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# Institutional Trust and Mistrust among Migrant and Refugee Women in Australia

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## SUMMARY

This briefing paper draws on findings from a major study focusing on experiences of safety and security among migrant and refugee women in Australia. We focus here on findings relating to participants' levels of trust across a number of institutions. A lack of institutional trust can impact social, economic, and political participation and negatively impact willingness to seek help and cooperate with various institutional actors. The findings from this study offer an evidence base to guide decision-making around allocating resources to support the needs of migrant and refugee women in Australia, and in the development of strategies that respond to the factors that undermine trust in state institutions, including the police.

## What we know

The Scanlon Foundation's *Mapping Social Cohesion* survey, which tracks Australian public opinion on social cohesion, immigration, and population issues, has generally found low levels of trust in government over the past decade. The survey reported that levels of trust in government to 'do the right thing' hovered between 26% and 36% between 2010 and 2019, before rising to 54% in 2020, the highest level recorded in the surveys (Markus, 2021). This corresponds with other national surveys (Cameron & McAllister, 2019) and reflects international trends that point to a 'trust deficit' in both the public and private sector (Llewellyn, Brookes & Mahon, 2013). This extends to levels of trust across the general community; the Scanlon Foundation survey reports that only 53% agreed that 'most people can be trusted' (Markus, 2021).

Trust in institutions and others in the community plays a key role in facilitating a safe, secure, and cohesive society and ensuring widespread economic, political, and social participation. Trust is also critical for ensuring community safety. For example, the willingness of residents to cooperate with the police is driven by their perceptions of police legitimacy and effectiveness. Levels of trust in the police are not evenly distributed across Australian society; studies have shown that people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often have different views about the role and legitimacy of police compared to others (Murphy & Cherney, 2012). For migrants and particularly refugees, attitudes can be affected by previous experiences of authoritative policing and/or biased and discriminatory behaviour from police in the country in which they currently reside (Weber, 2013).

The *Australia Today* survey conducted in 2015 compared attitudes and experiences of Australian-born with immigrants found that trust is highest among those who had arrived within the last five years, lowest among those who had been in Australia for between 10 and 14 years, before increasing again for those resident for 20-24 years (Markus, 2016). Despite the value of these findings to understanding how migration affects levels of trust, the evidence of the impact of gender and migration history on levels of trust remains inconclusive (Murphy & Barkworth, 2014; Sargeant, Murphy & Cherney, 2014). Moreover, many national surveys that measure levels of trust do not capture the experiences of particular migrants

and refugees (particularly temporary visa holders) and do not account for language proficiency in survey design and participant recruitment.

## The Migrant and Refugee Women Safety and Security survey

We draw here on data from the Migrant and Refugee Women's Safety and Security Study conducted by the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre in partnership with Harmony Alliance: Migrant and refugee women for change. The survey asked questions about domestic and family violence, trust in institutions and attitudes towards police, general victimisation and employment and financial security<sup>1</sup>. The final report was based on responses from 1392 migrant and refugee women across Australia. While the definition of 'women from migrant and refugee backgrounds' was designed to be broad, 98% of the sample comprised women who were born overseas, with country of birth comprising 125 countries. The majority (55%) of respondents had arrived in the last ten years. The sample had a relatively high level of educational attainment, which is reflective of the relative socio-economic advantage of the sample. While the survey is not a representative sample, and cannot provide a comprehensive account of the experiences of all women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, it offers a unique snapshot of a diverse sample of women from across Australia who were willing to share their experiences with us. Understanding the diverse needs and experiences of migrant and refugee women in Australia and catering to them appropriately is critical to building safer and more secure livelihoods for these women.

## Key findings

**Migrant and refugee women have generally low levels of trust in religious community leadership, moderate levels of trust in neighbours and the local community, and high levels of trust in the Australian healthcare and education systems.**

Participants reported relatively high levels of trust in the Australian healthcare and state/territory education systems. The most noteworthy finding was the lack of trust in religious leaders, with 28% of our sample reporting no trust in religious community leadership and only 23% reporting 'a great deal' or 'a lot' of trust.

Young people reported lower levels of trust overall and demonstrated particularly low levels of trust in religious

<sup>1</sup> For full details of the survey design please see: Segrave, M., Wickes, R., & Keel, C. (2021b). *Migrant and Refugee Women in Australia: The Safety and Security Study Technical Report*, Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/14794677>.

leadership. Forty-six percent of participants from South and North America reported no trust at all in religious leadership. Those participants with higher educational attainment and higher levels of English proficiency were also less trusting of religious leadership. Lastly, and unsurprisingly, those participants who were not religious were less likely to trust religious leaders compared to those who reported for whom religion was an important part of their daily lives.

**Younger women and those with a higher level of educational attainment viewed the police as less procedurally just and were less willing to cooperate with police.**

The willingness of residents to cooperate with the police is driven by their perceptions of police, particularly the perceived legitimacy of the police and their effectiveness. The majority of migrant and refugee women in our survey viewed the police as legitimate and procedurally just, suggesting high levels of trust. However, a fifth of respondents disagreed that police treat people fairly, are polite, and make decisions based on facts. Just under half of women under the age of 30 reported low levels of procedural justice, compared to a quarter of those over 65. Similarly, 43% of those with university qualifications reported low levels of procedural justice, compared to 21% of those who had only completed high school.

While the majority of migrant and refugee women in our sample were willing to cooperate with the police, those who have experienced victimisation were less willing. Individuals who experienced DFV and general victimisation had lower levels of trust in police, viewing them as less procedurally just and fair compared to the rest of the sample<sup>2</sup>. An experience of victimisation also affected attitudes towards the accessibility of police, and willingness to cooperate with police. These findings suggest that an experience of victimisation of DFV and non-DFV crime diminishes levels of trust in police and lowers the likelihood of cooperation.

## Conclusion

While there was generally a high level of trust in the institutions included in this study (including the judicial, education, and health systems), religious institutions consistently attracted low levels of trust. As such, the reliance on religious leaders as community representatives and key figures to provide information and support requires careful rethinking. The survey also found that women who had experienced victimisation were less likely to cooperate with police, suggesting lower levels of trust in police. These findings point to the importance of understanding the experience and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and specifically migrant and refugee women, who are often overlooked or underrepresented in national surveys on safety and security. As this study has shown, migrant and refugee women are not a homogenous group, and the variation in experiences and attitudes towards safety and security among these women should guide future policy and research.

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<sup>2</sup> The impact of victimisation on attitudes towards police is covered in greater detail in the research brief on 'Experiences of victimisation among migrant and refugee women in Australia'.

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