko i ngā whānau e pāngia ana e te tūkinu.

(It is important to understand the circumstances of family violence, how to address the problem, the challenges, and how the government will apply the law. It is a problem that highlights different forms of family abuse relating to violence, suspicions and other ills. It is important to find solutions, guidance and resources to help families affected by abuse. The biggest concern is improvement.)”



18-24, Woman, Māori

What do
these
findings
show?



Communities are willing to help, and many are already helping victims live safe and thriving lives. Their willingness to help, and their conviction that it is their role to do so, suggests a reassuring and positive shift away from the outdated belief that family violence is a “private matter”.

People’s responses suggest they often feel relatively comfortable with the prospect of responding to women experiencing abuse from a partner. This is especially true for Māori respondents, who are more comfortable with the prospect of supporting women experiencing abuse from a partner than others, and who are also less likely to be put off by any of the circumstances that commonly deter others from feeling able or willing to help.

The comments and explanations respondents gave throughout the questionnaire display hundreds of examples of support that they, as the family, friends, whānau, and informal networks of victims, have offered in the past. The range and types of support featured in these examples demonstrate some understanding of the complexities of family violence, and the real and sustainable safety that they fostered for the women around them.

Emotional support was discussed most frequently; however, many people also detailed ways they had practically supported someone by easing the burdens that they were carrying, which then positively contributed to how safe they were able to be at that time. Even when people identified barriers to how they felt practically able to support someone, they still felt a duty to help in whatever way they could – a phenomenon also reflected in similar recent studies.³⁶

However, people’s willingness to help (and their confidence to do so) was variable, rather than uniform – it was influenced by the circumstances of the victim’s situation. People’s answers show that it is common to hold back from offering support out of fear, worry about making things worse, feeling unsure what to say or do, or believing there is little point if she has been supported before and the violence continued. Each of these has been identified as common deterrants to offering support within other studies into informal help-giving too.³⁷

Some of the deterrants to offering support relate to myths about family violence that still exist in our society. Understanding more about family violence, and in particular the skill and effort victims continually put into managing risk in the ways that work best for them, can increase both people’s willingness to help and their capacity to help in ways that women find genuinely helpful.³⁸



Based on the responses in this questionnaire, increasing people’s understanding of family violence could mean challenging the idea that leaving is always safer or always viable; bringing the invisible workload and constant risk management that victims do into the national narrative, and encouraging people to look at who is choosing to use violence, and what that means for the options that a victim is left with.

As these myths and misconceptions lose some of their traction, the scope of support that people think to offer victims may expand far beyond the point of extreme risk or separation, and the onus on victims to somehow show their commitment to safety (e.g. by leaving) may fade. For instance, effective support can (as people with experience of family violence point out) be as simple as helping with meals, or with money, or with childcare. It could be as simple as taking the victim out for a while to have some fun, get some mental space, and replenish her wairua. Each of these things can counter some of the family violence-related losses and harms women face, and can top up the resources they have available to cope. Importantly, this kind of support remains helpful regardless of whether women stay with their abusive partners, or not, or whether the abuse escalates to a crisis point, or not.

Finally, as research has found in the past,³⁹ communities are both more likely to offer support and more comfortable giving it when they know where to go for help. Communities in this study asked for more information about both family violence, and government responses to family violence. Below are links to information about:

Women’s Refuge

Womens Refuge (<https://womensrefuge.org.nz/>)

Get help – Live chat with an advocate (<https://womensrefuge.org.nz/get-help/>)

Find your local Refuge (<https://womensrefuge.org.nz/contact-us/find-your-local-refuge/>)

How to help a loved one experiencing abuse (<https://womensrefuge.org.nz/get-help/>)

The Government’s long-term plan to combat family violence

Te Aorerekura (<https://tepunaaoonui.govt.nz/assets/National-strategy/Finals-translations-alt-formats/Te-Aorerekura-Action-plan.pdf>)

The New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse

Online library of family violence information (<https://nzfvc.org.nz/>)

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- ³⁹ As at 32.



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