

The Victorian Multicultural Commission submission to the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor on **Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms – Supplementary Submission**

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a supplementary submission on Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms. This submission reiterates the key positions and recommendations put forward in the preliminary submission with supplementary focus on VMC consultation key findings.

Initial submission summary of key points

1. Women from multicultural communities are found to experience exacerbated impacts and greater barriers to disclosure and seeking safety from violence compared to the broader community.
2. It is widely acknowledged that multicultural communities face unique and complex challenges in supporting their health and wellbeing and that they are at greater risk of poorer health and wellbeing outcomes.
3. Women and their children who experience marginalisation due to culture, ethnicity and/or uncertainty or fear around visa or immigration status experience heightened vulnerability to family violence.
4. That quality service responses should prioritise the needs and voices of victims and survivors and take into account different cultural nuances of multicultural communities.
5. The need for more aggregated and consistency in data collation on family violence in multicultural communities is required to measure against the service delivery system response and to inform improvements.
6. The need for culturally and linguistically appropriate information that is readily available for women from multicultural communities, including written, audio and video translated resources, about Victoria's family violence system to;
 - increase understanding and awareness about family violence; and
 - break down barriers to disclosure and reporting.
7. The contributing factors of family violence in multicultural communities, include:
 - a. Pre-settlement experiences, including trauma and dislocation
 - b. Social isolation in rural, regional and urban multicultural communities
 - c. Impact of low English proficiency, including use and availability of interpreters
 - d. Need for more culturally appropriate support services and early intervention programs
 - e. Cultural attitudes and norms towards gender equality, and feelings of shame
 - f. Unknown concept of what constitutes family violence as a crime, as well as an understanding of human rights and fear of authorities.

Context

Family violence has been identified as a critical issue impacting multicultural communities through the Regional Advisory Councils and community consultations undertaken by the VMC. The VMC is prioritising family violence prevention and response, particularly during COVID-19 and the complexities of intersectional response. Recently, focus has been placed on family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of how COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated many gendered systemic issues and drivers of family violence, as well as the effectiveness of preventative and response services for multicultural communities.

The VMC acknowledges that COVID-19 impacts all women experiencing family violence, however women from multicultural communities, including women on temporary visas and women with disability are disproportionately impacted. Experience of violence and barriers to accessing appropriate supports have been exacerbated due to COVID-19 restriction measures which are increasing social isolation and limiting connectivity to family, friends and support networks – it is therefore expected to see an increase in mental health and wellbeing related issues as well as family violence incidents.

Our observations highlight that COVID-19 blurs the lines between prevention and specialist family violence responses. It also amplifies the gaps and the lack of cultural competence that exists in the specialist family violence service providers who are currently under significant pressure. The VMC has been advocating for greater support for community/peak/faith organisations whose trusted position in their community provide a natural place for community members to seek out support during COVID-19 and can assist in relieving stress on service delivery response. Anecdotal feedback points to the overwhelming need to support women who live with their perpetrator under lockdown restrictions (often these women are very hard to reach) and the important role and unique access that ethno-specific community organisations have to these women in need. The VMC advocates to ensure that women and their children have access to the appropriate support and advice they need to stay safe and healthy and free from trauma and abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic, recovery period and beyond.

Summary of VMC Key Findings

Using technology to connect

- Private Facebook groups and the like have been set up for women experiencing trauma/high anxiety from family violence and other issues to provide support and safe virtual spaces.
- Women who don't feel safe to be on Facebook are accessing support through emails, file sharing platforms or telephone.
- Not enough support for women in ensuring their devices are safe to use.
- Women are connecting and sharing meals together through Zoom meetings.
- Increased need for family violence support services has escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic as restrictions limit mobility in seeking support, consequently increasing demand for adaptable online support services. The VMC is aware that some women experiencing

family violence have restricted or 'controlled' access to technology, leaving them disconnected from their networks and inhibiting their ability to seek support services.

Accessing in-language support

- There is a need for interpreters to provide in-language assistance to women seeking support and disclosing family violence.
- Issues around confidentiality and conflicts of interest for some women who in accessing interpreter services may be known to the interpreter – the client should be able to choose their interpreter and have every assurance that their privacy is protected.
- Women navigating the court system often are not supported with interpreters throughout the end to end process – this is particularly the case for women accessing legal aid where interpreters are usually utilised at the courts, meaning that women are not able to establish trust and connection with their interpreter.

Strengthening support services

- Need to strengthen support services in reaching women experiencing family violence, particularly as the lockdowns increase vulnerability of women and children with many not reporting abuse. Many grassroots organisations and ethno-specific organisations are better placed to outreach, navigate cultural barriers and support women in appropriate ways.
- There is a need to upskill and capacity build community leaders to ensure that support provided is adequate and responsive to the needs of women and their children experiencing family violence or provide referrals to specialised service providers.
- Mainstream organisations generally have longer waiting periods on risk assessment and access to support services which can place added stress and demand on community organisations to step up and fill the gaps in service delivery. Ensuring that community organisations have access to MARAM online training to build their capacity would ease pressure on current service delivery.
- Family violence frontline staff and specialist workforce is not representative of multicultural communities. Need to strategically prioritise employing bi-cultural workforces to better respond to the needs of diverse communities and ensure inclusive approaches to service delivery.
- Community members have raised that they are unaware on how to seek emergency accommodation during lockdown – particularly for those experiencing family violence and elder abuse.
- Ensure that the workforce capability is equipped with adequate training on trauma and abuse – particularly to support newly arrived women and their children, refugees and asylum seekers who need specific and relatable support. Connecting women and their children with appropriate culturally sensitive therapists is important to be able to achieve outcomes.

Newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

- Fear of authorities and being deported are barriers for disclosure for women holding temporary visas or who are on a partner visa experiencing family violence.
- Reporting of forced marriages in the Wyndham area and restrictions placed on newly arrived migrant women by perpetrator in accessing settlement services.
- Newly arrived migrant families need to be educated about their rights and responsibilities in Australia. For some, life can be very different to their country of origin and many women and children do not understand the legal system and processes, are not aware that family violence is illegal here and are not aware of the support services that may be available to them.
- Women on temporary visas and women who have language barriers are particularly vulnerable and are falling through the gaps.
- Newly arrived women who are also victims to trauma and abuse, feel significantly overwhelmed as they navigate their new life and settle in Australia. Suggestions received around providing risk-assessment upon arrival and link women in with appropriate services to ensure they are supported.

Creating awareness and providing education

- Different interpretations or meaning for 'family' for some multicultural communities – e.g. for Pasifika communities, the wider community is also defined as 'family'. By creating awareness and explaining family violence in all its forms, victims can better identify family violence and seek appropriate support.
- Education is the most important tool for family violence prevention work, particularly in the intervention space in multicultural communities – more work needed in breaking down generational gaps, promoting gender equality and creating awareness around the physical, mental and financial impacts of family violence on women and their children.
- Many community members were unaware of the Orange Door program and the support that the program offers to children and their families.
- In-language educational videos that can be broadcasted through ethnic media and social media would be beneficial in creating awareness about family violence and positive relationships and family life, as well as dispel associated myths and stigma.
- Work with community leaders and community members to understand the cultural needs and nuances of communities and to understand appropriate ways to increase levels of understanding on family violence – different communities require tailored approaches.
- Many women in forced marriages or for those that don't drive or have access to external support networks, find it difficult to receive information and resources on family violence and therefore don't know how to seek support – suggestions around providing resources via traditional means of letter box drops and flyers.

Building capacity of community leaders/interpreters

- Provide training for community leaders and influencers to recognise and provide support or referral pathways to specialist family violence services.
- Interpreters and translators can be upskilled to identify family violence and provide suitable referral pathway. Feedback received - 'we can do more'.

Recommendations

1. That the VMC work with DPC Multicultural Affairs and Family Safety Victoria (FSV) to identify suitable ethno-specific organisations and support and/or resource them to respond to increased demands around family violence arising from COVID-19.
2. That the VMC establish a working group involving DPC Multicultural Affairs and FSV to collaborate and share information, initiatives and to support multicultural organisations during and post COVID-19. The VMC will play a key role in providing community input and engagement in order to ensure that family violence responses are culturally appropriate and inclusive and timely.
3. That the family violence service delivery framework is integrated with an approach that rebalances the mix of mainstream and ethno-specific organisations to better meet multicultural community needs. Multicultural, ethno-specific and faith-specific agencies are critical and complementary to the specialist agencies and services. Appropriate training be provided to multicultural, ethno-specific and faith-specific agencies to ensure standards are satisfied.
4. Increasing accessibility of support programs and specialist providers in building perpetrator education within multicultural communities.
5. Promoting increased awareness through:
 - A series of family violence presentations (through online platforms) across Victoria to involve ethno-specific, multicultural, faith-based organisations and mainstream organisations and offer a joined-up service response.
 - Utilising ethnic / multicultural media platforms (such as SBS, 3ZZZ and other radio and online mediums) to disseminate information to multicultural communities.
 - Better utilising community leaders, influencers (including women and young people) or "support role people" who tend to be the first point of contact and often provide their support in a voluntary capacity. More needs to be done to recognise their efforts and provide them with training, tools and support.
 - Consider avenues for women experiencing violence to gain, regain financial independence through social ventures and community-based projects/initiatives.