



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

# Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Brotherhood of St Laurence  
67 Brunswick Street  
Fitzroy Vic. 3065  
ABN 24 603 467 024  
Ph. (03) 9483 1183

[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

Rob Hudson  
Group General Manager, Programs and Policy  
Brotherhood of St Laurence  
Ph: (03) 9483 2430  
[rhudson@bsl.org.au](mailto:rhudson@bsl.org.au)

## About the Brotherhood of St Laurence

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (the Brotherhood) is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile on matters of disadvantage, the Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

The Brotherhood works to address disadvantage at key transition points across the life course using a preventative and early intervention approach. We work with children and families in the early years, young people moving through school to work, adults who are in and out of work, and older people facing the challenges of retirement and ageing.

In all our work, we aim to strengthen the capacity of migrant, newly arrived and refugee communities to participate actively in the social and economic life of Australia. The Brotherhood's Ecumenical Migration Centre (EMC), operating since 1956, is at the forefront of these efforts.

This submission draws on the Brotherhood's experience of working with families and communities affected by family violence that we come across in a diverse range of situations, including:

- delivery of family support services including the Victorian Government funded Integrated Family Services, through which the Brotherhood focuses on supporting culturally and linguistically diverse families to address parenting and child welfare issues. Before federal funding ceased, we delivered the Family Relationship Service for Humanitarian Entrants which assisted families to repair relationships affected by the refugee experience
- delivery of settlement services such as Refugee Child Outreach, which works with newly arrived refugee families to ensure their young children are engaged with early childhood services; and the Settlement Facilitator program, which supports refugees who have been in Australia longer than five years with their settlement needs
- delivery of community capacity building programs such as the Victorian Government funded Refugee Action Program, which builds the leadership skills in newly arrived communities
- development of parenting support programs, including supported playgroups for fathers and for mothers at the Connie Benn Centre on the Atherton Gardens public housing estate in Fitzroy
- coordinating a collaborative approach which has trained welfare and education workers supporting public housing residents in Fitzroy to assist children and their families to build social and emotional literacy skills
- leadership of the new Epping Hub, where the EMC will be located in a collaborative multi-agency setting
- our Growth Corridors Strategy, which seeks to build the strengths of emerging communities. As part of this, we have established a partnership with Goodstart Early Learning to bring together programs which concurrently support children and their families. This approach builds on the latest research about the need to take a two-generation approach to moving families and children out of poverty by providing the best quality early learning programs in tandem with economic participation strategies for parents.

## Recommendations

### Reaching men early

1. Embed family violence prevention approaches into existing settlement support services for newly arrived communities.
2. Support the widespread availability of forums for men that foster positive family relationships, such as supported playgroups for fathers.

### Strengthening men's behaviour change programs

3. Strengthen standards for men's behaviour change programs and continue to build the evidence base to increase program effectiveness.
4. Expand the number of places in men's behaviour change programs, including programs targeted at culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, so that men seeking to participate do not miss out.

### Acknowledging and supporting the role of religious and community leaders

5. Work with all religious institutions to train and support religious leaders to engage with their communities about positive family relationships and family violence.
6. Equip key leaders to work with their communities on preventing family violence.

### Building emotional management skills for positive family relationships

7. Implement approaches in early childhood services and schools to improve the skills of children and parents to manage emotions and build positive family relationships. Locations with a high prevalence of family violence should be given priority.

## **Overview – investing in the prevention of family violence**

Consistent with the Brotherhood's general focus on prevention and early intervention to tackle poverty and exclusion, the unifying theme in this submission is the need to intensify efforts to address family violence at the preventative and early intervention end of the spectrum.

To date, the predominant response to family violence in Victoria has been interventions at the tertiary end, that is, interventions to keep women and children safe once violence has already occurred and mandatory behaviour change programs and criminal sanctions for men. Much less attention has been placed on preventative measures.

This submission makes specific recommendations in relation to:

- building the skills of men to engage in positive family relationships and avoid family violence
- equipping community and religious leaders to work with their communities on family violence prevention
- supporting children and families to build positive emotional regulation and relationships skills, for example through developing social and emotional literacy.

Although we do not make specific recommendations about them in this submission, we are also cognisant of broader preventative factors that are important for the Commission to consider, including:

- empowering communities to develop local approaches to preventing and tackling family violence
- addressing the links between disadvantage, joblessness and family violence
- addressing the lack of social infrastructure and support services in some areas with a high prevalence of family violence.

While there has been a significant shift in attitudes towards violence over the last few decades, there is still a long way to go. Greater investment in preventative measures to encourage behaviour change and engage communities in new approaches is critical to Victorian efforts to tackle family violence.

### **Culturally and linguistically diverse communities and family violence**

Although our submission is not limited to CALD communities, we have paid specific attention to the experiences of newly arrived communities, particularly those that we work closely with in Fitzroy, Footscray, Whittlesea and Hume. To inform this submission we spoke with leaders and members of CALD communities in Whittlesea (one of Melbourne's growth corridor suburbs with a high reported incidence of family violence) about effective responses to family violence. We also convened a workshop of Brotherhood staff who work directly with CALD families.

While violence is present in all cultures, attitudes towards it differ greatly across and within cultures. The prevalence of family violence in CALD families compared to other Victorian families

is not known, though increased risk can arise from cultural factors, trauma, the refugee experience, immigration status and the stress of acculturation.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the families that we work with have experienced considerable trauma and adjustment challenges through their pre-migration, migration, settlement and acculturation. These factors, when coupled with a lack of alternative strategies for managing emotions and discipline, increase the risk of men's violence against women and children.

For some CALD communities, the laws and norms in Australia are markedly different from those in their country of origin. This adds a dimension to the settlement process. For example, moving from a culture which is highly patriarchal to one which is moving towards gender equity can be particularly challenging,<sup>2</sup> and is often associated with significant shifts in traditional family dynamics. Men can experience a change of status, which can be compounded by a period of joblessness and by opportunities for their wives and children to attain (some level of) financial independence through income support payments or employment.

*'One of my younger brothers who sponsored us, he was the worst one. He didn't want us to adapt or learn Australian culture ... every time I used to come home he used to beat me. Every day when I finished English classes, I would go to the job and when I came home he would beat me. I said to him, "Until you kill me I'm not going to stop". – A woman who participated in the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Stepping Stones program in 2014.<sup>3</sup>*

Women from CALD backgrounds are reluctant to report family violence<sup>4</sup> due to a range of factors including:

- fear of being ostracised by their community
- concerns about jeopardising their immigration status
- concern that marriage breakdown will result in men taking custody of their children (as is the norm in some legal systems)
- unfamiliarity with the systems and laws in Australia.

The announcement of additional funds in the recent Victorian Budget to address family violence in CALD communities is a welcome development. We believe there is potential to reach more people with culturally responsive preventative and early intervention strategies.

## Family violence and disadvantage

The Brotherhood's reason for being is to prevent and reduce poverty, disadvantage and exclusion. While family violence affects all classes, suburbs and cultures, it is important to recognise that there is a correlation between family violence and disadvantage.<sup>5</sup> Although poverty and disadvantage do not, in and of themselves, cause family violence, there is a two-way relationship that needs to be recognised:

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<sup>1</sup> T Trijbetz, *Domestic and family violence and people from immigrant and refugee backgrounds*, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence interview with Professor Donna Chung, Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University, May 2015.

<sup>3</sup> D Bowman & Y Maker, *No! Not equal*, Future Leaders, Sydney, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> L Bartels, *Emerging issues in domestic/family violence research*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Defining the data challenge for family, domestic and sexual violence*, Cat. no. 4529.0, ABS, Canberra, 2013.

- Men's lower education attainment and lower income are associated with higher perpetration of family violence.<sup>6</sup>
- In times of economic downturn and rising unemployment, more domestic violence is reported, particularly physical violence in socially excluded communities.<sup>7</sup>
- Higher educational and economic status of women can be an insulator against violence and coercion,<sup>8</sup> providing the resources to cope with or end an abusive relationship.<sup>9</sup> Women's economic contribution to the family can be a factor in lessening family violence,<sup>10</sup> although this may vary across cultures.
- Violence has also been shown to limit the degree to which women are able to work, earn an income or independently make decisions about their health and their children's schooling and use of health services.<sup>11</sup>
- A recent study by Professor Donna Chung of 500 Australian women found that all of the women who left a violent partner were worse off economically, even if they had a job, compared to when they were in the family home and even compared to before they became involved in the relationship.<sup>12</sup>

While this submission does not contain specific recommendations to tackle the link between poverty and family violence, we believe that reducing poverty and building economic participation—both for men and women—may help to prevent or arrest family violence.

The Brotherhood is currently developing and piloting a two-generation approach in partnership with Goodstart Early Learning to address disadvantage. Using early childhood services as a universal platform, the model brings together high quality early childhood education with parent and family wellbeing support. It also focuses on the economic participation of parents through links with career planning, training and employment opportunities and financial programs, as well as building civic engagement and community connections. Our efforts will be concentrated in communities on the fringes of our cities, where other civic institutions and supports are not yet well established.

Our pilot is inspired by the two-generation approach developed by the Annie E Casey Foundation<sup>13</sup> and the Aspen Institute<sup>14</sup> in the United States. Based on considerable research, they have demonstrated that for early years interventions to succeed in moving children out of poverty and

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<sup>6</sup> CM Renzetti, *Economic stress and domestic violence*, National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women, USA, September 2009.

<sup>7</sup> ML Benson & G Litton Fox, *Economic distress, community context and intimate violence: an application and extension of social disorganization theory*, final report, Department of Justice, NCJ 193434, 2002; ML Benson & G Litton Fox, *When violence hits home: how economics and neighbourhood play a role*, Research in Brief, National Institute of Justice, Washington DC, September 2004.

<sup>8</sup> S Vyas & C Watts, 'How does economic empowerment affect women's risk of intimate partner violence in low and middle income countries? A systematic review of published evidence', *Journal of International Development*, no. 21, pp. 577–602, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> L Brush, 'The effects of work on hitting and hurting', *Violence against Women*, vol. 9, pp. 1213–30, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> C Kaukinen C & R Powers, 'The role of economic factors on women's risk for intimate partner violence: a cross-national comparison of Canada and the United States', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 229–48, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Vyas & Watts, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> D Chung, Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University, WA, publication forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Anne E Casey Foundation <<http://www.aecf.org/resources/creating-opportunity-for-families/>>

<sup>14</sup> The Aspen Institute <<http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/pages/the-two-generation-approach>>

setting them on the path to social inclusion, associated interventions with parents are critical. These include building parenting skills, offering education and employment support, and building capacity to develop a financial assets base and to engage in their child's education.

Given the relationship between poverty and violence, the two-generation approach may have a positive impact on the incidence of family violence, but as yet it is too early to tell. The Aspen Institute is currently supporting a number of family violence and women's empowerment programs to monitor the outcomes.

## The geography of family violence

While family violence exists right across Victoria, police data on family violence reports (which predominantly relate to physical violence) indicates that some areas are more affected than others.

The rural and regional areas of Campaspe, Latrobe, Central Goldfields and Mildura are the highest offending areas in the state. In metropolitan Melbourne, Casey, Hume, Geelong, Frankston and Whittlesea have the most reported family violence incidents.<sup>15</sup> We note that Casey, Hume and Whittlesea, all growth corridors of Melbourne, are characterised by rapid population growth, a lag in the provision of basic services, and comparatively poor social capital, civic connections, transport and employment opportunities. These factors may contribute to family violence.

Research indicates that geographical isolation compounds problems of family violence by reducing access to formal and informal support networks. Isolation often involves a scarcity of support services, greater distances, poor transport options and fewer pathways to safety.<sup>16</sup>

We hope that the Royal Commission in its final report is able to provide further insight into why family violence is particularly prevalent in some locations.

The Brotherhood is watching the Go Goldfields initiative in the Central Goldfields Shire with interest. Using a Collective Impact inspired approach, Go Goldfields is developing community-driven solutions to tackle a range of issues, including family violence. While it is too early to tell whether this approach will be effective, the early indications are promising. It could signal a way forward for place-based approaches in other locations with high concentrations of family violence.<sup>17</sup>

Child and Family Hubs could provide important infrastructure for developing early intervention and preventative approaches to family violence, particularly in areas with a paucity of social infrastructure. Embedding preventative approaches in universal services, in a non-stigmatising way, would increase the likelihood of reaching both perpetrators and victims. This would require investment to strengthen the capacity of universal services to address family violence.

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<sup>15</sup> Victoria Police, *Family Incident Reports - 2009/10 to 2013/14*,

[http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media\\_ID=72311](http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media_ID=72311)>

<sup>16</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Defining the data challenge for family, domestic and sexual violence*, Cat. no. 4529.0, ABS, Canberra, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Go Goldfields evaluation 2012–2014 (publication forthcoming)  
<<http://www.centralgoldfields.com.au/gogoldfields>>

## Recommendations

### Reaching men early

**Recommendation 1:** Embed family violence prevention approaches into existing settlement support services for newly arrived communities.

**Recommendation 2:** Support the widespread availability of forums for men that foster positive family relationships, such as supported playgroups for fathers.

For men in many cultures, talking about emotions and discussing challenges in their family relationships is not encouraged, nor are there many forums for this kind of exchange.

There is significant opportunity to adopt a preventative approach to family violence by supporting avenues for men to safely explore their attitudes and their behaviours towards family relationships, as a way of raising the issue of family violence. This could be achieved by utilising non-stigmatising forums that enable connection with ‘hard to reach’ men who might not otherwise be engaged about family violence.

While diverse men’s forums could be used as a vehicle for this approach, common elements that are needed to underpin efforts to engage men about family violence include:

- a group facilitator who is a trusted leader in the particular community and can play an intermediary role
- training tools and resources, such as Victoria Legal Aid’s Settled and Safe program for settlement service providers
- close links to a community service organisation to facilitate referrals and to provide a professional support network
- a culturally responsive approach. Engaging with men from CALD backgrounds around family violence can be complicated by language barriers, cultural norms for family relationships, stigma, and apprehension about the perceived intrusion of services into family life.

### Settlement support

Embedding family violence prevention in settlement support would enable newly arrived communities to access information and support from the outset.

Settlement service providers often run informal social groups for CALD men. . Such groups provide a soft entry point where men can gather and socialise, and where sensitive issues can be raised in an environment that is non-threatening and non-stigmatising. They reach men who may otherwise be isolated or hard to engage. Supported conversations in these forums can be effectively framed around family relationships, rather than being explicitly labelled as conversations about family violence. These groups offer a simple and economical vehicle for prevention and early intervention work to occur, as illustrated by the following case studies.

**Case study: Iraqi Men's Group**

A settlement service provider has run the Iraqi Men's Group for several years in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. A federally funded Men and Family Relationships Project Officer (of Iraqi background) facilitates the weekly gathering of 15–20 men.

An inviting space is created with Arabic language newspapers, refreshments and board games. The men socialise for the first part of the evening, and then a guest speaker talks to the group and takes questions, with discussion facilitated by the project officer. To avoid stigmatising attendees, a talk on men's behaviour change, for example, will not be advertised; rather, it might be entitled 'Being a good father and husband'.

The project officer is a trusted intermediary between the group and broader community/service system, and can broach issues in a non-threatening manner. He can acknowledge the upheaval of resettlement and the challenges of changed family dynamics, facilitate the provision of information about Australian norms and laws, and provide warm referrals to appropriate services.

The group is now connecting with a younger Iraqi men's group, who see their role as supporting young Iraqi men who have grown up primarily in Australia and are at risk of being socially isolated or marginalised.

**Case study: The 'Round Fire' Discussion Group**

Funded through the Family Relationships Services for Humanitarian Entrants program of the former Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) and the South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre ran a program to strengthen family relationships among newly arrived refugee families.

A therapeutic group for South Sudanese men, the 'Round Fire' Discussion Group, was developed by a psychologist and South Sudanese workers. The program was developed using the concept of the village fire where South Sudanese men traditionally resolved village and family problems over a meal. The fire represented a safe and sacred environment where they could be open and trusting of each other. Participants, interpreters and facilitators had to be men only so that the group could provide a familiar and safe environment to encourage trust and openness between group members and facilitators.

Feedback from participants indicated the success of the program as a way of assisting men from an extremely different cultural and political background to become open to new ideas and ways of understanding relationships in their family. Furthermore, the men requested that the group continue to meet and further explore issues that impacted on their settlement and their family.<sup>18</sup>

Recognising the value of embedding family violence information and education in settlement services, Victoria Legal Aid has developed the Settled and Safe program. This program increases settlement service providers' knowledge of family violence and the law and involves collaboration between legal aid and settlement services to deliver legal information to newly emerging communities.

The Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project is piloting the Settled and Safe program with the Iranian community. The program will be adapted with the Iranian community's input to ensure that it is culturally relevant and accessible.<sup>19</sup> Learnings from this project will be used to inform delivery of the training with other CALD communities in Whittlesea.

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<sup>18</sup> Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne), *'Round Fire' Discussion Group: a therapeutic group program for Southern Sudanese men – evaluation report*, Melbourne, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Whittlesea Community Futures & Whittlesea Community Connections, *Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project – annual report 2014*, Melbourne.

### Supported playgroups for fathers

Programs and services related to fathering offer another avenue to reach out to men about family violence prevention. Our consultations with CALD community leaders in Whittlesea revealed that focusing on the impact that violence has on their children is an effective way of engaging men.

At the Connie Benn Centre in Fitzroy, the Brotherhood is piloting a supported playgroup for fathers and their children who live on the adjacent high rise public housing estate and are mostly of CALD background. Led by a qualified early childhood educator, the group is designed to equip fathers to support their children's development through play and to build positive family relationships. The playgroup relies on philanthropic funds to operate. While the program is in its infancy and has not yet been evaluated, the potential of this model should be further explored.

### Men's behaviour change programs

**Recommendation 3: Strengthen standards for men's behaviour change programs and continue to build the evidence base to increase program effectiveness.**

**Recommendation 4: Expand the number of places in men's behaviour change programs, including programs targeted at CALD communities, so that those seeking to participate do not miss out.**

### Standards and quality

The Victorian peak body, No To Violence (NTV), the Male Family Violence Prevention Association, developed minimum standards for men's behaviour change programs, which must be adhered to by NTV members. Men's behaviour change programs funded by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services are also required to meet these standards. The standards, now almost a decade old, need to be updated to reflect current evidence and good practice. In particular, the standards need to address issues such as supporting those on waiting lists and robust accountability measures for the attendance and progress of participants.

The evidence concerning how effective programs are, for whom and in what circumstances needs to be collected and analysed as a priority. Researchers such as Chung argue that programs which fail to incorporate a number of critical elements or are facilitated by people without appropriate skills can be damaging and counterproductive.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, we would also like to see updated standards apply to all providers of men's behaviour change programs, regardless of how they are funded.

### Availability of places

Providing more places in men's behaviour change programs is an essential part of maximising early intervention efforts. The Brotherhood's experience is that many men who are seeking to participate in a behaviour change program are unable to secure a place, or experience significant delay. Those volunteering to participate are particularly affected, due to the priority given to court-mandated participants. This represents a significant missed opportunity to address violent behaviour at a point when someone is actively seeking support.

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<sup>20</sup> D Chung, *op. cit.*

No to Violence recently confirmed that men applying for a behaviour change program in Melbourne, both voluntary and mandated, wait on average three months just for an assessment and six months to attend a program. As at May 2015, programs in the southern metropolitan region have closed their intake for the remainder of the year. The eastern metropolitan region faces a similar situation and the northern metropolitan region cannot accept anyone who is not deemed a high risk. Most agencies are not funded to provide any interim support to men on a waiting list, although some offer counselling to ‘high risk’ men and others offer a monthly ‘holding’ program which attempts to keep men engaged while they wait for a place in a program.

No to Violence reported that increasing numbers of younger men (in their 20s and 30s) are seeking to participate in men’s behaviour change programs. This is promising given that workers in the field are of the view that younger people often show a greater capacity for behaviour change.<sup>21</sup>

#### Accessibility for CALD communities

In addition to the shortage of places in men’s behaviour change programs, there are other access barriers for CALD men. Nearly all programs are conducted in English, which effectively shuts out many CALD men, especially the recently arrived. Culturally and linguistically specific groups enable critical issues specific to new communities—such as the acculturation process—to be raised, whereas a predominantly Australian-born group is less likely to touch on these factors.

Two promising examples in the northern region of Melbourne are Kildonan UnitingCare’s South Asian Men’s Behaviour Change Program and the Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project’s Arabic-Speaking Men’s Family Violence Group.

#### **Case study: Kildonan UnitingCare South Asian Men’s Behaviour Change program**

The issue of family violence in Melbourne’s Indian community is receiving increasing attention following the deaths of eleven Indian women since 2012 and a surge in court referrals of Indian men to men’s behaviour change programs.

In response, Kildonan UnitingCare created a 22-week behaviour change course in September 2013 for South Asian men from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The program takes into account cultural issues relevant to South Asian families, as well as the social and economic impacts of migration and resettlement.

The group facilitator, Mahesh Ram Bhandary, says: “[These men] will have very strong ideas about what women’s roles are and what men’s roles are. In those societies where gender equality is less supported, the chances of family violence occurring are higher”.<sup>22</sup>

The group addresses cultural factors that may be contributing to violence, such as cohabiting with in-laws and arranged marriage. Participants also learn about Australian law in relation to family violence and discuss trauma, loss and grief in the resettlement process; how women’s and children’s wellbeing is impacted by patriarchal norms; gender equality and family roles; and the effects of alcohol misuse.<sup>23</sup>

The group is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice. While it runs in Heidelberg in Melbourne’s north-east, participants travel from Broadmeadows, Sunshine and Werribee to attend. The program is experiencing considerable demand, with men (both mandated and voluntary) waiting on average 2–3 months to participate. An evaluation of the program is currently underway and will be finalised in 2015.

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<sup>21</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence interview with No to Violence staff, May 2015.

<sup>22</sup> ABC, *Melbourne’s Indian community calls for end to domestic violence*, ABC, 2015, <<http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-15/melbournes-indian-community-calls-for-end-to-domestic-violence/6474228?pfm=sm>>

<sup>23</sup> Kildonan UnitingCare, *South Asian Men’s Behaviour Change Program*, 2015 <<https://www.kildonan.org.au/programs-and-services/child-youth-and-family-support/family-violence/south-asian-mens-behaviour-change-program/>>

**Case study: Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project (WCFVP) Arabic-Speaking Men's Family Violence Group**

The Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project (WCGVP) brings together key local agencies to design, deliver and evaluate an integrated, place-based model to reduce and prevent family violence.

In a scoping exercise conducted in 2012, the WCFVP found that CALD men had less access to existing men's behaviour change programs and that language barriers made these programs less effective for them. The WCFVP recommended the development of language/culture specific men's behaviour change programs to address these identified barriers. Demographic data from the City of Whittlesea pointed to a need for a group to reach the large Arabic-speaking community of both newly arrived and more established migrants and refugees.

Through financial and in-kind contributions from inTouch, Victoria Legal Aid, Scanlon Foundation, City of Whittlesea, Salvation Army Crossroads, and men's behaviour change specialist Tom Griffiths, WCFVP is now piloting an Arabic-Speaking Men's Family Violence Group. The pilot could provide valuable learning for an accredited Arabic-speaking men's behaviour change program in the future.<sup>24</sup>

**Acknowledging and supporting the role of religious and community leaders**

**Recommendation 5: Work with all religious institutions to train and support leaders to engage with their communities about positive family relationships and family violence.**

**Recommendation 6: Equip key leaders to work with their communities on preventing family violence.**

The influential and respected position held by community and religious leaders provides an opportunity to foster genuine leadership on family violence,<sup>25</sup> particularly in CALD communities.<sup>26</sup> These leaders are frequently asked for personal advice and are often the first port of call for both men and women experiencing family violence. Religious leaders are in the unique position of being asked to provide spiritual guidance and support to both survivors and perpetrators of family violence. Their response is critical to outcomes for women and children experiencing violence.<sup>27</sup>

Community and religious leaders recently consulted by the Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project spoke of the importance of acknowledging this role. They expressed a willingness to be involved in further training to support people affected by family violence and to work with their communities around family violence.

Targeted training and support for community and religious leaders would highlight the importance of placing a high priority on the safety of women and children and their right to a life free of violence. It would also need to confront cultural norms that make violence acceptable, and other factors that place pressure on women to remain in violent relationships. In the Brotherhood's consultations with CALD community leaders, one woman who had experienced family violence

<sup>24</sup> Whittlesea Community Futures & Whittlesea Community Connections, *Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project: scoping exercise report*, Melbourne, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Trijbetz, op.cit.

<sup>26</sup> Religious leaders were identified in the developmental research for the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence campaign as a key influence for non-English speaking background communities in relation to domestic violence response and prevention. See Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House, *Newsletter 12*, September 2002.

<sup>27</sup> National Resource Centre on Domestic Violence, *Religion and domestic violence - information and resources overview*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2007.

criticised the response she received from a religious leader who favoured the preservation of marriage above concerns for safety. Current information on appropriate referral options is also required for these leaders to be effective in their role.

*'It will take time for leaders' attitudes to change but the sooner we initiate change, and persist with it, the sooner the current normal will change to an anti-violence normal.'* – Female CALD community leader, Brotherhood of St Laurence community consultation, 2015.

A key project conducted during Partnerships Against Domestic Violence (commencing in 1999) worked with religious leaders. It provided them with both training and resources and produced positive outcomes, with many leaders acknowledging that they were able to take a different approach when confronted with family violence in their community. Leaders also signed an Interfaith Declaration against domestic violence.

There is opportunity to build on this approach by working with senior religious leaders and with religious institutions including training colleges, representative bodies and interfaith organisations. The aim would be to introduce intentional training and support to enable religious leaders to assist in the prevention of family violence.

Some promising examples of practical steps to equip religious and community leaders to help address family violence are outlined below.

**Case study: Anglican leaders' initiative to prevent gender violence**

The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne is piloting a smart phone app. It aims to equip Anglican leaders to become active in preventing gender violence and showing compassion for survivors of gender violence. The app includes prevention tips, resources and practical tools such as how to talk to someone who is in crisis. Complementary face-to-face training is being delivered to clergy and lay leaders.

Nationally, the Anglican Church is developing a framework for preventing violence against women and their children.

**Case study: Supporting Traditional African Mediators Project (STAMP)**

In 2010 Western Region Health received a grant from the Legal Services Board Victoria to develop the Supporting Traditional African Mediators Project (STAMP). The project developed a family violence training program for traditional African mediators, particularly in Melbourne's western suburbs, providing education and interventions that promote non-violent conflict resolution among African-Australian families.

The participants were community leaders who were often called upon by the community or police to mediate informally in family violence or conflict situations and to support people in court.

STAMP aimed to enhance understanding of and collaboration in family violence prevention through formal training, peer sharing of information and experiences and developing closer ties with the police and justice system. Results of the program evaluation indicated positive attitudinal changes about gender roles and increased knowledge of the Australia legal system. A support group called Marula, which formed through the project, continues to operate informally.<sup>28</sup>

Key stakeholders are in favour of Marula mediators receiving ongoing support, professional development and formalised roles to continue their work in supporting their communities to address family violence.

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<sup>28</sup> Gregory et al., 'Supporting Traditional African Mediators Project (STAMP) for family violence', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, vo. 34, pp. 234–44, 2013

## Building emotional management skills for positive family relationships

**Recommendation 7: Implement approaches in early childhood services and schools to improve the skills of children and parents to manage emotions and build positive family relationships. Locations with a high prevalence of family violence should be given priority.**

Being able to self-regulate is a critical factor in preventing family violence. This is because there is a link between a lack of social and emotional literacy and the use of violence. Those with limited options for expressing emotion and frustration are more likely to resort to violence.<sup>29</sup> Nobel Prize winning economist Professor Heckman links crime, limited social ability and lack of impulse control to low levels of social and emotional skills, which his research finds are best developed at an early age.<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, supporting children, young people and their families to develop the skills to manage conflict, stress and emotions and to understand healthy relationships is an important preventative measure.<sup>31</sup>

Early childhood services and schools can play a pivotal role. Education programs in early learning centres and schools with children and young people have consistently been identified as a key strategy for reducing violence in society.<sup>32</sup> One promising program that is being embedded in early years settings and schools in two Melbourne municipalities is Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), a research-informed curriculum taught by classroom teachers from Prep to Year 6. It builds emotional and social competence by addressing feelings, behaviour, self-esteem, social skills and problem solving. PATHS provides both an individual and community approach. It enables the whole school community to adopt a common way of dealing with social and emotional situations.

The complementary programs of Tuning into Kids™ and Tuning into Teens™ are available to skill parents in this social and emotional literacy approach. These evidence-based parenting programs focus on the emotional connection between parents and children, in particular teaching parents the skills of emotion coaching with their children.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, *The foundations of lifelong health are built in early childhood*, 2010, <<http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>>

<sup>30</sup> J Heckman, *The Heckman equation: a solution for better education and health outcomes, less crime and poverty and greater economic prosperity*, University of Chicago, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> J Guy, L Feinstein & A Griffiths, *Early intervention in domestic violence & abuse*, Early Intervention Foundation UK, 2014

<sup>32</sup> K Carrington, *Domestic violence in Australia – an overview of the issues*, E-Brief: Online only, Social Policy Group, 2003, <[http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/Publications\\_Archive/archive/Domviolence](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/Domviolence)>

<sup>33</sup> Tuning into Kids™ <<http://www.tuningintokids.org.au/professionals/research/>>

**Case Study: PATHS at Atherton Gardens**

The Brotherhood facilitates the Atherton Gardens Network, a collaboration of local schools, early years' services, community agencies and Victoria Police connected with the Atherton Gardens high rise public housing estate in Fitzroy, which has high percentages of migrant, refugee and asylum seeker families. The network identified a need to respond to violent behaviour in the community, including violence among children.

A comprehensive strategy has been devised to build the social and emotional skills of children and their parents. Local welfare and educational workers have been trained in the PATHS curriculum and strategies which provide a consistent approach to dealing with children's challenging behaviour. PATHS has been adopted by neighbouring schools, community services and early childhood services, such as the supported playgroups run by the Brotherhood. Tuning into Kids™ is offered to parents in the Atherton Gardens Estate to help them apply the positive emotional regulation and coaching approach at home.

The PATHS curriculum is currently being implemented and evaluated in two local primary schools. The testing to date demonstrates success, regardless of the background of the children. Teachers have documented significant changes in children's behaviour, including their ability to manage challenging emotions.

There are encouraging signs from our work with the PATHS approach at the Atherton Gardens Estate that building emotional regulation skills in the early years can have a positive impact on family violence. The Brotherhood is a founding member of Goodstart Early Learning, which provides early learning and care in 640 centres around Australia. Goodstart has identified self-regulation as one of the key outcomes it is seeking for children.

While the Brotherhood would support an approach that fosters emotional regulation and positive family relationships in all early childhood service and school settings, we suggest it be trialled in local communities with a high concentration of reported family violence as a priority.

We are mindful of the research which indicates that children who have experienced family violence display developmental challenges and regressive behaviour by age 5,<sup>34</sup> and have difficulty forming adolescent and adult relationships as a result of an increased propensity for violence, antisocial behaviour and a lack of trust.<sup>35</sup> Further, the experience of family violence in childhood can result in diverse attitudinal and behavioural responses to violence against women, with some studies suggesting that about 30 per cent of boys exposed to domestic violence will grow up to be violent themselves.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> K Richards, *Children's exposure to domestic violence in Australia*, Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice no. 419, June 2011; M James, *Domestic violence as a form of child abuse: identification and prevention*, NCPC issues no. 2, 1994; M Stiles, 'Witnessing domestic violence: the effect on children', *American Family Physician*, vol. 66, no. 11, pp. 2052–67, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Guy, Feinstein & Griffiths, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> K Richards, op. cit.