



# **Improving Family Violence Response Services for Culturally Diverse Communities in Victoria**

**Report on a forum held on 16 September 2021**





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## Introduction

On Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2021, grassroots organisations, community leaders and victim survivors came together for a forum to increase awareness about the need for more culturally responsive services for women experiencing family violence. The aim of the forum was to identify the gaps in funding and support for culturally specific family violence response services.

While the Royal Commission into Family Violence delivered some strong reforms and funding support from the Victorian Government, we are concerned that multicultural family violence response services are not being adequately funded and that there is a need for more culturally specific services. At this forum, we heard from leading organisations and multicultural community leaders about the models of family violence intervention and support that need to be expanded in Victoria.

The forum was hosted by Samantha Ratnam MLC (Leader of the Victorian Greens) and attended by Honorable Josh Bull MP (Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Youth), Ms Fiona Patten MP (Leader of Reason Party), Mr Bruce Atkinson MP (Liberal Party Member for Eastern Metropolitan) and community organisations including Shakti Australia, Indian Care Inc, Nepalese Women's Group, Victorian Afghan Network Association, Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health, Oorja Foundation Inc., JK Diversity, Settlement Services International and other community leaders representing Victoria's culturally diverse communities.

## Background

Family violence is a serious issue in Victoria that affects women and families from all backgrounds across the state. Women from culturally diverse backgrounds face compounding factors in their experiences of family violence and encounter additional barriers in seeking and obtaining help. This means that generalised family violence services are often ill-equipped to support victim survivors from culturally diverse backgrounds, which can contribute to an increased risk of violence and harm.

An important way to combat the systemic barriers faced by culturally diverse women experiencing family violence is through multicultural family violence services, such as those that understand the importance of intersectional approaches for culturally diverse communities. These services use culturally specific approaches that differ from those used by mainstream family violence service providers. This way, multicultural service providers are able to tailor their support to the culturally diverse communities they serve, and break down the barriers that these women would otherwise face when seeking help. During the forum we had the opportunity to hear from some of these service providers.



## Presenters

During the forum we heard from community organisations and victim survivors of family violence about their experiences.

### **Shakti International**

Shakti is a national not-for-profit community organisation specialising in the area of women's development, empowerment and domestic and family violence intervention, prevention and awareness. Representatives from Shakti spoke about their work in New Zealand and Australia, particularly their women's refuge model and how it is working. We heard accounts from victim survivors of family violence who had accessed Shakti's services that highlighted the benefits of establishing this model of service delivery in Victoria.

### **IndianCare**

IndianCare is a Melbourne-based not-for-profit organisation that provides a culturally sensitive service for people of Indian origin and supports their access to other existing community service organisations. It has projects that work to prevent and respond to family violence within the Indian-Australian community and operates a telephone helpline service that provides support for victims of family violence.

### **Jatinder Kaur - JK Diversity Consultants**

Jatinder Kaur is the Director of JK Diversity Consultants and an accredited mental health social worker who specialises in working with migrant and refugee communities. Her professional career spans 18 years and across various scopes of practice including research, child protection, family support, refugee settlement support, domestic violence counselling, policy roles and teaching social work practice. Jatinder also helped to set up the 'Sahara House' in Queensland, a culturally specific refuge for women of Indian background.

The forum was also addressed by several other women who had experienced family violence who shared their accounts of navigating the service system or lack thereof. Their accounts are incorporated in the next section of the report.

## Findings

### 1. Lack of specialist crisis refuges for culturally diverse women experiencing family violence

Women from culturally diverse communities are more likely to seek help for family violence when they're at crisis point and as such are overrepresented in crisis services. The demand for crisis accommodation in Victoria already outweighs the supply, and unfortunately, culturally diverse women face similar barriers when accessing crisis support services as they do when accessing mainstream family violence services. Mainstream crisis support services are sometimes reluctant to accommodate culturally diverse victim survivors because their needs differ to those that mainstream family violence services typically cater for. This often means that culturally diverse women, who are more likely to need crisis support, can't access it and are instead placed in motels or other general homelessness services that don't cater to their needs. A culturally specific crisis refuge for culturally diverse women would alleviate some of the pressure from mainstream crisis support services, and would provide safe, crisis accommodation for women who face unique barriers in accessing the help that they deserve.

*During the forum Scholastica spoke about her journey to Australia as a migrant woman. She migrated to Australia in 2018 and she knew no-one aside from her now ex-partner. Because of this she tolerated his abuse and resisted speaking up. However, after sharing her experiences with Shakti, she learned about how to get an intervention order and was given free counselling services. She requested Shakti to provide her with emergency accommodation because she was afraid of the consequences of speaking up. Unfortunately not having this facility available, she had to continue living in the same residence, which left her fearful of her life and impacted her personal well being.*

### 2. Inconsistent funding

Culturally specific family violence support service providers who have received government funding for projects or programs have expressed frustration at the inconsistency that comes along with such funding. The length of government-funded programs often remains uncertain with cyclical and time-limited funding. Family violence service providers report unexpected funding cuts, even when programs are doing well, which negatively impacts their ability to comprehensively help their clients. Furthermore, following the funding of pilot projects or programs for a limited number of years, without funding continuity, the knowledge and expertise developed by the program and staff involved are usually lost as staff are either deployed elsewhere or seek other employment. The Victorian Government's recent funding allocation to a range of culturally specific organisations for family violence prevention work, while very welcome, once again perpetuates this issue as it provides only time limited funding. Furthermore, providing funding only for prevention programs and not intervention programs creates another set of issues because the

organisations that receive this limited funding are more likely to receive more referrals and requests for help from those experiencing family violence, yet will have limited capacity to provide that support. They are therefore more likely to need funding to provide response and support services or risk asking their clients to navigate the mainstream system that does not adequately cater to women from culturally diverse backgrounds.

*Scholastica said it was unfortunate that while Shakti provided her with a holistic service, the organisation lacked resources such as in-crisis financial support and accommodation support. She stressed that organisations like Shakti should be supported as much as they can to enhance their support for the survivor victims of family violence.*

### 3. Limited culturally sensitive services and approaches

Multiple participants spoke about the lack of support for migrant communities they experienced when trying to access family violence support services. One participant, who now works with women facing family violence after her own lived experience, found a big gap between victim survivors and the support available. She recounted that while you can access interpreters, it can be really difficult to communicate when you're trying to express something traumatic through a third party, let alone sharing sensitive information. This highlighted the limited understanding of what culturally sensitive services and approaches actually mean when it comes to providing meaningful interventions. This is a concern shared by other organisations who have developed skills and tools to engage with culturally diverse communities in this type of support work.

*Arriving from Nepal in 2007, Bobby was in an abusive relationship for ten years. She stayed in the relationship for so long because she didn't know what to do and which organisation to reach out to or seek support. She was scared of the social circle and community pressure of continue to living with a abusive partner. She did not understand what social, financial and emotional abuse is until she had conversations with a stranger. She ultimately reached out to someone on Facebook as she didn't feel comfortable explaining what was happening to friends for fear of judgement. She then eventually left her partner and decided to create a support group with friends who were going through or knew someone that had gone through domestic violence. She found a huge gap between victim and support. She believes that many women choose to stay in a abusive relationship because it's what their community culture is. Bobby was unable to seek appropriate support from mainstream organisations who could not understand what she really wants in her life. Bobby said she wants to educate herself and find employment and be an independent person. Sadly there are employers who treat her unfairly when she said she is a single mother. She knows many women in her community who chose to stay in abusive relationship because raising child by themselves was really hard.*

## 4. Lack of funding and support for women on temporary visas

Temporary migration status can be used as an additional tool for coercion and control by perpetrators of family violence. There are significant barriers many women face when they are seeking support from health and family violence support services. Under current regulations, only women who hold particular spousal visas can access family violence provisions that enable them to leave an abusive relationship and stay in Australia, which means that women on temporary visas are denied access to support services that could really help them.

Women on temporary visas are often ineligible for support services such as public health, social security, and housing support, which can make them dependent on their partners or put them at risk of homelessness. This is especially concerning because the first large-scale study of migrant and refugee women in Australia, published this year, found that those on temporary visas reported consistently higher levels of domestic and family violence.<sup>1</sup> Inadequate support for women on temporary visas puts further pressure on culturally specific family violence services who become responsible for financially supporting women on temporary visas because their clients don't receive government support while they await the outcome of visa or residency applications.

Furthermore, many of these women are in Australia without other family or friendship networks, and may depend on the individual using violence for social and community connections. According to one participant at the forum, migration status "creates additional leverage for violence and control". She added that an inherent power imbalance exists when a woman is being sponsored by her partner in Australia or is in a relationship with an Australian citizen or resident. This power imbalance had been used as a form of family violence for many forum participants. For example, an Australian citizen or permanent resident partner can threaten to retract their visa sponsorship or any offer to sponsor the woman if she discloses or reports the violence in the relationship. In situations where a woman is migrating with her partner who is being sponsored for employment or educational purposes, the woman's migration and financial status depends entirely on her partner. This power imbalance is being used by men as another form of family violence.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/inTouch-Submission-to-the-Inquiry-into-FDSV-2020-FINAL.pdf>

*Sehar is a psychologist, university teacher and PhD student. She explained this wouldn't have been possible if Shakti hadn't rescued her from her abusive father 18 years ago. Unlike mainstream services who wanted to send Sehar back to her father after running a few anger management sessions, Shakti understood the complex cultural issues she faced and represented her in the court.*

*Shamli spoke about her experience being in an abusive relationship for eight years, before Shakti supported her to become independent. She now works at a refuge in New Zealand, where she has supported over 100 women. She strongly believes the culture and beliefs of Asian, African and Middle Eastern women can only be understood by agencies like Shakti who have workers from the same background.*

## **5. Limited resources for culturally diverse women who wish to remain in their relationship**

Migrant and refugee women experiencing family violence are more likely to want to remain in their relationship for a variety of reasons, such as immigration status or community pressure. This can cause a tension when services may be structured around leaving a violent relationship. While this tension is not experienced by culturally diverse women alone, when compounded by the barriers that these women face navigating the service system, it means family violence service providers aren't able to comprehensively help culturally diverse women seeking support.

## **6. Limited culturally specific perpetrator programs available to men from culturally diverse communities**

Perpetrator programs and interventions, such as men's behavioural change programs, are considered a key component of an integrated family violence system that addresses all aspects of family violence. Men's behavioural change programs are often used as a key method to target perpetrators and address family violence. Though there's a high demand for them in Victoria, most are only available in English, and there are even less that are culturally specific to men from diverse communities. Participants raised their concerns during the forum about the lack of availability of these types of programs that they believed could have a positive impact within their communities.

## Recommendations

1. That the Victorian Government fund the establishment of a culturally specific women's refuge in Victoria.
2. That the Victorian Government allocate more funding to culturally specific women's family violence services so that they are able to provide family violence interventions and response services.
3. That the Victorian Government develop a program of training and capacity building for culturally specific family violence support to increase the ability of paid staff and volunteers to provide effective frontline support to women experiencing family violence from culturally diverse communities.
4. That the Victorian Government review the way funding is allocated to culturally diverse organisations and ensure that there is flexibility for the organisation to design and deliver culturally specific approaches to family violence within any funding agreement.
5. That the Victorian Government ensure that there is a continuity of funding to culturally specific family violence support services to ensure they are able to build the capacity of their organisation and continue to provide services to the community.
6. That the Victorian Government review and update how it classifies and recognises acts of family violence that may be specific to particular communities (for example: dowry abuse) to ensure that women who are subject to these abuses are supported appropriately and not further disadvantaged by the arbitration and justice systems if these experiences are not recognised.
7. That the Victorian Government created formal mechanisms that facilitate meaningful collaboration between grassroots community organisations providing family violence response services to ensure knowledge and resources are shared.

### **Acknowledgements:**

I wish to thank all the participants who attended this forum for their invaluable contributions and insights. I especially thank those women who spoke of their lived experience. Your courage to share your stories and dedicate yourself to supporting other women is truly inspirational. Our multicultural communities have endured family violence that has devastated families and cost too many lives for too many years. I hope that we can work together so that all women can live free from violence.



**Disclaimer: Please note that all of the information in this document is confidential and should only be used by the direct recipient of the report for reference purposes only. Should the reader wish to cross reference an individual or organisation, please contact Samantha Ratnam MLC's office to seek appropriate approval.**

**Samantha Ratnam**

**Parliamentary Leader, Victorian Greens**

**Member of the Legislative Council for the Northern Metropolitan Region, State Parliament of Victoria**

**E: [samantha.ratnam@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:samantha.ratnam@parliament.vic.gov.au) P: (03) 9348 2622**