AkiDwA submission to the National Office for Community Safety on the development of the National Strategy for Improving Community Safety.

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Introduction:

AkiDwA, Swahili for sisterhood, is a national network of migrant women living in Ireland. Established in 2001, the organisation promotes the equality of migrant women in Irish society, free of gender and racial stereotyping and applies a holistic approach to integration, promoting a migrant and gender-specific approach to public services, as well as encouraging migrant women's access to mainstream services and initiatives.

AkiDwA welcomes the development of Ireland's first National Strategy for Improving Community Safety. This strategy comes at a critical time, as Ireland's communities are becoming more diverse. For many migrant women, community safety is more than crime prevention it is also about belonging, visibility, dignity, and access to protection without fear or discrimination. Our submission is informed by extensive frontline engagement with migrant women across Ireland in the last twenty-four years.

Issue 1: Defining Community Safety

From the perspective of migrant women, **community safety cannot be understood simply as the absence of crime**. It is shaped by the intersection of gender, migration status, race, culture, language, socio-economic barriers, and access to rights and services. AkiDwA's work over more than two decades shows that safety for migrant women is deeply connected to how they are *seen, heard, and treated* within their communities, by public services, and by the State.

For migrant women, feeling safe *includes:*

- being able to seek help or protection without fear of immigration consequences.
- being treated with respect and cultural understanding, rather than suspicion or judgement.
- having access to accurate information in a language they understand
- being able to report violence, harassment, or exploitation without fear of losing their children, status, or accommodation.
- living in housing and community environments that are stable, and free from intimidation.
- trusting that institutions will respond fairly, promptly, and without prejudice.

Through AkiDwA's engagement with migrant women nationwide, we hear repeatedly that many do not feel confident reporting gender-based violence, child protection concerns, discrimination, or unsafe living conditions. Some fear that cultural misunderstandings will be interpreted as neglect. Others worry that engaging with authorities could negatively affect their residency status or family life. In some cases, women who have sought help in good faith have faced responses that felt punitive or dismissive, reinforcing mistrust and discouraging future engagement.

Issue 2: Community-Grounded Knowledge

Migrant women, families, and community groups bring essential lived knowledge to the creation of safer communities. Their daily experiences navigating public spaces, interacting with services, managing language barriers, and responding to discrimination or violence provide vital insights into emerging risks and service gaps. Community organisations such as AkiDwA act as trusted intermediaries, offering culturally informed information sessions, safety workshops, accompaniment, advocacy, and spaces where women can speak openly without fear of judgement. These supports help women understand their rights, report concerns safely, and access services that may otherwise feel intimidating or inaccessible.

Despite their critical role, migrant women and migrant-led organisations face significant barriers to participating in community safety structures. Consultation often occurs late, limiting their influence, while fear of stigma, immigration concerns, or cultural misunderstanding can deter women from reporting safety issues. Structural challenges such as power imbalances with statutory agencies, short-term funding, and limited outreach to isolated groups further restrict engagement. Despite these barriers, community-led safety initiatives have been demonstrably effective when they include early involvement of migrant organisations, adequate resourcing, and strong multi-agency collaboration. Successful examples include multi-agency DSGBV initiatives, advocacy that supported progress on hate crime legislation, and information sessions in accommodation centres.

Issue 3: Collaboration

Meaningful collaboration is a cornerstone of community safety, particularly for migrant women whose experiences are shaped by intersecting barriers related to gender, race, culture, and immigration status. Effective collaboration requires more than occasional engagement, it must be embedded through sustained funding, clear referral pathways, and strong local partnerships such as Local Integration Teams. Regular multi-agency information forums create essential opportunities for frontline staff to share updates, identify emerging risks, and collectively address service gaps.

For collaboration to genuinely strengthen community safety, migrant-led organisations must be involved from the very beginning of policy and programme design, not brought in at the end for validation. When migrant women's organisations contribute early and meaningfully, collaboration builds trust, improves coordination across statutory and community sectors, and leads to safer, more accessible services for migrant communities.

However, persistent barriers undermine collaborative efforts. These include inconsistent or inadequate Garda responses, such as delayed follow-up, limited communication with victims, or failure to provide updates on court dates issues that can deter migrant women from seeking protection in the future. Gatekeeping by some service providers, short-term or project-based engagement, and consultation processes that appear tokenistic further erode confidence. Migrant women frequently report that their lived realities do not shape the final decisions, even when they participate.

Power imbalances between statutory bodies and smaller community or migrant-led organisations, combined with a lack of political will to embed inclusive practice, often limit the impact of collaboration frameworks. Addressing these challenges requires structural change, including:

- Mandated representation of migrant-led organisations in local and national community safety structures
- Outreach strategies tailored to women who cannot attend mainstream public meetings
- Practical supports such as translation, interpretation, childcare, and transport to enable full participation
- Clear, transparent feedback loops so migrant women can see how their input influences decisions

Issue 4: Measurement

Measuring community safety must address both objective and subjective dimensions. Objective measures: crime rates, Garda response times, refuge availability, implementation of DSGBV, FGM and hate crime policies, safety conditions in accommodation centres, and the geographic spread of community programmes; offer valuable data but do not capture lived realities. Many migrant women do not feel safe despite these indicators, due to fear of reporting, previous negative experiences, language barriers, and inconsistent service responses.

Felt safety depends on trust, inclusion, belonging, and perceptions of fairness. Women's confidence to report harm is often limited, particularly where reporting is perceived to threaten immigration status, family unity, or their standing in the community. Measuring what matters must therefore include community-led surveys, qualitative evidence from frontline organisations, structured feedback loops, tracking participation from marginalised groups, and attention to unreported harm captured through NGO casework. Closing the gap between actual and felt safety requires improving service consistency, ensuring interpreter availability, addressing cultural stigma, and strengthening trust between migrant communities and statutory agencies.

Issue 5: Policy and Governance

Several national and local policies currently support community safety, including DSGBV strategies, progress on hate crime legislation, and the work of Local Community Safety Partnerships and Local Authority Integration Teams. However, many policies inadvertently hinder safety for migrant women. Immigration and welfare rules create conditions of homelessness, financial instability, and exploitation; particularly where women cannot renew work permits, access social welfare, or navigate lengthy protection processes. EU nationals face a six-month waiting period before accessing welfare supports, placing them at high risk of homelessness.

Housing policies, especially local connection rules, frequently block women from accessing emergency accommodation. Direct Provision and emergency centres often have overcrowded and

unsafe conditions with no dedicated spaces for mothers and children. Healthcare access policies also create harm, particularly for pregnant women who cannot secure timely GP appointments or abortion care due to delays, lack of transport, and lack of clear information. These policy gaps demonstrate the urgent need for a strategy that identifies and reforms contradictions that expose women to risk.

To strengthen community safety, the National Strategy must recognise and address the ways policy contradictions expose migrant women to harm. This includes embedding migrant-sensitive and gender-responsive approaches across all relevant agencies, supported by clear lines of accountability. Migrant-led organisations must be embedded in all governance structures from the outset. Data collection should be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and migration status, and Garda responses must be subject to clear accountability standards. Sustainable funding for migrant community organisations is essential, recognising them as core partners in delivering safety, inclusion, and prevention.

Additional Considerations

Several emerging and persistent issues require strategic attention to ensure community safety for migrant women. These include the urgent need for culturally appropriate mental-health supports for survivors of violence and trauma, rising concerns about online safety, digital harassment, and the spread of misinformation; and the deep financial insecurity caused by restrictive immigration rules, delays in processing, and limited access to social protection. The absence of safe, child-centred environments in many accommodation centres continues to expose women and children to overcrowding, lack of privacy, and increased vulnerability. Additional challenges such as language barriers, limited access to legal information, isolation among stay-at-home mothers, stigma around reporting abuse, and the growing fear of hate incidents further impact women's ability to fully participate in and feel safe within their communities.

These concerns intersect with issues of community cohesion, health access, gender inequality, and broader social inclusion, and must therefore be fully integrated into future community-safety planning.

AkiDwA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this foundational national process. We strongly urge that the lived experiences of migrant women be embedded at the heart of the National Strategy from design through implementation to ensure a model of community safety that is equitable, effective, and truly grounded in lived reality for all.