

## OPEN Event Review - Unpacking the Invisible: examining domestic and family violence in culturally diverse communities

Settlement Services International (SSI) recently organised a panel discussion on unpacking the invisible struggles of domestic violence victims within our migrant and refugee communities.

- Nicola Berkovic (Moderator) - Legal Affairs Correspondent, The Australian
- Maria Dimopoulos - Former Chair, The Harmony Alliance
- Juliana Nkrumah AM - Domestic & Family Violence Project Manager, SSI
- Pallavi Sinha - Lawyer, Academic & Notary Public
- Dr. Heather Nancarrow - CEO, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS)
- Amani Haydar - Artist, Lawyer and Lived Experience Advocate

The panel was made up of preeminent representatives and advocates and identified areas of persistent concern which have been further exacerbated by COVID. Given the Victorian population is composed of people from [200 countries, speak 260 languages, and follow 135 different faiths](#), these messages are important for us all and can direct us to give renewed attention to how cultural diversity impacts on how families experience, understand and access FV or related services.

### In summary

The panel highlighted that:

- People from migrant and refugee backgrounds are some of Australia's most vulnerable domestic violence survivors, but their experiences and complexities remain largely invisible in mainstream discussions.
- Existing service systems are not adequately tailored or nuanced to recognise or respond to their needs.
- [COVID](#) has exacerbated the conditions of women from these communities.
- Key steps forward include promoting cultural awareness, addressing intersectionality<sup>1</sup>, building evidence, and strengthening capacity to address the challenges faced by culturally diverse communities.

### What can help

Culturally diverse women face multiple barriers to accessing domestic and family violence services. Improved understanding of culturally diverse women's experience and understanding of family violence by these services can help remove these barriers.

- **Not an individualised incident**  
Domestic and family violence is not considered an 'individualised' incident, especially for collectivists cultures which emphasise strong cohesiveness within families and communities. These cultures tend to emphasise values such as interdependence, harmony, conformity, and

---

<sup>1</sup> [Intersectionality](https://www.vic.gov.au/understanding-intersectionality) refers to the different aspects of a person's identity that can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. It can include social characteristics or attitudes, systems, locations (remote or rural) and structures in society and organisations that can interact to create inequality and result in exclusion (<https://www.vic.gov.au/understanding-intersectionality>)

reciprocity<sup>2</sup>. It is in such cultures. Notions of shame and honour associated with many cultures create a circle of silence and lead to further victimisation.

- **Recognising all kinds of violence:**  
Many people in diverse communities do not understand the concepts of domestic and family violence, coercive control, intimate partner violence and emotional abuse. Furthermore, existing definitions of domestic and family violence do not account for other kinds of violence that exist within multicultural families – those of in-laws, extended family or community. Domestic homicide is a well-recognised problem among multicultural communities. Therefore, language and framing of domestic and family violence must go beyond the existing paradigms and be tailored to the needs of the communities.
- **Understanding structural barriers**  
Migrant and refugee women, particularly newly arrived women on temporary visas face a combination of factors that further victimise them. They may have a language barrier and may not have social connections, financial stability, access to housing and knowledge of services and legal rights. They may not access these services or make a report to police due to fears of repercussions from partner or the system.

The panel identified the priority measures needed to reduce this invisibility and address the barriers. These included:

- **Focus on intersectionality rather than vulnerability**  
There is tendency to do a vulnerability analysis based on culture and ethnicity. However, services must be cautious because this can lead to stereotypes, and patronising behaviour. Instead, there is a need to focus on intersectionality which interrogates deeper issues such as structural racism and discussions of power inequalities.
- **Building evidence and capturing lived experiences**  
Domestic and family violence experiences of multi-cultural women remain invisible. Building the evidence base by capturing the different voices of women and children as well as men (who want to seek help in a culturally safe way), instead of relying on anecdotal information, is vital. This will inform community-led and ground up strategies to address the issue.
- **Building sector capability and culturally safe services**  
There is a need to strengthen capacity of specialist agencies to provide culturally safe services to women, children, and men. It is also vital to recruit and build capacity of bi-cultural as well as bilingual workers in specialist services.
- **Supporting and investing in settlement services to meet demand**  
Clients, especially newcomers, are hesitant to go to DV specialist services as they think their concerns might not be understood. The language barrier further adds to these challenges. Instead, they prefer to go to settlement services and other multicultural organisations which provide culturally safe general services. This generates increased demand for settlement

---

<sup>2</sup> Ma, K., Pitner, R., Sakamoto, I., & Park, H. Y. (2020). Challenges in Acculturation among International Students from Asian Collectivist Cultures. *Higher Education Studies*, 10(3), 34-43.

services which have limited resources and capability in this area. Vulnerable clients can therefore, get caught in a loop, bouncing between settlement services and domestic violence specialist agencies.

Considering the rise in demand, the panel emphasised the need for greater investment into settlement services and recruitment and capacity building of multicultural practitioners to provide specialist support. There is also a need to build cultural awareness in existing specialist family and domestic violence and broader children and families services.

The key messages of the panel discussion are in alignment with the findings of the [Inquiry into domestic violence with particular regard to violence against women and their children](#) found a strong and increasing demand to tailor domestic violence services to the needs of people from culturally diverse backgrounds. The [pandemic](#) has exacerbated the situation with growing demand for services but due to lack of investment, multicultural domestic violence services are currently limited in the support and services they can provide to meet this demand.

The Centre has convened a CALD working group to bring together a group of passionate practitioners who have extensive knowledge and experience in working with multicultural communities. The group will build the Centre's understanding of needs of multicultural communities, address barriers and collaborate on effective solutions and advocacy initiatives.

**To access the recording – [click here](#)**

To know more about the organisations participating in the panel and their work, follow the links below:

- [Settlement Services International](#) (SSI) is a community organisation and social business that supports newcomers and other Australians to achieve their full potential. They work with all people who have experienced vulnerability, including refugees, people seeking asylum and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, to build capacity and enable them to overcome inequality.
- [Harmony Alliance](#): Migrant and Refugee Women for Change is Australia's national migrant and refugee women's coalition.
- [Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria \(ECCV\)](#) is the state's peak body with over 200 members who are working to support and empower people from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Northern Integrated Family Violence Services (NIFVS) [resource page](#) provides information and several toolkits/guidance notes for working with CALD communities in the context of family violence.
- [CALD Taskforce Victoria](#) is a Victorian government initiative to work in partnership with community organisations, local governments and the Victorian Multicultural Commission to develop community specific, locally delivered solutions that will help slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).
- ANROWS published the [invisible women: invisible violence](#) report in 2016 to highlight the gaps in data on multicultural women and their experiences. There is a new research strategy as well which focuses on [intersectionality](#).