

INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRENDS AND ISSUES IN NSW

Organisation: Metro Migrant Resource Centre Inc.

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Inquiry into Domestic Violence Trends and Issues
in NSW



Submission by Metro Migrant Resource Centre Inc.

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Introduction

The Board and staff of the Metro Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) welcome this opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues' Inquiry into Domestic Violence Trends and Issues in NSW.

Metro MRC is often a first point of contact where women of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds seek assistance to escape violence in the home. Our agency is part of a provider network to the Commonwealth's Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) program in which we have immediate on-arrival contact with refugee and humanitarian entrants and case manage them during the early stages of settlement. This is often a period in which the stress and trauma of refugee camps, detention and grieving; coupled with the immediate challenges of finding accommodation, work and financial support in an unfamiliar environment and culture can test relationships and lead to domestic violence.

Older women from established communities also experience violence, emotional abuse and controlling behaviour – often the result of gambling, alcohol abuse, drugs and mental health issues. Relationships sometimes break down after the children leave home and underlying tensions which have been suppressed, finally surface. Older women are also susceptible to abuse and controlling behaviour at the hands of children who treat them as live-in child-minders and cleaners.

Metro MRC is also a provider of the NSW Government's Brighter Futures program, an early intervention program which targets CALD families and Aboriginal families referred by NSW Community Services or through other community agencies. A significant proportion of these clients are, or have experienced domestic violence. Families are case-managed through a range of support measures including home visits, parenting programs, quality childcare and other services to meet specific needs. Our caseworkers fully understand the cultural sensitivities and paradigms within the client's community which differentiates us from other service providers.

We also convene the Aboriginal Child and Family Network through our Marrickville office, which regularly brings together a network of over 70 service representatives which work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Inner West Sydney. This experience places Metro MRC in a unique position to provide feedback to the Inquiry on some of the more marginalised women and communities in society, and we trust that the information will assist the Committee's deliberations.

Our tenancy team regularly sees women in desperate need of emergency accommodation, or experiencing difficulties with landlords after fleeing violence and abusive relationships.

The following content is based on supporting research, our service experience, observations; and what we believe to be strategies to appropriately address domestic violence from the perspective of CALD and Aboriginal communities.

A snapshot of domestic violence in CALD communities

Causal factors:

- Language barriers leading to isolation
- Stressed and homesick
- Perceived loss of identity and authority in household by men
- Financial problems
- Financial freedom, women may not be allowed to manage their money
- Arranged marriages, forcing young girls and boys to get married.
- Lack of privacy due to accommodation and housing issues
- Cultural differences and religious beliefs
- Polygamy, second wife back home
- Cross cultural marriage
- Gambling and alcohol issues
- Infertility and lack of a male child
- Mental and physical disabilities
- Lack of job opportunities and being too old to enter the workforce
- Low awareness of the law

Forms of domestic violence:

- Forcing one's partner to have sex
- Denying sex
- Taking or limiting household money and money repatriated to homeland
- Denying women contact with friends and relatives
- Forcing women to cover or participate in religion activities
- Violent outbursts – throwing objects, shouting and hitting.
- Threatening to suicide
- Causing harm and fear.

Reason for not reporting domestic violence:

- Too much invested in the partner for women to leave
- Cultural and religious shame, and religious beliefs about divorce
- Isolation from the extended family; and women who do not have permanent residency fear deportation if they report the abuse
- Perception that women who seek assistance usually have a negative experience, or they will not be believed
- Not knowing who to turn to, and a reluctance to confide in others

Given the acute level of isolation and impact that domestic violence has on CALD and Aboriginal communities, the focus of our response is in the area of early intervention strategies to prevent domestic violence.

Early intervention strategies to prevent domestic violence

The view of the Metro MRC is that early intervention strategies need to engage at two levels, namely women and men from CALD and Aboriginal communities; and services which fall into the response paradigm surrounding domestic violence. Within these two broader groupings, there is a need to raise awareness of domestic violence and its impact among communities and to establish some key messages, tailored to the specific nuances of individual communities and cultural backgrounds. There is also a need for services to better understand the drivers of domestic violence within CALD and Aboriginal communities, and to better engage and develop the capacity to provide appropriate responses. The gaps and needs in current circumstances are outlined below.

The need for research

It is our belief that a major gap exists at the outset and in our understanding of domestic violence and how its prevalence in CALD and Aboriginal communities, and more research is needed to understand the extent and nature of domestic violence, dynamics within culturally different communities; understanding causal factors, and how to address the many barriers within cultural paradigms.

Statistics from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) relating to Metro MRC's catchment area (Inner West and Canterbury-Bankstown) shows an annual average increase of 5.3% and 4.6% respectively in domestic violence related assault. This is statistically significant when compared to stable levels within the Sydney region and for NSW.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>Inner West</i>	331	329	385	374	407
<i>Cant-Bank</i>	993	984	925	1034	1119

Source: NSW BOCSAR

It is well-known that these areas have a very diverse demographic in terms of cultural background, household income, private and public housing, educational attainment and there are pockets of high unemployment. A fuller understanding of the issue is limited by a lack of ethnicity data. A paper by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House (2003:11) states that little research has been undertaken to understand the incidence and frequency of domestic violence experienced by women from CALD backgrounds and that data on the prevalence of domestic violence in ethnic communities should be viewed as conservative estimates because of a multitude of barriers which prevent women from seeking and accessing services. In the absence of such data, services are reliant on anecdotal information and on their own experiences.

In respect of Aboriginal communities, the paper suggests that women experience far higher rates of violence than non-indigenous women, however, the data varies between jurisdictions and regions and there are a multiple factors that lead to

significant variations in the reporting and incidence of domestic violence. Consequently, statistics in respect of Aboriginal women and domestic violence as experienced by women in our urban catchment may not reflect the same issues and causal factors as in rural or remote locations.

Understanding the issues

While there have been attempts at brokering information and support for women through ethnic-specific organisations, this has often been ad hoc in the nature and delivery of initiatives. This is primarily due to domestic violence being of a lesser priority in terms of political and policy weight, yet it is an incessant generator of hardship which drives family breakdown and adds to the social cost in terms of its effects and aftermath. It therefore follows that there are insufficient resources to establish and sustain the momentum that is needed to address domestic violence.

There is also a need to better understand domestic violence and the cultural context in which it occurs. It is hard enough for any woman to act in response to domestic violence, but in some cultures the shame, sense of guilt and embarrassment are often amplified and it is extremely difficult to acknowledge that a problem exists and to do something about it. The close-knit nature of communities is such that people sometimes do not want to deal with services within their community, particularly among new and emerging groups where the only mode of communication is word-of-mouth. A sense of guilt, shame and dishonour will see women endure endless and silent torment in unhealthy relationships. In some cultures, the experience of women has been one of repression and fear arising from extreme manifestations of violence such as honour killings, abuse at the hand of family members and abandonment. While it may be difficult to equate such extremes with the experience of migrant women in Australia, women do continue to die and suffer extreme violence. A true understanding of the extent of domestic violence cannot be fully gauged because of repressive factors such as dishonour and shame which keep the incidence of violence under-reported.

Resources and coordination

Metro MRC has participated in networks across its catchment which deal with the issue of violence against women, including:

- the Bankstown Domestic Violence Liaison Committee
- Canterbury Domestic Violence Liaison Committee, and
- Leichhardt and Marrickville Domestic Violence Network

These networks are important in reporting and discussing issues encountered at the local and regional level, and in raising and maintaining domestic violence on the agenda. They also work locally to support public awareness through initiatives such as White Ribbon Day and other activities. While the networks are important in planning and coordinating locally, there is no overarching metropolitan or state-wide framework to actively guide and resource them.

A recurrent need among network discussions has been the need to better engage with women and communities of CALD and Aboriginal backgrounds. Metro MRC undertakes this task on behalf of such initiatives through its existing contacts with clients and services; however, a lack of resources prevents us from engaging at a wider level and in a more targeted way.

Our experience, understanding and connection with communities has identified the need for primary prevention strategies which engage communities in an educative, non-judgemental and tailored approach to the issue of violence against women; and where both women and men are the target audiences. This approach needs to be supported with an appropriate level of resources.

The Community Drug Action Team (CDAT) approach could provide a comparative model whereby locally based networks meet regularly to address local issues and coordinate actions. This happens under the broader NSW Health framework, with some funding available to resource local prevention strategies.

Community engagement

There needs to be a process that engages community organisations and services within the catchment to raise awareness and understanding of the issue. Ethnic organisations, particularly new and emerging groups are often disadvantaged by not being part of a wider push to prevent domestic violence and to educate the community. Government agencies and community based services need to reconsider who and how they engage with in order to involve some of the higher risk groups and to tailor strategies with input from these communities.

This would involve developing an understanding of the particular issues and causations that exist in individual communities, and developing information and messages that are relevant and which are more likely to influence behavior. The approach should engage both men and women to identify attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and to develop appropriate responses.

Such a strategy would benefit from the involvement of prominent spokespeople from within each community, as influencers who can speak on issues through the media (print and radio) and at community briefings.

Information needs

Information needs to be available in language to support any strategy, and which covers the law, women's and children's rights and how to access support services in the community. Such topics are often complex and may be incongruous to some very powerful social and religious values, but basic information about the law and rights should remain consistent. The challenge is in how information is delivered within the cultural context of communities and understanding some of the values without being judgmental and potentially alienating perpetrators or entire sections of the community. For instance, rather than labeling all men as potential

perpetrators, the emphasis of discussion could be on the importance of respectful and trusting relationships; recognising and managing stress and tension; it is better to be respected than to be feared etc.

Information resources to support such initiatives should be available to the community, organisations and services and online. Resources should be developed in consultation with a sample of readers to ensure that the language and tone is appropriate and readily understood.

Strengthening the capacity of services

The service response to domestic violence often lacks the capacity to work with CALD and Aboriginal communities for a variety of reasons. These groups are sometimes regarded as too difficult to work with, or services do not have the skills or resources to provide the level of sensitivity required.

More has to be done to engage services and lift the quality of the response, including police, court support, legal services, housing and other services. There needs to be cross-cultural awareness training among some of the key response services so that victims of domestic violence feel supported and are not dismissed or ignored. It is important that government drives and resources such reforms if the level domestic violence in the community is to be reduced.

Conclusion

More can be done to understand the extent of domestic violence in CALD and Aboriginal communities and the causations. Intervention strategies need to be responsive to the social and cultural nuances within communities and mindful of the dynamics that exist. Communities need to be actively involved in addressing domestic violence in a way that resonates best with those who are likely perpetrators of violence against women and children.

Services need to be adequately resourced and skilled up to play any real and meaningful role in CALD and Aboriginal communities. There needs to be a clearer understanding of the role of localised services and how they can best support education and awareness-raising and a stronger lead set by government in coordinating setting direction.

Metro MRC thanks the Committee for this opportunity to respond to a very significant issue and to put forward our experience in our work with some of the more marginalised groups in the community.

References

Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse Topic Paper: Australian Statistics on Domestic Violence www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au