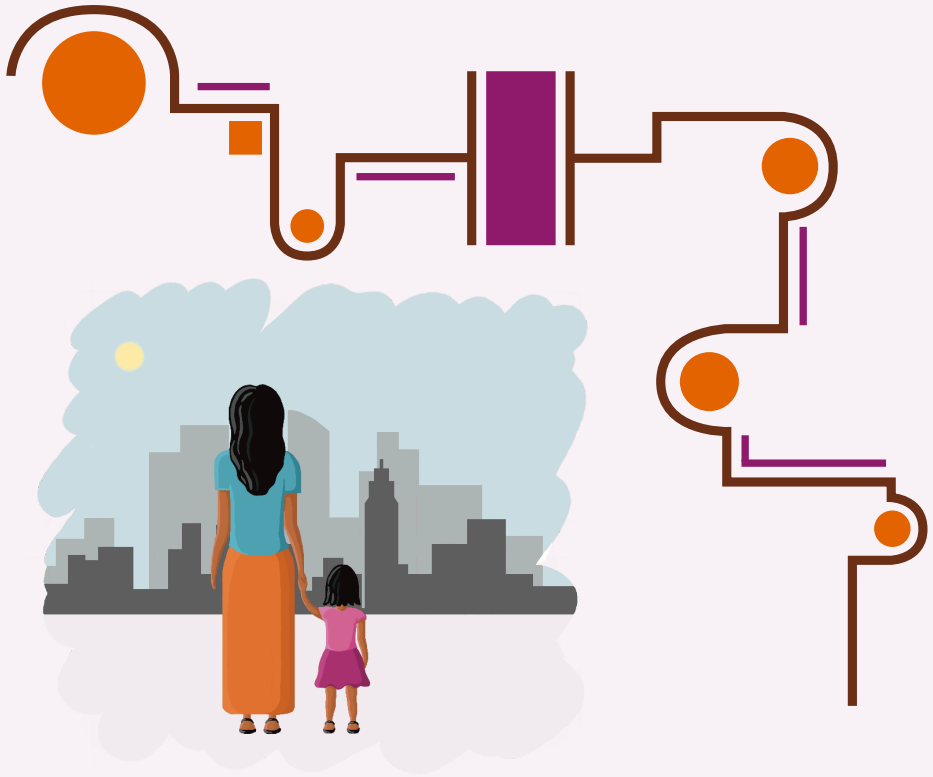




Maya's story

**A migrant woman's journey navigating safety
and justice in Aotearoa New Zealand**

Written by Dhilum Nightingale

Illustrated by Bijou Brown



This graphic novel and report are dedicated to all ethnic and migrant women who have navigated, or are currently navigating, New Zealand's Family Court and immigration systems while seeking safety from family violence. May this work contribute to building systems worthy of your trust, your dignity, and your right to live free from violence and fear.

This work was funded by:



This work was sponsored by:



This graphic novel was illustrated by:

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This booklet was designed by:


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DESIGN AND RESEARCH

www.afnankayededesign.com

Maya's Story

At the heart of this story is Maya.

Maya is a composite character, drawn from real experiences of ethnic and migrant women navigating safety, migration, and justice through Aotearoa New Zealand's legal systems. While Maya herself is fictional, the barriers she encounters are not. Her story reflects recurring patterns observed across diverse ethnic and migrant communities.

Through marriage, migration, coercive control, and her attempts to seek protection, Maya navigates multiple legal and social systems — Family Court, immigration, housing, income support, and a job market closed to short-term visa holders — each operating alongside the others, but rarely together. Instead of encountering a system that sees her as a whole person, Maya is viewed in fragments: as a temporary visa holder, a court applicant, a client, a risk to be assessed.

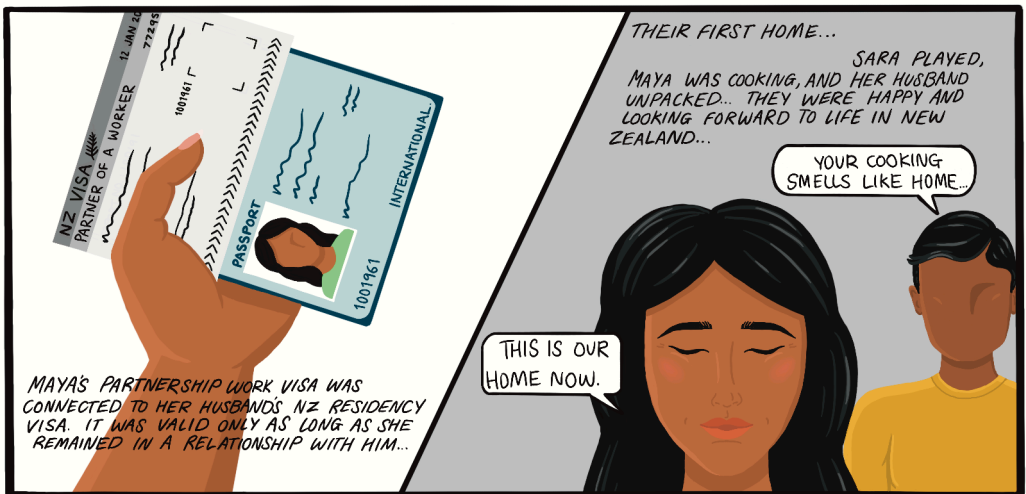


What is missing becomes clear. Family law and immigration law do not speak to each other. Support is fragmented rather than coordinated. Cultural context, trauma, and coercive control are often misunderstood or overlooked. Women are left to move between systems without clear information, predictable steps, or an understanding of how decisions in one process affect another.

Instead of voice and autonomy, Maya encounters confusion. Instead of holistic protection, she is required to carry responsibility for her own safety—and her child's safety—across systems that do not communicate with each other, and fail to see her as an individual.

Maya's story is not an anomaly. It reflects a broader pattern in which private harm intersects with public systems that are ill-equipped to respond to the lived realities of ethnic and migrant women.

This graphic novel shows what happens when systems fail to see the individual standing in front of them—until, eventually, she is forced to carry everything alone.



HE CAME HERE FOR A BETTER LIFE.
SO DID SHE.



THEY SHARED THE SAME HOPES
AND DREAMS FOR THEIR
DAUGHTER'S FUTURE...

NOTICEBOARD



Central Library

BUT IT WASN'T EVERYTHING
HE ENVISIONED.

THE CHANGE WAS
GRADUAL BUT HE
STARTED TAKING
IT OUT ON
MAYA.



WHO ARE
YOU
TEXTING?!

HE CONTROLS
THE MONEY, HER
PHONE... HE WON'T
LET HER WORK ...



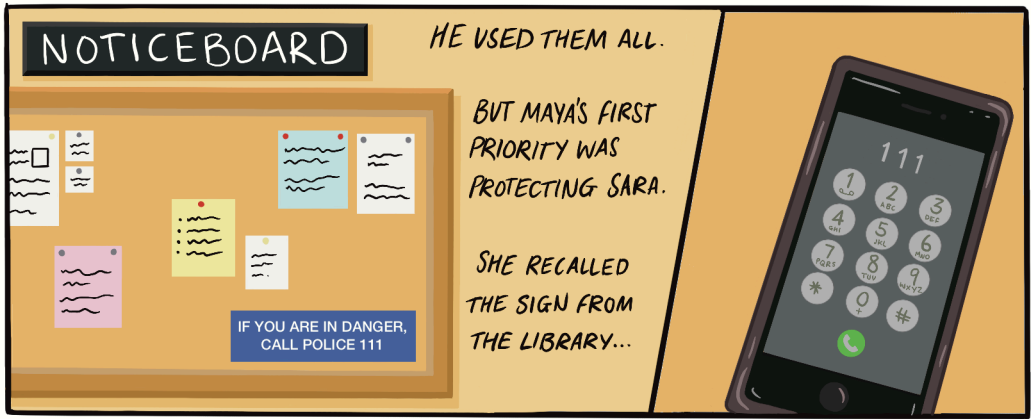
EVEN IF SHE KNEW
WHO TO ASK FOR
HELP SHE COULD
NOT REACH THEM.

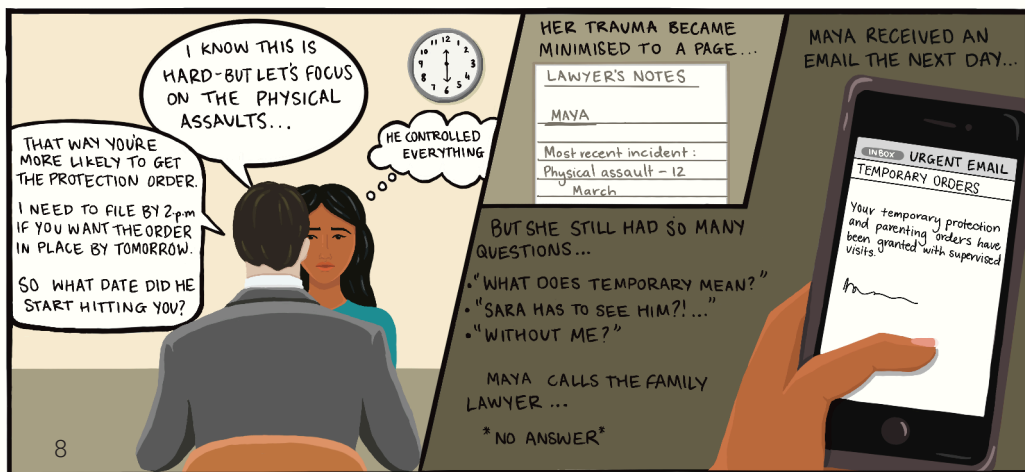
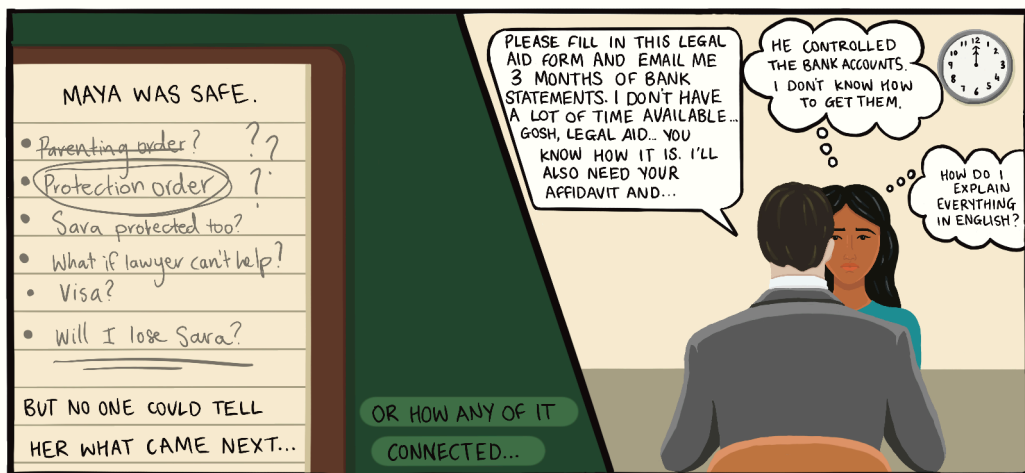
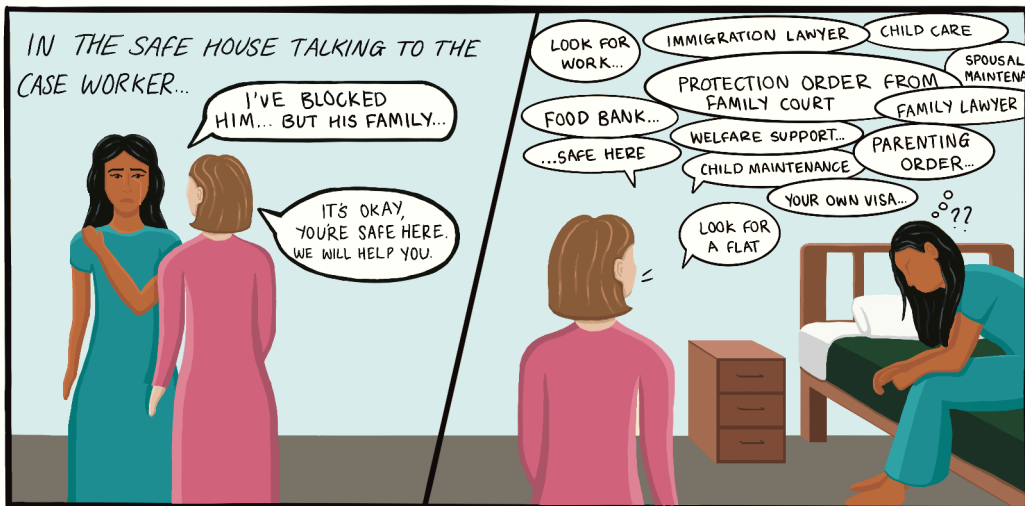
SHE COULDN'T EVEN
CALL HOME...

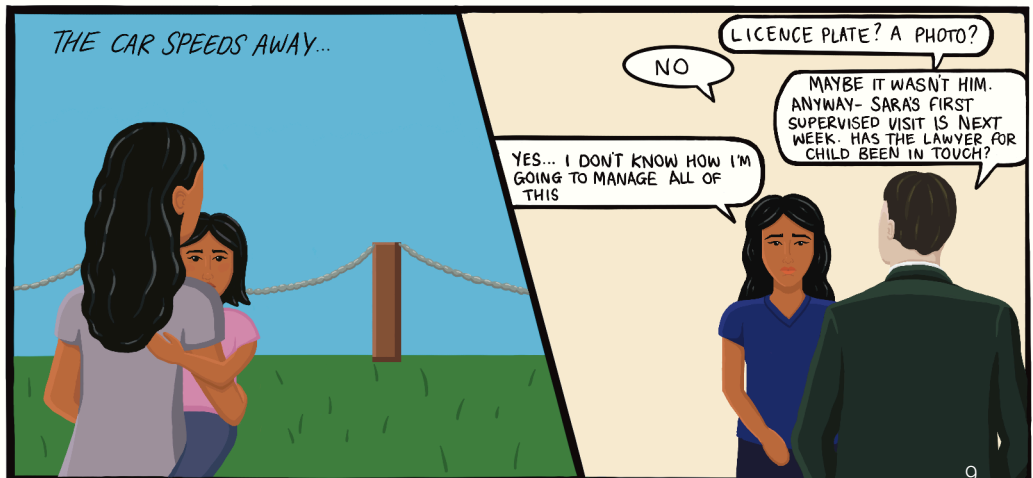
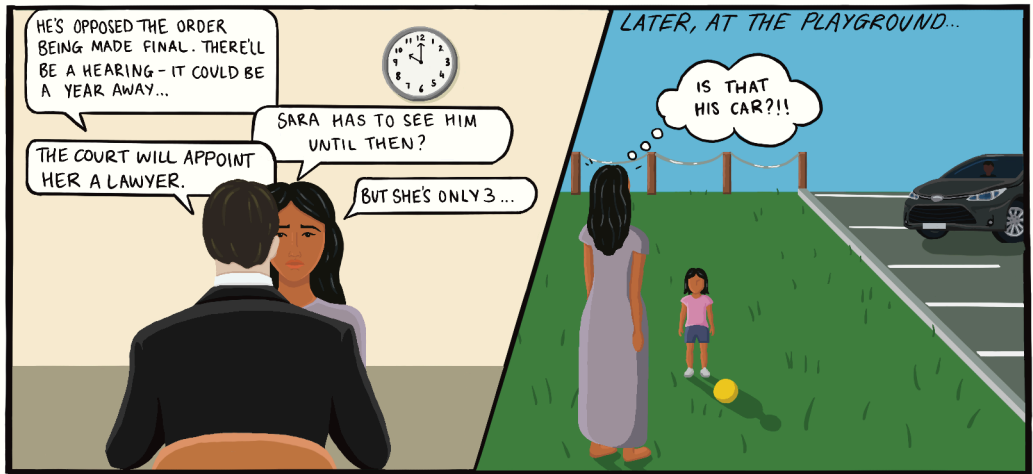
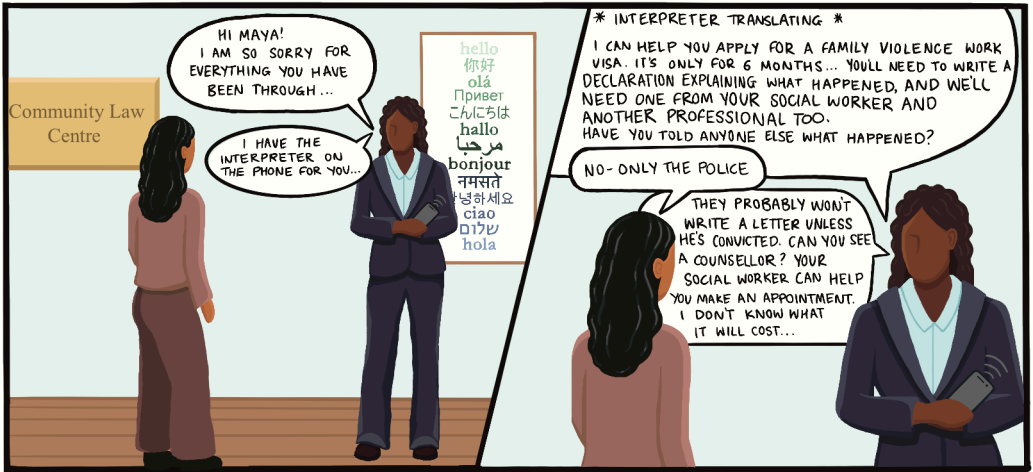
YOUR VISA
DEPENDS ON ME!

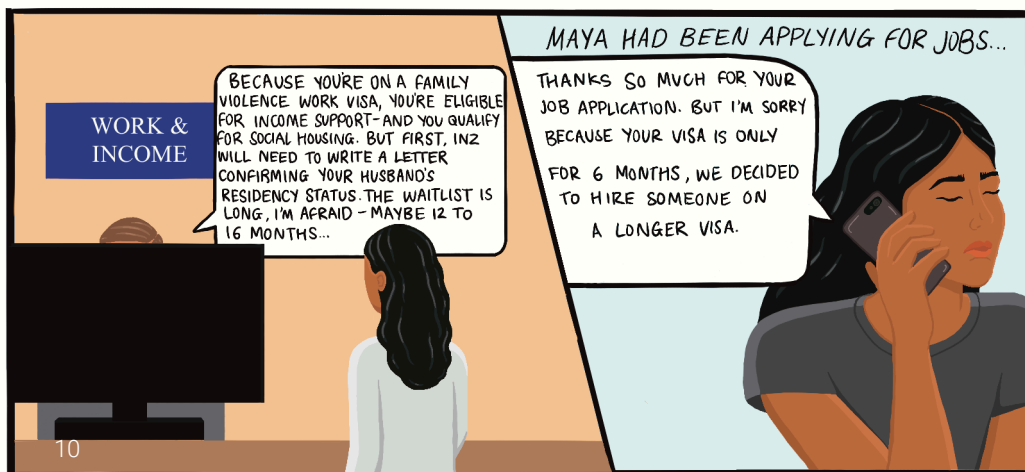
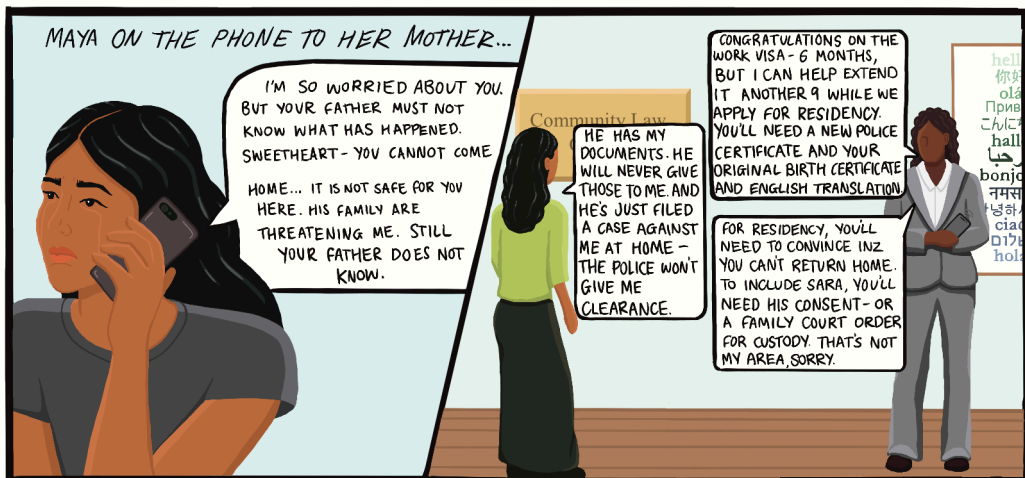












MAYA'S EX-HUSBAND VISITING HIS LAWYER...

SHE WANTS ME TO CONSENT TO SARA HAVING NZ RESIDENCY? NO - I WON'T DO IT. LET HER STRESS.

TELL ME ABOUT NON-REMOVAL ORDERS...

MAYA STRUGGLED TO WRITE HER RESIDENCY STATEMENT, SHAME AND FEAR STOPPING HER EACH TIME. WHEN SHE FINALLY FILED IT, INZ SENT A 'QUESTIONNAIRE' ASKING HER TO EXPLAIN IT ALL AGAIN - LEAVING HER FEELING UNHEARD, AND RETRAUMATISED.

NOTES
WHY I CAN'T RETURN HOME:
•

I CAN'T GO BACK. THERE'S NOTHING THERE FOR ME NOW - AND THE SHAME WOULD FOLLOW ME EVERYWHERE.

I AM ONLY CONCERNED WITH WHAT THE RESPONDENT HAS DONE.

HIS FAMILY ARE HARASSING ME ONLINE.

I DON'T THINK THE JUDGE WILL MAKE THIS FINAL. YOU MAY BE BETTER TO ACCEPT AN UNDERTAKING. IT'S NOT THE SAME AS A FINAL ORDER - BUT IT'S SOMETHING.

IF HE BREACHES IT, WILL THEY ARREST HIM?

NO - BUT IT'S THE BEST YOU'VE GOT.

NOT ENOUGH EVIDENCE FOR A FINAL PROTECTION ORDER

HUSBAND'S CONSENT NEEDED FOR SARA'S RESIDENCY

NO JOB OFFERS WITH A SIX MONTH VISA

NEED TO MOVE OUT OF THE SAFE HOUSE NOW

MAYA FACED BARRIER AFTER BARRIER...

Maya's Story Re-imagined



Every barrier in Maya's story was drawn from interviews with victim-survivors.

While additional barriers were identified, the following emerged repeatedly across numerous interviews:

- **A system that struggles to recognise coercive control** — let alone culture-based coercion and transnational abuse.
- **Inconsistent access to interpreters** — and victim-survivors often not knowing they could request one — meaning their full story is never told, and disclosure is never complete.
- **Legal aid too underfunded, and buried in process, to hear the whole story** — and unavailable entirely for immigration matters, leaving women reliant on stretched community law centres and pro bono lawyers.
- **Protection orders traded for undertakings that cannot be enforced**
- **Shame, stigma, and community and family pressure** to reconcile, silencing help-seeking at every step.
- **Services operating in silos, so that rarely does any single person or agency see the whole person's journey and their needs** — victim-survivors re-traumatised each time they tell their story to a new person, and left to coordinate their own safety across systems that do not communicate with each other, and which may exclude them entirely.
- **Visa dependency, immigration criteria, and court proceedings themselves weaponised by perpetrators** — with children used to continue harassment and control through the legal process

Does the system have to be this way?

What follows next is *Maya's Story Re-imagined*. It is not intended to address every challenge Maya faced. Instead, it is an invitation — to everyone working in, participating in, and interacting with the system — to imagine what different and better could look like, and to start building it.

"Everyone in every role has something they can do at every step."

— Discovery Workshop participant, Tāmaki Makaurau, July 2025,
Navigating Safety and Justice in Aotearoa New Zealand, p.154.

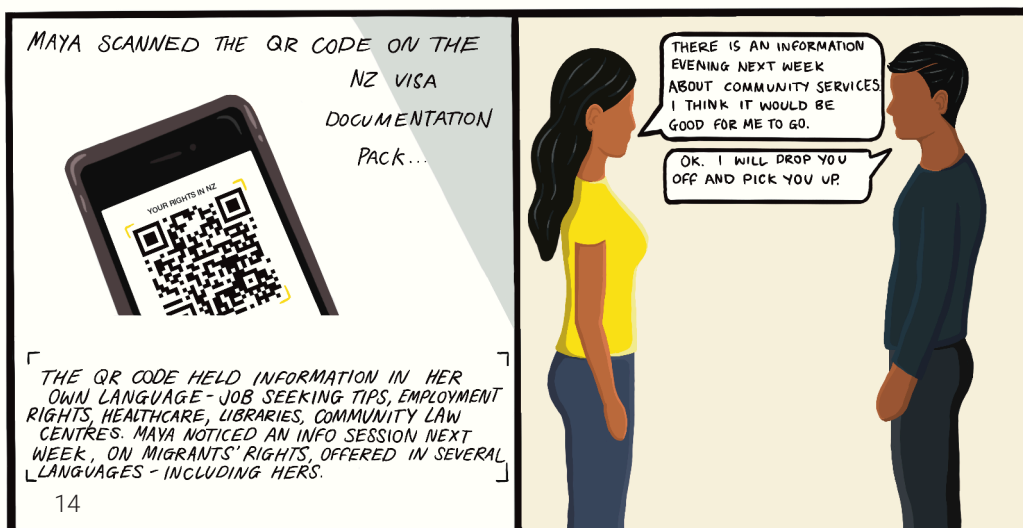
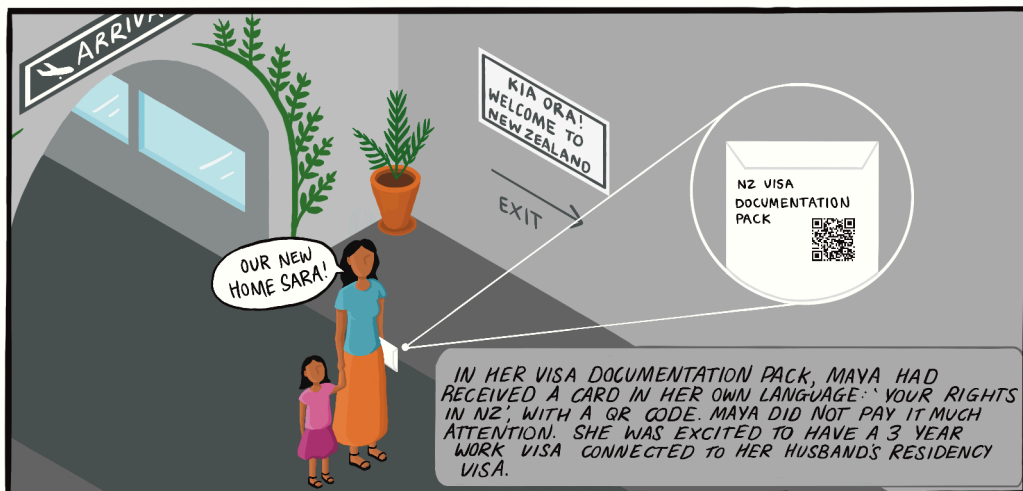
What is within your sphere of control or influence to make a meaningful difference to safety and justice outcomes for Maya, and for other victim-survivors of family violence in ethnic and migrant communities?

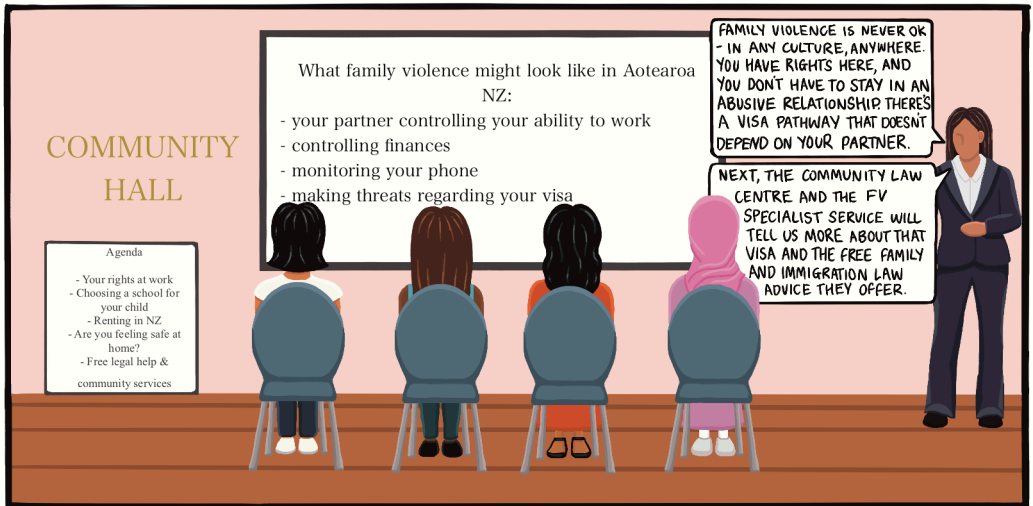
We hope Maya's Story has amplified victim-survivors' voices — and that *Maya's Story Re-imagined* inspires action: by Ministers, officials, the judiciary and court staff, lawyers, the New Zealand Law Society, Immigration New Zealand, the family violence sector, civil society, community and faith-based organisations, interpreters, and members of the public.

See the Call to Action at the back of this book, and the full list of recommendations in [*Navigating Safety and Justice in Aotearoa New Zealand*](#).



To continue the conversation, please contact us at:
mayasstory@shama.org.nz





MAYA KNEW THE SUPPORT SERVICE TO CALL. THAT INFORMATION HAD REACHED HER - THROUGH THE QR CODE IN HER VISA PACK, THE BROCHURES AT THE LIBRARY, AND THE INFO SESSION IN THE COMMUNITY HALL.

I NEED HELP PLEASE, MY HUSBAND IS ABUSING ME AND I AM WORRIED ABOUT MY DAUGHTER. IT IS NOT SAFE FOR US TO BE HERE.



I'M SO SORRY THIS IS HAPPENING. THIS IS NOT YOUR FAULT. I WILL PUT YOU ONTO A SOCIAL WORKER WHO CAN HELP. WHAT LANGUAGE WOULD YOU PREFER?

WE HAVE PHONE INTERPRETERS AVAILABLE...



IN A LIBRARY MEETING ROOM, MAYA MEETS MICHELLE, HER SPECIALIST ADVOCATE. SHE WAS COMPASSIONATE, UNDERSTANDING AND REASSURED MAYA SHE WOULD BE WITH HER AT EVERY STEP...

I KNOW THIS IS REALLY HARD. WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING FOR YOU RIGHT NOW?

MY DAUGHTER AND MY VISA. I WILL NOT BE SEPARATED FROM SARA. I AM SO SCARED.



WELCOME TO THE SAFE HOUSE. YOU WILL BE SAFE HERE. LET ME SHOW YOU TO YOUR ROOM.



MAYA, THIS IS AMEERA, YOUR INTERPRETER. SHE'S A FAMILY VIOLENCE ACCREDITED SPECIALIST, AND EVERYTHING YOU TELL HER STAYS CONFIDENTIAL.

THIS WEEK, YOU'LL MEET THE REST OF YOUR TEAM - A COUNSELLOR, A DOCTOR, THE POLICE OFFICER FROM THIS EVENING, AND KIM, YOUR FAMILY AND IMMIGRATION LAWYER. I'LL BE WITH YOU AT EVERY MEETING, SO YOU'LL NEVER HAVE TO START YOUR STORY OVER.



SHE DID NOT HAVE TO THINK OF EVERYTHING HERSELF. BECAUSE ONE PERSON HELD THE WHOLE PICTURE, MAYA COULD BEGIN TO TRUST THAT THERE WAS A WAY THROUGH...

THANK YOU SO MUCH! I'D FEEL VERY LOST WITHOUT ALL OF THIS SUPPORT.

A panel showing two women sitting at a table. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing an orange shirt. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a pink shirt. They are both looking at each other.

IN MAYA'S LAWYERS OFFICE...

HI, I'M KIM. IT'S SO NICE TO MEET YOU. MICHELLE HAS FILLED ME IN - I'M SORRY ABOUT WHAT'S HAPPENED. I'M HERE TO HELP WITH THE VISAS - YOURS AND SARA'S - AND THE FAMILY COURT APPLICATIONS. EVERYTHING IS COVERED UNDER LEGAL AID.

A panel showing four people sitting at a long table in a lawyer's office. From left to right: a woman with dark hair in a pink shirt, a woman with blonde hair in a white shirt, a woman with dark hair in a blue shirt (Maya), and a woman with red hair in a grey suit (Kim). A clock on the wall shows the time is approximately 10:10.

MICHELLE THANKS FOR ARRANGING ALL THE STATUTORY DECLARATIONS - YOURS, THE COUNSELLORS, AND MAYA'S. THEY'RE ALL EXCELLENT. I UNDERSTAND THE CONTROL HE USED, THE VISA THREATS, THE PRESSURE FROM HIS FAMILY BACK HOME, AND THE STIGMA YOU'D FACE IF YOU RETURNED. THAT MUST HAVE BEEN SO FRIGHTENING SEEING HIM AT THE PLAYGROUND YESTERDAY. SHALL WE GO THROUGH YOUR AFFIDAVIT NOW?

A panel showing four people sitting at a long table. From left to right: a woman with dark hair in a pink shirt, a woman with blonde hair in a white shirt, a woman with dark hair in a blue shirt (Maya), and a woman with red hair in a grey suit (Kim). Michelle is speaking to Maya and Kim.

MAYA SPEAKS OPENLY - SHE FEELS BELIEVED, AND KNOWS NONE OF THIS IS HER FAULT. SHE UNDERSTANDS WHAT COMES NEXT, AND DOESN'T FEEL RUSHED.

A panel showing two women sitting at a table. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing a blue shirt. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a white shirt. They are both looking at each other.

TWO DAYS LATER... THE TEMPORARY PARENTING AND PROTECTION ORDERS HAVE BEEN GRANTED, AND THE FAMILY COURT HAS CONFIRMED THAT SARA CAN BE INCLUDED IN MAYA'S VISA APPLICATIONS AS THAT IS IN HER BEST INTERESTS.

THE INZ FAMILY VIOLENCE SPECIALIST TEAM HAVE BEEN IN TOUCH TODAY - THEY HAVE YOUR APPLICATIONS. A SPECIALIST, TRAUMA-INFORMED CASE OFFICER HAS BEEN ASSIGNED AND SHE WILL WORK WITH YOU THROUGH THE WORK VISA AND THE RESIDENCY PROCESS.

WONDERFUL, THAT'S REALLY REASSURING.

A panel showing two women standing and talking. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing a green shirt. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a brown dress.

THREE WEEKS LATER...

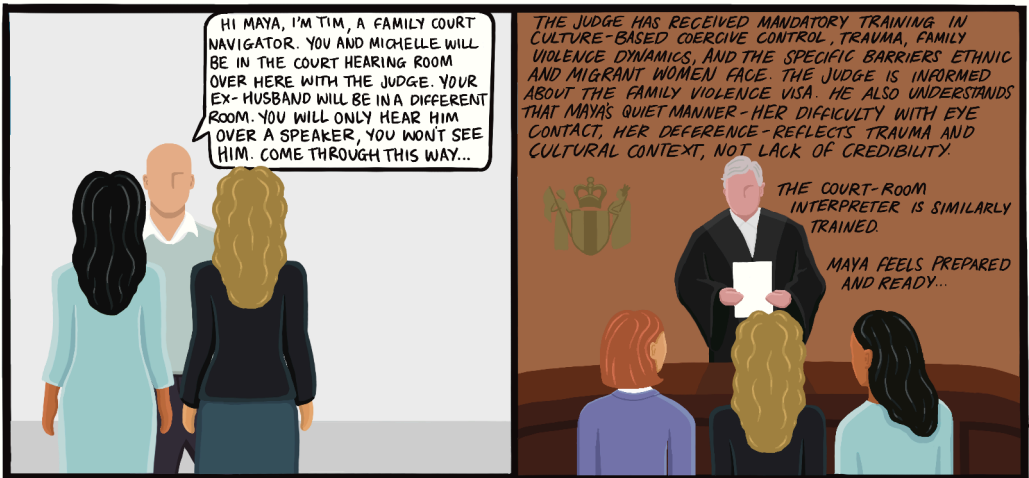
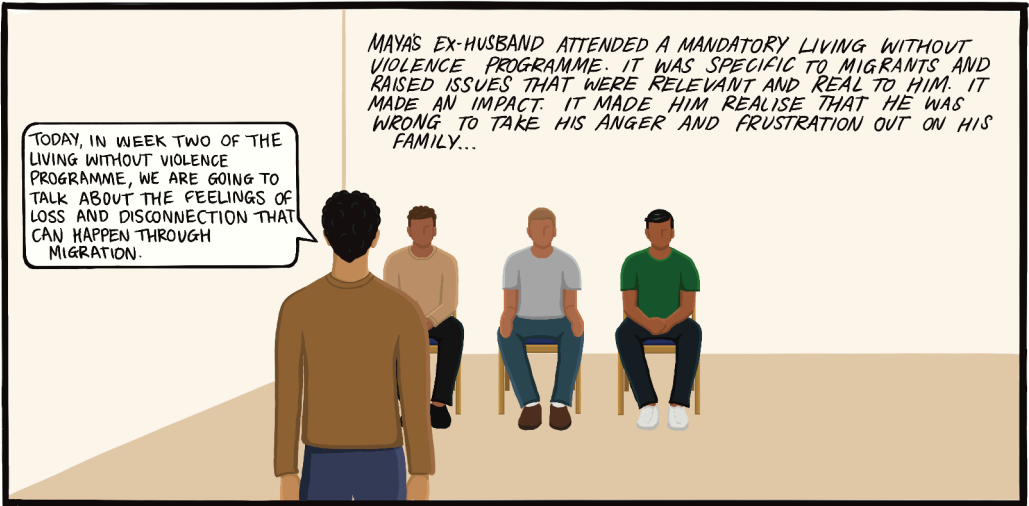
CONGRATULATIONS - YOUR NEW 3 YEAR VISA HAS ARRIVED. YOU WON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT VISA APPLICATIONS AGAIN FOR A WHILE.

3 YEARS OF STABILITY - FOR BOTH OF US. I'M SO RELIEVED!

WHILE SARA IS AT DAYCARE TOMORROW, IF YOU LIKE, WE CAN MEET A FV-SPECIALIST INCOME SUPPORT OFFICER AT WORK AND INCOME - THEY RUN A GREAT CV AND JOB-READINESS WORKSHOP AND CAN HELP TO GET YOUR QUALIFICATIONS RECOGNISED HERE.

THE SYSTEM SAW MAYA AS A WHOLE, AND MOVED AT THE PACE SHE NEEDED. HER VISA WAS FINALLY HER OWN - HE COULD NO LONGER USE IT AS A WEAPON. SHE AND SARA WERE SAFE AND COULD BEGIN TO REBUILD.

A panel showing two women standing and talking. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing an orange shirt. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a blue dress.



MAYA FELT HEARD SHE EVEN DARED TO HOPE THAT THE MAN SHE ONCE LOVED WOULD ONE DAY RETURN TO HER, AND THEY COULD BE A FAMILY AGAIN. BUT SHE KNEW THAT SHE HAD TO PUT HER SAFETY AND SARA FIRST, AND THAT IS WHAT SHE HAD DONE.



6 MONTHS LATER...



LET'S WORK ON YOUR RESIDENCY APPLICATION TODAY. I KNOW GETTING RESIDENCY WILL HELP A LOT WITH YOUR JOB HUNTING.

5 MONTHS LATER...

Welcome to the Community Hub

YOU'VE DONE SO WELL MAYA. YOU HAVE A JOB, YOU'VE MOVED INTO A NEW FLAT, YOU AND SARA ARE BOTH NZ RESIDENTS. ITS AMAZING WHAT YOU'VE BEEN ABLE TO ACHIEVE.



INTEGRATED SERVICES, COORDINATED SUPPORT THAT TRULY SAW MAYA, AND IMMIGRATION SECURITY - STEPPING STONES INSTEAD OF BRICK WALLS.

MICHELLE AND KIM, I HONESTLY COULD NOT HAVE DONE THIS WITHOUT YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. THANK YOU SO MUCH - FROM US BOTH.

BYE AUNTY MICHELLE, BYE AUNTY KIM!



3 MONTHS LATER, IN MAYA'S LIVING ROOM, MICHELLE CALLS...

THE SYSTEM STILL CARED; MAYA'S SUPPORT DID NOT DISAPPEAR WHEN HER LEGAL CASES CLOSED.

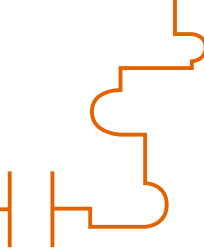
THE AGENCIES HAD SEEN HER WHOLE. MAYA DID NOT HAVE TO CARRY THE WEIGHT ALONE.

SHE AND SARA CONTINUED TO THRIVE...

WE ARE DOING GREAT, THANK YOU! HOW ARE YOU?



Universal Needs



Across survivor and advocate interviews, and the discovery workshop, a consistent picture emerged: the current system largely fails ethnic and migrant women in three fundamental ways:

- The system does not see them as individuals
- The system is fragmented
- Immigration precarity undermines safety at every turn.

From these sources, ten universal needs emerged—the foundational requirements for a family violence response that ensures ethnic and migrant women can safely leave violent relationships, navigate the legal system, and rebuild their lives.

Information that reaches women where they are

Online, through trusted community channels, addressing migrant-specific questions, accessible even when technology is monitored, and leading to a known, central place for help rather than a maze of agencies.

Time

Legal aid funding that reflects actual complexity, contracts that allow wraparound support rather than crisis intervention only, and court scheduling that accommodates interpreted proceedings.

Training that is ongoing, specific, and accountable

Not one-off workshops, but mandatory continuing education embedded in accountability mechanisms for judges, lawyers, interpreters, and court staff.

Interpreters who are trained, available, and safe

At every meeting with lawyers, not just court appearances; trained in family violence dynamics; and selected with consideration for community dynamics and gender.

Cultural evidence as standard practice

Lawyers trained to gather and present it, cultural and structural impact statements as standard components of affidavits, and judicial education on how to interpret and apply cultural evidence.

Integration across systems

Family lawyers with immigration knowledge, Immigration NZ processes aligned with Family Court timeframes, information sharing between agencies, and a coordinator model so women are not left to navigate alone.

A survivor-centred approach that preserves autonomy

Women deciding who leads their support, services designed around the woman's journey rather than agency structures, and respect for women's decisions even when professionals might advise differently.

Safe spaces—physical and relational

Separate waiting areas, professionals who respond with empathy rather than administrative detachment, and processes that do not require women to repeatedly recount trauma.

Children recognised as victims in their own right

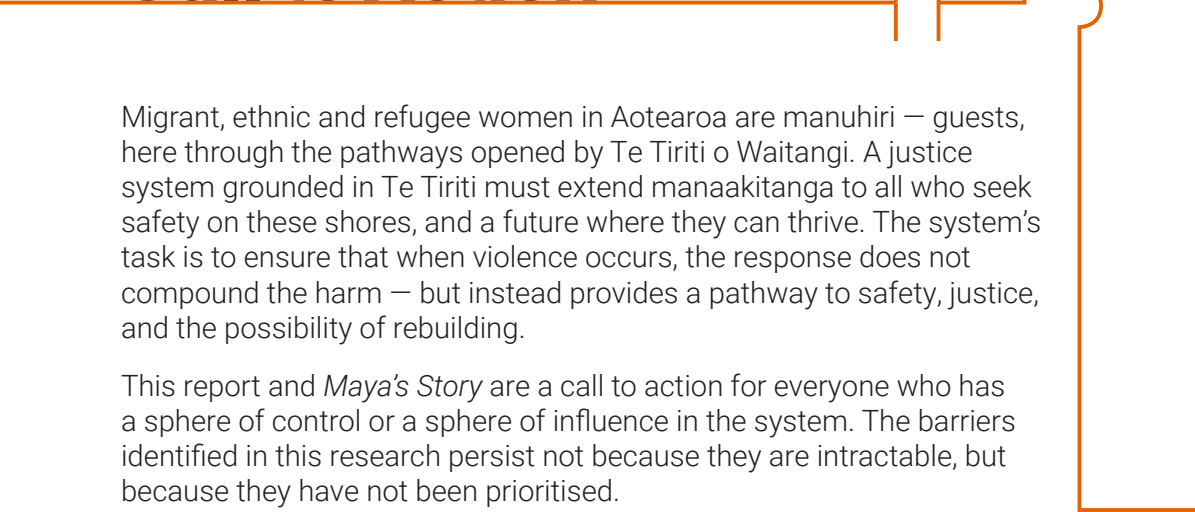
Lawyer for Child trained in family violence dynamics; where visa precarity is an issue the paramountcy principle actively applied to each child in their particular circumstances, and recognition that a mother's safety and a child's wellbeing are deeply interconnected.

Immigration security as a foundation for safety

A family violence visa pathway that is flexible and timely, work visas of sufficient duration, trauma-informed immigration processes, and an end to the use of immigration status as a tool of coercive control.

Addressing these needs may not require wholesale system redesign. Instead, what is needed is a more empathetic immigration policy response, greater attention to implementation gaps, cohesive service delivery, adequate resourcing and training, and a genuine commitment to seeing ethnic and migrant women victim-survivors of family and sexual violence as whole people with unique needs.

Call to Action



Migrant, ethnic and refugee women in Aotearoa are manuhiri — guests, here through the pathways opened by Te Tiriti o Waitangi. A justice system grounded in Te Tiriti must extend manaakitanga to all who seek safety on these shores, and a future where they can thrive. The system's task is to ensure that when violence occurs, the response does not compound the harm — but instead provides a pathway to safety, justice, and the possibility of rebuilding.

This report and *Maya's Story* are a call to action for everyone who has a sphere of control or a sphere of influence in the system. The barriers identified in this research persist not because they are intractable, but because they have not been prioritised.

To the Government

The recommendations in this report require political will and adequate resourcing:

- Commit to a cross-agency response that recognises family violence affecting ethnic and migrant women cannot be addressed by any single ministry in isolation. The Ministry of Justice, Immigration New Zealand, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Ministry for Ethnic Communities must work together.
- Resource the family violence sector adequately to provide culturally responsive, specialist services—including sustainable funding for ethnic-specific organisations that have the cultural expertise and community trust to support these women effectively.
- Reform immigration settings so that women's safety is not held hostage to their visa status. The family violence visa pathway must be extended, simplified, and made accessible.
- Fund legal aid properly so that lawyers have time to build trust, understand cultural context, gather evidence of coercive control, and advocate effectively.
- Invest in interpreter services that are professional, trained in family violence, and available at every stage—not just in the courtroom, but in lawyer meetings, with support services, and throughout the immigration process.

To the Judiciary

Judges hold immense power in family violence proceedings:

- Undertake mandatory, ongoing training in cultural competence, trauma-informed practice, and the specific barriers ethnic and migrant women face—including coercive control, immigration abuse, and multi-perpetrator violence.
- Recognise that demeanour is shaped by culture and trauma, not just credibility. A woman who cannot make eye contact, who defers, who struggles to articulate her experience in a linear narrative, may be demonstrating the effects of abuse— rather than indicating unreliability — and training should equip court professionals to make that distinction.
- Ensure courtroom safety is proactively addressed for every ethnic and migrant woman appearing in family violence proceedings.

To the Legal Profession

Lawyers play a critical role at the earliest stage of a survivor's legal journey:

- Require cultural competence and trauma-informed practice training as part of continuing professional development for all lawyers practising in family law.
- See the whole person—not just the legal file. Ask about immigration status. Ask about cultural pressures. Ask about extended family involvement.
- Offer interpreters proactively—do not assume that conversational English is sufficient for proceedings that will determine a woman's safety and her children's future. Ask appropriate questions to understand the level of English competency, and where there is any doubt, arrange an interpreter.

To the Family Violence Sector

Specialist family violence services are lifelines for survivors:

- Build cultural capability across all services, while supporting and adequately funding ethnic-specific providers who have the expertise and trust to reach women that mainstream services cannot.
- Advocate for systemic change, not just individual support. The barriers documented in this report are structural. They require structural responses.
- Coordinate and communicate—with each other, with lawyers, with immigration advisers. Women should not have to tell their story from the beginning every time they encounter a new service.

To Immigration New Zealand and the Minister of Immigration

Immigration settings are weaponised by abusers every day:

- Train all staff in family violence dynamics, including the ways immigration status is used as a tool of coercive control.
- Amend immigration instructions to recognise family violence contexts, particularly regarding parental consent requirements for children's visas.
- Extend the family violence work visa to three years, and reform the residence visa pathway to focus on what matters: whether violence occurred during the relationship — not whether a woman can prove she is unable to return home.
- Align immigration decision-making timelines and processes with Family Court proceedings, so that visa decisions do not cut across or contradict the safety outcomes women are working to secure through the courts.

To All of Us

Family violence thrives in silence—when communities look away, when families pressure women to stay, when neighbours do not ask questions.

For ethnic and migrant women, that silence is often harder to break. It may be enforced by family loyalty, community reputation, or the fear that speaking out will bring shame not just to themselves but to everyone they love. It may be shaped by cultural expectations about marriage, by pressure from elders, or by the knowledge that their community is small and news travels fast. It may be compounded by not knowing that what is happening to them is recognised as violence under New Zealand law, or that help exists.

Every person in Aotearoa has a role to play:

- Believe women when they disclose
- Provide information about where to get help
- Challenge cultural bias and narratives that excuse violence or blame victims
- Support women to make their own choices, at their own pace
- Understand that leaving is not simple, and abuse is often hidden — sometimes, just asking how someone is can be the first step toward help.

If You Need Help

If you recognise any part of Maya's story in your own life, you are not alone — and help is available.

- **In immediate danger?** Call **111** (Police)
- **Women's Refuge Crisisline** — **Free call** 0800 733 843 (**0800 REFUGE**) — 24/7
- **Shama Ethnic Women's Trust** — **(07) 843 3810** or info@shama.org.nz — culturally responsive support for ethnic women experiencing family or sexual violence
- **Safe to Talk** (sexual harm) — Free call **0800 044 334** or text **4334, 24/7** — safetotalk.nz
- **Family Violence Information Line** — **Free call** 0800 456 450; areyouok.org.nz
- **Need to Talk?** — Free call or text **1737**, any time
- **Free legal help** — communitylaw.org.nz
- **Citizens Advice Bureau** — **Free, confidential, independent information and advice for anyone.** **0800 367 222** or cab.org.nz
- **Dhilum Nightingale, Barrister** — Free family violence immigration advice through Community Law Wellington & Hutt Valley. dhilum@wclc.org.nz

