



# Preventing and addressing sexual and/or intimate partner violence against women international students

## Practice guide for delivering a whole-of-community response

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**Australian Government**  
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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The INVEST project</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>INVEST survey findings at a glance</b>	<b>3-4</b>
<b>Student and stakeholder voices</b>	<b>5</b>
Student Voices	5
Stakeholder voices	6
<b>How can we strengthen support for women international students?</b>	<b>7</b>
Actions for government	8-10
Actions for tertiary institutions	11-14
Actions for community organisations and services	15
A whole-of-community response to prevent SV/IPV against international students	16
<b>Further information about the INVEST project findings</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Resources and supports for international students experiencing SV/IPV</b>	<b>17</b>

# Introduction

Approximately 700,000 international students come to study in Australia each year, with the vast majority enrolling in higher education, vocational education and training, or English Language Intensive Courses (ELICOS).<sup>1</sup> Women comprise almost half of Australia's international student population (48.1% in 2023).<sup>2</sup> International education provides enormous benefits for the Australian community. International students foster Australia's rich cultural diversity, provide essential workforce skills, contribute billions to our economy and further our connections with the global community.

Although many students have positive experiences studying in Australia, unfortunately, this is not the case for all. Experiences of gender-based violence, including sexual violence (SV) and intimate partner violence (IPV), are common among women tertiary students,<sup>3</sup> and international students may be vulnerable to victimisation due to a range of structural factors.<sup>4</sup> Being subjected to SV/IPV can have a major impact on women international students' mental and physical health and undermine their ability to engage in educational and social opportunities in Australia.

## Experiences of gender-based violence are common among women tertiary students

The need to prevent SV/IPV and support affected students has increasingly been recognised by governments and educational institutions. The national [Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education](#), released in 2024, identifies strategies to address the high rates of SV/IPV for women tertiary students, and introduces the [National Student Ombudsman](#) as a channel to investigate complaints about a range of issues, including gender-based violence. However, whilst the Action Plan represents a significant step forward in addressing SV/IPV in the broader tertiary student population, specific strategies for tackling SV/IPV amongst women international students are absent.



Australian governments, tertiary institutions and community organisations must work together to ensure that women international students are included in national efforts to prevent and address SV/IPV. Tertiary education providers have a responsibility to provide access to specific services to support international students' mental and physical wellbeing, as outlined under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act (ESOS Act), the [National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students](#) 2018 (standard six). Australian governments and community organisations also share a responsibility to support international students and protect their safety while studying in Australia.

However, to develop effective responses and strategies a greater understanding of the experiences of SV/IPV for women international students is needed.

# The INVEST Project

INVEST (INternational students' sexual and intimate partner Violence Experiences STudy) is the first comprehensive national study of the SV/IPV experiences of women international students in Australia.

Funded by the Australian Research Council, the aims of INVEST were to:

- investigate the nature and circumstances of SV/IPV against women international students
- explore the lived experience and impacts of SV/IPV as an international student
- understand women international students' help-seeking needs after experiencing SV/IPV
- identify good practice responses and recommendations and develop resources to assist Australian institutions, services and governments to prevent and address SV/IPV against women international students.

INVEST is a collaboration between The University of Melbourne, Monash University, Deakin University, and the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health.

The study collected data from international students and key stakeholders through:

- a national online survey of 1,491 women international students in Australia
- interviews with 56 women international students who had experienced SV/IPV in Australia
- focus groups with 16 key stakeholders including higher education professionals, student advocates, international student organisation representatives, and international health insurance representatives.

## About this guide

This practice guide synthesises the findings of the INVEST study. Putting the voices and experiences of women international students at the centre, it provides practical recommendations for tertiary institutions, community organisations and government policymakers to prevent and address SV/IPV against women international students in Australia. The recommendations complement Australian Department of Education's [Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education](#) (2024) and the forthcoming [National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence](#).



Putting the voices  
and experiences of  
women international  
students at the  
centre

# Survey findings at a glance



**We ran an online survey of women international students between 2020-2022.**

We advertised via higher education institutions, international student groups and social media. Students self-selected to participate and were eligible irrespective of whether they had had an experience of SV/IPV.



**A total of 1491 women international students provided eligible responses.**

The demographics of our sample were broadly similar to the overall population of international students in Australia during 2020.

- Mean age of participants was 25.5 years
- 79% spoke English as a second language
- 38% were living in NSW, 34% in Victoria, 11% in Queensland



**Students came from a variety of nations,**

including 29% from China, 11% from the Philippines and 10% from India.

**Over half (54%) reported experiencing either sexual violence since arriving in Australia or IPV in the last 12 months.**

**INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE in the last 12 months was reported by 45% of participants who had ever been in a relationship, with 22% reporting severe combined abuse. For 94% of these women, the perpetrator was male.**

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE since arriving in Australia was reported by 40% of participants.** The most common type of SV was unwanted sexual contact (including harassment, sexual comments and sexual touching). Concerningly, **18%** of participants reported experiencing forced or coerced sexual acts, and **11%** reported completed or attempted rape/sexual assault.

For **97%** of the participants who had experienced SV, the perpetrator was male. For **62%** of participants the perpetrator was a stranger and for around **60%** the perpetrator was a known person such as an intimate partner (17%), a casual hook-up (22%), friend or acquaintance (28.2%).\*

\*Participants could select a perpetrator type for each incident of SV; therefore percentages do not sum to 100

# Factors associated with increased risk of SV/IPV

International students who experienced the following issues reported higher rates of SV/IPV:

- **Students reporting housing insecurity were nearly two times more likely to report forced or coerced sex** compared to students who did not report housing insecurity and **1.8 times more likely to report IPV** than students who did not report housing insecurity.
- **Students who reported financial insecurity were 1.7 times more likely to report forced or coerced sex** compared to students who did not report financial insecurity and **1.8 times more likely to report IPV** than students who did not report financial insecurity.
- **Students who reported having low social support were 1.7 times more likely to report forced or coerced sex** compared to students who did not report low social support and **more than twice (2.3 times) as likely to report IPV**.



# Student and stakeholder voices

## Student voices

We held in-depth interviews with 56 women international students who had experienced SV/IPV while studying in Australia. Our interviews explored the impacts of SV/IPV and the barriers students faced in seeking help.

**“He knew that I was isolated, I was alone ... I mean, I was the perfect target. Somebody who's new to the area and doesn't have anybody to support them.”**

**- Hana, student from Singapore**

## Experiences and Impacts of SV/PV

Participants said their experiences of SV/IPV were affected by their social, legal, financial and housing insecurity in Australia. For example:

- Many encountered men who sexually objectified and fetishised them because of their culture or race.
- Perpetrators of SV/IPV used students' limited social networks and lack of understanding of local laws and services to manipulate and further isolate them.
- Students often felt trapped living with perpetrators because of a lack of options for housing, employment and income support.
- Perpetrators often threatened to cancel students' visas if they tried to seek help or leave the relationship.
- Students said their temporary residency status and lack of support in Australia meant men believed they were unlikely to face legal sanctions for perpetrating abuse against international students.

After experiencing SV/IPV, women international students said they felt immensely vulnerable and that they were a prime target for abusive men.

**“Being sexually assaulted in Australia came as a shock ... I saw myself as like a deer in headlights, like I was some sort of wounded animal or a sort of prey ... It takes a lot of your confidence away.”**

**- Maria, student from Mexico**

For most, the impacts of SV/IPV were significant, including anxiety and depression and in some cases, physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy. Along with the trauma of SV/IPV, feelings of vulnerability led students to withdraw from the social and educational opportunities they had travelled to Australia to pursue. Feeling isolated in Australia and disconnected from loved ones back home caused students an immense sense of loss, not only of their dreams and aspirations, but also their identity.

## Support needs and barriers

After experiencing SV/IPV in Australia, many international students said they felt abandoned and unsupported by the service system. They described major barriers in seeking support, healthcare and legal assistance after their experiences of SV/IPV, including:

- a lack of accessible information about their legal rights in Australia and how to report SV/IPV
- concerns that reporting SV/IPV would affect their visa status or course enrolment
- a lack of accessible information about available healthcare services and how to seek help
- limited availability of linguistically and culturally responsive support and a lack of understanding among service providers of the challenges international students face

- a lack of specialised on-campus SV/IPV support at some institutions, with student services primarily focused on academic issues
- the prohibitive cost of counselling, health and legal services for international students, particularly in context of high tuition fees
- insufficient healthcare cover through private insurance and ineligibility for Medicare.

Exacerbating their isolation, almost all participants felt unable to tell their families about their experiences of SV/IPV as they did not want to worry them or disappoint their expectations.

**“I don’t feel Australia cares about me or has any concern about me ... All the services are not eligible for me.”**  
**- Raissa, student from Brazil**

Only a small number of women international students obtained support, though it took great resilience and resourcefulness to find the right help in Australia. However, many said they disclosed to friends because they felt friends understood their experiences. They also appreciated being supported by social workers and health practitioners who shared a similar cultural and linguistic background and migration experience.

## Stakeholder voices

Sixteen stakeholders from the tertiary sector, student advocacy groups, international education peak bodies, and student services came together to discuss the issue of gendered violence against international students. They identified additional structural factors and barriers that disempowered international students and put them at risk of SV/IPV. These included:

- governments and institutions treating international students as ‘cash cows’ but neglecting to provide them with adequate housing, social and financial support
- inadequate government resourcing and regulation to ensure institutions consistently provide culturally sensitive, trauma-informed support for international students who experience SV/IPV in Australia



- different laws and cultural understandings of sex, consent and SV/IPV in students’ home countries, that may discourage help-seeking
- a lack of education programs about relationships, consent and violence that are tailored to international students.

**“Tertiary institutions often show a lack of accountability when the students are impacted by any type of violence ... But if you bring the students in, you have to take some responsibility to have support available for the students.”**  
**- Stakeholder**

# How can we strengthen support for women international students?

Consistent with the *Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education* (2024), our findings suggest that institutions, organisations and the wider community all have a responsibility to prevent and address SV/IPV. However, our study highlights that a proactive and tailored approach is essential to protect and support women international students in Australia. We recommend the following strategies for governments, tertiary institutions and community services to strengthen responses to SV/IPV for women international students.

**“Because of their visa they cannot access income support from Centrelink and they might not be able to work ... When they experience violence they have nowhere to go and no access to income.”**

**- Stakeholder**



## Actions for government

**Our findings point to a need for governments to prioritise the safety of international student women in Australia by tailoring policies and increasing resourcing and regulation. Recommendations include:**

### **1. Address the structural issues that put women international students at risk**

Inequitable policies make international students vulnerable to SV/IPV and prevent them from accessing support, healthcare and legal protection. The following actions could help to tackle the structural factors that increase risk for women international students.

#### **1.1 Increase financial support.**

A lack of financial resources can prevent international students from being able to escape abusive relationships, unsafe accommodation or exploitative employment situations. Providing access to social security payments and removing the restrictive employment conditions on student visas could help reduce the risks women international students face due to financial insecurity. Continuing to ensure equitable access to family violence support payments for temporary visa holders will be important.

#### **1.2 Increase access to secure, affordable and safe student housing.**

Findings from INVEST suggest that there is an association between insecure housing and increased risk of SV/IPV. To help prevent SV/IPV against women international students, governments could strengthen the regulation and oversight of student accommodation providers and the private rental market and provide more low-cost housing options for international students.

#### **1.3 Provide increased access to affordable healthcare**

People who experience SV/IPV frequently access healthcare, particularly mental health and sexual and reproductive health services. International students are not able to access healthcare via Medicare, but must take out private Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) as a condition of their visa. Although OSHC policies are required to provide a level of cover that is broadly comparable to Medicare in terms of what services are included, students often face gap fees when accessing these services. These can be a barrier for financially stressed students. Although there are some services without gap fees, these are not necessarily culturally safe or appropriate for international students who have experienced violence. A further issue is that many OSHC insurers require students to serve a 12 month waiting period before being eligible to access obstetric services. For students experiencing reproductive coercion or an unplanned pregnancy due to violence, this means they may not be covered.

**“[We need funding] to make sure we can take the time to build the trust to allow us to help international students.”**

**- Stakeholder**

## 2. Develop a centralised online hub for international students

International students can face difficulties in locating information about SV/IPV and support in Australia. A central, tailored online resource for international students would provide a much-needed source of information about sexual consent, legal rights and available supports (translated into multiple languages). Stakeholders suggested the Study Australia website could be expanded as a central hub for information about SV/IPV, as many students access it before they arrive and during their stay in Australia. International students and key stakeholders should be consulted to ensure that the information provided is relevant. Sufficient funding should be allocated to ensure the resource is kept up to date.

## 3. Mandate consistent responses through national policies and regulation

If passed, the [National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence](#) will require all tertiary institutions to provide adequate education to staff and students, guidance to prevent SV/IPV and support for those who experience violence. The [National Action Plan](#) underpinning the Code also identifies that responses must address the specific needs of international students, along with other key cohorts. Our findings underscore the importance of specific and tailored policy and practice responses for international students. The Education Services for Overseas Students' (ESOS) [National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018](#), which regulates the provision of education for international students, should be aligned with any measures introduced in the National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence.

## 4. Fund institutions to deliver tailored support to international students

The National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence will introduce standards for student support providers, including the need to provide tailored support for specific cohorts such as international students. Based on our consultations with student counselling and support providers, a lack of funding currently prevents them from being able to provide effective support to women international students. Increased resourcing is critical to enable services to deliver tailored support that meets the needs of international students, including funding to provide support and resources in languages other than English.



**“I would love to see a one-stop shop [because currently for international students] locating the different information means going to a bunch of different websites. A lot of them don’t provide culturally appropriate information for international students, or languages other than English.”**  
- Stakeholder

## 5. Ensure systematic data collection across institutions

The National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence will include standards for data collection and reporting, to increase transparency and hold providers accountable for their performance in preventing and responding to gender-based violence. Our findings highlight the importance of institutions systematically collecting and reporting specific data on women international students' experiences of violence to build the evidence base about how best to deliver effective, tailored responses. Data collected should include experiences of IPV as well as SV.

**“Without policy enforcement we see really uneven action across the sector ...You might have a university that puts a lot of resources in, or you might get one that doesn't do anything.”**

**- Stakeholder**

## 6. Improve coordination between governments, institutions and services

The following strategies will facilitate a more coordinated response.

- Form a national advisory group to address the specific issues for international students in Australia and to contribute to developing and tailoring the national Action Plan.
- Fund stakeholders with expertise in issues faced by women international students (including migrant/multicultural women's community organisations, institutions and international students) to contribute to advocacy and policy initiatives associated with the government's Action Plan and National Code.
- Allocate clear responsibilities and roles to governments, institutions and community services to ensure accountability for the support and safety of women international students.
- Fund each state and territory to develop a cross-sector community of practice on issues for women international students, to facilitate shared knowledge and referral pathways across key services and sectors.



## Actions for tertiary institutions

Consistent with the National Action Plan, our findings highlight the need for tertiary institutions, including affiliated organisations and student accommodation providers, to develop a whole-of-organisation response to prevent and address SV/IPV against women international students. The following strategies are recommended based on evidence gathered in the INVEST study.



**“We need to be confirming that students are aware of affirmative consent laws ... and looking at a whole host of vocabulary around different sexual acts ... because trying to introduce these ideas in English can be challenging. [There] can be a barrier of moving through the taboo and cultural shame and stigma [and] actually understanding the language of what happened [and] that it's wrong and in some cases that it's a crime.”**

**- Stakeholder**

### **1. Provide tailored resources and programs on rights, relationships and SV/IPV**

The National Code will require institutions to embed respectful relationships education for all tertiary students and staff, and to recognise and address the needs of different student cohorts, including international students. Our findings underscore the need to tailor prevention and education programs to the specific needs of women international students so they can safely navigate their stay in Australia. Programs and resources should:

- Equip international students with understanding and language around respectful relationships, sex and consent.
- Emphasise that all students are entitled to feel safe and to receive support and protection if they experience SV/IPV.
- Highlight the factors that may put women international students at high risk of experiencing SV/IPV, such as insecure employment and accommodation, and advocate for policy change to address them.
- Explain students' legal rights in Australia and map the legal and healthcare services available to assist those who experience SV/IPV.

### **2. Co-design and deliver resources and programs**

It is crucial that programs and resources recognise the particular challenges international students may face and build on their existing knowledge, rather than assuming all international students are naïve about relationships, sex and consent. It is also important to recognise that international students come from a diverse range of countries and backgrounds. To ensure programs and resources are relevant and effective, they should be co-designed and delivered with women international students from different backgrounds, along with multicultural/migrant women's organisations and other stakeholders.

### 3. Provide programs and resources in multiple languages and different formats

To make information more accessible for international students, the following strategies are recommended.

- Provide programs and resources in multiple languages. Resources should be translated by accredited translating services and reviewed by relevant community members to ensure that they are accurate and culturally appropriate.
- Engage students using varied communication methods. It is crucial to leverage social media channels such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. Holding in-person events with support staff present is also an important way to engage students.
- Share information at key times. Information about SV/IPV and the services available should be provided before students arrive in Australia, as it is a time when they are actively seeking information. Information should also be delivered at orientation and reinforced throughout their studies.

### 4. Promote the availability and confidentiality of support

The following strategies are recommended to assist women international students who experience SV/IPV to understand and feel comfortable to access support services and organisations.

- Use clear language for programs and services. To help students to understand the supports available for SV/IPV, institutions should avoid using general terms (e.g. 'Safer Campuses' or 'Respect') when naming programs and services.
- Emphasise the confidentiality of support. Confidentiality is a major concern, as many international students fear that disclosing or reporting SV/IPV could affect their visa status or enrolment.
- Separate support service delivery from student administration. This can help reassure students that their enrolment or visa will not be affected if they disclose SV/IPV.

**“We spend a lot of time reassuring students that it is an entirely confidential system. Any notes we take about our interactions with them are stored on a different system to [the one] that has all our student records.” - Stakeholder**

### 5. Deliver trauma-informed, culturally responsive support

As per the recommendations of the National Action Plan to Address Gender-Based Violence, all tertiary students need service providers who are skilled in delivery of trauma-informed care. It is essential that staff have training in understanding the harmful impacts of SV/IPV, and how to prioritise the safety and autonomy of survivors. In addition to these principles, the following strategies are recommended to enhance support for women international students.

- **Train student counselling and support staff to deliver trauma-informed, culturally responsive care for international students who experience SV/IPV.** It is crucial that staff understand and challenge their own biases and assumptions and are trained on how to support international students in a culturally appropriate way, including how to work with interpreters if required. Institutions should collaborate with migrant/multicultural women's organisations to develop staff training and ongoing professional development programs on culturally responsive service delivery.

“You can explain more details of what happened [in your language]. It's good to have a person speaking in your language.” - Alessia, student from Peru

- **Increase the diversity of the workforce, particularly in student support services.** Workforces should reflect the diversity of the populations they serve, including international students. To promote an inclusive and diverse workplace culture, institutions and organisations should actively employ staff from various genders, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Identify and advocate for international students at high risk.** Our findings show that living in precarious accommodation or facing financial stress puts international students at greater risk of experiencing SV/IPV. Support services should recognise situations of high-risk and the importance of early intervention. Services should take a proactive role when international students are facing financial or housing insecurity, including through sensitive inquiry about SV/IPV experiences and advocating for them to obtain affordable and safe housing, income and employment.
- **Build connections and collaborate with community-based support services.** Sexual assault, domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health, mental health and legal services can provide specialised support, and often students prefer to access them as they are not connected to their institutions. Developing stronger referral pathways and cross-sector coordination between institutions and community organisations will improve the support available for international students.

## 6. Develop skills across the institution to respond to SV/IPV

To develop a whole-of-organisation response to SV/IPV against international students, institutions should:

- **Equip all staff to respond to SV/IPV.** Although this is relevant for all students, women international students may be more likely to disclose SV/IPV to a trusted staff member rather than a support service. As identified in the national Action Plan, a wide range of staff - including academic and professional staff, and staff in student unions, residential colleges and student accommodation - should be trained in responding to SV/IPV. Staff education on SV/IPV should specifically address the needs of women international students as a cohort at high risk.
- **Implement peer support programs.** International student peers can offer valuable information about SV/IPV and the support services available. Peer supporters need to be trained and supported to ensure they can provide trauma-informed and appropriate responses without negatively impacting their own wellbeing.
- **Educate leaders of student clubs and associations,** including those for international students, to enable them to provide a trauma-informed response to SV/IPV.

## 7. Foster equality, diversity and inclusion of women international students

Evidence consistently suggests that gender-based inequalities, intersecting with other forms of discrimination and disadvantage, are primary drivers of SV/IPV.<sup>4</sup> Our findings suggest that along with gendered inequality, the factors that put women international students at risk of experiencing SV/IPV are social isolation and exclusion, along with culturally or racially based stereotyping and sexualisation.

To help counter the factors that contribute to SV/IPV against women international students, institutions and organisations should:

- Model gender equality, diversity and inclusion across the institution. Proactively offer opportunities for women international students to take leadership roles and have a voice within institutions, organisations and the wider community (for example, by being involved in decision-making committees, speaking at public events or in the media).
- Ensure gender equality and violence prevention policies and programs represent all women, including international students.
- Co-design violence prevention programs and policies with women international students.
- Foster connections and social networks between international and domestic students via ‘buddy’ systems, mentorship programs and social activities.

**“A lot of time I was left alone on my own and I didn’t have anyone to talk to. I struggled a lot.”**  
- Giana, student from Italy

**“We have found [it] has been helpful ... having an international support area that has a peer-based drop in model run by paid international student peers ... We find that sometimes students are comfortable disclosing to another student in language, or to somebody who’s in a similar kind of age and has the similar life experience.” - Stakeholder**



## Actions for community organisations and services

Migrant or multicultural women's health services, SV/IPV organisations, sexual and reproductive health, and legal services have specialised expertise in responding to SV/IPV against women international students. Collaboration between governments, institutions and key community services is crucial to strengthen responses to international students who experience SV/IPV.

Resourcing should be provided so that community services and organisations have a greater capacity to:

- provide policy advice to government and institutions
- co-design violence prevention, intervention and education programs and resources tailored to women international students
- provide specialised training for staff at tertiary education institutions on delivering trauma-informed and culturally responsive support
- build partnerships and referral pathways with local institutions and student support providers.

**“A lot of students went to [community organisations] for support, because they ... felt that there was that privacy and confidentiality, so [their disclosure of SV/IPV] couldn't be tracked back to their academic records or their parents or anything.” - Stakeholder**



# A whole-of-community response to prevent and address SV/IPV against women international students

## Governments

- Address the structural issues that increase risk
- Develop an online hub of information for international students
- Mandate a consistent response through policies and regulation
- Fund institutions to deliver tailored support
- Ensure systematic data collection
- Improve coordination across sectors and services

## Tertiary institutions

- Provide tailored violence prevention & education
- Co-design and deliver resources and programs
- Provide programs in multiple languages & formats
- Promote the availability and confidentiality of support
- Deliver trauma-informed culturally responsive support
- Develop skills across the institution to respond to SV/IPV
- Foster gender equality, diversity and inclusion of women international students

## Community organisations & services

- Provide policy advice to government and institutions
- Foster partnerships and referral pathways with institutions and student support providers
- Co-design targeted violence prevention and intervention programs
- Train staff at tertiary institutions on delivering trauma-informed and culturally responsive support.

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## More information about the INVEST project findings

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## Support for international students experiencing SV/IPV

**1800Respect:** National counselling, information and support service for SV/IPV, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Ph: 1800 737 732 | W: [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

**National Student Ombudsman:** The Ombudsman works with students and higher education providers to resolve student complaints. They are independent and impartial with powers to investigate a broad range of issues including gender-based violence. Ph: 1300 395 775 | W: <https://www.nso.gov.au/>

### State and territory support services for migrant and refugee women experiencing SV/IPV

- [inTouch](#) (Victoria)
- [Immigrant Women's Support Service](#) (Queensland)
- [Multicultural Centre for Women's and Family Safety](#) (New South Wales)
- [Women's Safety Services SA: Migrant women's support program](#) (South Australia)
- [Ishar Multicultural Women's Health Services](#) (Western Australia)

