

Part 1:

REFUGE AND 'RISK'



WOMEN'S REFUGE

Part 1: Refuge and 'Risk'

'Risk' and 'safety' are the bread-and-butter of Refuge advocacy.

Seeing risk and responding to it helps us to create a bridge from family violence to safety and wellbeing.

Risk is...

The *potential* for harm (or worse harm) because of family violence

Refuge's response offers...

The *potential* for safety... if we make the most of the opportunity to help

This resource is part one of a series all about risk, designed for (and with) Refuge kaimahi. It aims to support kaimahi in their practice talking about risk with clients, responding to risk, and advocating for safety. It can be used as a standalone resource or as part of training.

Part one is all about the evolution of risk and safety work at Refuge, and how we understand risk (and where it comes from) right now.

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Kō wai tātou

Who are we?

Safety, in the eyes of kaimahi at the beginning of the Refuge Movement, was about much more than hiding wāhine from perpetrators...

it was about liberating wāhine and their tamariki.

The Refuge Movement began as a battle - wāhine collectively fighting for the rights of other wāhine, such as our right to:

Safety and dignity

Freedom from harm and further marginalisation

Resources

Make choices and participate fully

They say...

"Our women knew we stood with them, no matter what."

"We didn't always get it right but we did the very best that we could."

"We didn't have a risk assessment then. Just a lot of heart."



He aha ai kei konei tātou?

Why are we here?



Today, we still serve the same purpose. Family violence risk was why Women's Refuge came into being, and remains the reason for its existence.

Women (and their kids) come to Refuge when they are at risk because of family violence. For some, the violence becomes lethal. Every year in Aotearoa, the lives of wāhine and tamariki are taken by perpetrators of family violence.

Why ask about risk?

We ask wāhine about risks so that we can act on that information to make them safer.

A 'risk summary' is our template for what we ask and what we write down. It shows us:

- How we can keep our clients safe from more or worse violence
- How we can advocate for them in a way that restores their rights, freedoms, and resources



The evolution of Refuge risk assessment

How we think about risk, write down information about risk, and respond to risk is always changing - and it's up to all of us to make sure the ways we change it work the best for the wāhine we serve.

We can see three stages in how Refuge's approach to risk has evolved to where it is now.

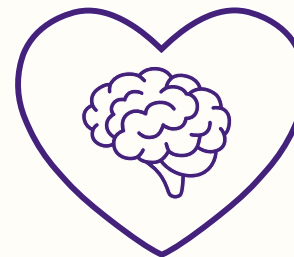


The heart: when Refuge began

- Keeping wāhine and their children safe through staunch advocacy, aroha, and manaakitanga
- Standing with them as equals
- Often risky - for both wāhine and for kaimahi

The rise of clinical, data-led intervention

- Narrow focus on risk - severity/lethality only
- A numbers game - the more 'yes' answers, the higher the risk
- Misses out kaimahi knowledge



The new way: joining what we know and who we are

- Looks at much wider range of abuse tactics, not just the extreme ones
- Paints a picture of the kinds of abuse we know can lead to homicide
- Relies on specialist knowledge of kaimahi and the essence of Refuge mahi

We use our specialist understanding of family violence to understand risk

How we think always influences how we act. Naming what we know about family violence and what it means for risk then becomes the lens we look through when we're listening to women talk about family violence.

For example, we know that...

Risk never 'just happens' - wāhine are actively put at risk by perpetrators

Family violence doesn't happen by accident. It's perpetrated on purpose, and violates the rights, mana, and tapu of a wāhine or tamaiti.

Wāhine and tamariki come to Refuge because a perpetrator put them at risk, not because they did anything wrong.

We have to **name the risk** (the family violence) and **where it comes from** (the perpetrator).

They are also put at risk by inequality and unhelpful systems

Wāhine with the least power are often treated the worst and are the least resourced by systems and services. Every interaction a victim has with a service either reduces risk or adds to it.

Safety comes from having good options, not making good choices

Wāhine and their tamariki are more at risk when the people around them 'don't get it' and blame or judge them for 'not making good choices'. But most of the options they have to choose from have a downside, and could put them at risk in other ways.

Often, they end up trading one kind of risk for another kind of risk.

When we understand family violence and power, we *can* 'get it', and we can see why safety isn't about making good choices, but about having good options - and sometimes there are no good options to choose from.

We also know that...

- ▶ Separating isn't always safer
- ▶ Almost all our clients are at critical risk
- ▶ Sharing information about risk with others can be helpful or very harmful

and we know that when they come in, the risk is probably the worst it's ever been

Victims call Police or Refuge when all the things they are already doing alone no longer work well enough for them to feel safe.

And that's usually not all they're dealing with.

Many of the ways they have to manage risk or manage the impacts of past violence come with some kind of cost or take some kind of toll. These can mean risks to their

- Energy
- Physical health
- Finances
- Housing stability
- Mental health
- Relationships
- Day-to-day lives and opportunities



Understanding the risks wāhine come in with

If we think about a woman whose partner has used violence against her for years, perhaps by shoving her, keeping her up all night, accusing her of cheating all the time, putting holes in the wall of their home, taking her money, telling everyone she's an alcoholic and a bad Mum, and stopping her from seeing her friends.

What kinds of burdens might she be carrying when she decides to reach out for help?



Refuge looks for these burdens and addresses them as 'risks', while other agencies might see them as simply 'needs' that sit alongside the family violence, but aren't related to it.

He aha
ngā tūraru
ka titiro
mātau mōu?
What are the risks
we look for?



Filling in risk forms should show us both the risks **'of'** violence and the risks **'from'** violence

RISKS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

Risks to the lives and physical wellbeing of wāhine and tamariki are our top priority, and that begins with how we see risk information.

Our first look at that risk information focuses on what the 'right now' risks are, and whether the perpetrator's actions indicate a threat to life or physical safety.

RISKS FROM FAMILY VIOLENCE

However, this is not our ONLY priority. Even when physically safe, violence causes massive losses to victims' time, health, wairua, capacity, money, relationships, and even their reputations. If we only look at the likelihood of a client being hurt or killed, we might not see all the extra burdens she carries because of the family violence.

The risks that stick around usually come from the impacts of past violence. Some examples might be:

Forced to take out debt

YES NO

RISK *May struggle to stay on top of the debt for a long time, which puts her access to money for essential living costs at risk*

Smashed property and belongings

YES NO

RISK *Lost tenancy and her future access to any suitable housing is put at risk*

RISKS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

All the ways that the perpetrator may use any kind of family violence against the victim (and her children) in the future.

RISKS FROM FAMILY VIOLENCE

All the ways that the consequences of violence in the past and present may adversely impact victims' (and their children's) wellbeing, stability, resources, and possibilities in life.

BUT WHAT IF WE MIGHT ALSO BE ANOTHER SOURCE OF RISK?

Even the act of engaging with a service is another burden on clients - one made necessary because of the perpetrator. Not all service experiences are good - some clients will have encountered racist, oppressive, judgemental, unhelpful, or unsafe responses from services. Even reaching out to Refuge could feel risky to them.

They might worry about:

- The risk of others (like kids' schools) finding out
- The risk that the abuse will get worse
- The risk that they will feel judged or shamed
- The risk of their information being shared with others
- The risk that engaging will mean intervention they don't want
- The risk that Refuge will notify child protection
- The risk that they'll lose even more control over their lives
- The risk that their challenges will be seen as their fault
- The risk of having to do things they don't feel capable of
- The risk of being asked to leave their sons for a safehouse

These risks have a flow-on effect on what safety is possible: if a woman is struggling to cope with what has already happened and has been let down by helping systems, she has fewer ways to get safer.

Wāhine engage because in that moment, they believe the benefits outweigh the risks.

We have an opportunity to prove them right by earning their trust, being on their side, giving them options they wouldn't otherwise have, and taking some of the burden off them.

The risk of strangulation happening again and stopping her breathing

The risk that she has a brain injury that needs treatment

Have they ever choked or strangled you?

YES NO

Have they tracked where you are and what you're doing?

Has this stalking gotten worse in the last month?

Have they forced or pressured you to take out debt?

Have they threatened to have your kids taken away?

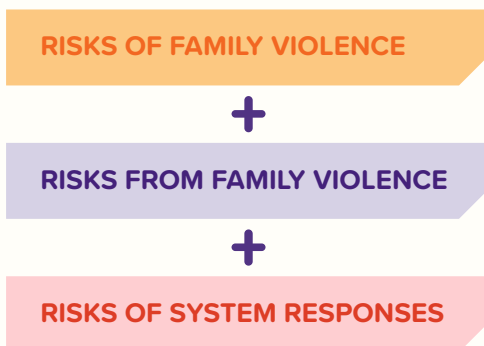
The risk of financial hardship and not being able to buy essentials

The risk that the abuse will continue to escalate and end in homicide

The risk that kids will be taken away from their safe parent

Putting it all together

Each of these layers of risk (risks OF violence, risks FROM violence, and system risks) adds another layer onto women's experiences of family violence, risk, and coping.



The risk that she will feel judged by us and disengage out of fear that her involvement with Refuge will count against her in a care of children hearing

The risk that she has a brain injury that needs treatment

The risk of financial hardship and not being able to buy essentials

The risk that the abuse will continue to get worse and end in homicide

	YES	NO
Have they ever choked or strangled you?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have they tracked where you are and what you're doing?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has this stalking gotten worse in the last month?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have they forced or pressured you to take out debt?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have they threatened to have your kids taken away?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The risk that kids will be taken away from their safe parents

The risk of her being hurt or killed

The risk that IRD will impose more debt for non-repayment

The risk that we close the file after assuming it's her choice not to engage

Separating 'risk' from 'safety'

Refuge uses risk forms to track the spread of abuse and harm across the lives of wāhine and tamariki so we can do something about it.

Information about how our client stays as safe as possible, what strategies she uses, what support she accesses, and what people around her (including us) are doing to keep her safe should be recorded somewhere else - not on the risk forms.

Risk forms are only about what the perpetrator has done or is doing - not our client's actions, her other problems, or any actions other people take on her behalf.

RISK IS:

- About the perpetrator's actions only - both harm they caused in the past, and harm they might still cause in the future
- Captured in the **risk forms**

SAFETY IS:

- What the wāhine does, we do, or others do in response to the risk from the perpetrator
- Captured in **safety plans or case plans** (not the risk form)



Risk information means nothing unless we act on it

What now?

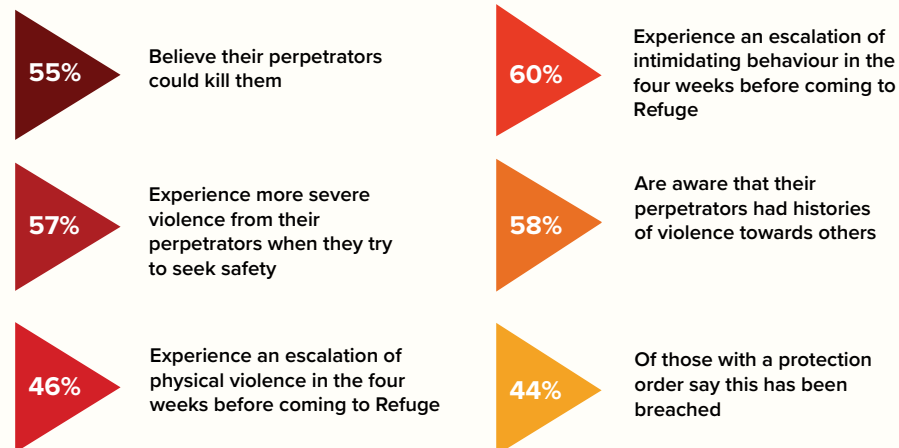
Recording information about risk, by itself, has never made anyone safer. But how we use it can.



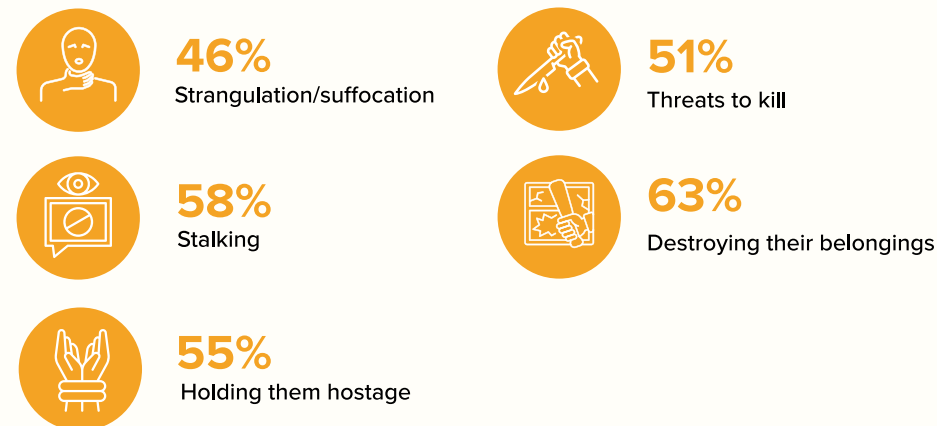
We honour the rights, tapu, mana, dignity, and liberty of all wāhine and tamariki - and we take care of them

Finally, we can learn about risk from our national risk data. It reminds us that...

Most clients come into Refuge at critical risk



The abuse against them often signals lethality



Risk extends to kids as well as their Mums

Of clients who were mothers, the abuse also involved:



Assaulting them while they were pregnant



Harming them in front of their children



Taking or threatening to take their children

These numbers show us that children are not separate from the violence - they are at risk when their Mums are at risk.

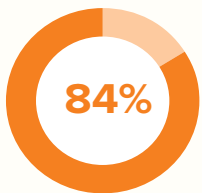


79%

Of victims' children were made to feel afraid

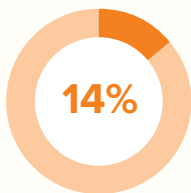


Many of the risks to their physical and emotional wellbeing might not be seen as 'family violence' by others



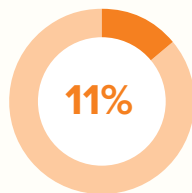
84%

Were constantly accused of things



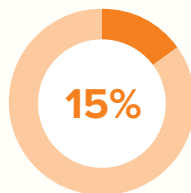
14%

Were forced to get pregnant or continue/end a pregnancy



11%

Were forced to use substances



15%

Forced to stop using contraception



Were made to take out debt they didn't want



Were stopped from seeing or having relationships with whānau and friends

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That's the end of part one! We've covered what risk is, how we approach it, and how risk is about *potential* - the potential for a safe outcome or the potential for an unsafe one.

We've also covered how risk relates to the essence of who we are as Women's Refuge, different types of family violence risk, the risks to clients when they first come into service, and the reasons behind Refuge's new approach to using risk information.

In part two of the series ('Asking about Risk') we look at how to start conversations about risk with clients. Part two gives examples and reflections from Refuge kaimahi on asking about risk in ways that feel safe for clients and kick-starting our advocacy for them.





WOMEN'S REFUGE

Made with the generous support of Contact Energy.

For more information about the risk and safety project, contact Natalie Thorburn (Natalie@refuge.org.nz) or Cleo Arathoon (Cleo@refuge.org.nz).

womensrefuge.org.nz

National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges
Ngā Whare Whakaruruhau o Aotearoa
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