



**SHAKTI** Australia Inc.

**Submission on Family  
Violence in Asian, African  
and Middle Eastern  
Immigrants of Colour**

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Royal Commission on Family Violence

29<sup>th</sup> May 2015

## Contents

1 Executive Summary .....	2
2 Background on Shakti .....	3
3 Current Situation of Family Violence in Asian African Middle Eastern Communities .....	5
Overview of Current Situation .....	5
Answering the RCFV Questions.....	6
Other goals the Royal Commission should consider.....	6
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.....	7
Barriers preventing Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities engaging with or benefiting from family violence services.....	8
Improving responses to family violence in Asian, African and Middle Eastern Communities .....	9
Gaps in current approaches to addressing family violence in Asian, African and Middle Eastern Communities .....	9
Evidence from our research.....	11
Survey on Family Violence Service Providers in South East Melbourne.....	11
Focus Group .....	12
4 Recommendations .....	14
More Research.....	14
Improved cultural awareness and sensitivity across the social services and justice sector.....	14
Policies, Procedures and Partnerships to better protect Asian, African and Middle Eastern Women .....	14
Greater Resourcing for Crisis Response and Emergency Accommodation .....	15
Grassroots empowerment.....	15
Conclusion.....	16
Bibliography .....	17

## 1 Executive Summary

In Australia, culturally and linguistically diverse communities make up a significant portion of society. The changing trends in migration increasingly from Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries to metropolitan cities such as Melbourne indicate the need to change how services respond to the needs of immigrant communities, in particular where the safety needs of women and their children are high and lives are at risk. The effects of family violence on women from these communities are worsened by multiple and pre-existing disadvantages. These disadvantages manifest in barriers to accessing family violence services such as cultural and social stigma, social isolation and marginalisation, limited integration into Australian society and language difficulties. Although attempts have been made to mitigate these barriers, there are significant gaps in the system. This includes such as lack of culturally appropriate service provision, crisis response and insufficient emergency accommodation as well as inaccessibility of resources on family violence that solely and specifically target Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities.

It is important to note that the CALD group is very broad, encompassing not only immigrants from Eastern Europe and Latin America but also peoples of colour such as Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Issues such as honour-based violence, dowry abuse, under-aged / forced marriage and FGM are mostly found in Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities, but not in Eastern European, Latin American or mainstream Australia. Consequently effective responses to family violence suffered by Women of colour must recognise these differences.

We recommend that the Royal Commission into Family Violence takes into consideration the need for more research on this issue, particularly in terms of obtaining family violence data disaggregated by racial / ethnic group. We also recommend that there be improved cultural awareness and sensitivity across the entire social services and justice sector. It is imperative that a national strategy is developed to enable well-designed and implemented policies and procedures, as well as multi-agency partnerships. These initiatives can only thrive with a greater commitment to resourcing immigrant led initiatives that are able to implement culturally-competent responses to family violence utilising a human rights-based and women's rights based approach.

We believe that such a national integrated service programme model will effectively provide cost-effective implementation with sustainable monitoring mechanisms that can lead to long-term change.

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

## 2 Background on Shakti

Shakti Australia Inc. and its daughter organisations Shakti Migrant and Refugee Women's Support Group Melbourne Inc. and Shakti Migrant and Refugee Women's Support NSW Inc. are locally-driven initiatives supported by New Zealand based national, community organization Shakti Community Council Inc. As an organisation, Shakti specializes in providing culturally competent crisis intervention services for women and families of Asian, African and Middle Eastern origins. It has been operating for 20 years in New Zealand and 4 years in Australia.

Shakti Melbourne was incorporated in Melbourne on October 27, 2011, following the establishment of a Steering Group led by local women and the founding members of Shakti, New Zealand. Shakti NSW was incorporated in December 2012 following a similar initiative.

Shakti's goal is to promote the well-being, safety and human rights of women, children and young people of Asian, African and Middle Eastern origins based across Australia. Activities of Shakti include/will include the following:

- Community workshops on awareness of cultural oppression and domestic violence within migrant and refugee communities of Asian, African and Middle Eastern origins.
- Safe, confidential and culturally sensitive specialist support services including refuge/shelter for migrant and refugee women.
- Capacity and capability building of migrant and refugee women who wish to work in the area of women's empowerment and development and thereby promote community development
- Specialist advocacy and culturally competent services for young victims of forced/underage marriage
- Immigrant women's self-development and self-empowerment workshops/programmes

### HIGHLIGHTS OF ACTIVITIES IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS IN AUSTRALIA:

#### **2012**

- **February** - Shakti founder Farida Sultana was invited by the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, Melbourne to make a presentation on Human Rights Education for Immigrant Women. She made a presentation on the practice of underage marriages occurring within communities of Asian, African and Middle Eastern origins.
- Shakti was invited by the Department of Human Services to be part of the consultation meetings for development of the Action Plan on Addressing Violence Against Women and Their Children in Victoria. Robust round of discussions were held with senior staff including then Director, Jill McCabe following which we submitted a written feedback on the Action Plan.
- Networked with various officials within the Department of Human Services and NGOs to provide awareness about Shakti and build working relationships and collaborations.
- Secured funding and moral support from local city councils to begin work in the area of preventing and reducing domestic/family violence.
- **April** - Shakti members and former clients of forced/underage marriage were interviewed by ABC Four Corners Programme titled 'Without Consent'. The outcome was overwhelmingly

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

positive and we received a number of calls and emails offering donations and support for our work.

- Set up an office in Rowville, Melbourne and commenced work.

#### **HIGHLIGHTS OF SOME OF OTHER KEY ACTIVITIES IN AUSTRALIA**

- **Forced Marriage/Trafficking:** Shakti made a submission to the Enquiry on the Crimes Legislation Amendment (Slavery, Slavery-like Conditions and People Trafficking) Bill 2012, which was held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2012. This bill sought to establish new offences on forced labour, forced marriage, organ trafficking and harbouring a victim. Consequently our group was invited to present at the Public Hearing to the Human Rights Sub-Committee in Victoria.
- **Working Relationship with Federal Attorney-General Department:** The Federal Attorney-General Department invited and funded for Shakti to participate at the National Roundtable on People Trafficking on 28th November 2012. Shakti was invited to be one out of 3 keynote speakers to present on our culturally-specialist work, the key issues and factors arising out of working with women and children victims of various forms of trafficking, slavery and slave-like conditions, dowry-related violence, threats of honour killing, female genital mutilation and forced and child marriages.
- **Working Relationship with Australian Federal Police/Training:** Shakti was invited by the Australian Federal Police to the Australian Institute of Criminology Forum to Address Demand for Human Trafficking on 20th June 2012. Our work later led to training sessions on 7th March for Australian Federal Police (Victoria branch) and on May 9, 2013 for senior AFP (Canberra). Shakti trained 50 AFP participants on cultural awareness and on appropriately attending to forced marriage victims.
- **Launched Culturally Specialist Multilingual Domestic Violence Crisis Line 1800 SHAKTI.** In April 2015, 2015 representatives from government agencies, city councils, community services sector and migrant and refugee communities attended to launch Australia's first culturally specialist, multi-lingual domestic violence crisis line in South East Melbourne. This service is being considered as a significant milestone in Australia's efforts in ending violence against women including the issue of forced/servile/underage marriage among Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities in Australia. This event was inaugurated by Mayor of Knox Council, Cr. Peter Lockwood. Other speakers included Cr. Nicole Seymour from Knox Council, Cr. Shahadat Chowdhury from Parramatta City Council, NSW; Ms Annette Gillespie, CEO of Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre and Senior Sergeant Marilyn Ross, Sex Industry Coordination Unit, Victoria Police.

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

### 3 Current Situation of Family Violence in Asian African Middle Eastern Communities

#### Overview of Current Situation

The effects of family violence on women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities are worsened by multiple and pre-existing disadvantages. It is important to note that the CALD group is very broad, encompassing not only immigrants from Eastern Europe and Latin America but also peoples of colour such as Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This sub-group shares greater cultural similarity than with those from Eastern Europe and Latin America. For example, the human rights abuse practice of “honour killing” is commonly understood in the socio-cultural context of gender oppression in various Middle Eastern, African and South Asian cultures and faith groups. The historicity of “forced child marriage” is also prevalent in communities with origins of countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan but also in the more fundamentalist and radical faith sects of Muslim populations in Southeast Asia. In countries such as Netherlands, Germany and the UK these forms of violence against women and children are predominantly instances in migrant communities of Turkish, South Asian, Moroccan and Lebanese descent. Therefore in such contexts, family violence is not only tolerated, but normalised.

This is in contrast to Eastern European cultures which apart from linguistic differences, share more similarities with Western European cultures and mainstream Australia.

As an organisation that works specifically with Women of Colour from Asia, Africa and the Middle East we know first-hand how these cultural similarities manifest into disadvantages that play out on a daily basis. We also see how these disadvantages act as significant impediments in ensuring the safety of women and children in our communities.

The Royal Commission on Family Violence, the Second Action Plan 2013-2016 (Moving Ahead) of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 and Victoria Police have correctly identified issues such as language, community perceptions, geographical and / or social isolation and lack of cultural understanding from mainstream support services as key issues that negatively affect refugee and migrant women.

Due to the unique intersectional challenges and marginalisation that these communities of colour face, the true extent of family violence remains camouflaged. As an NGO, we believe that this is the case for two main reasons. First, insufficient data is collected by state authorities. The current data available on family violence has little to no disaggregation according to ethnic group / race. The blanket categorisation of all non-Australian born migrants as CALD reduces the scope to accurately analyse the experiences of women of colour from these communities and produce appropriate responses. **There is a cultural specificity of practices such as forced marriage, under-age marriages, servile marriages, dowry-related violence, threats of honour killing and FGM which occurs essentially in Asian, African and Middle Eastern origin communities.** Since they follow a different cultural logic to that of the dominant framework of Western values, it prevents a broader engagement with the issue across Australian institutions, service providers and the general public. This has negative consequences for the victims, since the marginalisation of the issue in Australia has resulted in a lack of culturally appropriate responses (and knowledge / awareness) by social service workers and law enforcement. This in turn reduces the effectiveness of their interventions or

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

sometimes even thwarts an intervention all together in the attempt to be culturally sensitive and avoid allegations of racism.

Secondly, Women of Colour are reluctant to report instances of violence and hence family violence in these communities remains underreported. Aside from the shame and stigma associated with accessing domestic intervention services, there is a grave lack of understanding of what constitutes family violence in Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities. Domestic violence as described under Australian law and as per international human rights treaties, are not considered as such within many of these immigrant communities. In addition there are a number of culturally-sanctioned oppressive practices that are almost exclusively found in Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities that are not easily identifiable under the law. The main reason being, that they are not experienced by mainstream Australia. They are also not experienced by Eastern Europeans and Spanish-speaking members of the CALD group. Consequently these abuses are rendered invisible to mainstream service-providers and are silenced by the communities themselves. These include under-aged / forced marriage, dowry violence, female genital mutilation (FGM) and honour-based violence. These particular practices whilst appearing to be complex “cultural” expressions are deeply imbedded with a gender-bias against women and girls. As a result they perpetuate gender-oppressive patriarchal norms. These in turn strengthen the concept of male privilege and exacerbate domestic violence, power and control.

For examples of culturally-sanctioned forms of family violence please **see our appendix**.

## Answering the RCFV Questions

### Other goals the Royal Commission should consider

Whilst the goals of the Royal Commission are commendable, we are unsure whether they are able to address the unique needs of Women of Colour. As mentioned earlier, **culturally-specific forms of abuse are not easily identifiable under the law**. As such, one goal of the Royal Commission should be to broaden its definitions of family violence to include culturally-sanctioned abuses such as FGM, dowry abuse and honour-based violence. There are already provisions for forced marriage and servile marriages in the law. However, we strongly believe that these laws need to go further. For instance we have clients whose lives were endangered as a result of the narrow scope of the forced marriage legislation. The corresponding lack of culturally-sensitive policies and procedures in handling this issue was instrumental in inappropriate responses from Australian Federal Police in some cases, which in turn put our clients at risk. Therefore in addition to broadening the definition of family violence another goal of the Royal Commission should be to **ensure culturally appropriate responses to family violence are prioritised**. Such responses need to acknowledge culturally oppressive practices and operate within a human rights framework. According to an article published by VAWNET.org “[c]entral to culturally competent domestic violence services to immigrant women is an in-depth understanding of domestic violence in immigrant communities” (Rana, 2012, p. 1)

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

### **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**

In our work with Asian, African and Middle Eastern women we have found that the likelihood of family violence occurring is directly linked to the philosophical mindset - of individuals, families and communities. As described earlier, oppressive cultural practices and attitudes normalise family violence. This serves to entrench male privilege and power, whilst promoting female subordination. A prime example is rampant dowry-abuse in South Asia and its diaspora, despite being outlawed in India in 1960. Therefore family violence is indiscriminate, cutting across socio-economic and geographic lines. It affects wealthier immigrant families of colour just as much as those who are economically disadvantaged. **It is only when there is a significant shift in attitudes towards human rights and women's equality that we can expect a lesser degree of family violence to occur.**

However, we do agree that social, economic and geographic factors can exacerbate the effects of family violence. Social and economic marginalisation experienced by people from Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities is a significant barrier preventing victims of family violence from seeking assistance.

Numerous studies link high levels of unemployment faced by immigrants from Asian, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds face high levels with racism and discrimination by potential employers (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Booth, Leigh, & Varganova, 2012; Hawthorne, 1997; Kabir & Evans, 2010; McAllister, 1995). Within this context, unemployment and economic disadvantage can appear to be the trigger of family violence. However, we do not believe this is the case. Rather, discrimination and low income levels often suffered by immigrants of colour increases the likelihood of women staying in violent relationships to ensure basic survival.

In addition, immigrant communities often erroneously conflate integration into Australian society with assimilation. As such, integration is rejected for fear of losing cultural identity and traditional values. Unfortunately, the younger generation either born and / or brought up in Australia face substantial competing pressures to either conform to their cultures of origin or to that of mainstream Australia. The resulting intercultural and intergenerational conflict such as this may also lead to families and communities of these young people adopting oppressive and harmful practices, such as forced marriage and honour-based violence, in an attempt to regain control over young people and preserve the cultural integrity and honour of the family and community.

At times, second generation Australians choose extreme allegiance to the traditional cultures and values, becoming part of the radicalisation of such cultures and religions.

We have also found in our work that in terms of geography, cultural enclaves – particularly around South Eastern Melbourne are especially dangerous for vulnerable women and young people. This is because these silos discourage full integration into Australian society and allow for harmful cultural practices to flourish as if people were still in their countries of origin. Through our conversations with clients and other members of the community, we have heard of stories of under-aged / forced marriages being conducted in places of worship by religious leaders who are non-resident in Australia. Therefore although the cultural/religious marriage has been recognised by the



Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

community, it is not recognised under Australian law and consequently not entitled to the same family violence provisions as a state registered marriage.

Lastly, we are increasingly seeing an interaction between the global rise in extremism and religious fundamentalism and family violence. According to Gokal and Manzur (2013) “Fundamentalist movements are characterized by their intolerance of diversity and plurality and by their coercive nature, which includes the use of violence to enforce norms. All fundamentalisms reinforce patriarchy, gender inequality and heteronormativity.” (p. 16, Gokal and Manzur, 2013). Our experiences corroborate this study as we have a number of clients whose abusive husbands have extremist inks, or increasing radicalisation. Even though the causes and effects are different, both presents highly risky and complicated cases, with the latter becoming an increasingly common factor to the rise of domestic and family violence. The Sydney Siege was a prime example where the terrorist, Man Haron Monis, had a number of charges for sexual assault and was also charged as an accessory to the murder of his ex-wife (Elliot, 2014). We agree with Gokal and Manzur (2013) that such extremism is only set to rise and with that increasing rates of family violence.

### **Barriers preventing Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities engaging with or benefiting from family violence services**

In addition to the barriers mentioned in the previous section, we believe there also includes the following:

#### ***Culture and Social Stigma:***

According to our research, we found that mainstream service providers adopt a “culture neutral” stance and presume a baseline level of female autonomy and empowerment. This mind set is not widely prevalent in Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries. Consequently when people from these communities migrate to Australia, their discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls remain intact. In our cultures, female empowerment is seen as “Western culture”, associated with broken families and general licentiousness. Therefore seeking help to leave violent relationships is akin to “behaving like a Western woman”. Furthermore, Asian, African and Middle Eastern cultures are honour-based cultures and as such seeking access to family violence services and leaving marital relationships is seen as bringing shame on the family. The result of such actions could result in being ostracised by extended family members and the wider community. For women who are heavily dependent on their communities of origin for psycho-social support, this could be devastating for their emotional well-being and mental health,

Culture and social stigma are therefore significant barriers to accessing and benefiting from family violence services.

We strongly believe that culturally competent family violence intervention and prevention initiatives are imperative for improving service provision. This is more than simply training mainstream agencies to be more culturally “sensitive” or hiring language specialists. What is needed is **strengthening of initiatives that are driven by women from Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities who are trained and experienced in culture and gender analysis combined with a human rights-based approach**. This is important because these women already have the credibility and unique insight into the cultural dynamics, having originated from these communities. Additionally, some are former survivors of family violence as is the case with Shakti. Combined with their specialist human rights-based and female-empowerment training, they are able to more

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

accurately to challenge cultural relativist excuses for blatant disregard for / violation of women's human rights.

### *Social isolation / lack of integration into Australian Society*

Mainstream service providers also rely on a level of integration into mainstream Australian society that is not feasible for immigrant women trapped situations of family violence. This is particularly the case for women who are new migrants and non-resident. Through our work in Australia and for 20 years in New Zealand, we have found that women must be assisted out of family violence first before they can integrate well into mainstream society.

### *Language and Education*

This is a commonly cited issue for women of colour from Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities. In particular new migrants and / or non-resident are often unaware of their rights under the law. This is exacerbated by lack of English and the consequent inability to communicate with key service providers. This situation can be partially improved by increasing the use of interpreters in first-response / emergency services and within family violence agencies such as multilingual family violence crisis hotlines. Additionally increasing the availability multilingual resources on domestic violence prevention is also helpful. However, it is imperative that this utilises a culturally-competent approach, such as ensuring that the interpreting services and resources employing a human rights-based framework and appropriately addresses culturally-sanctioned abuses specific to women of colour.

### **Improving responses to family violence in Asian, African and Middle Eastern Communities**

The most effective approach to addressing family violence in migrant and refugee communities is through a holistic end-to-end wrap around approach. This includes not only culturally-competent and appropriate intervention and prevention services but also rehabilitation and re-settlement into the community. Therefore strong linkages for life-skills programmes towards skills development, training, mentoring and employment facilitation of vulnerable and welfare-dependent migrant and refugee women will ensure that once they escape the cycle of violence, they can eventually break it permanently. **The key success of this approach will lie in immigrant women of colour and the same/similar ethnic origins delivering such services with cultural competence, as is the case with Shakti.**

### **Gaps in current approaches to addressing family violence in Asian, African and Middle Eastern Communities**

#### *Lack of Culturally Appropriate Service Provision and Diluting the Needs of Women of Colour*

While there a number of family violence service providers for the CALD community, there still remains a deficiency of culturally-aware and competent domestic violence specialist service providers addressing the issue of violence against women and children for and led by women of colour. Through our research it also emerged that there is a distinct lack of services that seek to address the issue of violence against Asian, African and Middle Eastern women and children within the human rights/women's rights framework versus cultural framework. This is because when mainstream agencies or other CALD services hire bicultural workers or language specialists, the staff

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

members are not trained to identify and dismantle cultural oppression in their own cultures within a family violence framework. As a result, their well-meaning attempts to help family violence sufferers do not address the root cause. Instead they often end up perpetuating the same misogyny and victim-blaming mentality. As an organisation, we have had clients who came to Shakti after being serviced by a bi-cultural worker from a mainstream agency or another CALD agency who advised the women to modify their behaviour return to their abusive situations. This is unacceptable as it puts victims in unnecessary risk and potentially life threatening situations.

Furthermore, despite certain organisations servicing a vast array of CALD women, there is a concern that the diversity may override the very real differences contained across cultural groups between the “East” and “Eastern European” nationalities. This could potentially adversely affect the safety of servicing women from Asian, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

### *Lack of Culturally Appropriate Crisis Response*

In Victoria there is currently no 24 hours / 7days a week crisis line services that caters specifically to women of Asian, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds in the region. As mentioned in the previous section multilingual staff in mainstream agencies or other CALD agencies are not necessarily trained in cultural analysis and gender analysis within the domestic violence analysis. For example we have had cases where other agencies arranged for women to be put into cabs driven by member of the same ethnicity. This is a highly risky situation for the women as the taxi-drivers could invariably be known to victim or abuser and would find the address of safehouse locations, thereby placing her in danger.

### *Lack of Emergency Safehouse Accommodation*

Furthermore, it has become apparent to Shakti, through victims and survivors that there is a paucity of culturally specialist and appropriate refuge/safe-houses for victims of Asian, African and Middle Eastern descent. We have had several cases where women have opted to stay out of existing refuges/shelters, despite the risks. This could be due to a range of issues such as religious practice, dietary requirements which can cause tension when living in these situations. Leaving the abuser is a huge step for an immigrant woman of colour which puts her significantly at risk of being discovered by her abuser or pressured by her community to return to the abuser’s household. Therefore a culturally safe and sensitive refuge will increase the likelihood seeking support to leave an abusive relationship. This will also assist in addressing the woman’s fears of leaving the abuser.

### *Accessibility of service: dissemination of information*

In the previous section we acknowledged that language and education is a common barrier for women of colour accessing family violence services. However we argue that ineffective dissemination of information of family violence is a significant gap in the provision of family violence services. It is not enough that multilingual resources are produced, the channel through which they are distributed is equally important. At present a large number of resources and campaigns are promoted through mainstream media networks and mainstream community “spaces”. However, if we are to keep more women of colour safe, then more attention must be given to their formal and informal social networks. For instance, there should be more targeted marketing to immigrant media networks – both digital, radio and print. Additionally, promotion should be used at immigrant gatherings and places of worship. Ultimately a grassroots reach approach, particularly through agencies that run by similar immigrant communities will significantly improve the effectiveness of the family violence system.

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

## Evidence from our research

Over the years, Shakti has conducted a number of studies on the availability of domestic violence services for Asian, African and Middle Eastern women in Melbourne and Victoria at large. In the recent past Shakti also partnered the Australian Institute of Criminology in a research project on forced marriage. In all of our studies we have found overwhelming evidence that suggests ethnic migrant and refugee women of colour continue to fall through the gaps in the system.

### Survey on Family Violence Service Providers in South East Melbourne

In one of our recent studies we conducted a survey on existing family violence and community / social service providers in South East Melbourne. The participant organisations were selected randomly and were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. The high rate of cultural diversity in South East Melbourne was commonly cited as a challenge that the agencies experienced operating effectively in the area. They also advised that there is a great need for more culturally-appropriate and competent services in the region. This indicates that the current domestic violence services are inadequate for the needs of Asian, African and Middle Eastern women.

Another theme that arose from the data was that although the agencies were aware of domestic violence occurring in Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities, only 40% of the participants had come across instances of forced marriage and dowry abuse. Given that at least 30% of residents in the Melbourne region originate from Asia, African and the Middle East, this suggests that a significant portion of refugee and migrant women are not being properly serviced. This could be that the women are either not reaching out to these agencies or when they are, culturally-specific forms of abuse are not being discovered by these agencies.

Our survey also revealed that only 20% of participants reported experiences with or attempted to service non-resident ethnic women. This indicates that within the already marginalised group of Asian, African Middle Eastern women, those without permanent residency were highly vulnerable and inaccessible to mainstream social services agencies.

It was interesting to note that one well known culture-specific social service agency (will not be named for confidentiality purposes) had been in the region for over 20 years, yet all of their family violence clients were through referrals from the police. This raises the question as to why sufferers of family violence from this particular cultural group are not contacting this social services agency directly. This is in direct contrast to Shakti New Zealand, which has been operating for 20 years and fields over 13,000 calls per year related to family violence intervention and advice; with over 60% of the calls being self-referrals. We should point out that New Zealand<sup>1</sup> is equivalent to the population of Melbourne<sup>2</sup> and 30% being from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Therefore the report from the Melbourne-based culture-specific social services agency is cause for alarm. We believe that because this particular agency is not specialised in family violence and / or working with women only, women from this particular community are not sufficiently protected from social stigma and shame should they approach the agency for help. This corroborates our earlier observation in the previous section that linguistic competency is not a proxy for cultural competency. Therefore it is imperative culturally-specialist family violence service providers are:

<sup>1</sup> Estimated at 4.6 million people as at 22/05/2015 (Statistics New Zealand, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> 4.25 million people live in Greater Melbourne area (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014)

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

- Have a strong understanding the interaction between gender and culture within the domestic violence analysis and human rights framework.
- Sufficiently distanced from “community leaders” who mainly tend to be male.
- Victim-centric and recognise that effective family violence intervention in any culture is about centralising the safety and health needs of the victim. This must be above and beyond the cultural norms and values of how family violence is traditionally handled.

### **Focus Group**

We also conducted a focus group where the participants included 20 clients, women community members and associates of Shakti. This method of data collection was selected for a number of reasons. First, it was deemed efficient given the amount of available time for research. Secondly, we felt that the qualitative data that we would obtain would provide a rich depiction of the issues faced by refugee and migrant women. Lastly, we felt that it was an appropriate and non-threatening method to obtain sensitive information from our Asian, African and Middle Eastern women. This is because of the “domino effect” as participants felt empowered to share their experiences after listening to other people’s stories.

A number of interesting themes arose from the data, corroborating the findings from our other studies and our experiences as an organisation in this field. For the purposes of brevity only three will be discussed.

### ***Lack of cultural understanding by social service agencies***

Our participants recounted stories of how government agencies down-played the gravity of the situation due to a limited understanding of cultural oppression. For instance, dowry-abuse is not experienced by mainstream Australians or the Eastern European CALD community. Therefore unless cultural training is given, agencies will be unable to pick up on key warning signs. One participant remarked “more than half the session with any authoritative figure is spent trying to explain culture and tradition before an appropriate solution is found.” Another participant mentioned how government agencies had a tendency to group all peoples from CALD communities together. However as repeatedly argued through this submission, Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities are very different to those from Eastern Europe. Participants also described how some women felt that their specific dietary and religious needs were ignored by mainstream family violence safe house agencies. As a result some returned to their abusive situation. Therefore participants called for increased cultural awareness training within statutory agencies and resourcing of a culturally competent toll-free crisis line and culturally-specialist refuge for Asian, African and Middle Eastern women.

### ***Inaccessibility of family violence services for Women of Colour***

Participants also shared stories of women desperate for help, but not knowing where to turn to. For instance, one young woman purposely set-off the metal detector at the airport by putting spoons in her clothing. She knew that her family were taking her overseas for a forced marriage. As such she went at lengths to speak to anyone who could help without endangering her life by alerting her family. This corroborates the earlier argument that producing multilingual resources on family violence is insufficient to guarantee protection against abuse. What is needed is increased awareness about the ways family violence manifests in Asian, African and Middle Eastern

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

communities and thus creating a response system that catches such. Part of this can include a more effective distribution of resources that are tailored to women of colour via a grassroots approach, led by immigrant women. This will ensure that more vulnerable women and children of Asian, African and Middle Eastern descent are reached.

### *Culture, Social Stigma and Lack of Integration*

As previously mentioned in the submission, mainstream service providers of family violence, presume a certain level of integration into Australian society. This presents itself as a barrier to women from Asian, African and the Middle Eastern communities who are new migrants. Findings from our focus group also suggest that family violence is the cause of social isolation experienced by many women of colour. Consequently, it prevents them from integrating well into mainstream society. Therefore it is important that the family violence services are culturally competent, so as to empower women to identify and break free from oppression within their own cultural context. The role-modelling by women from their own communities who are former survivors is an effective way of ensuring more Asian, African and Middle Eastern women are able to live self-reliant and violence free in the long term.

## 4 Recommendations

In order to foster a violence-free society in Victoria, where family violence is significantly reduced and even eliminated, it is imperative that all members of society are included. Therefore any initiative to reinforce community working against family violence and facilitate early intervention must take into account the specific cultural needs of the Asian, African and Middle Eastern community. This is particularly pertinent, given the insidious nature of the culturally-sanctioned forms of abuse that are not prevalent in Eastern European CALD communities or mainstream Australia. As mentioned severally, these culturally-specific forms of family violence include dowry abuse, forced / under-age marriage, FGM and honour-based violence.

The following section describes more effective responses to family violence within Asian, African and Middle Eastern Communities:

### More Research

As argued throughout this submission, there is a significant knowledge gap in the complex nature of family violence faced by immigrant women and children of Asian, African and Middle Eastern origins. Therefore it is imperative that **more research is done into the matter, particularly in terms of disaggregated data on family violence and how it affects different racial groups**. This will better enable policy-makers and social service providers to be advised accordingly. This will enable better recognition of the need for an **effective national integrated service programme model to be developed**. This model should provide cost-effective implementation with sustainable monitoring mechanisms that can lead to long-term outcomes. This will not only improve the lives of women and their children, but also lead to maximised productivity while mobilising communities regardless of race, colour or religion to speak out strongly towards eliminating all forms of violence toward women, in Australian society as a whole.

### Workforce Development across the social services and justice sector

We have mentioned severally that linguistic competency is not inter-changeable with cultural competency. Language specialists that provide family violence support under a mainstream, Western philosophical framework will continue to provide inadequate support to Asian, African and Middle Eastern women who operate under an “Eastern” philosophical framework. Therefore an improvement of cultural awareness is need on two levels. The first is for “first responder” agencies, participants in justice sector, health sector and state-sponsored social service agencies. The second level is cultural sensitivity training for referral pathways such as CentreLink, Citizen’s Advice Bureaus, healthcare professionals, courts, lawyers, DHHS, school counsellors and teachers. For both groups there should be **special emphasis on picking up warning signs on culturally-specific forms of abuse such as under-aged / forced marriage, dowry abuse and FGM**. It is also imperative that the increased cultural awareness is accompanied with an acute **recognition of the need for culturally-appropriate and competent intervention and refuge services and resourcing such initiatives**.

### Legislative Provisions and Policies to better protect Asian, African and Middle Eastern Women

An important component in better protecting Asian, African and Middle Eastern Women is legislative reform. Therefore we recommend that **legal provisions on family violence are strengthened to include issues such as dowry abuse, FGM**. This will increase visibility of these



Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

issues in the wider community, helping to reinforce community rejection of these types of abuses and hold those who have perpetrated these crimes to be held accountable. Additionally it will enable more appropriate responses to family violence in Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities to be designed and implemented.

### Strategic Partnerships

It is also pertinent to note that there are many organisations do good work in advocacy and representation of issues as well as prevention work in various States and territories. However, there needs to be more investment in a **national strategy and framework that draws on a multi-agency response to build knowledge and specialist skills across various State and territory bodies**. With a growing number of diverse new migrant communities over the last two decades, it is becoming urgent that cost and outcome-effective programmes for women and children in situations of vulnerability are developed across different sectors.

### Greater Resourcing for Crisis Response and Emergency Accommodation

As repeatedly argued throughout this submission, there is a distinct gap in specialist competency that stretches beyond language barriers and which lacks in-depth cultural analysis within the domestic violence response framework. It is strongly recommended that there exist **specialist crisis intervention system for immigrant women victims of Asian, African and Middle Eastern descent and their children in Victoria**. Part of the response system must include a culturally-specialist safe house. This is because women from immigrant communities normally have a high resilience in staying in abusive relationships and often leaving the abuser is a huge step. This puts them at significant risk of being discovered by the abuser and suffering further harm.

The refuges must offer safe and confidential accommodation along with advocacy and specialist allied support. The age group of clients should be 16 years, upwards, to particularly accommodate the impact of the anti-trafficking legislation that incorporates forced marriage and for young women who will seek to leave such situations. These safe houses will ensure client safety and empowerment by providing casework and advocacy services that enable clear identification of culturally harmful practices besides domestic violence. Consequently, clients will be better placed to distinguish between healthy cultural norms and those that violate women's and children's rights. This approach will also promote harmonious living within the wider community and encourage women to move away from insular living.

### Grassroots empowerment

Besides the above, Shakti's emphasis in the community advocacy approach lies **with survivors being role models and agents of change**. Such a concept challenges existing social and structural norms, helps overcome shame and stigma associated with the victims of domestic violence and is empowering for the survivors.

Through operating in this culturally-appropriate intervention model, we expect to see women and children of Asian, African and Middle Eastern descent better able to access specialist services, tailor-made to cater for their needs. As a result they will be better able to understand abuse and domestic violence. We expect that intergenerational cycles of violence will be more easily identifiable within communities and hence curtailed. This will lead to victim-survivors more able to create pathways to self-reliance, no longer forced to remain in abusive relationships that ultimately lead to poor health



Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

and well-being outcomes and greater government expenditure on health and social services. We also believe that this approach will lead to an overall reduction in repeat offending and general instances of family violence in Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities. This will facilitate harmonious living between the ethnic immigrant and wider communities, driving long-term social change.

## Conclusion

In Australia, culturally and linguistically diverse communities make up a significant portion of society. The changing trends in migration are increasingly from Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries to metropolitan cities such as Melbourne. Therefore there is an urgent need to change how services respond to the needs of refugee and migrant communities, in particular where the safety needs of women and their children are high and lives are at risk. In order to foster a violence-free society in Victoria, where family violence is significantly reduced and even eliminated, it is imperative that all members of society are included.

Barriers such as cultural and social stigma, social isolation, lack of integration into wider society and language difficulties can be mitigated through a commitment to improving social inclusion in Victoria. This can be achieved through increased cultural awareness and sensitivity, as well as a greater understanding of the unique needs presented by people from Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities.

Unfortunately, the deficiency in statistical data on incidences of domestic violence reflects a general lack of research and public awareness of the issue in Victoria and Australia at large. The cultural specificity of practices such as forced marriage, dowry-related violence, threats of honour killing and FGM which occurs mainly in Asian, African and Middle Eastern subset of the CALD group follows a different cultural logic to that of the dominant framework of Western values. This prevents a broader engagement with the issue across Australian institutions, service providers and the general public. This has negative consequences for the victims, since the marginalisation of the issue in Australia can lead to a lack of culturally appropriate responses by social service workers and law enforcement, which reduces the effectiveness of their interventions or sometimes even prevents an intervention all together in the attempt to be culturally sensitive and inclusive.

The complex nature of family violence faced by immigrant women of colour from Asian, African and Middle Eastern origins means that existing systems must address the need for culturally specialist service provision, which currently leave a gap of knowledge, create legal and social grey areas, and result in a missing service structure for such victims from communities of colour. It is paramount that these gaps are addressed in the future by conducting more research into the matter and advising policy makers and social service providers accordingly. Official recognition of a need for a national integrated service programme model is thus also recommended. This is one that can effectively provide cost-effective implementation with sustainable monitoring mechanisms that can lead to long-term.

Submission for the Royal Commission into Family Violence – Shakti Australia Inc. 29 May 2015

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# SHAKTI Migrant & Refugee Women's Support Group Melbourne Inc.

## Appendix 1: Shakti Non-Resident Clients

Social stigma, fear of deportation, scared of domestic violence, threats to be killed or family back in native country being killed and blackmailed into believing that they will lose their children if the authorities are involved. These are just some of the many reasons why a non-resident or new migrant woman will continue to bear the cycle of violence.

Shakti migrant and Refugee Women's Support Group Melbourne Inc. has numerous such cases where the battered and defeated women are on the verge of self-harm or mental disorder. With its limited resources and with the generous support of the community the clients with non-permanent residency are referred to agencies and authorities that can assist.

With so social welfare provisions, these women are basically left at the mercy of their perpetrator or live on the charity of neighbours and friends.

### Kavitra\*

Kavitra, a young South Asian mother of two boys is our latest client who was left to fend for herself after her husband decided to move out.

The couple moved to Australia [REDACTED] years ago and the physical and mental torture started soon after. Her husband came on a student visa and sponsored his wife. She said they left for Australia soon after getting married and after reaching Australia she saw her husband's true colours. Kavitra's husband was possessive, controlling and wanted to live the life of a single man while she had to stay in the house to cook and clean for him.

In the [REDACTED] years they had been married, Kavitra remained a housewife, looking after the couple's two children while he was still studying. Both Kavitra and her husband were on student visas.

She described how her husband would often demean her and become physically abusive, slapping her if the food or clothes were not in order and had gradually started taking his anger out on the children.

Kavitra could not stand the torture that she and the children were going through so she decided to come to Shakti for advice. She needed the assurance that her husband will not be deported because she will have to go with him. She was also concerned about being able to afford rent and expenses of the two children as her husband had moved out temporarily.

Earlier this year, a neighbour called the police after hearing Kavitra's screams as her husband meted out a harsh beating. As a result she received an Intervention Order.

The fear of social stigma and deportation has gripped her firmly and she fights the dilemma of seeking a separation, fighting to stay in Australia and to have full custody of the children with access for their father to visit.

Shakti has referred Kavitra to a doctor who has kindly agreed to do the consultation for free for her and her children. The organisation is also trying to get more information about her housing and visa status so that she can live independently and without fear.

### **Suki\***

Another recent case is of Suki, another South Asian woman in her early 20's who had an arranged marriage and came to visit her husband [REDACTED]. Instead of sponsoring her on a partnership visa or cultural marriage visa, he kept her in the precarious position of a tourist visa.

Despite paying a huge dowry and spending lavishly during the wedding her husband treated her like a slave, boasting that he has the citizenship and nothing can happen to him. Both Suki's in-laws and husband have told her that she is a baby making machine and he that he wants only sons.

Last month Suki was so badly beaten that she had to ring up a mutual friend to get away. She received an intervention order and will have the hearing of her case later this month. Her main aim is to get her husband convicted and settle down in Australia.

Suki is fearful of returning back to her home country. Her family have told her repeatedly that they do not want her, claiming that they have already spent so much on the wedding. The husband's parents have threatened to get her killed if she returns because it would bring disgrace to their family.

Suki described how her husband drank alcohol and would always order and push her around if he wanted anything. Often her husband would grab her hair and violently push her into the wall. He was also verbally abusive, calling her degrading names if he wanted his food or clothes.

She hoped he would improve with time thinking they were strangers and it was an arranged marriage. However, the situation continued to worsen and he would verbally and physically abuse her in public. She also suffered sexual abuse as her husband would force her to sleep with him saying it was his right as her husband.

Shakti staff has sighted the threats and messages her family has sent her on social media via private message. Shakti continues to lobby with the Immigration Department and staff have accompanied her to court for support.

### **Puja\***

Puja is a ■■■ year old woman of Indian origin who entered into an arranged marriage at the age of ■■■. Soon after completing her Masters, she moved from India to Melbourne, sponsored by her husband. Her family had paid dowry of roughly US \$ 35,000. However, the requests didn't end there. After arriving in Australia her husband demanded US \$10,000 from her family. Puja suffered emotional, psychological and physical abuse from her husband from day one. When she informed his family, they accused her of making him angry and that 'she deserved it.' The dowry abuse continued to manifest in the form of threats of harm to her family members.

Puja had the courage to take out an intervention order and move out from her marital home. However, under the influence of narcotics, her husband attacked her at her workplace in front of her colleagues with kitchen objects. This was in complete breach of the intervention order and he was subsequently incarcerated.

While she worked 20 hours a week, her husband claimed her earnings. He socially isolated her and threatened to harm her and her family when she did not 'listen to him' including threats of withdrawing her sponsorship and sending her back to India where she would be harmed. Her husband would speak to his family but never allow her to communicate to her family. Her husband sent abusive and threatening text messages to her father back in India. The threats include acid attack, gang rape and murder. Puja's parents felt powerless as her husband had strong ties with gangs, police and political leaders who were prone to corruption and bribery in a country where women found it hard to get justice.

Through the local police she got to know about Shakti and the work they are doing in Melbourne.

\*Names changed to protect the identity of the client.

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