Family violence and culturally diverse women

Summary

- All forms of family violence (also called domestic violence) are illegal and unacceptable in Australia. But for women from culturally diverse backgrounds, the situation is complex.
- Help and support are available for women from culturally diverse backgrounds experiencing family violence.

All forms of family violence (also called domestic violence) are illegal and unacceptable in Australia. But for women from culturally diverse backgrounds, the situation is complex. Their own cultural context, and a mix of cultural and social factors within Australia, make culturally diverse women particularly vulnerable to violence. These factors also make it more difficult for them to get help and support.

There’s been little research into the incidence of family violence among culturally diverse women, except to highlight that cultural values and immigration status make family violence cases more complicated for these women.

For any community, family violence is destructive. It can cause physical and psychological harm, particularly to women and children. Family violence is the leading contributor to preventable death, disability and illness among Victorian women aged 15 to 44 years. And it can pass from one generation to the next.

Help and support are available for women from culturally diverse backgrounds experiencing family violence.

What is an illegal act of violence in Australia?

Some behaviours that are considered illegal acts of violence in Australia may be accepted in some cultural contexts, and may go unreported in Australia. This makes it difficult for culturally diverse women to receive the help and support they need. Some examples are:

- **marital rape** – some women may not consider forced sex with their partner (also called marital rape) to be family violence. Since 2006, around 100 countries have changed their laws to make marital rape a crime but, in practice, in many countries, marital rape continues to go unrecognised and unpunished, despite the law.

- **dowry-related violence** – a dowry is gifts, money, goods or property the bride’s family gives to the groom or in-laws before, during or at any time after a marriage. In some circumstances, the groom or his family demands a dowry, sometimes violently, using battery, marital rape, acid attacks, wife burning, starvation, deprivation of clothing, evictions, and false imprisonment. The recent **Royal Commission into Family Violence** in Victoria recommended the Victorian Government act urgently to make dowry-related abuse a form of family violence under law.

- **forced and servile marriage** – forced and servile marriage have severe psychological, emotional, medical, financial, and legal consequences. Victims may be isolated, have limited access to social services, have their education interrupted, and be left with no economic independence. Many of these marriages are unregistered, leaving the woman without legal protections. Because these arrangements are based on the man holding power over the woman or child, they are likely to become abusive.

- **child marriage** – in Australia a person under 18 cannot consent to be married unless they are aged 16 or 17 and have both parental and court consent. The **forced marriage of a child is an offence** under the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Commonwealth). This practice also constitutes child abuse and is a violation of children’s rights under the **United Nations convention on the rights of the child**. Because the child has no legal rights in this relationship they are more likely to be subject to abuse.

- **female genital mutilation** – the World Health Organization defines female genital mutilation as all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. This practice is internationally regarded as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.
Family violence and culturally diverse women in Australia

Many culturally diverse women come to Australia with physical, mental and sexual health conditions as a result of their experiences of sexual assault, war and conflict, and their time in refugee or detention camps. In addition, men in their communities and the extended family often regard the changes that take place in their family in Australia as undermining their authority and the cohesion of their family and try to reassert their authority by using violence.

Barriers to reporting family violence and accessing services

Once in Australia, culturally diverse women face a number of barriers to reporting physical and sexual assault, which are thought to occur at a higher rate than in the general population. These include:

- lack of support networks and extended family support (isolation)
- lack of understanding about Australian law and their rights
- lack of knowledge about housing, income and support services
- poverty, lack of access to health care or income support, and no option to work (if they were sponsored to come to Australia or hold a limited rights visa)
- religious beliefs about divorce
- fear of becoming isolated from their community.

Women may also be fearful about:

- risking future Australian residency or entitlements (this is especially common among women on temporary or spouse visas)
- deportation and the risk of worse persecution back in her own country
- use of interpreters from their community and concerns about confidentiality.

Other barriers to reporting family violence include:

- guilt and shame over the sexual violence previously suffered
- language barriers, and limited availability of translators or interpreters
- reluctance to confide in others
- continued abuse from immediate and extended family.

Where to get help

- Call 000 at any time if you are worried about your safety or your children’s safety.
- In Touch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (Victoria) Tel. 1800 755 988
- safe steps Family Violence Response Centre Tel. 1800 015 188
- 1800 RESPECT (National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line) Tel. 1800 737 732
- Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- MensLine Australia Tel. 1300 78 99 78
- White Ribbon (list of national hotlines and state and territory helplines)
- Salvation Army

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