

Part 2:

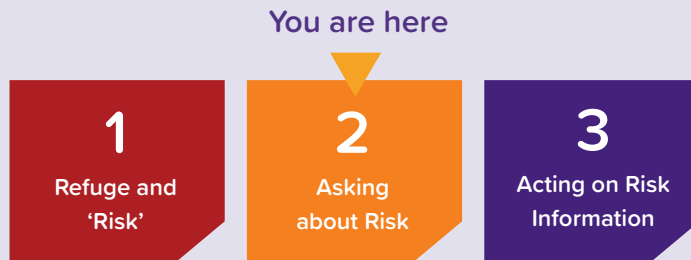
ASKING ABOUT RISK



WOMEN'S REFUGE

Risk Kōrero with Wāhine

In the last booklet (part one) we looked at the evolution of how risk is assessed and managed, how Refuge approaches risk, and the risks that wāhine come in with. This booklet (part two) is all about how we ask about, listen for, and record family violence risk.



These booklets are part of a series all about risk, designed with (and for) Refuge kaimahi. They aim to support kaimahi in their practice when thinking about, talking about, and acting on risk to make wāhine safer.

Every Refuge asks about risk and records information about how clients are at risk because of family violence. The risk forms used to capture this information stay on each client's file, and guide what we do to support their safety.

We find out about risk by talking to wāhine about their experiences of violence and the shape of violence in their lives.

Every time we talk to clients, we understand more about the risks they are facing - so it is important to set up those conversations well, nurture them, and take care of our clients both through those conversations and through what we write down from them.



Who are we capturing family violence risk for?

We honour women's rights, **tapu, mana, dignity, and liberty** when:

- We welcome whatever she decides to share about her experiences
- We can be trusted to hear and respond to her in mana-enhancing ways
- We do not take more power away from her
- We record how her right to safety has been violated by the perpetrator and what this means for her
- We only use the information she shares with us to make her life better and safer

We honour these in all the conversations we have with her about violence and risk, including:



On a crisis call



In the car driving to an appointment



A purposeful conversation about risk



While making kai



During a phone or face-to-face catch-up

Accessing Refuge can feel risky

When wāhine come into Refuge for the first time, they may not know what to expect. Even making contact with Refuge could feel difficult, distressing, or risky for them. They do not yet have any reason to trust us. Their experiences with other agencies may have taught them to be cautious.

While we are thinking about the risks to their safety from the family violence, they are constantly assessing the risks of engaging with Refuge, and making decisions about what to share with us based on what they feel is safe or not. They might be assessing:

- The risk of feeling unsafe and feeling unable to speak
- The risk of being asked questions they can't answer
- The risk of someone judging them harshly or blaming them
- The risk of written notes making them look bad
- The risk they will run out of time and be late to pick up the kids
- The risk that Refuge will notify child protection
- The risk that they'll lose even more control over their lives
- The risk that kaimahi won't 'get it' and they'll feel worse
- The risk of having to do things they don't feel capable of
- The risk that we won't be able to do anything to help them

Safety work begins as soon as we start talking about risk

Kōrero about risk is what gives us the bulk of information we need to figure out how to help. It doesn't need to feel like an interrogation or a test.

Understanding family violence risk begins with really hearing women's stories - stories of violence, worry, fear, burden, shame, impact, meaning, and significance.

Taking an active role in how she tells her story, and responding with care, skills, and knowledge about family violence, can make that kōrero safer, help her feel safer, and build her confidence in Refuge to be a safe and supportive service for her.

A 'safe' approach to family violence risk has three parts:



1. Asking about risk - when and how?

We can ask ourselves:



And then start by focusing on...

Manaakitanga

Does she need kai first? Is she afraid, tired, or emotionally overwhelmed? Is it late, or has it been a big day?

Are we in a private enough space, without other people around? Can I entertain her kids without them hearing stories of violence that aren't appropriate for little ears?

Is it comfortable, warm and friendly, with water, snacks, and soft chairs?

Whanaungatanga

Do I know who my client is, her whakapapa, where she comes from, and who she feels connected to?

Does she know enough about who I am to feel comfortable with me? Is she unsure if I'm going to react in ways she doesn't want?

Is she relaxed, at ease, and talking about it with me because she wants to?

"I focus my attention just on her, my phone is away, I don't look at the clock, or talk to anyone else at the same time."

"Make it comfortable for that. Pick your timing, so it's not when everything is already too much for her. Get the tissues and the kai, you know, the basic stuff to make it an okay process."

Find the flow (that works for her)

Many clients find it stressful or overwhelming to be asked a long list of personal or distressing questions one after another.

If she has the time and energy (and privacy), it may be better to simply kōrero about her experiences in a more natural and comfortable way - while still covering the same range of risk questions.

Wāhine accessing Refuge have usually had someone else pulling the strings in their lives, taking away their right to make choices for themselves.

Paying attention to whatever the client seems most comfortable with (e.g. length of time, way of talking, word choice, openness) and matching it can go a long way in restoring her power over her own life.

"Doing the risk paperwork was the most traumatic part of getting help from Refuge, because it's not just remembering things that did happen, it's all of the other questions - that stuff didn't happen to me but once someone asked those questions, those scenarios all played in my brain anyway."

We can start by asking:

“Instead of reading out any questions, I just ask ‘what brings you in today?’ and then ask ‘how bad did it get?’ or ‘what was the worst part?’”

“I take cues from her body language – if she doesn’t like eye contact, I modify what I am doing so she feels comfortable.”



We can also ask:

What did you notice first?

What happened next?

What changed?

Did that happen a lot?

How come?

What was that like?

What was going on for you right then?

Family violence may not be the only unjust or oppressive experience they’ve had - wāhine come up against racist, prejudiced systems and may distrust services.

It’s up to us to earn their trust, make them feel as comfortable and safe as possible, and accept that they might not want to share everything right away, or ever.

Asking about risk

We can follow the client’s lead by...

- Making sure the space is comfortable and private
- Offering food and drink and showing her where the bathrooms are
- Explaining the purpose of the session and asking if now is a good time
- Hearing what she needs most right now
- Reminding her that she can take a break or stop altogether at any time

2. Listening for risk by hearing women’s stories

Gentle kōrero about what brings her to Refuge, how the abuse started, and how it changed or got worse over time puts her more in control of the conversation.

Hearing and responding to the stories they share is about more than just ‘finding out the facts’ - our responses to them in that moment can change how safe they feel.

A client’s story of violence is:

- Based on how she sees and understands things right now - it may be told and re-told differently as the way she sees and understands it changes
- Never complete - what she shares is based on what feels safe, what feels welcome, and what feels expected of her
- A deeply personal thing - it must be freely shared, respected, and cared for

We listen out for both:

The perpetrator’s purposeful, destructive, and evolving use of violence and coercion (even when this can’t be easily seen by others)

The victim’s equally purposeful, adaptive, and self-protective responses to the violence (even when these can’t be easily seen by others)



What tells us more about risk?

Hit with an open fist? YES NO

What can this tell us?

This tells us that...
The perpetrator hit her once or more, sometime in her life.

This tells us that...
"I'd know the slap was coming because it always does then. It's like a warning, like back down or you'll be in for it. It's like the first thing he does if I've talked to anyone he doesn't like for whatever reason."
The perpetrator often hit her as a way of isolating her by controlling who she could talk to and physically hurting her if she did not comply.

Destroyed her phone? YES NO

What can this tell us?

This tells us that...
The perpetrator somehow broke her cell phone.

This tells us that...
"It would be the ultimate punishment, you know, like a parent sending a child to their room, he'd take it, and then he'd smash it, all because I'd dared to call my sister. So it would be like punishing me by making me totally alone, no safety net, no calling for help."
The perpetrator set rules about who she could talk to, and controlled her use of her phone. When she resisted his 'rules', he aggressively destroyed her only means of calling for help or support.

Threatened to take the children? YES NO

What can this tell us?

This tells us that...
The perpetrator threatened in some way to remove the children from her.

This tells us that...
"His go-to thing to scare me was to tell me every secret of mine that he'd ever known about and tell me what a bad Mum I'll look like in court. He'd go on and on about how crazy and unstable and dangerous they'd think I was, how he'd convince them I should never be around the kids again."
The perpetrator anticipated what she might do to try to get safer from him, and sabotaged it by convincing her that he could lie and manipulate the Court into taking her children away from her.



Telling her story might feel risky

She might not have told anyone about parts of it before. She may find it hard to put words to what she's been through, because words can make it seem more real or make it seem like something she has to act on.

Her mind may have protected her from fear or terror by avoiding thinking about it or by constantly remembering it. She may worry about how her mind and body will respond if she thinks about it again now in front of someone.

Other people may have responded badly to what she has shared with them, and she may anticipate that now too.

It also has huge potential to make her feel safer

Welcoming her story helps to counter stress, shame, and confusion that it carries when untold in her mind.

Affirming her responses to violence can help her make sense of her experience in a positive way. This includes her responses such as thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that she or others might judge harshly if they don't see them as being responses to violence.

Encouraging the telling of stories beyond the point of terror can help her brain and body to remember feelings of safety, not just risk. For example, we could ask how she got to safety after being strangled, rather than stopping her story at the point of being strangled.

Listening for risk

We can follow the client's lead by...

- Asking open questions
- Encouraging the telling of stories of violence to carry on until the point that they reached safety
- Normalising and validating her responses to the violence
- Naming the feelings back to her, not just the events
- Encouraging taking breaks
- Making sure she feels believed and heard with our words, our body language, and our actions

3. Recording risk

What now?

Risk information means nothing unless we record it and act on it

Refuge records clients' stories in a way that best supports safety

Filling in a risk document and adding it to a client's file creates evidence of a perpetrator's pattern of violence and shows how it puts the client at risk.

It's important to write down even the seemingly obvious or 'common' behaviours that wāhine talk about, like the day-to-day acts of control, coercion, manipulation, or isolation.

Often those details haven't been talked about anywhere else, and aren't recorded anywhere else. Having them written down can help a client later on.

A good summary of family violence risk includes:

A. An overview of the perpetrator's violence and any recent changes to it

+

B. The main risk the victim is facing right now

+

C. A checklist of the types of violence used

+

D. A list of any 'red flags' (indicators of future lethality/severe violence)

+

E. Links between the kinds of violence used and the kinds of risk, hardships, or challenges for the victim now

Refuge uses the text boxes in the risk form to outline a client's story of the perpetrator's violence. This helps to keep her lived experience at the centre of the mahi.

Example

A.

Summarise her experiences of the perpetrator's violence, and how it has changed in the last month

She and [the perpetrator] have been in a relationship for seven years. Looking back she sees that he was always controlling, including by choosing her friends and making the rules of the house. He controls the money and a few years ago she found out about debt he ran up in her name. When she raised it, he hit her for the first time. Since then, he belittles her constantly and tells her often she's a "bad Mum" when she finds ways to keep their son entertained and away from his abuse. Two weeks ago, his violence escalated and he strangled her until she lost consciousness and then acted like "nothing ever happened." As soon as she stops feeling scared, he finds some reason to get upset and hurt her, and he told her he'll kill her if she leaves him.

B.

Identify the main concern for her safety right now

Example

The most immediate risk is him finding her and physically assaulting or killing her, which he threatened to do if she left. He doesn't know where she is right now but could find out as soon as she starts going out again. He has also tracked her phone in the past and could do so again.

Identifying as many of the abuse tactics as possible can carry a lot of weight when communicating the risks to others.

C.

Example

	YES	NO
Have they ever choked or strangled her?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have they tracked where she is and what she's 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 her to take out debt?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have they threatened to have her kids taken away?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have they damaged her property?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Have they hit/punched her in the head?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have they harmed her in front of children?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Have they destroyed her phone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Did the abuse get worse when she took steps to stop it/get safer?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

D.

Name any red flags for future severe violence or homicide

Example

- Strangulation
- Stalking
- Threats to kill
- Coercive control
- Recent separation
- Escalation of his abuse - the violence was more severe every time she tried to get away
- Threatening children

Our understanding of violence helps us see past social myths about abuse (including who is responsible for it) to identify who did what to whom.

It also means we can make the links between the perpetrator's use of violence and the challenges our client is left with.

E.

Link the abuse tactics to possible risks she faces now

Example

Because of [the perpetrator]'s abuse there are also risks of:

- Financial hardship - she's struggling to buy the essentials for her son
- A possible untreated brain injury
- Her son being taken from his safe parent
- Her feeling isolated and in more danger because he destroyed her phone
- The perpetrator continuing to track/stalk her
- Unmanageable debt that he made her take out, which will get in the way of her paying rent in the future

Have we made it clear to others where the risk is coming from?



Good recording practices:

Check it with her

Showing her what you've written down and checking whether its accurate shows respect, transparency, and good faith. It also reduces the risk of misunderstandings becoming part of the written record of her life.

Don't confuse 'risk' with 'safety'

Refuge risk forms are **only** about the perpetrator's behaviour.

They are not about our client's actions, other challenges she is facing, or any actions other people do on her behalf.

We keep information about 'risk' separate from information about what a client is doing, or what we're doing for her. If we include other information about her in the risk forms, the violence and what it has caused in her life may get lost or obscured.

Risk is:

- About the perpetrator's abusive behaviour in the past, and potential abusive behaviour in the future
- Captured in **risk forms** and often also in casenotes and Empowerment Star notes

Safety is:

- About what the wahine does, we do, or others do in response to the risk from the perpetrator
- Captured in **safety plans** or **case/goal plans** as well as casenotes, Empowerment Star notes, and initial assessments

Update the risk information

Risk changes quickly, so recording a quick update every couple of months (or when there's a big change in her circumstances) is vital. That doesn't mean filling in all the forms again.

These updates only need to capture:

- Recent violence (any abuse perpetrated since the forms were last filled out)
- New or changing 'triggers' for the perpetrator's violence
- Changes to her circumstances or her safety
- Her main safety concerns and the main risks you can see

Recording risk

We can follow the client's lead by...

- Filling in the forms and uploading them to her file
- Explaining how it will be stored safely and kept private
- Sharing what is written down with her
- Making a concrete plan to follow up and update what's recorded about the risk
- Checking it reflects her experiences
- Discussing with her how she would like that information to be used (at the start and anytime it is requested)
- Changing anything she feels is inaccurate

What can we do with that information?

Kaimahi have used risk information to get safer outcomes for clients, such as:

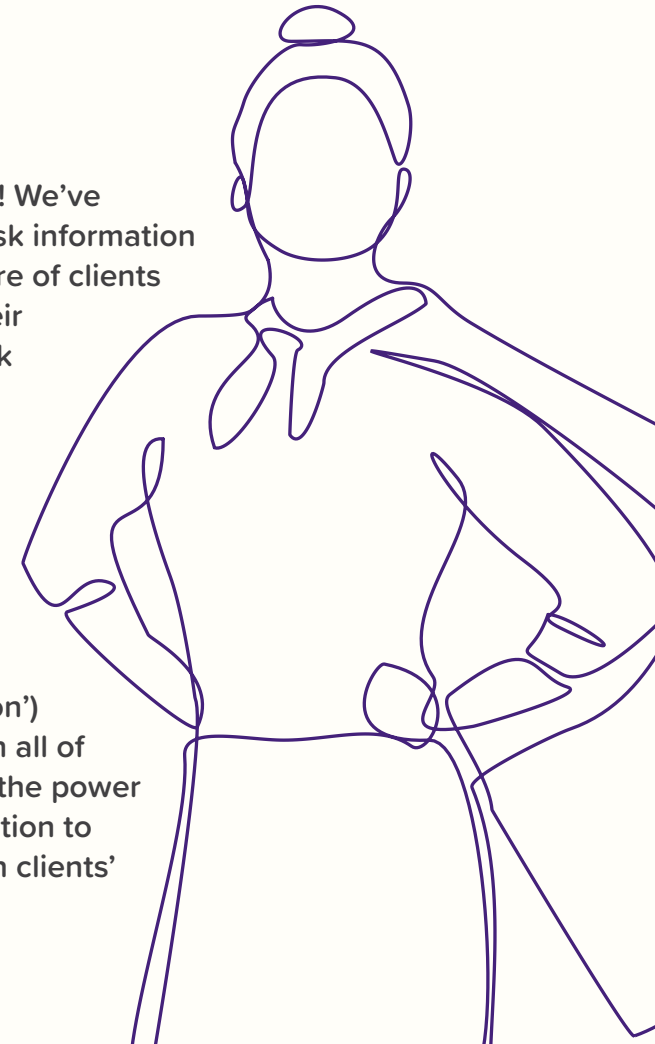
- ✓ A Judge acknowledging a perpetrator's risk to his children and prohibiting any unsupervised contact
- ✓ A university giving special consideration to a student who would otherwise have failed because of her partner's abuse
- ✓ A protection order being approved after the client's lawyer told her it wouldn't be
- ✓ ACC reviewing and approving a claim for cover relating to the impacts of family violence perpetrated years earlier
- ✓ IRD reversing a \$30K debt a client had because of her partner's economic abuse
- ✓ A Lawyer for Child giving a history of the perpetrator's violence in their report to the court
- ✓ A client's GP assessing and diagnosing her traumatic brain injury
- ✓ Whānau understanding what a client was dealing with and stepping up to stop her partner using violence against her again
- ✓ A client seeing the black and white evidence of her partner's violence, showing her she wasn't crazy - the impacts were valid

We can build the foundations of safety when we:

- Ask about risk
- Listen to women's stories of violence and risk
- Record the risks well

That's the end of part two! We've covered how and when risk information comes up, how to take care of clients when they are sharing their stories of violence and risk with us, and how we can write these down in ways that honour them, their mana, and the risks they are facing now.

In part three of the series ('Acting on Risk Information') we look at what to do with all of that risk information, and the power of using recorded information to really make a difference in clients'



You are here

1

Refuge and
'Risk'

2

Asking
about Risk

3

Acting on Risk
Information





WOMEN'S REFUGE

Made with the generous support of Contact Energy.

For more information about the risk and safety project, contact Dr 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
2024