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Victorian Arabic Social Services' (VASS) response to Royal Commission into Family Violence

About VASS

The Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. VASS is a peak organisation providing support and advocacy services to people of Arabic Speaking Background (ASB) in Victoria. Since its formation in 1986, VASS has expanded to servicing Victorians of all CALD backgrounds, with the majority of clients coming from Arabic speaking, Assyrian, Chaldean, Kurdish, Iranian, Turkish and Horn of African backgrounds. VASS provides a range of services, including Aged Care and Disability Support services, Family Services, Gamblers' Help services, Youth Services and Settlement Services, and has undertaken a range of community development programs. VASS employs workers from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds who cover a range of professions including social work, psychology, community services, aged care and interpreting. VASS provides support and advocacy on both individual and community levels and is a voice for the ASB community in Victoria. VASS works with many clients experiencing family violence, including elder abuse, at a prevention, intervention and crisis support levels.

VASS' response will be structured via the questions found in the Royal Commission into Family Violence Issues Paper, with less relevant questions omitted.

Summary of Recommendations

1. An increase in culturally and linguistically appropriate family violence support services through providing long term, ongoing funding to ethno-specific services to deliver family violence support programs;
2. An increase in community education campaigns that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and tailored to specific communities to increase knowledge of the law in relation to family violence, the services available and how to access them;
3. Increased accessibility for people of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds to the courts and police services through cultural competence training, increased employment of bilingual staff, and closer collaboration with ethno-specific services;
4. Increased research in relation to family violence within CALD communities

Question 2 *The Royal Commission wants to hear about the extent to which recent reforms and developments have improved responses to family violence, and where they need to be expanded or altered.*

VASS applauds the recent reforms and developments, but believes that more needs to be done to have improved responses to family violence for people of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. People of CALD backgrounds in Victoria can have a very different experience of domestic violence to those from Anglo-Celtic and English speaking backgrounds. However, there is very little research relating to the level of family violence experienced by people of CALD background, let alone relevant services available. Considering that in Victoria, almost half (46.8%) of Victorians were either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas¹, more research certainly needs to be done in this area. Research and data is necessary for a basis for future work.

Given the dearth of research, especially for people of Arabic Speaking Background (ASB) communities in Victoria, VASS draws on its own experience, project evaluations and formal and informal research to support its submission.

Question 4: *If you or your organisation have been involved in programs, campaigns or initiatives about family violence for the general community, tell us what these involved and how they have been evaluated.*

AND

Question 5: *If you or your organisation have been involved in observing or assessing programs, campaigns or initiatives of this kind, we are interested in your conclusions about their effectiveness in reducing and preventing family violence.*

VASS has been involved in many programs addressing family violence within the community, including the 'No Excuse for Family Violence' project in 2008-09, for which VASS received an Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Award. Similarly to VASS' ongoing work in this area, the 'No Excuse for Family Violence' Project combined information sessions delivered to the wider ASB community in multiple locations across Victoria, with individual and family-centred case work. The information sessions focussed on definitions of family violence as well as the effects of family violence and steps to take if one is experiencing family violence. The sessions were facilitated by VASS, with guest speakers from the Police Force, and WAYSS Family Violence Workers.

VASS found, through surveys and informal feedback after the program, that this approach was very successful, hence it being a continuing model for our work in this area. The

¹ Victorian Multicultural Commission (2014) *2011 Census: A snapshot of our diversity*, <http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/population-and-migration/victorias-diversity/2011-census-a-snapshot-of-our-diversity>, accessed 28 April 2015

information sessions were successful as they combined the expertise and knowledge of those in the family violence field, with the cultural knowledge and understanding of those working at VASS. Having VASS as the facilitator and organiser is key to the success when targeting the ASB community, as VASS is well trusted and respected in this community, and is able to draw a larger and more eager crowd than 'mainstream' services may be able to on their own. VASS highly recommends such an approach. Women who attended the information sessions reported that they became aware of the different forms of family violence, including financial and emotional abuse, with some reporting that they could identify this in their own relationships, and were considering taking out intervention orders.

As mentioned, VASS also provides case work support to individuals and families affected by domestic violence. This includes such aspects as: creating safety plans, ongoing counselling, supporting victims to get intervention orders, among other things. These are evaluated through surveys from the clients, as well as through measuring outcomes, such as social and emotional wellbeing.

The following is a brief example of a success story of VASS' work in this area:

VASS' Family Support Worker was contacted by a local primary school, because a student (of ASB) in grade 6 disclosed thoughts of suicide. After meeting with VASS' Family Support Worker it was evident that he had witnessed family violence (a form of family violence in itself that is often disregarded), and the distress of his experience was leading to suicidal thoughts. The Family Support Worker worked with the child and his mother (who had already left the violent relationship), separately and together, providing counselling. She also referred the child to a local psychologist, and worked in collaboration with her. The child is now in secondary school, and is a leader in the school and a role model to others.

Question 6: *What circumstances, conditions, situations or events, within relationships, families, institutions and whole communities, are associated with the occurrence or persistence of family violence?*

AND

Question 7: *What circumstances and conditions are associated with the reduced occurrence of family violence?*

Beliefs around patriarchy and gender inequities are associated with the occurrence and persistence of family violence ². This is regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, social class or

² Wall, L (2014), *Gender Equality and Violence Against Women: what's the connection?*, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, <https://www3.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/researchsummary/ressum7/ressum7.pdf> accessed 29/05/2015

education, and spans across many different cultures. It applies at a cultural, community, institution, family, relationship and individual level. Likewise, attitudes that reflect the equality of both genders are associated with reduced occurrence of family violence. To achieve this we need education, on a community level, about the right for everybody to feel safe in a relationship and that violence (in the broadest sense of the word) is wrong and unlawful. This community education needs to be targeted and delivered to all community groups, particularly those who do not know the Victorian legal and service systems as well as others, and who have other barriers such as lack of English proficiency and illiteracy.

For the ASB community and other CALD communities in particular, dependency on the partner is a situation that is related with the persistence of family violence. This can be for a number of reasons, including language, economics (no individual income or assets), lack of knowledge of the supports available and lack of social support network. This can make it even more difficult for the victim to leave or seek out an intervention order, as they have nowhere else to go and no one to ask for support. Many accept living with domestic violence because there are “no other options”.

Although family violence affects people of all classes, religions, ethnicities and levels of education, those who are economically and socially disadvantaged, such as newly arrived migrants, particularly of CALD backgrounds, are significantly worse off because of the barriers they face to receiving support.

Question 8: *Tell us about any gaps or deficiencies in current responses to family violence, including legal responses. Tell us about what improvements you would make to overcome these gaps and deficiencies, or otherwise improve current responses.*

There are many gaps and deficiencies in the current responses to family violence as they relate to people of CALD backgrounds. A major issue for people of ASB is the lack of knowledge of the legal system in Victoria. In many of the countries that VASS' clients originate from, family violence is not a heavily punished crime, and so seeking legal recourse or calling the police does not always occur as an option to the victim experiencing family violence, nor does the perpetrator think he will be accountable for his actions. Furthermore, in many of the countries that VASS' client group come from, the police are not a source of support, but one of fear, so there is much hesitation to call the police for any reason. The Police Force should do more to address this perception, through activities such as involvement in community events and community engagement programs. VASS suggests that culturally and linguistically appropriate community education programs could also address the lack of knowledge in the community about the laws and legal processes available around family violence.

Similarly, there is a lack of knowledge of the support services available within the ASB community. Moreover, there is a lack of dedication and sufficiently funded support services available to people of CALD background, including ASB. There are few dedicated multicultural or ethno-specific family violence support services in Victoria, despite our high proportions of people from CALD backgrounds. VASS provides culturally and linguistically appropriate family violence support services, but does this through the Family Support Services, rather than a dedicated family violence service area. The funding provided to VASS is episodic and not ongoing, and is insufficient to deal with the high demand for services. In fact, VASS has recently had its application to renew its Family Services, including family violence support services, rejected by the Federal government, despite their recognition that family violence is a 'national crisis'. VASS is not the only ethno-specific service to experience such circumstances. This is a huge gap in services for people of CALD backgrounds, which puts them at a further disadvantage in times of dire need. This can be addressed by providing sufficient, ongoing, dedicated funding to ethno-specific and multicultural community services to provide family violence support, through culturally and linguistically appropriate support for victims and behaviour change programs for perpetrators.

Another barrier experienced by people of CALD background, that constitutes a deficiency in current responses to family violence, is language. A lack of English proficiency can impact upon all stages of the response to family violence, from dealing with the police, to the court system, to seeking support services. Although sometimes there are interpreters available, in VASS' experience many victims are hesitant to use interpreters. This is for many reasons, including a wish for privacy, and in smaller communities, the fear that the interpreter will be known to them and disclose their issues to the community. Training and employing more bilingual workers in the police force, the courts and social support services can address this issue, as can closer collaboration between these services and ethno-specific services, which is explained further below.

Question 9: *Does insufficient integration and co-ordination between the various bodies who come into contact with people affected by family violence hinder the assessment of risk, or the effectiveness of (early intervention, crisis and ongoing) support provided, to people affected by family violence? If so, please provide examples.*

AND

Question Ten: *What practical changes might improve integration and co-ordination? What barriers to integration and co-ordination exist?*

Insufficient integration and co-ordination between the various bodies who come into contact with people affected by family violence does hinder the assessment of risk, and can

encumber the effectiveness of support provided to people experiencing family violence. This is especially the case for people of ASB and other CALD backgrounds, as their understanding of family violence and the necessary responses may be different. Furthermore, in VASS' experience, many people of ASB, especially those who are more recently arrived, are distrustful of government and social services and are hesitant to engage with them, but will often engage with VASS, and use VASS as a conduit between themselves and other services. Service integration between all services involved is always a must, but is particularly pertinent when working with clients from ASB and other CALD backgrounds.

VASS understands that a major barrier to coordination and integration is a lack of knowledge of relevant services, particularly when it comes to knowledge of local ethno-specific services, and a lack of a frame of reference for what coordination might look like. A practical step towards increasing collaboration and coordination could be through the use of such simple mechanisms as lists of relevant local agencies, distributed to other agencies. For example, the Broadmeadows Police Station and Magistrates Court could have a list of local ethno-specific services, as well as general family violence support services, that they could contact and refer people involved in family violence onto. Similarly, ethno-specific agencies, dedicated family violence support agencies, and the courts could have Memorandums of Understanding, or similar procedures in place that stipulate when and how to work with each other.

The following is a good practice example of integration and co-ordination between the various bodies involving VASS:

VASS' Family Support Worker was working with a client who was thinking of applying for an intervention order against her husband. The client also had some young children. When it became evident that there were multiple agencies working with the client, the services involved decided to have a group meeting with the client. At the meeting a plan was created that outlined each agency's role and associated goals when working with the client. VASS supported the client from a cultural perspective, giving some background as to why family violence is wrong, and ongoing counselling in Arabic. Berry Street linked the client and her children in to relevant support groups for victims of family violence. Kildonan Uniting Care provided information about the effects of family violence on victims, including children, and supported her through the court process. The client successfully got an intervention order and is living free of violence, with the ongoing social support in place to help her through.

If such a meeting had not taken place, and plan not created, the client could have been engaging with three services that were all providing the same information and leaving gaps where there was no support.

Question 11: *What are some of the most promising and successful ways of supporting the ongoing safety and wellbeing of people affected by violence? Are there gaps or deficiencies in our approach to supporting ongoing safety and wellbeing? How could measures to reduce the impact of family violence be improved?*

A lack of services, in general, and for people of CALD backgrounds in particular, is a major deficiency in the approach to supporting ongoing safety and wellbeing of those affected by family violence. Increasing the culturally and linguistically appropriate support services available is fundamental to supporting the ongoing safety and wellbeing of people affected by violence. This would lessen the straining demand on existing services, and would not only mean that more vulnerable members of society are assisted, but that they receive a more comprehensive service. At present, family violence services are stretched beyond capacity to provide the most basic of services to those who need it. Furthermore, ethno-specific services that may provide family violence support services as part of other programs, such as VASS, are provided with short-term, episodic funding that is not specific to family violence, which limits their capacity to provide long-term services and support the ongoing safety and wellbeing of people affected by violence.

It also comes back to knowledge of the services available. How can people of CALD backgrounds access services to support them when they don't know that they exist, or how to access them? Community education and advertising campaigns that target individual CALD communities*, in community languages, are needed to boost knowledge of what support is available, otherwise people affected by family violence will continue to suffer in silence. VASS recommends that the government partner with the various ethno-specific agencies to create culturally and linguistically appropriate, meaningful, community education campaigns that will reach the intended target audience.

*VASS stresses that community education and advertising campaigns are tailored to specific communities, as each community will have different needs and understandings in relation to family violence. For example, people of ASB may be unaware of the law surrounding family violence, whereas another community group may know about the laws, and need only to know what support services are available.

Question 14: *To what extent do current processes encourage and support people to be accountable and change their behaviour? To what extent do they fail to do so? How do we ensure that behaviour change is lasting and sustainable?*

At present there is still too much obligation for women to change their circumstances and lifestyle, for example, leave the house and become homeless, when they are the victim of a crime. Although behaviour change programs are at times mandated by a judge, there are

still far fewer people accessing behaviour change programs than those accessing support as victims and survivors.

Research has shown that behaviour change programs are not always successful in producing a change in violent behaviours³. However, research has indicated there are many factors that may improved the efficacy of behaviour change, such as increasing the length of programs, and providing culturally and linguistically appropriate programs. VASS recommends that there be more research into the efficacy of different models of behaviour change programs, including longer programs, and programs that are delivered by bilingual and culturally competent workers.

To ensure that behaviour change is lasting and sustainable, there should be programs that are proactive and preventative as well as reactive interventions. Education programs around healthy relationship behaviours should be run in schools, from primary school through to secondary school. This is a long lasting and sustainable measure, as behaviours are able to be shaped rather than re-shaped.

Question Seventeen: *Are there specific cultural, social, economic, geographical or other factors in particular groups and communities in Victoria which tend to make family violence more likely to occur, or to exacerbate its effects? If so, what are they?*

AND

Question Eighteen: *What barriers prevent people in particular groups and communities in Victoria from engaging with or benefiting from family violence services? How can the family violence system be improved to reflect the diversity of people's experiences?*

AND

Question Nineteen: *How can responses to family violence in these groups and communities be improved? What approaches have been shown to be most effective?*

Domestic violence is extremely debilitating and can have long-lasting impacts on those who experience it, including children who witness it. In VASS' experience, people of CALD backgrounds, and in particular of ASB, experience multiple complexities around family violence, and experience multiple barriers to accessing support and justice in Victoria. It is understood that family violence is predominantly by male perpetrators to female victims, and that it stems from a patriarchal world-view. This 'culture' of violence and gender inequality supersedes all 'ethnic' cultures, religions or countries of origin. However there are

³ Day, A; Chung, D; O'Leary, P; Justo, D; Moore, S; Carson, E and Gerace, A, (2010), *Integrated responses to domestic violence: Legally mandated intervention programs for male perpetrators*, Australian Institute of Criminology, <<http://aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/tandi/401-420/tandi404.html> > accessed 28/05/15

other aspects of Arabic culture that impact upon domestic violence. The first of these is that divorce is still frowned upon to a large extent. This makes it more difficult for a woman to leave or seek to change a violent relationship, as the reaction within the community may be negative towards the survivor, rather than the perpetrator. This difficulty is compounded for new and emerging migrant groups as the victim is likely to have a smaller social support network.

For refugees and newly arrived migrants this experience can be even more harrowing. In a number of ways their circumstances of being in a country whose language, culture and legal and social systems are different to their own make the experience even more distressing, and can inhibit the victim's ability to access support services and legal intervention.

Being a refugee or migrant can exacerbate and enable some abusive behaviours that are not applicable for other Australians. For example, many of VASS' clients have received threats from their partners of deportation to the country they have fled from, particularly if the victim wishes to speak out about the abuse. VASS' has had clients that have been denied access to English classes, driving lessons and tests, employment and other opportunities that would increase their independence by their partner, thus creating a dependency on the abusive partner for all aspects of everyday living.

The barriers for CALD communities in Victoria to engaging with and benefitting from family violence services are numerous, including language, lack of understanding and awareness of service system, mistrust of government services, and a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate support services. VASS reiterates that there are three steps to addressing this.

1. An increase in ongoing, long term funding for culturally and linguistically appropriate support services to work with people of CALD backgrounds, including men's behaviour change programs
2. Community education that is culturally and linguistically appropriate and tailored to specific communities to increase knowledge of the law, the services available and how to access them; and
3. A more culturally and linguistically appropriate response to family violence cases from Victoria Police and the courts, through increased cultural competence training, employment of bilingual staff and closer collaboration with ethno-specific services.

VASS has found that collaborative approaches between ethno-specific services, 'mainstream' family violence support services, and police and the courts, to be the most successful in improving the ASB community's knowledge of family violence, its impacts, the law as it relates to family violence, the support services available and how to access them. This is evidenced by VASS' award-winning 'No Excuse for Family Violence' project and ongoing work and evaluation in this area. A collaborative and culturally and linguistically appropriate approach is the most successful in providing ongoing and long lasting support to victims.

Question Twenty-one: *The Royal Commission will be considering both short term and longer term responses to family violence. Tell us about the changes which you think could produce the greatest impact in the short and longer term.*

The majority of the recommendations for changes outlined in this submission are medium- to long-term changes. VASS believes that a combination of all of the recommendations will achieve the greatest result.

Again, VASS would like to thank the Royal Commission for facilitating the opportunity for individuals and organisations to write about their experience of family violence.