

## Help for abused women in the Dutch refuge services

### A study on supply and demand in the refuge services

Every year, 17,000 to 18,000 women flee to women's refuges in the Netherlands because of violence by a partner or ex-partner. Many bring their children. What types of women make use of such services? What are their backgrounds, and what problems and care needs do they have? What help are they now receiving from the services, and does it amply address their situations? As no data was available to answer these questions, the Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport commissioned the Trimbos Institute and the Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre to assess the match between supply and demand in the Dutch women's refuge services. This article reports the key results of this first nationwide study on the services.

### More than 200 women interviewed

The main part of the study involved 218 interviews with women, recruited via a representative sample of 18 women's refuge organisations across the country (almost half of the nationwide total). The target population consisted of women aged 18 or older who had come to the services as a result of abuse. Abuse was defined as all forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence. In selecting the women for the sample, we took into account their country of origin (Dutch-born / foreign-born) and the stage of their involvement (initial crisis services in the first three weeks / follow-up services beyond three weeks). The interviewed women were thus distinguished as follows:

	<b>Initial services (1 day to 3 weeks)</b>	<b>Follow-up services (&gt; 3 weeks)</b>
<b>Dutch-born</b>	63	47
<b>Foreign-born</b>	51	57

A total of 34 of the interviews were administered in 15 languages other than Dutch. Topics included the women's profiles, their quality of life, their physical and mental health, and the types of help they desired and received in more than ten life domains. In addition to the individual interviews, we held group discussions with women and performed observations in the refuge agencies. We also conducted a survey and several group interviews with agency staff.

### Profiles of women and refuge workers

The 218 interviewed women using the services averaged 32 years of age, and over half were of non-Dutch origin (predominantly Surinamese, Moroccan or Turkish). Half were married, and the large majority (81%) had children. The women faced serious social deprivation: many had no income of their own, very low education levels (40% to 50% had no formal education or primary school only) and low rates of labour market participation. A considerable percentage were not fluent in Dutch. More than half (61%) were in debt. Their perceived general quality of life was low. Virtually all had experienced psychological

violence, the vast majority (80%) had suffered physical violence, and one third reported sexual violence.

Over two thirds of the women in the crisis stage and more than half in the follow-up stage were suffering moderate to severe depression; more foreign-born women were depressed than Dutch-born women. High percentages of women had posttraumatic stress disorders (87% in the crisis stage, 81% in the follow-up stage). Depression and PTSD were assessed using standardised instruments.

Most of the operational staff in the refuge services were women, with an average age of 38. Three quarters were of Dutch origin, and three quarters had intermediate vocational qualifications. They were employed for an average of 27 hours a week, and averaged 13 hours of direct help to abused women. More than half (57%) of the workers felt this was too little time. They mostly worked with groups of women (61%), with individual women (82%) and/or with family systems (58%).

**Match between supply and demand**

The table below shows the percentages of women reported service needs in specific life domains and the percentages who felt these needs were being met by help from either within or outside the refuge services or both.

<b>Life domain</b>	<b>Help needed</b>	<b>Help received</b>
Housing	91%	63%
Financial affairs	83%	67%
Mental health	73%	65%
Safety	70%	88%
Personal resilience	67%	50%

Women mainly expressed needs for practical help – in housing (seeking and arranging accommodation) and financial matters (applying for benefits, money management, straightening out an organisational chaos). Mental health and resilience issues also scored high. These were all areas in which women were receiving less help than they desired. Safety was the sole area in which women received more help than they believed was strictly necessary. The stringent safety measures in the refuges are designed with the most serious threats in mind. Individual women must observe them even if they consider them excessive for their own situation, which is especially the case after some time has passed and their own danger has subsided.

Foreign-born women expressed more service needs than Dutch-born women. What stood out the most were their greater needs concerning financial affairs, daily activities, social contacts, safety, physical health, social and cultural issues, and finding meaning and purpose. In comparison with Dutch-born women, they particularly received less help in finding housing (partly because those without residence permits were ineligible) and receiving mental health care. They received comparatively more physical health care, probably because they tended to somatise their problems. Interestingly, Dutch-born women reported receiving more help than they thought necessary (unsolicited interference).

The women themselves judged the follow-up services to be more responsive to their needs than the crisis services. This was partly attributable to the time limits

imposed on their initial stay. Not uncommonly, it was incumbent on the women themselves to find safe follow-up accommodation, and that provoked considerable additional stress. Since women were known to be departing after six or eight weeks, the crisis staff did not always begin dealing with all their problems. The most common deficiencies in the initial-stage help involved housing, financial matters, daily activities, and building social contacts and personal resilience.

The help that women did receive from the refuge services was judged by them as generally adequate. The range of support services in follow-up stage was rated more suitable than that in the crisis stage. The longer women received services, the more benefit they reported in terms of perceived improvements in various life domains. Compared to their situation before turning to the refuge services, they saw particular improvements in safety and resilience, as well as positive changes in their mental health and their relationships with their children. Decline was reported mainly in their material situation, particularly in terms of housing, finances and daily activities, as well as (not surprisingly) in their relationships with the perpetrator(s) of the violence.

### **Factors affecting supply and demand**

Several factors appear to contribute to the less-than-optimal balance between supply and demand in the women's refuge services. One problem is that many of the methods employed by the services are still based on principles such as self-reliance, self-responsibility and self-motivation which are not well suited to the group of women currently being reached. Another difficulty is that clients and staff differ widely in their views of what help is needed and offered; in most life domains, staff assume that more help is needed than the women do. The question is why this is. One possibility is that the abused women are not fully aware of the extent and severity of the problems they face. Workers may also be operating too much on the basis of their own norms. Communication is another factor that could be making services less responsive to the needs of the clients. Agencies often fail to engage interpreters in situations where that is necessary. A related problem is the verbal nature of the available services. Both individual and group-based activities largely assume language proficiency. The lack of interpreters effectively excludes non-Dutch-speaking women from participation. A significant overall factor is the relative lack of structuring in the service provision process. Less than half of the interviewed workers (44%) said they drew up support plans for their clients, far fewer than felt that was necessary.

A notable finding is that the staff of the women's refuge services tend to take upon themselves (or upon the refuge services in general) a large measure of responsibility for helping abused women. Cooperation with external agencies and bodies is not exactly intensive. This can partly be blamed on a lack of responsiveness from the other organisations. Many of them have waiting lists or require that clients be in stable situations before they or their children are eligible for services. Our findings underline the need for cooperation. The women's refuge services cannot solve all of their clients' problems alone, if only because structural factors that govern women's deprivation cannot be addressed at the level of the agencies' primary function.

## **Conclusion**

A troubling picture emerges of the sheer accumulation of violence, poverty and social exclusion that haunts the women in the refuge services. Foreign-born women are the worst off by far. They have fewer societal resources and less social support to fall back on than Dutch-born women, and they are more depressed and traumatised. No less than a society-wide offensive is required to eliminate the structural barriers that separate them from a safe and independent life. What is also needed is to find ways of reaching these highly vulnerable women at a much earlier stage.

A revealing finding is the great diversity within the clientele of the refuge services. The women we spoke to differed from one another in almost every way – age, social and cultural background, social status, ethnic origin, religious background, nationality, and mastery of the Dutch language. For this reason alone, it would not be feasible to create culture-specific services to help them. Provisions will have to be individually tailored to each client's needs.

Our study shows that the refuge services are the most effective in providing a safe haven for abused women. They perform this function so effectively, in fact, that some women view the safety measures as excessive, as these are geared to the direst threats. The recovery function of the services is clearly in need of improvement. Clients and operational staff agree that the services are too hectic and that they more resemble a pressure cooker than a haven for recovery. Daily life in groups containing so many traumatised women and children, mostly in cramped accommodation, is a frequent source of added stress, which can sometimes reach such high levels that women decide to leave. The transition function of the services – in the sense of providing support in the process of building a safe, independent existence – could also do with improvement. Deficiencies are particularly evident when it comes to the provision of practical help to women in securing the necessities of life, and more attention also ought to be devoted to the women's considerable mental health problems and faltering resilience. Community social work could make a significant contribution here, and it also has a role to play in the follow-up support services.

As we have pointed out above, the women's refuge services have relatively few cooperative relationships with external organisations. They still form a rather inwardly directed service type. Whereas for years the refuges occupied quite an isolated place in local service networks, they are now positioning themselves more assertively in the continuum of welfare and justice that addresses domestic violence. This has generated more links to the surrounding world. The refuge services now need to enter into more consultations with external partners, such as child and youth services and mental health agencies, to achieve clarity about which organisations will assume which tasks and responsibilities in providing services to women. A pertinent issue in those contacts might be the frequent difficulties faced by the refuge services in gaining access for their clients to local facilities, due to their acceptance criteria and waiting lists.

To make the refuge services more responsive to the needs of the women who use them, a shift to more professionalisation is now needed. There is also an essential need to reflect on issues of method, and specifically on the principles and assumptions that underlie the approaches. The women's refuge services

have already decided on the contours of a master plan to tackle the changes now deemed necessary.

Note: A more detailed account of the findings and suggestions for coordinating supply and demand in the women's refuge services is contained in the Dutch research report entitled J. Wolf, I. Jonker, S. Nicholas, V. Meertens and S. te Pas, *Maat en baat van de vrouwenopvang: Onderzoek naar vraag en aanbod*. Amsterdam: SWP, 2006.

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