

Preventing violence against women: Community of Practice reflections

Promoting respectful relationships and gender equality

In June 2014, VicHealth hosted its third Community of Practice forum for advanced practitioners of primary prevention of violence against women (PVAW). The forum theme, Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities, set the stage for practitioners to explore the intricacies and nuances involved when working across cultures.

This paper captures the themes and highlights generated through discussions between advanced practitioners, in order to share this practice knowledge more broadly in the emerging field of PVAW.

*The content and quotes reported here come directly from forum presenters and participants, and all quoted text is italicised.

CALD communities leading the way to respectful relationships – the experience of *In Touch*

The forum commenced with practitioners from *In Touch*, a multicultural centre against family violence, sharing their experience of running a primary PVAW program within four ethno-specific communities in Melbourne between January 2012 and June 2014.

In Touch's mission is to facilitate healthy relationships within CALD families to live life without violence. It works across the continuum of violence from primary prevention to crisis intervention.

This primary prevention project, *CALD communities leading the way to respectful relationships*, aimed to increase awareness of gender equality, respectful relationships and family violence within Croatian, Indian, Sudanese and Vietnamese communities in Melbourne.

The project partnered with four local ethno-specific community organisations and established a task force committee (TFC) for each, comprising about four to eight members. TFC members and facilitators drawn from each community were trained in prevention of family violence, using the VicHealth 2007 framework *Preventing violence before it occurs*. Each task force then developed its own action plan and delivered eight prevention activities within its community, involving local stakeholders.

Most of the family violence happens in darkness. Our project is trying to remove the darkness and put some light out there. (Indian TFC member)

Project Highlights

- **Community engagement.** An estimated 20,190 community members from the four targeted communities were directly or indirectly exposed to the project's message. Sampling of a modest number of attendees (by convenience), including TFC members, indicated that 95 per cent of participants reported an increased awareness of respectful relationships after attending an activity.
- **Empowering community members as 'change agents.'** TFC members and facilitators were significantly more knowledgeable and confident in talking about gender equality at the end of the project. Training was key to this. Forty-one community members received training related to respectful relationships and family violence prevention.
- **Building capacity and leadership for sustainable impact.** All partner organisations reported a desire to continue with family violence prevention initiatives and two communities received local council funding to continue awareness-raising work.

Project Outcomes

What we achieved was to break the silence. Family violence is a taboo issue in many communities but now they are talking about it.

A full evaluation report is currently being prepared and will be available from the *In Touch* website www.intouch.asn.au

Questions

The *In Touch* presentation stimulated questions with much conversation centring on the following questions:

1. Does family violence occur more often in CALD communities?

The media perception that violence against women is more common in CALD communities can make communities defensive — they can be concerned that you think they are more violent.

It is unhelpful to suggest that CALD communities are more violent, however they could be:

- more accepting of gender inequality and tightly defined gender roles than in the general community (VicHealth NCAS report 2009)
- marginalised from access to mainstream prevention information due to language barriers.

2. How did you keep the focus on prevention? Primary prevention is such a new concept, even with service providers.

It was very difficult in the beginning as they were only interested in how to deal with disclosure.

We stressed that the work was primary prevention, but that is so hard to get through. One organisation we partnered with later backed out because they thought it was about responding to violence, not preventing it.

Many came on board wanting to help victims and we couldn't ignore this need. So we really focussed on referral: recognise the indicators, respond supportively, then refer, refer, refer. They did get disclosures from women who'd been abused, and they knew what to say and where to refer.

3. So what helped to bring the groups back 'upstream'?

A relentless chipping away, which was very resource intensive. For example we attended every meeting of the groups to ensure the activities planned were prevention-focussed not response-focussed.

Some effective approaches included:

- emphasising it was not the workers' role to get involved and more harm could be done by trying to figure out who was right or wrong, or by taking victims home
- reinforcing the idea of being change agents in their own community
- ensuring that workers knew what support services were available and where to refer

- highlighting that prevention work can affect many people's lives whereas responding to one woman who has experienced violence, affects only one life.

It was a difficult process with all four groups but by the end of the project they were all proud of fact that they were working in prevention.

4. What was your experience of working with faith leaders?

Faith leaders hold authority so it's a lot easier once you have them on board. Know the protocols in working with faith-based organisations so you can better bring them along. Consider what kind of PVAW messages we want to deliver to them. It can take a year to establish a connection and trust with them.

If you don't have the vicar on board (in Anglican communities) it'll undermine all your work.

One of our partner organisations had a religious affiliation which at times did cause conflict and worked against us.

Rather than have a faith leader in each TFC we conducted some activities through faith settings. For example, one really successful activity was White Ribbon Day with the Indian group. The faith leader incorporated a respectful relationship theme in his speech at their temple to over 1000 people.

Responses regarding scripture:

Practitioners had experienced both victims and perpetrators referring to scripture to condone or excuse violence.

We have female victims of violence who say 'in my scripture it says the woman needs to obey the man all the time'.

We regularly hear perpetrators of violence use lines to serve their purpose — 'In my scripture...'

In one community I was working with, a gentleman came up to me and said 'the Holy Scripture tells us the man is superior and the woman is subordinate. This is the way that it is'. What do you say to that? Scripture is wrong?

In my experience of working in communities people tell me there is nothing in the scriptures that condones violence against women, but there are many lines about gender roles. I would know a few lines in each major scripture and use that, if I needed to. If you get stuck just ask questions and invite a conversation.

Religious leaders agree with, and do listen to, the principle of respect. It's a framework they relate to.

5. What's the best starting point for conversations when first engaging a group? Is it at the prevention end of the spectrum, with gender equity, or is better to start with the problem of violence?

Gender equity: *When we focus just on gender equity there is not the buy in, especially from men. When we explain it's a determinant of violence against women it gives them the outcome we are aiming for.*

Family violence: *Violence against women gets the buy in. We were drawing people in with the problem of family violence – but then most wanted to focus on response rather than prevention.*

Human rights: *Using a human rights perspective works very well. Men relate to it because of their experience of trauma and the disempowering process of asylum seeking or migration.*

Healthy family: *It is helpful to frame it as being about how to raise kids now that you are parents.*

Respectful relationships: *Our main messages were related to respectful relationships and this engaged a lot of people. We were able to bring in family violence as part of that.*

6. How did you go about recruiting members into the task force committee?

We exercised a lot of caution, using a formal process of expression of interest and screening as you really need to know who you are working with. We did a lot of asking around to ensure we had credible people who were role models in the community.

Practitioners then pooled their experience to generate some 'tried and tested' strategies when working with CALD communities.

Action suggestions

CALD communities are diverse so get to know them.

Consider:

- What are the pathways that have brought them here? This will have an impact on their learning. Have they come as an international student or have they been living in a refugee camp?
- What is their experience of violence? – *People coming from war torn countries can have a complex experience of violence and some men will see themselves as victims of violence if they have witnessed people being killed in front of them. PVAW education needs to be sensitive to that background.*

- How long have they been living here and what has been their acculturation process?
- What are the community's priorities? *They may not be the same as ours. Can we add a gendered lens to what they are already doing?*

Beware of 'universal programs' – they won't reach diverse audiences and will re-enforce the gaps.

Ensure projects are community driven

- Use ethno-specific workers at the forefront of working with communities. Have this built into funding and allow sufficient time to build relationships.
- Be in general conversation with numerous people in the community, talking to non-leaders as well as leaders – *Recognise that a community isn't a single entity, it contains lots of different voices. Make sure you hear all of them.*
- Walk with the community, practise active listening, adapt to what you find along the way, and be patient.
- Work with influential ethno-specific organisations so they can make structural changes in how they work and to get gender on their agenda.

Beware:

- *Don't just grab any ethno-specific worker ...and say 'you are Thai – you'll do!' You need to find out if that person has shared values, and is trusted and respected by the community. Don't send people into communities who aren't part of it.*
- *Beware overloading the community workers ... they are probably already on four other committees because of the types of people they are.*
- *Don't assume faith leaders are the best or only place to start – not all people will feel they are the best leader or spokesperson.*

Communication

- Identify the specific ethnic newspapers and radio that have the greatest following in each community and use these media channels to reiterate key messages.
- Harness the power of word of mouth – *Don't just rely on the written word. Some communities rely on oral languages and people may not read even in their own language.*
- Be rigorous with translations and interpreters – *Even when we used professionally reputable companies and had translations triple checked by bilingual workers, we had to go back four to five times. It was technically correct but minimised the message.*

- Ideally education material would be written in the community's native language rather than translated from English.

Funding and reporting

Discussion focused mainly on how to deal with limited, short-term funding.

- Do less so you can do it well:
Working with diverse communities, the resourcing needs are intensive. So rather than bite off more than you can chew, be conscious of what you can do well, and what resources that will take. What can we cut back on? Which strategies will reach the most people?
- Honest reporting:
If there isn't enough time or funds allocated for partnership and engagement we have to say that in our evaluation reports rather than make it look OK to funders. There needs to be funding recognition of the time this work takes.
- Seek non-government funding:
Can we harness more lucrative partners? Work out where there is an interest in those who have resources. Think creatively and find out what will appeal to them – the public perception of the organisation, for example, or the effect on their bottom line.

Look after partnerships – they don't take care of themselves

- *Take time upfront to check you are in agreement about the determinants of violence against women as well as your roles, and that there's an understanding that gender equity takes time, so you don't get caught out part way through.*
- *Do maintenance activities and regular check-ins to keep relationships positive.*
- *Assume that at some stage there will be conflict. Think about how we are going to manage that.*
- *Partner organisations can have very limited resources, so do things like provide backfill for training.*

Establish an authorising environment

Refer to the law, relevant policies, human rights, research and the costs to the community of violence against women.

Reinforce that this is the law. Legally, girls and boys have to be in school so you can't keep the girls home, and that under our law violence against women is a crime.

Beware of colluding!

At times there will be a tension between wanting to keep an influential person engaged while also needing to challenge them.

One man was coming up to PVAW workers saying 'this is great you are focussing on PVAW because our women really need to learn how to behave better.' You have to leave no doubt that this was not an appropriate thing to say.

The Big Challenge: our own cultural bias

Practitioners acknowledge that many people working in PVAW come from an Anglo background so a cultural bias creeps in from the start – from the way the funding guidelines are written to how the program is planned and implemented.

- *We are a group of nearly all white women and there is a sense we are above racism. We think that we are objective and approach our work in an unbiased manner. We don't have anyone in this room here calling us to account when we are unconsciously being racist.*
- *The role of mainstream organisations is to learn from the community, to ask them how we should go about our work, but we don't do this well.*
- *We could fundamentally change the way we work – how we plan our projects, organise meetings, and organise our time. But we don't have these conversations in our workplaces as it would mean change – changing the hours I work, the way funds are allocated, even ownership of our programs.*
- *We can be creative about this though. For example we can employ people from the local community to co-facilitate sessions and provide leadership. In our project we diverted half the funds to community members so we only work one day a week.*

Top 10 forum insights

1. Engage influential ethno-specific organisations and ethno-specific workers who are trusted by the community. Take care in recruiting to ensure project representatives have credibility with the community.
2. Faith leaders hold authority so take the time to get them on board, but don't assume they are always the best place to start.
3. Get to know your community. CALD communities are diverse, so no single CALD approach will fit all CALD communities.
4. The best starting point for conversations will depend on each community, but a human rights, family health or respectful relationships focus can work well.

5. 'Authorize' your work by referring to the law, research and influential examples.
6. Nurture partnerships and take time to ensure there's a common understanding about the work, including the determinants of violence against women.
7. Tailor your communication strategy for each community. Identify popular media channels, use word of mouth and engage quality translators and interpreters.
8. Remember that a prevention approach to violence against women is still very new so continually re-enforce this focus, and train workers in referral rather than responding.
9. Funding and planning needs to take into account the time and resources PVAW work takes. When resources are limited, do less, well, and be honest in evaluation reports when resources are insufficient.
10. Be aware of our own cultural bias and make efforts to adapt to each community's ways.

Helpful resources for promoting equity

Building on our strengths: a framework for reducing race-based discrimination and supporting diversity.

VicHealth 2009

www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Programs-and-Projects/Freedom-from-discrimination/Building-on-our-strengths.aspx

Cultural competence tips sheets.

A series aimed at assessing and improving cultural competence at an organisational level.

Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health.

www.ceh.org.au/culturalcompetence

References

VicHealth 2007, *Preventing violence before it occurs: a framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

VicHealth 2010, *2009 National Survey on Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.



Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
PO Box 154 Carlton South
Victoria 3053 Australia

T +61 3 9667 1333 F +61 3 9667 1375
vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au
www.vichealth.vic.gov.au

September 2014
Publication number: P-MW-198

VicHealth acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

