

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

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (the VMC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor on Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms. The Commission is in a unique position to gather intelligence and inform relevant government and agencies on systematic and community wide settlement and service issues impacting multicultural communities in Victoria.

Family violence is a national emergency and public health concern which has more recently escalated due to restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

There is growing evidence amongst multicultural communities of the use of the pandemic to exert coercive control, and that there is a significant increase in demands for adaptable services in supporting victims of family violence and comply with restrictions imposed. Migrant and refugee women, particularly those holding temporary visas face complex challenges in accessing welfare, legal and medical supports - all of which have been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The VMC takes an active role in promoting greater understanding of the lived experience of family violence within multicultural communities in Victoria. In doing so, the VMC considers the particular needs and cultural nuances of addressing family violence, as well as providing feedback to government departments and agencies on the community experience in interfacing with the family violence response system in Victoria.

There are several priority areas that underpin the VMC's submission and are complementary to those identified in the VMC's Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016), including:

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.

The prevalence of family violence occurs regardless of culture, ethnicity, sexual identity, age, socio-economic status or religious belief - all forms of family violence are experienced in multicultural communities as within mainstream communities. However, some women and children from multicultural communities can experience a wider context of gender specific harm including sexual violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour killings. Women and children from multicultural communities also experience different levels of compromised safety (including safety from harm and legal status) and welfare due to various barriers in understanding rights, accessing support and visa/legal vulnerability.

The VMC has undertaken a series of recent community consultations, including its Regional Advisory Councils, and COVID-19 related consultations with multi-faith leaders and key service providers to gather intelligence on issues impacting multicultural communities in Victoria, including family violence. In this submission, the VMC will respond to key focus areas outlined by The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor:

- how the family violence service system, and users' experience of it, has changed since the Royal Commission
- looking forward: what is still required in the family violence reforms
- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Context

About the Victorian Multicultural Commission

The Commission is an independent statutory body, established in 1983 and now constituted under the *Multicultural Victoria Act (2011)*, that strengthens cultural diversity in Victoria through consultation, advocacy, celebration and promotion. As one of the main links between communities and government, the Commission holds consultations, forums and roundtables with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities to understand the issues they face. We then work together to identify and recommend potential solutions to government, departments and agencies to facilitate more inclusive and accessible programs and policies. The Commission is informed by its eight Regional Advisory Councils (RAC) across Victoria – three metropolitan and five regional. Each RAC comprises up to 50 members drawn from the local area to represent their community. Members are local residents, local government councillors and officers, local business people and service providers from non-government organisations.

Cultural Diversity in Victoria

Victoria is home to one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world and Australia's fastest growing state with a population of 6,566,200 as at 31 March 2019. Migration to Victoria has resulted in its diversity increasing significantly. Net overseas migration was the major contributor to the state's population change and net interstate migration gains for Victoria were the second highest recorded in the year ending 31 March 2019.

At the 2016 Census, 49.1 per cent of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas.

VMC Response to Key Focus Areas

How the family violence service system, and users' experience of it, has changed since the Royal Commission

The Victorian Government's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women *Free from Violence*, commits to 'reaching people in a range of places' and to 'innovate'. The strategy aims to achieve change by 'strengthening whole community efforts and actions' and acknowledges the critical importance of community-based services and co-designing solutions with community members.

The Victorian Government has demonstrated national leadership in its response to family violence and we have seen significant developments across the breadth of sectors whose work intersects in this area. What is less visible is the undocumented and unfunded work that takes place at grassroots levels. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this work is fundamental in early intervention and often results in outcomes that reduce the workload of family violence specialist services who are already overwhelmed.

Early intervention is an essential component of addressing family violence and makes a significant contribution in terms of reducing the long-term socio-economic costs of family violence.

The existing research base recognises the many barriers culturally and linguistically diverse women confront in accessing information and support around family violence. It is also well known that mainstream family violence service options are not adequately providing culturally informed responses thereby resulting in systemic barriers which compound already existing barriers multicultural women face.

The work of Family Safety Victoria (FSV) is critically important in delivering against the Royal Commission on Family Violence's recommendations. It has worked with the Multicultural Affairs division of Department of Premier and Cabinet and the VMC, particularly in the primary prevention space for multicultural communities.

FSV have funded capacity building and culturally responsive initiatives to support multicultural communities, including:

- Orange Door; program that delivers free family violence services across Victoria. By 2021 there will be a total of 17 sites in Victoria offering support to all victims experiencing family violence including adults, young people and children, as well as referral services and interpreter and translating services.
- Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM); a set of guidelines that enable supports services to effectively identify, access and manage family violence risk as well as addressing multicultural communities' experiences of family violence.

The VMC acknowledges the dedication of ethno-specific and multifaith organisations that do great work directly with communities in family violence prevention and response services. InTouch and Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights are some of the many multicultural specific organisations that provide case management support to victims. There is a need to provide further support to multicultural, ethno-specific and faith-specific organisations with more substantive and longer-term funding as they have direct access to multicultural communities and offer timely solutions. The VMC advocates for greater and easy access to MARAM training and provide greater choices for people from multicultural communities to access services.

However, community feedback indicates that there are significant gaps that need to be addressed. Detailed consultation findings can be provided as supplementary material following this submission.

Looking forward: what is still required in the family violence reforms

Summary of VMC Key Findings

- Community feedback indicates that the level of understanding of the different forms of family violence continues to be limited within grassroots communities. It is well documented that newly arrived migrant families need to be better informed about support services available to them and be educated about their rights and responsibilities in Australia, including for example, that family violence is a criminal offence.
- There are also concerns that in-language information and awareness about the family violence support services available is not reaching all multicultural communities and ethno-specific organisations.
- Promoting workforce diversity to better reflect the community and employment of bicultural and bilingual workers to appropriately respond to the needs of clients from multicultural communities and offer quality, timely and better solutions both in preventative and response to family violence. The VMC has identified through consultations that various generalist and specialist family violence service providers are not culturally inclusive or require cultural competency training.
- Providing leadership to and building capacity of community leaders to identify family violence within their communities and provide appropriate responses. The VMC understands that community leaders are trusted members of the community – they act as access points to trusted information and support on issues impacting multicultural communities.
- The importance of accurate data collation should not be under-estimated to provide the evidentiary base to better target programs and services as well as address organisational issues that can range from board representation, workforce diversity, cultural competency training, design and delivery of information and resources.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated many gendered systemic issues and drivers of family violence. The VMC acknowledges the importance for the Victorian community to adhere to stay at home restrictions to control the spread of COVID-19, however, for some women and their children home is not a safe place. As with the increase of many other public health concerns from COVID-19, there is a range of responses including increase in reported as well as under-reported cases of violence against women and their children.

COVID-19 is impacting all women, 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 and cultural activities – increasing levels of mental health and wellbeing related issues are expected.

COVID-19 blurs the lines between prevention and specialist family violence responses. It also amplifies the gaps in the existing services where clients from multicultural communities were referred to specialist service providers only to be referred to their original referrer. This an example of the lack of cultural competence that exists in the specialist family violence service providers.

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. We also advocate for capacity building over time to enable community organisations to meet the needs of their communities and increased genuine choice for women in accessing appropriate support through service providers.

Summary of VMC Key Findings

- It is well documented that housing affordability can affect a woman's decision to leave a violent relationship and that family violence is the most common factor contributing to homelessness among women and children. The likelihood and continuation of family violence is dependent on the availability of housing for both survivors and perpetrators of family violence. In the current environment of COVID-19 pandemic, victims cannot seek emergency accommodation or refuge with family or friends.
- Family violence has escalated as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and consequently significant increases in demands for adaptable services using technology as a means to provide support to victims.
- Women who are temporary visa holders represent one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in relation to family violence – a significant number of women who seek support from family violence crisis services are temporary or provisional visa holders. Australian migration laws disproportionately impact such women and places them in a position of dependency on their spouse/partners, and continuation and success of their relationship in order to gain pathway to permanent residency. This means that women from migrant and refugee backgrounds can be more at risk of family violence.
- Women who are temporary visa holders are a particularly vulnerable cohort within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the following:
 - Usually in precarious, casual or contracted employment with many women having lost or reduced working hours.
 - Exclusions from COVID-19 related support provisions by the federal government are placing particular strain on women who have children to support and cover daily living expenses.
 - Temporary skilled visas holders (482) currently still have the requirement of finding another sponsor within 60 days if their employment contract ends, and no access to welfare support during this time.
 - For women dependent financially on partners who have lost their jobs, there's a clear concern regarding the rising levels of abuse because of financial stress and uncertainty.
 - Women who may have sought to leave a perpetrator and to be financially independent have lost this lifeline to sustain their financial security.

- Not all temporary visa holders have access to Medicare and are not eligible for all health services, access to contraception and abortion.
- As the medical service provision is one opportunity for women to seek support in the context of family violence and as such there needs to be more accessible and innovative ways that enable women to share safety and security concerns as well as access to ongoing medical support.
- Women and children in isolation due to COVID-19 are increasingly at risk of family violence and coercion. It is recognised that migrant and refugee women were already hard to reach due to language barriers, limited access to communication and services (including perpetrators controlling what they access) and social pressures within their community to remain silent. Therefore, social isolation and restrictions on movement have undoubtedly contributed to increased experiences of family violence.
- Family violence service providers are also significantly impacted due to COVID-19. These specialist services, including ethno-specific women's support groups provide critical preventative and responsive support to women and their children experiencing family violence. The family violence systems response is facing many challenges due to the growing demand and complex caseloads with many transitioning to telephone or online services – this means that managing the safety and privacy of people seeking support adds another layer to challenges faced by service providers and organisations.

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. That multicultural, ethno-specific and faith-specific agencies are a critical and complementary to the universal agencies and services.
4. Increasing accessibility of support programs and specialist providers in building perpetrator education within multicultural communities.
5. Promoting increased awareness through experienced based understanding approaches and information sharing about family violence prevention and response services in multicultural communities through:
 - A series of family violence roadshows (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 and 3ZZZ) to disseminate information to multicultural communities.
 - Better utilising community leaders 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.