

Multicultural Women's Alliance Against Family Violence

Family Violence in Culturally Diverse Communities
Finding support and solutions through lived experiences

Tuesday 17th October 2022
Queen Victoria Women's Centre, Melbourne

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Cross-cultural Context of Family Violence

The understanding, knowledge and experience of family violence is contextually defined and influenced by the cultural context of individuals and families within and across societies. This understanding of family violence in the western context however makes assumptions about what the family looks like and the nature of relationships and dynamics of power within it, which doesn't apply to cross-cultural contexts where family means a collective set of relationships and power. There are stark differences between the conceptualisation and experience of family in collectivist and individualist cultural dimensions which makes understanding of family violence in different cultures more critical. There is an obvious link between the differences in conceptualisations and the evidence around family violence in cross-cultural communities as it depends on how gender, power and relationships is understood within the context of families and societies in certain cultures.

Increasing evidence indicates that family violence is highly prevalent and has serious consequences physically, mentally and socially. Women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual, financial and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class, ethnicity, religion and culture. This leads to the significant gender disparities in health outcomes which can only be addressed through culturally appropriate interventions. Although data are important in terms of numbers, they are inadequate for understanding the nature and understanding of family violence racial and ethnic groups, particularly newer immigrant groups. In many cultures, it is critical to maintain the social expectations even after migrating to Australia and the immigration status adds another complexity to the intimate partner relationship when one of the partners is classified as dependent. This alliance took leadership in generating discussions to address the issue of family violence in cross-cultural communities.

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Responding to violence in cross-cultural communities

A forum hosted by the Multicultural Women's Alliance Against Family Violence with following aims where over 50 representatives from community, service organisations, public system and research sectors attended to generate dialogue of finding appropriate solutions.

1. Advocating for funding for grassroots organisations → need to show the strength and necessity of grassroots organisations and exactly why funding needs to be allocated these groups as opposed to only the larger, mainstream organisations
2. To raise awareness about family violence in culturally diverse communities, its impacts on women/families/communities and explore culturally sensitive solutions.
3. To connect to more culturally diverse communities to introduce the work of the Alliance and inform the ways how communities can involve and contribute for addressing the family violence issue.
4. To enable a collaborative environment for community dialogue about the issue of family violence to generate collective actions.

Discussions were based on current evidence and specific case studies from the communities to highlight various issues contributing to family violence. Outcomes of those discussions are summarised in following diagrams.

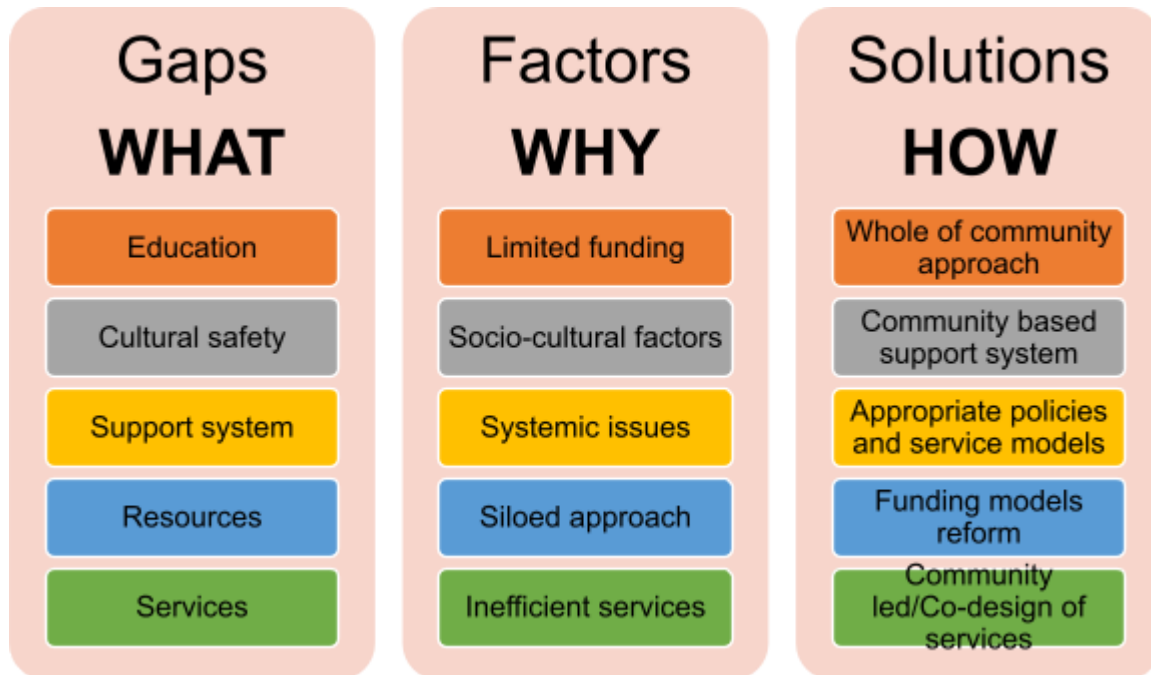
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Case Study

Serena, an educated, full of life, physically disabled girl, got married to someone she chose, thinking that she had found the love of her life. He had disclosed that he was divorced but did not disclose the fact that he was a paedophile and was restricted from seeing his own kids. She learnt this only after her first child was born. She felt stuck because of the stigma of the divorcee tag. (I remember a client whose parents said they would rather have a divorced daughter than a dead daughter but the daughter did not want the tag of divorcee-deep rooted beliefs). Her husband was her carer who took the benefits without (actually) caring for her. Finally, she summed up the courage to leave when she realised that he had not changed. She was put in a room. Given food she was not used to eating every day. She felt isolated and judged. She could not share her fears or wounds with anyone because they assumed that she had got married for a visa. It was not that she was not helped. They understood her words since she spoke English but not the meaning behind them. Far from feeling secure, she felt so uncertain about her plight that she decided to go back. She saw no hope. It always gets harder when you go back as the perpetrator gets encouraged to get nastier. She gave up her career to protect her children. Things were tolerable while the kids were young though she had to suffer emotional and financial abuse. As the kids grew older her husband bribed them with junk food, new gadgets and screen time to speak his language. Her son uses his father's abusive language and mimics his temper tantrums. The daughter follows suit because she does not want to miss out on the attractions. He has the money to engage a 'good' lawyer while she is struggling to make ends meet. She is living separately now but is afraid she might lose her kids to him as he has applied for unsupervised visits. During her session she told me that she had felt heard and understood after 15 years.

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Discussion Outcomes: Service Issues



Case Study

Ms K was born overseas, and English is her second language. She met Mr Smith after completing year 12 in Australia. She had a 2-year gap before she enrolled in university, not working or studying at university. She was with her family as a 19-year-old young lady. After a few months in the relationship, they were engaged and got married with the help of her mother. Mr Smith had no job or study. He used to live with his parents. Neither had been married or in a long-term relationship. They soon started living together as a couple, and Ms K had three children after 6 years of her marriage. She was subjected to lots of levels of abusive violence including verbal, physical and emotional abuse, being told what to wear and how to look. There were threats of economic abuse to her family. As a result, Ms K couldn't eat, was physically ill, had low self-esteem and diminished confidence. The abusive marriage left her isolated with emotions that led to postnatal-depression and anxiety. She suffered in silence and alone because fear of failure and letting her mother and family down was more important than reaching out for help.

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Another contributing reason for suffering in silence was because Ms K who grew up in public housing was now living the dream of owning her own home and wanted to continue leading by example to her community. Although her partner forced her to pay for their house if she wanted to have a child initially. Due to that she approached her mother and her stepdad, and they were given \$20,000 to pay the first house deposit. This left Ms K powerless and disempowered. Her Mother was one of the Somali Women's Development Association Inc. long term management Board members. Ms K decided to end of her life, and she attempted four times to commit suicide where one of her attempts was witnessed by her mother. Her mother on our board members reached out for help to Somali Women's Development Association Inc.

I personally had a relationship with my daughter separate from the mother. Then the mother approached me and said I need your help Sainab and explained to me the situation of her daughter. Then I started to engage with Ms K and tried to bring her back to the community which is something she was always passionate about. I started by taking Ms K to coffee, social gathering and community activities and assisted her to get help for her children to enrol family long day care services so she can get time to get help herself that she needed. We referred Ms K to Safe Steps but soon she realised their services weren't culturally appropriate and she came back to Somali Women's Development Association Inc. and continued her one-on-one counselling session 3 times a week. Mr Smith and his family took Ms K to children court and Somali Women's Development Association Inc. social worker – Sainab Sheikh was representing Ms K at the court and finally Ms K won the case. The outcome was successfully achieved.

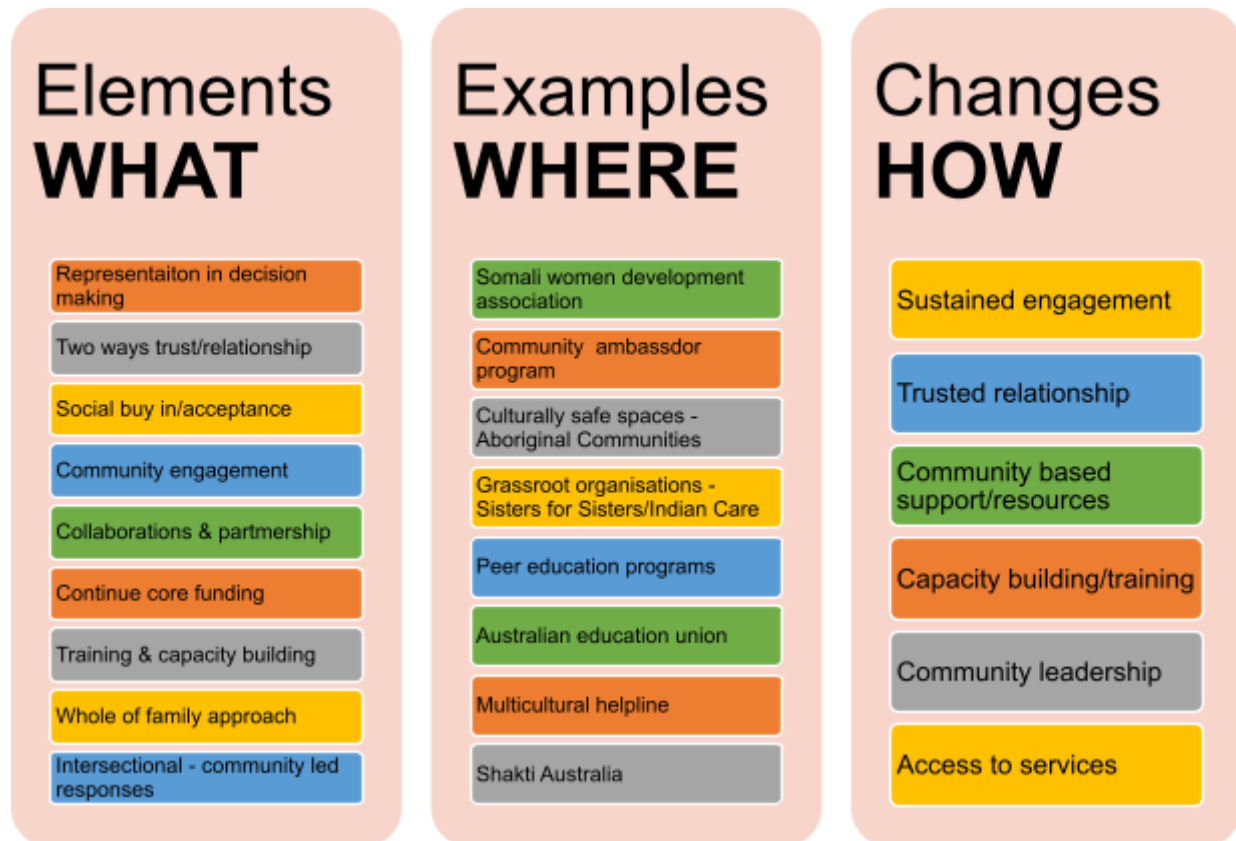
Somali Women's Development Association Inc. offered Mrs K and her three children accommodation within the community as we have built a system within our community to accommodate those who are homelessness or victims of family violence. These accommodations are within the community who are already overcrowded but they decided to support one another. In conclusion, Ms K has become a mental health champion and family violence survivor within our community and advocates family violence and mental health through Somali Women's Development Association Inc. She is currently working, studying, and raising her three beautiful children with healthy relationships and she has a good relationship with her family, friends, and the community. Very successful achievement

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outcome. We Somali Women's Development Association Inc. are very proud of her achievements.

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Discussion Outcomes: Culturally Appropriate Services



Discussions around culturally safe services for women from diverse backgrounds explored numbers of factors influencing multiple levels. These factors were spread across individual, family, community, society, system, services and broader policy levels. The critical theme emerging from the discussion was around the gaps in cross-cultural knowledge among the service providers and inefficient support system which is failing to acknowledge the needs of women and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. It has therefore led to numbers of other contributing factors including gender and power relationships, access to information, resources and services, social, legal and financial security to women that are critical to address the current issue of higher prevalence of family violence. While there are examples of localised, culturally safe and socially accepted services provided to women, the group highlighted the need to capitalise those services to be able to increase the reach and the depth of support to all vulnerable women who will otherwise be left behind in deep trauma.

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The group collectively agreed that there is no 'one size fits all' approach while working with people from diverse sets of cultures and urged the need to take a whole of community approach to empower women, so that they are able to take appropriate actions for their safety. These changes couldn't be achieved without the reform of our current health, social support, justice and community service system.

Discussion Outcomes: Cross-cultural Complexities and Suggested Strategies

Complexities

- Understanding of social and cultural context of women
- Victim blaming approach to services
- Systemic inefficiencies to accommodate socio-cultural needs
- Limited cultural knowledge and skills of services providers
- Short term nature of funding and programs
- Knowledge gaps - community and services
- Lack of decision making power to the women and the community
- Community has no trust to public system - police, justice/legal and health

Suggested Strategies

- Culturally appropriate responses - services, resources and support system
- Education, training, leadership and capacity building - both providers and the community
- Diverse workforce to represent the community with sufficient language support
- Ongoing and sufficient funding to the grassroots initiatives with bilingual/community based resources/support
- Development of cultural toolkits to provide to all organisations
- Community based/community led approaches to service development and programs
- Whole of community approach to education and capacity building
- Intersectional, collaborative, culturally safe, tailored, flexible and non-judgemental approaches to service design
- Funding and resources to build capacity of the community for sustained actions