



Torture and Trauma Survivors Service of the NT Inc.

MELALEUCA REFUGEE CENTRES RESPONSE TO NT SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE FRAMEWORK

August 2019

WHO WE ARE

Since 1996, Melaleuca Refugee Centre (MRC) has been supporting Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants and Migrants in the Northern Territory (NT), through employing a team of skilled, qualified and experienced professionals.

Our experience extends across all age groups, individuals, families and communities. With the support of the NT Government and the Federal Government, MRC provides a program for clients, which assists their education and settlement/orientation. Our experience includes the following experience:

- Over 23 years in the provision of a Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma Services (PaSTT)
- Over 10 years providing Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS)
- Over 7 years providing family support services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds including services aimed at reducing family violence
- Over 5 years providing trauma support services for people in Immigration Detention Centres.
- Up to 3 years in coordinating refugee and migrant health services and specialist domestic violence support services

MRC's services are complementary and integrated, easing our clients' resettlement and healing process.

MRC is a member of the Forum of Association of Survivors of Torture and Trauma, Settlement Council of Australia, Multi-cultural Youth Advisory Network, the Settlement Council of Australia, Ministerial Advisory Network and the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims.

We're also the lead coordinator of a Local Area Coordination network, comprising 20+ NGOs and Government Agencies in the NT, with a focus on refugee issues.



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WHO IS OUR COMMUNITY?

For the purpose of this paper, these are our communities:

Melaleuca works with migrants and humanitarian entrants who come from many different nationalities and who are living in the Northern Territory today. Over the past 3 years, we have predominantly worked with people from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria within the Humanitarian Settlement Program; and from Asia within our Community Development Programs.

Melaleuca Refugee Centre is committed to support culturally diverse communities to prevent sexual violence and strengthening the systems that respond to sexual violence.

CONTEXT

According to the 2016 ABS Census, almost 20% of the NT population was born overseas. Unfortunately, this number does not equate to the number of services available to support people impacted by sexual violence.

It is important to note that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is the most commonly experienced form of family violence in Australia. In addition to physical and sexual violence, women from refugee backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to financial abuse, reproductive coercion and immigration-related violence. Men can also be victims/survivors of intimate partner violence; however, there is little research into experiences of this in Australian refugee communities. (El-Murr, 2018).

Pre-arrival experiences of physical and sexual violence can have harmful, lasting effects and negatively impact on settlement experiences (Taylor & Lamaro Haintz, 2018). These lasting effects exacerbate their isolation causing further anxiety impacting their mental health.

Sexual assault is a violation of fundamental human rights, we are aware that everyone has different emotional and physical responses to sexual violence. It is our duty to provide support and education to ensure we address the culture of blame and normalisation of abusive sexual behaviours.

OUR RESPONSE

A. What are the problems related to sexual violence in your community and in the NT that the framework should consider?

Based on our clients' experiences, women from diverse backgrounds do not usually report sexual violence to police due to a variety of factors including language barriers, lack of knowledge in regard to their rights and access to support services, fear, previous negative experiences when reporting Domestic & Family Violence issues and a range of cultural matters.

In relation to the cultural matters, the ideologies of how partners behave and the social expectations that inform relationships within a person's culture prior to their arrival in Australia, often means that what was once normalised within one culture becomes an issue in another. An example is the issue of sex and intimacy. In some cultures, marriage is an arrangement that comes with obligations on one partner to succumb to the sexual needs of the other partner. Universally and in line with Human Rights, this is unacceptable. However some societies re-enforce this practice. Within the original cultural setting the entire system normalises this expectation, and the partner who must succumb (usually the woman) has no other point of comparison or affirmation that they have a right to say no or other choices.

On arrival in Australia, the societal expectations differ greatly. There are choices and the partnership is seen as equal. One flight possibly up to 22 hours in duration, and a person suddenly finds themselves approximately 30 years into the future. This sudden change is a significant ideological time travel, which affects and questions the values of both parties. The person who often has to succumb to the needs of the other partner, struggles to claim their right without guilt or a sense of betrayal and the other party feels a sense of entitled violation of their cultural rights as the foundation of normality that they have lived their entire lives accepting sudden changes. In such circumstances, husband and wife take on new definitions of victim and perpetrator.

This imbalance which undoubtedly corrects a moral and ethical wrong, inadvertently births a force of defence of one's values and new control. In the words of Viktor Frankl "*The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal*". Without a planned lead into an accepted transition to change value sets, a new act of violence is born as the fight for preservation of morality which was held on from birth and culture is defended.

A system that seeks to force change suddenly is transactional. Such system forces peace by imposing systemic violence. It says certain actions must stop immediately and without understood reason. Depending on how the system does this, the actions stop publicly but continue covertly. The survivor whose own understanding of why things must change is not matured. They too protect their culture by not telling anyone and are loyal to their cultural values,

while people who use violence seemingly appear to have stopped their actions, which then become a hidden secret.

A system that seeks true transformation provides context and guidance towards change. A welcome journey which allows understanding to occur. People who use violence is supported to look deep within themselves to take action that gives life and pride, especially as they have not known any other way. The survivor is equally supported to accept that the required change is their right and they see value in who they are.

A transformational change is longer lasting and stems from within, it is passed on to the next generation and a new culture of respect is born within the new society that settlement occurs in. While a transactional change is short lived and externally imposed. The cause for change therefore in that instance becomes fear driven rather than life giving.

According to research by Yoshioka et al. (2001) which examined wife abuse attitudes among a sample of 507 Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Cambodian adults living in the United States. The findings showed that 24% to 36% of the sample agreed that violence is justified in certain situations, a finding that reflects the significance of patriarchy despite cultural variations. Although comparison between the ethnic groups showed some disparity, the research exemplified factors relating to the normalisation of violence, the power status of men, and the corresponding sub-status of women, that might prevent Asian women from seeking assistance for violence. This signifies a pattern of rapid change from culture to culture when migration or refugee movement is involved. In effect, the status of women was not altered or improved by the experience of migration. To do so will be to provide extensive education to both the women whose perception of self were about subserviency and the men whose patriarchal beliefs were correlated with control and violence.

Cultural barriers may also prevent people to report, especially if a family member is the perpetrator; speaking out may bring ostracism from the community, further isolation, shame and trauma to the victims and their families. Research from the National Research Organisation for Women's Safety found that migrant and refugee women were subjected to pre-arrival family violence – particularly IPV – and experienced pressure from families and communities to normalise and tolerate violence (ANROWS, 2017).

What are the possible solutions?

Sexual violence is a significant violation of a person's rights. To stop this violation, one must:

1. Understand and uphold morality (change that is driven by the heart)
2. Understand impact, legislation and consequences that is (cognitive) and;
3. Self-discipline.

In keeping with the theme of Transaction, which is driven by ordinary tasks generating cause and effect vs Transformation that speaks to long lasting change driven by understanding and purpose, we propose the following approaches:

- **Reduce isolation:** Isolation plays an important aspect towards reducing and or addressing Domestic Violence. People who are newly arrived migrants and refugees are significantly isolated and have limited contact with the wider community as a result of confidence and language barriers. Creating opportunities to connect them more to existing services and to form natural friendships enhances safeguards for them.
- **Values adjustment and gender roles:** Invest time and resources into working with both victims and perpetrators to shift their value base and to understand why change is necessary in a way that is non-threatening, sustaining of dignity and strengths based, while ensuring rights and morality is understood. In this context, it is also important to explore and unpack the issue of family conflict being seen as a result of women being more dominant and independent, when in actual fact the dominance and independence is a necessary social construct of their new community and society.
- **Educate about rights:** Empower both the victim and the perpetrator to understand rights and the consequences of violating such rights.
- **Address intergenerational capacity:** That the change process is tiered to engage with first generation migrants and refugees as well as the next generation of youth who are cradling two worlds – their original culture re-enforced by their parents and their new environmental culture that is re-enforced by peers and the general community.

Sexual education within a cultural context should not be limited, it is as important as mental and physical health. Sexual education is about having a conversation about rights and consent, it is about learning that saying 'no' is a right, and that it is our responsibility to respect others' decisions. It is about educating communities, education prevents and reduces stigma. Sexual education is about empowering children and young people.

- **Educate about responsibility:** That lead to individuals feeling safe reporting sexual violence and to address violence tolerance and normalisation, especially the culture of blaming the victim and dismiss the perpetrator.

B. What is needed to address sexual violence in your community?

In the NT, we have a variety of multicultural communities ranging from established communities to recent arrivals who are Migrants and Humanitarian Entrants. Addressing the issue of Sexual Violence in multicultural communities is not a once size fits all approach. It requires consideration at a systemic and operational level. The following strategies are worth considering:

- Consider the inclusion into policies and practices the primary factor of mediating aspects of culture on the impact of sexual violence in migrant and refugee families and identify ways to establish holistic education strategies that speak with cultural context to enable long term change.
- Consider the impact of negative settlement outcomes for women and men particularly in regards to isolation, the limitations of language and the lack of employment opportunities which limit their exposure to the incidental learning of the dominant culture within which they are settling. This has an adverse effect on self-esteem and increased vulnerability.
- Consider socially acceptable practices and educational pathways for community leaders of various groups almost as an induction into community leadership that supports their ability to suspend judgement or cultural bias, and to act as true ambassadors who can support various speak up strategies for women while standing up to work with perpetrators to change.
- There are various national mainstream services that exist to support women and to educate men about the impact of sexual violence against women. Such services for example the White Ribbon Foundation and Lifeline are ideal partnership links to supporting multicultural communities. This also presents opportunities for some collaborative culturally appropriate resources that focus on long-term impact.
- Consider involving refugees and migrants directly in the development of policies and programs that address sexual violence against women.
- In relation to language there are a number of barriers especially within regional areas such as:
 - The inability of victims to speak the main language and to report directly into the system, which calls for the need of service providers using printed information using images, plain English and flyers and posters translated into different languages.
 - The use of face to face interpreters in a small regional town who may already be members of the victims' community, which has an impact on confidence and the openness to make disclosures safely. An opportunity exists for providers to use telephone interpreter services in such instances.
 - The lack of cultural sensitivity with which information may be provided to victims, which can have a further demoralising impact on them due to stigma, and or taboo's associated with certain matters.
- Initiate systems to gather accurate data within the NT that supports change. There is a lack of national (or NT) data on women and children on temporary and spousal visas experiencing violence, but the majority of the clients accessing our support services reporting being impacted by Domestic Family and Sexual Violence live in rural and semi-remote communities across the NT, and the majority of them are married to Australian men.

- According to the *Path of Nowhere Report*, women and children on temporary visas experiencing violence face specific barriers to seeking support including lack of English language skills, social networks, and understanding of their rights. Perpetrators of violence use fear of deportation and loss of custody of their children to maintain power and control to use violence against women. (National Advocacy Group on Women on temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, 2018). There is a need for outreach services to support women experiencing sexual violence.
- There is also a need for programs for mainstream men who are married to migrant and refugee women to work through issues of respect that keeps all parties safe.
- Culturally, gender and age appropriate community programs and education will teach communities awareness and preventative behaviours, as well as to demystify behaviours and to minimise and eliminate risks. These education and community development programs need to be delivered by appropriately-trained bilingual community facilitators to ensure cultural safety.
- There is a need for culturally appropriate counselling services to support and respond to people impacted by sexual violence, but also to work with people with harmful sexual behaviours. Often this has a link to Trauma Counselling. The opportunity exists for existing trauma counselling services to extend and increase specialty.
- Community interpreters need to be better trained to deal with sexual violence in their communities.
- The police need to be culturally trained to attend and communicate with cultural diverse communities and interpreters.

C. What needs to be considered?

Support and Information – Online apps and websites

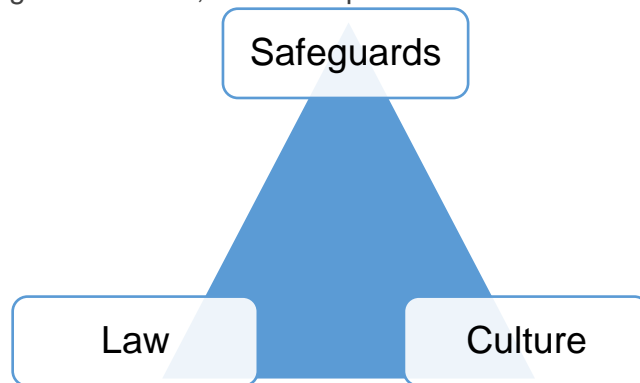
- 1- Apps need to be revised, to ensure that phone numbers to NT multicultural services are included. Currently 1800 RESPECT does not include any multicultural services in the app's NT section.
- 2- Mainstream service providers need to be prepared to service multicultural communities by connecting with interpreters to ensure efficiency and cultural safety.
- 3- Use of culturally appropriate language, we prefer the use of 'people impacted by violence' and people 'who use violence'.

- 4- Services need to work together, share information and resources. Domestic and Family Violence Networks should work together with Sexual Violence services and supports. This will improve service efficiency and referral processes, and assist multicultural services to access information and help from the wider community.

CONCLUSION

i *It is our ethical responsibility to educate our communities to address and prevent violence.*

The three pillars of safeguards, culture and the law are important. To enable individuals to understand change and to embrace such change. When one or two of the pillars fall off for the sake of protecting an individual, the whole person is not seen.



Following this model, education and community development programs can educate communities on the topic, identification of risks and prevention strategies.

This model allows the dissemination of information on community's rights and responsibilities, and how the criminal justice system processes sexual assault cases in a cultural appropriate way.

There is an urgent need to work with multicultural communities with the aim of addressing the normalisation of sexual violence and beliefs which stigmatises victims. This requires robust community education and leadership as well as the active participation of all community members, including children and young people. Melaleuca supports the rights of individuals and advocates for long lasting positive transformational change that honours human rights and transcends generations.

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