

Part 3:

ACTING ON RISK INFORMATION



WOMEN'S REFUGE

Our role in responding

The last booklet (part two) focused on how we ask about, listen for, and record family violence risk. This booklet (part three) looks at the 'what now' - what we can do with that risk information once we have it, and how we can make sure wāhine end up safer or better off as a result.



Women's Refuge exists because of family violence risk, and aims to restore safety in the lives of wāhine and their tamariki through advocacy. Wāhine and tamariki come to Refuge because they are at risk - and because of what they hope we will be able to do to help.

Part one talks about risk as potential. The potential for someone to be harmed more, or the potential for safety - for them to be freer from violence and the harm and losses that come with it. Advocacy is how we steer that potential towards safety.

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.

What have we learned about what works?

For a long time, it has been standard practice to assess family violence risk by rating how high or low it is, based on the number of 'yes' answers to questions about the violence. But this approach to risk does not align with Refuge's purpose, mahi, and kaupapa.

Women's Refuge stands up for the rights of wāhine and tamariki, so we want to respond to risk in the ways that work best for them. Recently, we explored what that could look like for both clients and for kaimahi.

Based on the risk information of over 5000 Refuge clients around the mōtu, we can see that almost every client has at least one indicator of lethality risk.

Can these tools really predict who is likely to be hurt or killed?

No - but the info we get can be useful for how we advocate.



Feedback from both wāhine and kaimahi highlighted the importance of responding to risk in ways that put what wāhine need most at the centre.

Is a 'risk rating' what wāhine need most when they first get to Refuge?



No – what she needs most is for us to hear what she needs and find a way to help.

Which means moving away from...

Clinical-feeling 'assessment'

Counting tickboxes

Rating the level of risk

And moving towards...

Listening for what risks are on top for her

Linking these risks to the violence

Matching these risks with advocacy

As an advocate:

1. Every question we ask must serve a purpose
2. What we write down lights the path of advocacy by showing us exactly what she needs help with
3. It's how we act on information about risk that matters most

We can act on information about all three kinds of risk

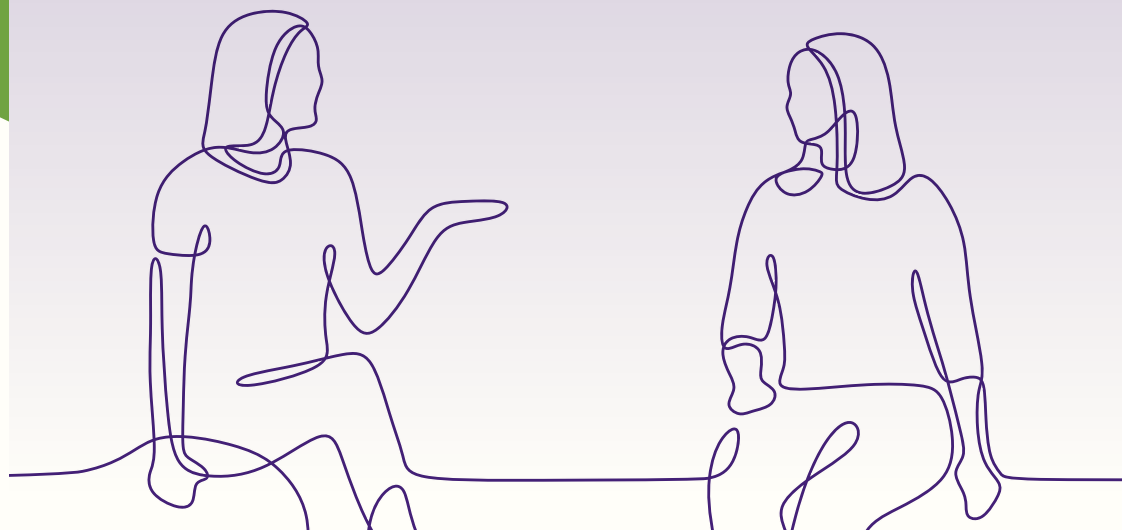
RISKS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE



RISKS FROM FAMILY VIOLENCE



RISKS OF SYSTEM RESPONSES



Making 'safety' real and worth it

Victims of family violence experience risks to every part of their lives, not just their physical safety - and so navigating risk and safety often involves trade-offs. They make the choices that are safest for them at the time, and it is up to us to create better safety options for them to choose from.

Most of our advocacy for a wahine can be done whether she stays in the relationship or not.



Safety might look like improved:

Experiences of systems and services

Wāhine have an agency on their side, and kaimahi who listen, get it, and use their collective power when acting on a client’s behalf. This helps protect them from harmful, colonising, racist, or discriminatory responses from the state and other organisations. Sometimes, when other agencies don’t do enough, we can do more ourselves.

Day-to-day coping and capacity

They have time for themselves, help with their kids, enough money for the basics and some luxuries. Wāhine will know where they will be living and feel comfortable there.

Physical safety

Wāhine have plans in place for when the danger is highest and somewhere to go if they need it.

Relationships with whānau and their social connectedness

They have strong relationships with everyone in their whānau they want relationships with. The people they are close to understand the violence and their responses to it or impacts from it, and wāhine have opportunities to grow and nurture relationships.

Physical and emotional wellbeing

Wāhine have any health concerns assessed and treated, are up to date with health check-ups, and have the plans, support, connections, and resources to get them through tough times.

Opportunities and life prospects

Wāhine get to make decisions about their lives and their children’s lives. They have the freedom to parent, live, and plan for the future the way they want to. They have access to income and housing that is healthy, suitable, and long-term, and can engage in work or other goals however they want to.

Access to the right support

They feel confident that if or when they need support, services will welcome them, respect them, treat them well, and meet their needs.

Risk information: a roadmap for advocacy

We can help build the bridges between 'risk' and 'safety' by being on her side, keeping our eyes on the violence, listening to what safety looks like to her, and using the power we have to fight for her right (and her children's right) to:

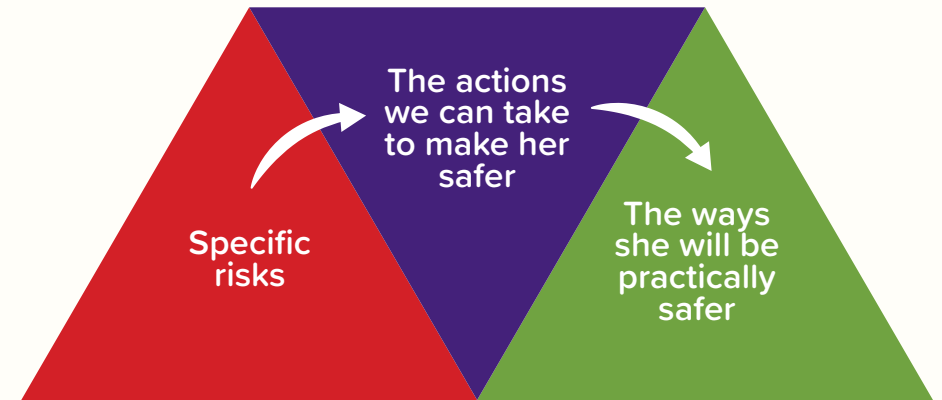


Some of that advocacy needs to happen right there in the room with wāhine and some of it can happen on behalf of wāhine - without them needing to be there for it.

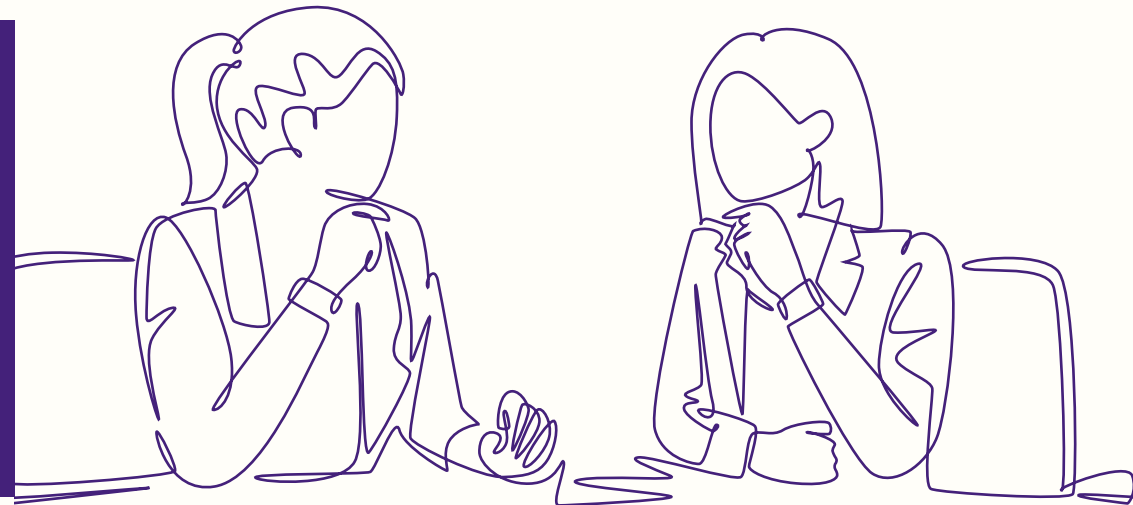
We use risk information to guide:

- What we focus on right now and what we park and follow up later
- How we respond to her in person (e.g. by tailoring the pace, language)
- What immediate practical needs we try to meet (e.g. food parcels)
- Who else we involve in supporting her safety
- What tasks we can do ourselves without her needing to be present
- Which services we prioritise for her (e.g. safe house versus community)

How? By linking the **family violence** to the **specific risks**



The next pages are examples of how information about violence leads to the identification of risks, possible advocacy actions, and ultimately, safety outcomes for wāhine and tamariki clients.



The risk of being hurt or killed

What's recorded

- Choking or strangulation
- Threats to kill
- Her fear that she will be killed
- Escalating violence when she seeks safety

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. She believes he is capable of killing her.

Possible Actions

Let her lead the conversation, remind her it wasn't her fault, and explore what it means for her now

Decide with her who needs to be involved and what they need to know to safeguard her and the children

Explore whether going into a safe house or getting Whānau Protect is a good option for her

Create a safety plan that is tailored to her, and make sure every agency knows their role in making it work for her

The Risks

The risk that if she reports the violence, her ex-partner will come after her for revenge

The risk that living in fear and trying to avoid him will take a toll on her and her children's wellbeing

The risk that the violence will escalate, and that her ex-partner will hurt or kill her or the children

Safety

She knows she is not to blame, and knows who will help and what they will do

Someone knows about the violence now and there is a documented record of it

She and the kids are in a safe space tonight where the perpetrator can't find her

Example 2

The risk of an untreated brain injury

What's recorded

- Hit/punched in the head
- New difficulties with memory/concentration
- Stopped her accessing healthcare

Three months ago he assaulted her for over two hours, including kneeling her stomach and hitting her several times in the head. She talked about having “blank spots” in her memory and feeling “out of it” and forgetting things ever since. She couldn't leave the house to see a doctor because she knew it would lead to him hurting her more.

The Risks

The risk that she will suffer longer-lasting impacts if not medically assessed and treated for a potential brain injury

The risk that people will assume she is using drugs or lying instead of seeing her limitations as a result of a family violence brain injury

The risk that if her head injury is not talked about or recorded at the time, she won't be able to access funded support later if she wants it

Possible Actions

Support her to see her GP, go with her, offer to help explain the violence and symptoms to her GP, and advocate for a concussion referral

Consider the potential for brain injury and take care to speak slowly, use visual cues, write down information, and check in with her about physical and emotional wellbeing

Help other services she is involved with to understand how the injury affects what she is able to do for herself and what support she needs

Make sure there is an ACC claim made and explain to her what she could be entitled to right now or in the future if things get worse

Safety

The referral for the injury led to the right support, entitlements, and treatment to heal and recover

Her support people understand the impacts of the injury and support her with it

People talk to her in a way she can understand and remember, and she can stay engaged without feeling overwhelmed

Example 3

The risk of harm to children and the Mum-child relationship

What's recorded

- Harmed her in front of children
- Shared false information about her parenting
- Made the children feel afraid

He routinely tells her and the kids that she is weak, a bad Mum, crazy, and to blame for his violence. Sometimes she ends up believing she is to blame and that everything she does for them is wrong.

When they separated, he made a child protection report claiming she neglects the children. The kids are afraid of him and often try to guess what he wants from them so he doesn't get angry.

The Risks

The risk that the false information he has given paints Mum in a bad light and could lead to the children being in his care some, or all of the time, even when it is not safe

The risk of the kids being hurt, continuing to feel scared, or suffering because of the violence toward Mum

Possible Actions

Find a way for the kids to have their own support, from people who understand the violence and can respond well to kids' feelings about it

Record all of her parenting efforts, tasks, and strengths in her file (and if she agrees, share them with the other agencies involved – such as family court, OT, school)

Tell her what she is doing well and name all of the things she does to care for the kids and meet their needs

Help lighten her load by getting her help with childcare and kids' activities

Safety

Other agencies see what she is doing to care for her kids and see her strengths

She feels uplifted as a Mum and is confident in her parenting

The kids can work through their thoughts and feelings about Dad and the violence with someone they trust, and have faith in the system to protect them

Her mana is enhanced and she feels cared for

The risk of harm to whānau relationships

What's recorded

- Controls all of what she does every day
- Stops her from seeing friends and family
- Monitors who she talks to

They have been in a relationship for seven years. Looking back she sees that he was always controlling, including by choosing her friends, making her feel like she can't safely spend any time with her family, and creating conflict between her and her family and friends.

The Risks

The risk of her feeling blamed by others (or blaming herself) for kinds of abuse that aren't obvious to everyone

The risk of her losing friends and feeling isolated

Possible Actions

Label and record the controlling behaviour as abuse

Find ways for her to rebuild some social connections (like groups)

Kōrero about the household 'rules' set by the perpetrator and the impacts of the perpetrator's power and control

Help her find the words to explain it to others

Offer to provide the background information for family and friends to understand how the perpetrator got between them

Safety

She can put words to the invisible kinds of abuse and name it for what it is

She has reconnected with friends and family who understand her situation and no longer blame her

Her social circle has expanded

Example 5

The risk of having to live with constant threat and stress

What's recorded

- Tracks where she is and what she does
- The stalking continued after separation
- Had breached protection order

He insisted on knowing her whereabouts all the time and made her ask permission to go out. Now he drives past her address frequently, monitors what she and her friends post online, calls her from unknown numbers, and turns up at social events she is at. She feels panic now when her phone rings or cars pull into her driveway. She has a protection order, but every breach she has reported has been labelled by police as 'minor' and not prosecuted.

The Risks

The risk that the perpetrator will do it more if he knows he will get away with it

The risk of not being able to use her phone freely to get support

The risk of her feeling unable to go out, answer her phone, or go about her daily life, and the stress, fear, and panic increasing

Possible Actions

Validate her distress, worry, and feelings of being watched and isolated, and name the stalking as a part of the abuse

Talk to her about ways of documenting all of the (even 'minor') episodes of stalking, such as in the Bright Sky NZ app

Support her right to report all breaches, and reflect that every breach is an offence (and follow up with Police about these breaches)

Talk about technology and safety (e.g. by exploring what the perpetrator can access on her phone or online)

Safety

She feels calmer and less worried

She can evidence the abuse and there is a better chance of him being held accountable in the justice system

She feels confident using her phone safely and feels more connected to others

Example 6

The risk of debt and financial hardship

What's recorded

Forced her to take out debt



Pressured her to get money in ways she was uncomfortable with



Her partner refused to share his income, forcing her to continue to get the sole parent benefit. She was constantly afraid of losing this as she would be unable to feed her children.

Possible Actions

Record the way he forced her to access income (as well as his control or abuse that came with it)

Reflect to her how his abuse left her with no other option, and provide her with essential goods

Access other funds or benefits for her and/or the kids

With her permission, advocate for her with Work and Income so they understand it was about his abuse, not her choices, and ensure her continued income

The Risks

The risk that she will feel blamed and judged

The risk that she will feel she has to stay with the perpetrator to stay afloat financially

The risk of her benefit being cut, making her unable to meet basic needs

Safety

Her weekly income stays in place

She has what she and the kids need for the week ahead

Other agencies understand the situation as violence, rather than blaming her for it

The risk of long-term impacts from sexual violence

What's recorded

Forced her to have sex



Forced her into other sexual activity



She gets really tense and finds it difficult talking about the times he was most angry and aggressive, and says that's when he forced her to have sex. She thinks he chose that way of hurting her because of how bad it made her feel about herself afterwards, and because it didn't leave her with any obvious physical injuries. She thinks about it a lot and it makes her feel worthless and disrespected.

The Risks

The risk of feeling unable to speak about it because of stigma or shame

The risk of suffering mental health consequences, including PTSD, and not being able to get counselling or compensation later because it wasn't recorded

The risk of untreated infections or sexual injuries

Possible Actions

Make sure she knows it is okay to talk about it, and that it's often part of women's experiences of abuse

Support her to make an ACC claim and talk to her about the full range of entitlements (e.g. Rongoā this could give her (and find a counsellor if she wants one)

Talk to her about self-test options for her sexual and reproductive health, and help overcome barriers for getting checkups

Talk about some of the common impacts women experience and normalise talking about it as part of discussing the abuse

Safety

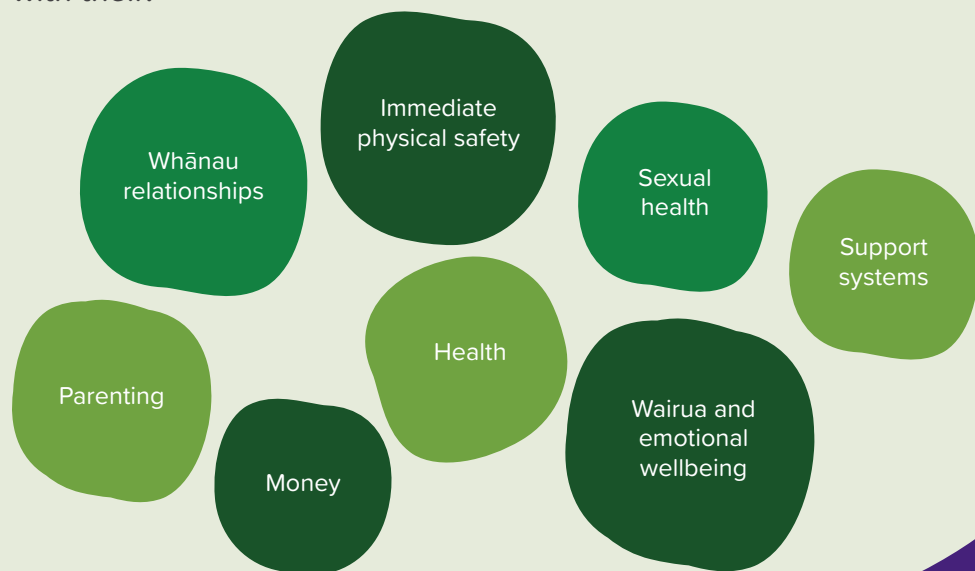
Her physical and sexual health is protected

Whether she wants counselling now, later, or never, it will be available to her (e.g. ACC sensitive claims)

She feels heard and supported about what has happened to her - instead of holding it all inside

How would our client be safer now?

Based on these examples, we can see that if all this advocacy happened for wāhine, they would be in a much better place with their:



As a result of this advocacy:

- ✓ She is safer right now
- ✓ That safety will stick around so that her future life is safer and happier

Acting on risk information often means sharing risk information



Sharing risk information can:

Increase the risk

(if we do it carelessly or without our Refuge lens)

Increase her safety

(if we do it carefully, respectfully, and using our Refuge lens)

When sharing information we make it make sense by talking about:

Example:

The violence first

Name the violence before the risks, needs, and the causes.

The perpetrator's violence included holding her hostage, shoving her into the wall, threatening to harm her cousin, hurting her while she was pregnant, restricting her phone use and checking her call log, and making her children feel constantly afraid.

The pattern

How do all the different parts of abuse fit together?

She tried several times to suggest he stay somewhere else for a while. He refused and they "fought for hours about it". She changed her routine with her kids so they would be away from him more of the time, even though this meant more time planning activities out of the home.

Changes over time

What happened first? What happened next? How did it escalate?

He first used physical aggression to intimidate her (and the children) in 2020 by pushing her after yelling at her for getting the "wrong" spaghetti. Over the next several months, he switched between seeming "caring" and yelling at her, pushing her, and stomping on her foot, before strangling her earlier this year and threatening to kill her.

Why it matters

Spell out every single flag about danger and lethality in their file and how this makes her unsafe.

The risk form I completed with her in April showed several indicators of lethality, including strangulation, threats to kill her and to hurt the children, harming her while she was pregnant, stalking her, and holding her hostage. His violence has in the past increased when he finds out she is seeking support or safety, and he recently told her "you'll never get away from me".

Your understanding

As a specialist in this field, what risk do you see? What might happen next?

Given the red flags for severe physical violence or homicide, I feel she is at critical risk of being hurt or killed if he is not prevented from seeing her and their children. There is no indication that he acknowledges his behaviour as violent or risky or is willing to take steps to behave in safer ways for his children's sake.

What needs to happen now

Explain what that person/organisation needs to do to address the risks of more harm to the victim/her children.

The children's safety and wellbeing is mostly provided by their Mum. To keep them safe, they need to be kept with their Mum, and the perpetrator needs to be stopped from seeing them. He also needs to be prevented from returning to their home and putting them at risk.

Sharing information about family violence risk can help to:

Communicate the risks to the client (and her children) to other organisations so they can put safety levers in place.

(e.g. to Police, the woman's lawyer, the Lawyer for Child, or the judge)

(e.g. to her counsellor or other mental health services)

Help other professionals to understand more about what she has gone through/is going through so she doesn't have to repeat her story all over again.

Show how her choices were limited or influenced by the perpetrator's abuse - so that her actions aren't judged negatively by others.

(e.g. to Work and Income, banks, child protection)

(e.g. to GPs, children's schools, her employer, or ACC providers)

Prompt other services to both identify the specific risks they have a role in addressing, and take the necessary steps to protect her wellbeing now and in the future.

Is the information recorded and shared from a family violence perspective?

- Only the perpetrator can choose to stop their violence
- Help, intervention, and support for wāhine experiencing family violence are only necessary because of the perpetrator's use of violence
- Being a victim of family violence is never a choice - they can choose to end the relationship, but they cannot choose to end the violence
- Safe responses begin with naming the risk and where it came from (e.g. the perpetrator's violence, colonial violence, harmful or oppressive systems)
- Many of the options wāhine have to choose from will add to their safety in one way while increasing risk in other ways
- When victims remain at risk it is because they have not had good options, not because they make bad choices
- Good support means doing things for them they would not be able to do for themselves, and doing more than just what is necessary
- Every action an organisation takes (or does not take) either increases risk or increases safety for the victim (and her tamariki)

The end goal is for wāhine and their tamariki to be safer and better off (from their perspective) than when they arrived.

You are here

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Refuge and
'Risk'

2

Asking
about Risk

3

Acting on Risk
Information

How will we know if we're getting it right?

Did we make it clear to others where the risk is coming from?

Whose priorities did we serve - hers, or our organisation's?

Did we make it more or less likely that she will seek support in the future?

What risks did we address? How did we make sure we weren't making it worse?

Did we do the practical tasks for her so she wouldn't have to?

Did we take the responsibility for safety off our client, and put it onto agencies?

How would she say she's safer or better off now?

What needs does she still have and how will we make sure these are met?

That's the end of the risk series! We've covered what family violence 'risk' is, the changes over time in how Refuge sees and responds to risk, and how we can strengthen our response to risk to align better with Refuge kaupapa.

This booklet covers the 'what now': how our advocacy needs to respond to risk in a way that creates sustainable and meaningful safety for wāhine and tamariki clients.

All of our mahi revolves around risk and safety. Our goal is that wāhine leave Refuge after a positive, mana-enhancing experience, knowing they can come back anytime. Ultimately, our advocacy results in wāhine being confident that they are safer and better off as a result of Refuge support.





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
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