

# Royal Commission into Domestic and Family Violence and Sexual Violence

**Australian Refugee Association (ARA) - Submission 2**

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### Culturally Safe Multifaceted Family and Domestic Violence Service Model

*ARA recommends the design and implementation of multifaceted family and domestic violence service model within specialist migrant and refugee services.*

A multifaceted family and domestic violence (FDV) service model provides a comprehensive approach to address the complex needs of survivors, particularly within migrant and refugee populations. These models integrate various services, including:

- prevention and early intervention;
- crisis intervention through a co responder program; and
- recovery supports including counselling; employment; education and driving lessons

Research shows that such approaches enhance accessibility and effectiveness, as it allows individuals to receive holistic support in one location, fostering a sense of safety and trust. For example, a study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that service integration can lead to improved outcomes for victims, such as reduced recidivism of violence and better overall mental health (AIHW, 2021). A program that combines job training with mental health support can facilitate a survivor's transition to economic independence while simultaneously addressing trauma-related challenges (Rosenberg et al., 2020). This holistic approach not only assists survivors but also contributes to the overall well-being of their families and communities.

The benefits of implementing a multifaceted model are particularly significant for migrant and refugee families, who often face additional barriers when seeking help due to language differences, cultural stigmas, and a lack of familiarity with the local legal system. A single service organisation serves as a centralised hub, reducing the fragmentation of services that often leaves victims feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. Evidence from a program in Canada demonstrated that when a singular organisation provided multiple services, the participants reported a higher satisfaction level and a greater likelihood of utilising the services offered, resulting in better long-term outcomes (Baker et al., 2020). This comprehensive approach not only addresses immediate safety needs but also supports long-term empowerment and recovery.

Furthermore, a multifaceted service model promotes community engagement and awareness, fostering a broader understanding of domestic violence issues within migrant and refugee communities. By offering educational programs and workshops, these organisations can help dismantle harmful cultural norms and encourage healthier relationships. A study from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicated that community-based interventions significantly reduce instances of domestic violence by empowering individuals with knowledge and

resources (UNHCR, 2021). In essence, a multifaceted service model not only enhances immediate support for victims but also contributes to long-term societal change, ultimately leading to healthier communities.

## Prevention & Early Intervention

### Settlement Supports

*ARA recommends the inclusion of FDV information and available support in settlement and welcome packages for new arrivals.*

Integrating family and domestic violence support into settlement packages is crucial for the well-being of individuals, particularly women and children, who are often the most vulnerable during the resettlement process. Research indicates that migrants and refugees face unique challenges, such as language barriers, cultural isolation, and limited knowledge of available support services, which can exacerbate their vulnerability to domestic violence (Vaughan et al., 2016). Additionally extensive, direct feedback to ARA community engagement staff from new arrivals shows that the inclusion of information on FDV and available supports is wanted by the community. Providing family and domestic violence information in a culturally sensitive approach, considering the community's level of understanding at the earliest possible point in the settlement journey can also help break the cycle of abuse by ensuring early intervention through higher levels of awareness.

### Cultural Community Education and Awareness Campaigns

*ARA recommends increased funding for Community Education programs and Awareness campaigns including topics on legal rights, the child protection system and community sessions with the police.*

Raising awareness about FDV, legal rights, and available support services within migrant and refugee communities can help reduce stigma and address some cultural beliefs that prevent people from seeking help. These campaigns should involve community leaders and members who can influence attitudes and create a more supportive environment for victims seeking help.

Cultural beliefs, stigma, and structural barriers significantly prevent help-seeking for FDV among migrants and refugees. The stigma around seeking help can be especially prevalent among migrant and refugee communities, often rooted in cultural norms that prioritize family honour, discourage revealing personal problems, and perpetuate shame around issues like domestic violence. Many women from these communities' face controlling behaviours, violence towards others or property, and physical or sexual abuse, but find it difficult to seek help due to cultural expectations and fears of stigmatisation (Monash Lens, 2021).

Additionally, immigration policy and visa status can further complicate help-seeking. Temporary visa holders, for instance, may fear deportation or losing their right to stay in the country if they report violence. This vulnerability often

results in migrant and refugee women experiencing isolation, financial hardship, and restricted access to support services (ANROWS, 2020).

Migrant and refugee families fear the intervention by child protection services. This fear is heightened by concerns that their children might be taken away, especially when they depend on their partners for financial and legal support (Aliverti, 2020). Many families feel trapped in these situations, as their immigration status can make them particularly vulnerable to state interventions, which they often perceive as punitive rather than supportive (Canning, 2019). This fear is compounded by a lack of understanding of how child protection systems operate, often rooted in language barriers, cultural differences, and the trauma associated with their migration experiences (Maiter & Stalker, 2021). Moreover, migrant and refugee families may have witnessed or experienced violence in their home countries, making them more reluctant to engage with authorities who, in their past experiences, may have been sources of harm (Spitzer, 2019). As a result, many remain in violent situations, fearing that any interaction with child protection services will lead to the loss of their children, exacerbating the cycle of violence and trauma.

Migrants and refugees often carry deep-seated fears of the police due to traumatic experiences in their home countries. In many regions, police forces are known for brutality, corruption, and a lack of accountability, leading to a culture of fear and mistrust (Amnesty International 2018). These experiences can shape the perceptions of migrants and refugees, making them hesitant to report crimes or seek help from authorities (Human Rights Watch 2020). The fear of police brutality can be particularly acute for survivors of FDV, who may worry that reporting the abuse could lead to further harm or even arrest (UNHCR 2021, WHO 2019). This reluctance to report FDV can have devastating consequences, as it prevents victims from accessing essential support services and perpetuates cycles of violence.

FDV support services and advertisements predominantly focus on helping women, which can make refugee and migrant men believe that there is no support available for them. This gendered approach often stems from societal norms and stereotypes that primarily view women as victims and men as perpetrators of violence, overlooking the fact that men can also experience domestic violence, especially in migrant and refugee communities (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). As a result, male survivors may feel isolated, stigmatised, and discouraged from seeking help due to the lack of visible resources catering to their needs (Bates, 2020). This limited portrayal of FDV survivors in advertisements reinforces the misconception that men's experiences are less valid or unimportant, leading to a significant gap in access to support services for male survivors. To address this issue, FDV services must ensure that their advertisements and informational materials depict support for all genders, making it clear that services are available to anyone experiencing domestic violence, regardless of gender. Inclusive advertising can help challenge stereotypes, reduce stigma, and encourage more male survivors, including those from refugee and migrant backgrounds, to seek help (Morgan & Wells, 2019). By making advertisements more representative of all potential victims, service providers can create an environment that feels safer and more accessible for men, ensuring that they

receive the assistance they need. The current advertisements and informational materials are not designed to encourage positive changes or critical thinking. They focus more on highlighting the negative consequences and shocking people rather than guiding them to consider alternative pathways for making changes. Furthermore, the materials are not tailored to the community's current understanding of FDV to promote meaningful change.

### **Cultural Awareness Training for Police and Justice Systems**

*ARA recommends the funding of regular and structured cultural awareness training programs within the context of FDV for police and justice staff delivered by specialist migrant and refugee agencies.*

To effectively respond to this complex issue, it is imperative for police and justice systems to possess a deep understanding of the cultural nuances and specific needs of migrant and refugee communities. A lack of understanding of culturally specific words and expressions will enable appropriate and timely responses to signals or expressions that often go unnoticed or are dismissed by police and justice personnel. ARA shares some examples from its experience and expertise.

Example 1: Sexual abuse and rape within a marriage contract can be confusing for both men and women. For instance, using the question "Has he forced you for sex?" can be unclear because the married couple may believe they have provided consent through the marriage certificate/commitment when they entered the relationship.

Example 2: Some threatening messages and slang may be considered real-life threats. However, if translated into English, they may lose their seriousness and meaning. When two people are engaged in an argument the term "I will come to you" within some Middle Eastern cultures has a sinister meaning of "I will harm you".

Cultural awareness is essential for effective communication, empathy, and trust-building within diverse communities. For police and justice personnel, cultural awareness can help to:

- **Overcome cultural biases:** By challenging stereotypes and preconceptions, cultural awareness can help to prevent discrimination and ensure fair treatment of individuals from different cultural backgrounds.
- **Improve communication:** Understanding cultural differences in communication styles, nonverbal cues, and language can facilitate effective interactions and enhance information gathering.
- **Build trust:** By demonstrating respect and understanding of cultural values and traditions, police and justice personnel can foster trust and cooperation within refugee and migrant communities.
- **Identify cultural risk factors:** Recognizing cultural factors that may increase the risk of FDV, such as gender roles, family structures, and cultural norms related to violence, can enable early intervention and prevention efforts.

Effective cultural awareness training for police and justice personnel should include the following components:

- **Cultural safety:** Training should focus on developing a broad understanding of different cultures, including their history, values, beliefs, family dynamic and customs.
- **Cultural sensitivity:** Participants should learn to appreciate and respect cultural differences without making generalizations or stereotypes.
- **Cross-cultural communication:** Training should address effective communication strategies for interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- **Understanding of trauma and resilience:** Given the traumatic experiences many refugees and migrants have endured, training should include information on the impact of trauma and strategies for building resilience.
- **Case studies and role-playing:** Practical exercises can help participants apply their knowledge to real-world scenarios and develop effective response strategies.

Cultural awareness training is a critical component of effective responses to FDV in refugee and migrant families. By equipping police and justice personnel with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and address the unique needs of and presentations within these communities, we can work towards creating safer and more inclusive environments for all.

**Culturally Safe Practice for Family and Domestic Violence Gateway Services**

*ARA recommends the funding of cultural awareness training within the context of FDV for mainstream FDV services, delivered by specialist migrant and refugee agencies to enable culturally safe practice, including questioning and access to support in language.*

FDV services need culturally appropriate questioning and volunteers who speak the languages of migrants and refugees to ensure that these communities feel understood and supported. Many migrants and refugees come from diverse cultural backgrounds where family dynamics, gender roles, and concepts of violence may differ significantly from those in the host country (Maiter & Stalker, 2021). As a result, services that use culturally inappropriate questioning or fail to understand these differences can inadvertently alienate victims, making them less likely to seek help. Tailoring questions to be culturally sensitive ensures that service providers respect the client's background, enabling them to gather accurate information while also building trust and rapport.

Some refugee and migrant men experience domestic violence and seek help as victims, but they face unique challenges that can lead to wrongful criminalization. In some cases, their wives, who may be more educated or more familiar with the local legal system, portray them as the perpetrators of violence, even when they are the victims (Rees & Pease, 2019). This dynamic can result in men being unfairly arrested or imprisoned due to language barriers, lack of knowledge

about the legal system, or societal stereotypes that typically view men as aggressors. As a result, many migrant and refugee men are discouraged from seeking help, fearing they will not be believed or will be further victimized by the system (George & Harris, 2019). This situation perpetuates a cycle of silence and isolation, preventing male victims from accessing the support they need and reinforcing harmful stereotypes about domestic violence.

Language is another crucial barrier that often prevents migrant and refugee families from accessing domestic violence services. Without volunteers who speak their language, survivors may find it challenging to communicate their experiences, leading to misunderstandings or incomplete information being provided to service providers (Alaggia & Donohue, 2018). Having volunteers who speak the same language not only facilitates more effective communication but also helps reduce the sense of isolation that many migrants and refugees feel when navigating unfamiliar systems. These volunteers can bridge the gap between clients and services, ensuring that victims receive the support they need in a way that feels both accessible and respectful.

Furthermore, the presence of culturally appropriate and linguistically skilled volunteers can help dispel the fears and mistrust that many migrants and refugees have towards formal institutions. Experiences with authorities in their home countries may have been negative or even violent, leading them to distrust organisations, including those intended to help (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). When service providers and volunteers demonstrate cultural sensitivity and communicate in a familiar language, they can break down these barriers, making it more likely for victims to seek and accept support. This culturally informed approach is essential for creating an inclusive environment where all victims of FDV feel empowered to access the services they need.

### **Bicultural Family and Domestic Violence Co Responder Program**

*ARA recommends the implementation of a Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) Co-Responder model across South Australia aligning with models being implemented in Queensland (Queensland Government 2023) and the Northern Territory (Northern Territory Government 2024). Specific, specialist Bi-Cultural Co-Responders from specialist migrant and refugee services must be included as foundational elements of the Co-Responder Model.*

The implementation of a FDV co-responder model that includes bi-cultural workers is essential for effectively addressing the unique needs of migrant and refugee women and families. Research has shown that migrant and refugee communities often face additional barriers when seeking help for family and domestic violence, such as language difficulties, cultural stigmas, and lack of familiarity with legal and support systems (Vaughan et al., 2016). By incorporating bi-cultural workers into the co-responder model, service providers can bridge these gaps, ensuring that migrant and refugees feel understood, respected, and supported.

Bi-cultural workers play a critical role in bridging the gap between services and communities. According to ANROWS MuSeS project report, culturally sensitive approaches are more effective in building trust and rapport, which leads to

improved outcomes in domestic violence interventions (ANROWS, 2020). These workers have firsthand knowledge of cultural practices, beliefs, and norms, making them better equipped to identify signs of violence, offer culturally appropriate advice, and navigate complex cultural dynamics. Their presence in the co-responder model ensures that interventions are not only trauma-informed but also culturally competent, enabling migrant and refugee women to feel understood, supported, and empowered to seek help. A co-responder model, which pairs law enforcement or other crisis responders with FDV specialists, becomes even more impactful when bi-cultural workers are included. This approach allows immediate, culturally informed responses to crisis situations, ensuring that the unique needs of migrant and refugee families are met in a timely manner. Evidence shows that integrating bi-cultural workers leads to increased reporting of domestic violence incidents and improved access to services for marginalized communities (Segrave, 2017). By implementing this model, service providers can better address the intersecting challenges of domestic violence and cultural barriers, ultimately enhancing safety and support for migrant and refugee women and families.

### Recovery Supports

*ARA recommends:*

**Culturally Safe Counselling:** *Services should offer counselling in multiple languages with trained professionals who understand the cultural backgrounds of migrants and refugees, ensuring that the support is relevant and accessible (Maiter & Stalker, 2021).*

**Employment Assistance:** *Providing job training, language classes, and mentorship programs can help survivors gain the skills and confidence needed to secure employment (Murdolo & Quiazon, 2021).*

**Education and Driving Lessons:** *Offering driving lessons and educational opportunities can help survivors gain independence, improve mobility, and access a wider range of job opportunities.*

Migrant and refugee families experiencing FDV face unique challenges that make recovery more complex. Many are unfamiliar with the legal, social, and economic systems of the host country, which can leave them feeling isolated and unable to access essential support services (Murdolo & Quiazon, 2021). To facilitate recovery, comprehensive support is necessary, including culturally sensitive counselling, employment, education, and driving lessons, which address both the immediate safety needs and the long-term empowerment of survivors. These services can help build independence, resilience, and a sense of belonging in the host society.

### Culturally Appropriate Counselling

Access to culturally appropriate counselling is crucial for migrant and refugee survivors of domestic violence. Trauma-informed counselling can address the specific experiences of migrants and refugees, such as past trauma from conflict or persecution, while also providing support to process the effects of domestic violence (Maiter & Stalker, 2021).

Counsellors who understand the cultural context and speak the same language can help clients feel safe and supported, reducing the stigma often associated with seeking mental health support within migrant communities.

#### **Employment, Education and Driving Assistance**

Furthermore, housing support, employment assistance, education, and driving lessons are essential for helping survivors rebuild their lives. Safe and affordable housing is a critical need for those leaving violent situations, as many migrant and refugee women may not have the financial means to secure independent accommodation (Holtmann & Rickards, 2018). Employment support, such as job training, language classes, and help with understanding local job markets, empowers survivors to become financially independent. Additionally, education and driving lessons increase access to employment opportunities and essential services, enabling survivors to navigate their new environment confidently. By providing these comprehensive supports, migrant and refugee survivors of FDV can regain their autonomy and rebuild their lives in a way that promotes long-term safety and stability.

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