

Paper

Responding to Diversity

AVERT
FAMILY VIOLENCE



**Collaborative Responses in
the Family Law System**



Australian Government
Attorney-General's Department

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Responding to Diversity

Adapted from *Point of Contact* 2004 Book 9 Working with Diversity, Discussion Paper 1: 'Diversity: an Overview'

Introduction: Ways of thinking

What is Diversity?

The concept of diversity is based on individual acceptance and respect. It is an understanding that individuals are unique and different. Diversity includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, culture, age, physical ability and religious, political and other beliefs. People are different. We each are a unique individual coming from a unique background carrying our own unique blends of life experience

Valuing individual diversity means reaching beyond stereotypical views of individuals and using the strengths and different perspectives that each person offers as a result of his or her culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, race, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, and age.

Diversity and the Family Law System

The need to develop diversity competencies within the family law system has increasingly been recognised. These diversity competencies need to be based on an understanding of the diversity that characterises the range of stakeholders within the system involved.

Each component of the family law system invariably has a range of different learning needs. However, the development of diversity competencies is closely associated with inter-professional, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning.

Inter-professional and multidisciplinary learning, particularly within the context of diversity and equality, therefore, provides an overarching framework for the development of diversity competencies across the various sectors that make up the family law system.

Multidisciplinary learning has been said to improve communication and trust between different professions by improving collaborative skills thereby reducing the 'silo' effect between professions, enhancing professional relationships and facilitating more creative and integrative responses.

Concepts, such as those of diversity, equality and human rights are not easy to define. Nevertheless a critical starting point in the process of developing diversity and equality competencies and capabilities is the need to develop shared understanding of these concepts and their application.



Culture and diversity

Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations. (UNESCO 2001 - Article 1, Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity)

A starting point for defining culture is thinking about the symbols, beliefs, knowledge and behaviours that people have in common. However, individuals from a cultural group, or a community within it, do not all do the same things or hold the same values. Nevertheless, within cultures and communities there are likely to be some shared reference points – things that are ‘understood’ (even if they are unspoken).

For individuals to grow and develop as healthy people, basic needs have to be met, such as shelter and food. In addition to these basic needs however, there are also some fundamental ‘building blocks’ that underpin a positive sense of self. These may include connections to significant others (e.g. family, friends); access to resources (e.g. work, housing, education); and that you will be respected and valued.

However, we know that some people within our society have easier access to, and more experience of, these positive ‘building blocks’ than do others. Everyone of course, experiences difficulties, but for some people, as well as everyday difficulties, they also live with the additional burdens of dealing with, for example:

- Prejudice and stereotypical assumptions about their community and culture
- Not speaking English as a first language
- A disability – and people’s assumptions about what this means about them
- Poverty
- Health issues, physical and/or mental
- Geographical isolation
- Social isolation
- Homelessness.

It is important that people experiencing additional burdens such as those listed above, are given effective and appropriate support from the community. Given the range of differences and needs, it is obviously not tenable to adopt a simple position that claims to treat everyone the same.

Workers within the family law system, who themselves also are culturally diverse, have an important role to play in offering appropriate responses to the diverse range of people with whom they come into contact in the course of their work. It is arguable that their role is even more crucial when they are responding to people who are not in the ‘mainstream’ of society, for reasons of their cultural, linguistic or religious background, for example. In fact, the



quality of response that people in this position receive is an important indicator of the sort of society we are.

Eight Key points about Diversity

Key point 1. Developing Identities

A person's sense of identity and ways of seeing the world are made up from a complex weave of factors, for example sex, age, sexual preference, learning experiences, geographical location, physical health and ability, life events and experiences and so on.

And none of these features necessarily has a fixed priority. Constellations of such factors come into the foreground of awareness in a person's experience at different times and in different contexts. For example, being Jewish might feel completely normal and 'just the way life is' for a child until s/he comes up against some experience of anti-Semitism. Similarly, for a child who is being brought up by same-sex parents.

Factors leading to a sense of identity as listed above are made even more complicated because people are not static in who they are. Growth is a dynamic process and human beings grow and change throughout their lifetimes so that some of these factors could change over time. The point of spelling out these layers of complexity is to underscore the inadequacy of thinking and practices that either:

- Classify whole communities according to some observed characteristic (e.g. non-English speaking), or
- Seek to wash out differences between people with simplistic and doubtful assumptions such as: we treat everyone the same.

Key point 2. Cultural practices and meanings

Everyone has 'culture'. It is learned from birth and continues to grow through a range of social and environmental experiences and relationships (and the meanings we make of them). Experiences of cultural practices in communities and smaller groups with which we affiliate, such as work teams, are so much a part of us, that what we do and think seems to be normal.

One of the consequences of regarding cultural practices and beliefs as 'normal' (the way things are) is that it is possible (perhaps unavoidable) to make some spurious assumptions about others – both in terms of their motivations and their behaviours. This is especially problematic when some groups hold more systemic power or influence than other groups. Examples of spurious assumptions can include:

- That social/legal systems and arrangements in place are value free and non discriminatory
- That some behaviours apply to whole categories of people (e.g. In X extended family members all live together – as if individual differences do not occur)



- That some categories of people can be spoken of as if they are one homogenous group e.g. people who do not speak English as their first language
- That some individuals are inherently bad
- That experts know best
- That some people and groups are by definition problematic (or can't help it)
- That some people/groups are, by definition, ignorant.

Key point 3. Everyone is a cultural participant

All of the factors mentioned above apply to everyone – they are not special features that apply to certain (other) cultural or ethnic groups. To consider this issue further, it can be a useful exercise to become an anthropologist of your own life and try to explain and describe some of your own cultural practices and understandings. It can also be interesting to think about what symbols are an important part of your descriptions.

Key point 4. The importance of connections

Being a part of a culture or community can offer feelings of belonging, mattering and connectedness. Developing a sense of personal identity is usually influenced by cultural or community connection (or lack of it).

Key point 5. Changes and developments

Cultures and communities are not static. Practices, values and traditions are likely to change over time. Think for example, of 'dating behaviour' in your own social group and community of thirty or so years ago, or the food practices and styles that were in place when you were a child, to note how quickly things can move on. Such changes are likely to be the case for all communities and so it is important not to carry fixed notions or stereotypical ideas about how things work in particular groups.

Key point 6. Multiple realities

Individuals usually operate in and between several groups and communities throughout their everyday lives, so aspects of cultural affiliations are 'in play' or highlighted, depending on the context. If, for example, someone is at a family wedding, it is quite likely that particular ethnic and cultural traditions are in the foreground of a person's responses, feelings and sense of community identity. However, when that same individual is involved with another group – for instance a work group or a group of significant friends – the connections that are in the foreground of experience and response may well have absolutely nothing at all to do with ethnic origin.

In these different contexts 'cultures' are constructed which function to produce shared meanings, values and aspirations for the group. Such cultural constructions and meanings are rarely named or spoken of – but they are learnt and known by members of particular groups.



Cultural constructions might involve for example:

- Attributes that give someone status
- Things that are regarded as funny
- Achievements that are seen as important
- Social values and attitudes that are regarded as important
- Assumptions about good ways to spend time.

It can be an interesting exercise to explore the similarities and differences between the cultures of two seemingly disparate groups against the above criteria.

One of the features of group affiliation and operating within its frameworks is that it then becomes a relatively easy step to define insiders and outsiders. Creating insiders and outsiders can operate as a hostile mechanism – as is sometimes seen in schoolyard behaviours where certain children are excluded, or in racist behaviours and practices. However, it can also be a benign phenomenon – where groups can use a ‘shorthand’ with each other that others may not understand at all – but where no particular intent to exclude exists. Imagine, for instance, a discussion among a group of physicists, where concepts, questions and enthusiasms may well be incomprehensible to someone who is not in that culture. In a similar way, the conversations and preoccupations of a group of people in long-term custody may not make much sense if we are not familiar with the cultural assumptions and experiences of incarceration that are in play.

Key point 7. Balances and contexts

There is a common phenomenon of naming (and therefore seeing) people through a highlighted aspect of their identity. In the popular press for example, tags are used such as ‘paedophile magistrate, Joe Bloggs’, or ‘drug cheating athlete, Mary Smith’.

We are encouraged to think of particular aspects of a person as being their total identity – the definition of ‘who they are’ and all we need to know. For people with a disability, this is a commonly reported frustration – i.e. being seen as disabled first and then as a person, second.

Perhaps there are some issues that prompt responses of not wanting to know any more about the person. This has certainly happened throughout history. For example, Oscar Wilde was gaoled and then banished from his own country, because of his homosexuality. The fact of his literary genius, his commitment to parenting his children, and his talents for being an exceptional friend, became totally irrelevant.

If we define someone totally by a particular aspect of their behaviour, we are deciding to close the door on any further possibilities or future insights. For practitioners in the family law system, this can be problematic and even counter-productive, especially in the area of family and domestic violence.



Key point 8. Knowing best

There are some issues that family law system workers can take as given, for example, the priority of safety for a child. There are some issues however, where holding an absolute assumption about what is best for someone, may not in fact be a shared assumption by the person or people in question.

Some people with hearing impairments recently demonstrated this point by voicing their concern about the widespread acceptance of the bionic ear as the best response possible where its use was viable. Their view was, that in trying to make the hearing impaired 'the same as' everyone else, a whole hearing impaired culture (including signing, and the shared unique meanings created within such a community) would be destroyed.

It is an example that highlights the complexities involved in understanding diversity. It also highlights the tendency for people to assume that the norm (being 'normal') is desirable. Even putting aside the problematic concept of what 'normal' means, complex issues still remain.

Some people, for example, who are prescribed medication to stabilise a bi-polar condition, can find it difficult when they experience the subsequent flattening out of their mood. And arguably, when this occurs, some of the talents that were apparent in the heightened (more manic) states, would also be flattened out.

Gay and lesbian people could also be identified as a minority group but it certainly could not be assumed that they would prefer to be 'straight', or that the communities and groups in which they live are less rich or diverse than in any other group.

Past Government policies had a devastating effect upon Indigenous people and the effects can still be felt by families and communities today.

These examples demonstrate that being 'marginal' is not always experienced as a negative. What is experienced painfully are some of the stereotypical attitudes and responses that are often directed towards marginalised groups.

What emerges from this discussion is that it is vital to think through our own responses (and what informs them) just as carefully as we think about groups that we offer services and responses to. It just could be that a person's greatest burden is in dealing with the assumptions that are being made about them!



Defining family in diverse settings

Defining what constitutes a family is difficult. Traditionally, the term “family” has implied a monogamous, male-female marriage. However, over the years this traditional outlook on family has been quickly evolving. This evolution can be attributed to the increase in divorce rates, the inclusion of women in the workforce, a decline in birth rates, an increase of single parent families, an increase in cohabitational relationships and same-sex relationships. Families take many different forms, including single people with children, couples without children, children born inside or outside of marriage, gay and lesbian couples, adopted children, etc. The term family will be used in this text in its broad sense to indicate that there are many family structures and acceptable definitions.

Australia’s population is experiencing dramatic shifts in its demographic profile. Australia in 2010 is more multicultural, multi-faith and multilingual than ever before (ABS 2006). Newly arrived communities, particularly refugee and humanitarian entrants, are contributing significantly to this shifting population landscape (FECCA 2010). These new communities are a major part of the changing face of Australian families.

Among migrant and refugee communities there are numerous cultural constructions of the family that may include biological or non-biological members. The roles (such as nurturer, protector) and obligations of each family member may be quite different from those expected in a nuclear family. Families also vary considerably within communities, and assumptions about family make-up cannot be made based on stereotypes.

In terms of reflecting on the changing face of Australian families, recent research in Australia suggests that overall grandparents are playing an increasingly active and significant role in the lives of young children. ‘In 2003, there were 22,500 Australian families in which a grandparent or grandparents were the guardians of their grandchildren’ (ABS 2005) Grandparents come from a diversity of age groups and walks of life but share a common commitment to the grandchildren.

The family law system recognises the important role that grandparents play in a child’s life. Specific references in the Family Law Act to grandparents and other relatives of the child have been made to ensure that the courts recognise the importance of the relationships that the child has with their wider family. Family dispute resolution practitioners are required to advise on the types of issues that parenting plans may cover. This includes the amount of time a child spends with other people, such as grandparents.

Based on current trends we can anticipate that Australian families will become more diverse and include a higher proportion of de facto relationships, same sex families, step-families and culturally diverse families. In the future, the family law system will need to provide families with early access to services to enable them to reach successful agreements before conflict escalates. (Govey 2009)



There is no doubt that the composition of Australian families has changed considerably over recent times. Families and family life have experienced significant change, including relationship patterns, gender roles, fertility, relationship breakdown, the work and family interface, and the growth of diverse family types. The diversity of Australian families needs to be recognised by everyone, but particularly by those involved in the family law system.

Diversity and family violence

Everyone's cultural 'lens' will frame how they view issues – including the issue of family and domestic violence. One of the most important points to be made in relation to this is that no cultural or community groups are immune from the reality that family and domestic violence occurs within them. Family and domestic violence exists across class, ethnicity, cultures, employment, social and religious groups.

In spite of this universal phenomenon, the ways in which it is commonly thought about and spoken of (or significantly, not spoken of) often implies that it is a problem relating to 'others' and not to 'us'. Another feature of this distancing is that 'others' or otherness, then becomes the explanation of the violence itself. A striking example of this dynamic was exposed by the ABC Media Watch (2002) report: *Criminal Gang or Islamic Gangs* where Alan Jones is quoted as saying on his popular talk back show:

Let's not mince words here –these are racist attacks against ordinary Australian girls carried out by out of control Lebanese Muslim gangs who hold us and our police service in contempt...Now they are showering their contempt for Australia and our police on these young girls [Alan Jones, 30 July 2001].

The emphasis is clear in this statement – rape is not being exposed as a brutal crime perpetrated by men against women, but rather, as a crime that Muslims are perpetrating against Australians. Regardless of how this particular news story might be analysed, it is easy to see how ideas about whole groups of people (in this case Muslims) can gain traction. Ideas generated in popular media in this way often imply that certain characteristics are inherent in everyone of a certain background and that there are no differences of values or behaviours between them.

However, the idea of family and domestic violence being 'a normal part' of some communities (but not 'ours') is not only a concept promoted by popular commercial media. It is also a concept that emerges in the judgements of criminal courts (Dimopoulos and Assifiri, 2004). And, presumably, associations about ethnicity and violence are also being applied in other service delivery contexts as well, such as health services, schools and the police force.

There are some major problems not only in this way of thinking, but also in its potential outcomes. Braaf & Gangley (2002) point out that such stereotyping is offensive and that it also denies the principle that rights to safety are a human right that should be extended to everyone. It also, of course, denies men's responsibility for the crime because it has become 'explained' on cultural grounds.



In reality, in most societies, including Australian society, only a minority of perpetrators of family and domestic violence are ever called to account or sanctioned for their actions. If there are so many similarities in the experiences of family violence across communities and groups within Australia, the question arises: In what ways might differences need to be considered?

Kelly (2002) answers the question in this way:

Whilst no context is free from violence against women, some – the home, residential and custodial institutions, war, conflict and displacement, appear to exacerbate the level of non safety for women and girls, at the same time as decreasing access to intervention and support. Whilst variations in political, cultural and economic contexts do not change the reality or brutality of abuse, they certainly do affect its meanings and the options available to women and girls for naming it, seeking support, protection and redress. (p.5)

Indigenous issues

As a matter of respect it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous people have lived in Australia for over fifty thousand years and have the oldest living culture in the world. However, there was, and is, great diversity among Indigenous people. Before white settlement, for example, there were hundreds of distinct languages spoken, and even today 50% of people in remote areas speak an Aboriginal language at home. And knowledge of the Dreaming, stories, paintings and ceremonies was held according to complex traditional law and kinship.

Indigenous groups in contemporary Australia are themselves diverse. It is just as inadequate to speak of the Indigenous point of view as it would be to speak of the non Indigenous point of view – it is not possible to generalise. Yet at the same time Aboriginal people recognise each other as being of one people. And there are also likely to be strong bonds in understanding shared historical experiences and their impact on contemporary life.

Many Indigenous communities suffer very high rates of family violence. Family violence is one of multiple traumas often experienced by Aboriginal children. These multiple traumas include the witnessing of community violence, the death of loved ones, parental incarceration, dislocation from home and community, poor health and poverty.

Indigenous leader Professor Lowitja O'Donoghue (2004) has said that 'many children are growing up in communities where violence has become a normal and ordinary part of life' and that this has resulted in a generation of young Indigenous people who are:

- 'engaging in high risk and illegal behaviours
- mis-using alcohol and other drugs
- trying to function in spite of profound emotional and physical damage
- trying to form loving relationships, even though they are confused about what love is
- and, most terrifying of all, harming themselves and killing themselves at unprecedented rates'. (p. 31)



More recently, statistics on child abuse have shown that it is on the increase amongst Indigenous children and at a much greater level than amongst non-Indigenous children.

In 2007-08, approximately 35 per 1,000 Indigenous children aged 0-16 years were victims of substantiated child abuse and neglect. This was an increase from 16 per 1,000 children in 2000-01. During the same period, the rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect among non-Indigenous children aged 0-16 years remained relatively constant (increasing from 5 to 6 children per 1,000). (ABS 2010)

Professor Mick Dodson (2004) has also spoken of the crisis within Indigenous communities and the urgent need to redefine masculinity for Indigenous boys. He writes of alcohol and drug abuse, sexual and family violence and involving the criminal justice system amongst young men (p. 39).

Wundersitz (2010) notes that Indigenous violence is related to a number of situational and life-style factors: however she also claims that 'alcohol is now regarded as one, if not *the*, primary risk factor for violence in Indigenous communities'. The key risk factors for Indigenous family violence relate to substance use; social stressors; living in a remote community; levels of individual, family and community (dys)functionality; availability of resources; age; removal from family; disability; and financial difficulties (Bartels 2010).

The evidence indicates that Indigenous women may not access mainstream services, including legal and counselling, due to possible lack of anonymity and fear of repercussions (Morgan & Chadwick 2009). In addition, many Indigenous women have experienced poor outcomes when they have reported violence. These have included, for example:

- Reprisals from the perpetrators of violence
- Absence of culturally appropriate responses
- Lack of useful effective advice
- Lack of appropriate services, especially in remote areas
- Fear of what will happen to the person in custody.

There are some points that have emerged from recent research into Indigenous family violence that offer useful insights for responding appropriately. Wundersitz (2010) has shown that socioeconomic factors are an important background to understanding Indigenous violence. Some of the factors affecting remote communities include low incomes, overcrowding in housing, lack of employment, poor education and reduced health. Added to this are issues of poor parenting skills, high levels of intra-family conflict and low levels of social capital and resilience.

Wundersitz goes on to explore what she terms 'precipitating causes' for violence at an individual level. These include jealousy over material goods, payback between families, and failure to repay debts. However, despite all these recognised factors, it is unclear which should be addressed first to reduce the incidence of Indigenous violence.



Issues for people of culturally and linguistically diverse background (CALD)

Note: In this section the terms 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse' (CALD) and 'Non-English speaking Background' (NESB) are both used. While these are a convenient shorthand it should be remembered that all people are culturally diverse. See Key Points 2 & 3 earlier.

Migrant and refugee families face a complex and alien environment. Newly arrived communities are confronted with a range of settlement issues, including health and educational concerns, employment, housing, questions of identity and belonging and so on. Recent research suggests that newly arrived migrants are also likely to encounter a range of common legal problems in the first five years after they arrive in Australia (FCLC 2009) particularly in relation to family law issues, including family and domestic violence.

Many families who migrate to Australia find their roles also change significantly. Many families have been totally restructured, with family members missing, separated or unable to migrate due to death or remarriage. Some families may be living together for the first time. Siblings and extended family members may have taken on a guardianship role where parents have died or are living overseas, often without much support or recognition.

The loss of status that many families experience on migration often leads to a deep sense of loss. Some families experience a complete class shift on arrival. Professionals with overseas qualifications may face unemployment or unskilled work due to a lack of Australian work experience and discrimination.

Financial pressures are often severe, as unemployment is high among newly arrived communities and families may be paying off overseas debts or sending money to relatives overseas. Refugees usually arrive with no possessions or financial assets and have to start their lives again. Where family members are working long hours or doing shift work, the impact on family cohesion can be negative.

Refugee and humanitarian entrants have been identified as having very specific and complex settlement needs. Most have experienced displacement from their home country due to war and have spent years in refugee camps with significant health problems resulting from malnutrition and limited access to health care. Profound social and cultural displacements and loss and trauma define the experience of many.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 80% of all refugee women experience rape and sexual abuse, which are used as weapons of war (Mehraby 2001). It is estimated that over 50% of refugee women arriving in Australia have experienced rape and other forms of sexual abuse.

Nevertheless, it is important that in describing the challenges confronting newly arrived communities, we guard against the unintended consequence of pathologising refugee and humanitarian entrants. The refugee 'label' rightly acknowledges the plight of people fleeing situations of war and oppression. However, while having this status affords a number of rights from countries signatory to the 1951 UN convention, the concept of 'refugeehood' within resettlement contexts can become a master status that defines a person above and



beyond any other form of identity (Marlowe 2010). It is critical that the resilience that is characteristic of so many is not rendered invisible in the process of planning and implementing settlement support programs.

It is important to be aware of the special problems of young people in the CALD community. Young people often take on a role as advocate for the family and are often called on to provide assistance with settlement needs and interpreting. This can lead to a power shift, with parents losing dignity and status and children taking on a greater burden of responsibility. This power imbalance has significant long-term consequences for family dynamics and can lead to family conflict.

Newly arrived migrants, particularly refugees and humanitarian arrivals, are likely to encounter a range of common legal problems in the first five years after they arrive in Australia (FCLC 2009). The most common causes cited by the literature for these legal issues are the lack of accessible and translated information and the unfamiliarity of the Australian legal system, particularly for those coming from what some legal theorist describe as 'law avoidance' (Kidder 2002) societies.

Fear of the police and 'the law' is reported to be very widespread. For example the Victorian Foundation House suggests that many new migrants from war torn areas have a well grounded suspicion of legal systems and institutions and a lack of trust in the domestic legal system (VLA 2009).

Legal difficulties are compounded by the fact that new arrivals may find it difficult to recognise legal problems and to seek legal assistance. While the range of legal issues varies, one of the most common identified relates to family law, and in particular family and domestic violence (FCoA 2007).

It has been shown that NESB women who are victims of family violence are less likely to access mainstream services or contact the police. This may be due to a number of reasons, including a perception by the women that there is a lack of understanding of their particular situation. Other factors include: language barriers; restricted access to a culturally sensitive interpreter who may also be from the same small community; and dependence of the victim on the perpetrator for citizenship or residential status (Morgan & Chadwick 2009). Some women do not report sexual assault because they do not recognise it as domestic violence. Others do not want to report family violence as their religious principals precluded them from divorce (Bartels 2010).

It is important to note that NESB women who have a disability are at even greater risk than other NESB women, and this is discussed more fully in the next section.

In addition to these cultural barriers, a literature review of family violence in CALD communities in Australia in 2006 concluded:

Research findings consistently indicate that this situation [as outlined above] is exacerbated by the fact that although many agencies and service providers have presented rationales that



support practices that are more inclusive of women from CALD communities, in practice these strategies do not appear to be implemented. (Bonar & Roberts 2006 p. 22)

In terms of responding effectively to issues around family and domestic violence in culturally diverse contexts, the following good practice guidelines are recommended:

- Ensuring that the staff and management committee of a service reflects the cultural diversity of the community.
- Providing staff training in cultural awareness and communication (including identifying individual values, assumptions and prejudices, knowledge of parenting practices and attitudes to violence in different cultures).
- Ensuring the availability of interpreters, and providing training in the use of interpreters and interpreter services, including the Commonwealth Government's Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) and on-site interpreters.
- Networking and coordinating with ethno-specific services.
- Ensuring that information is available in different languages.
- Linking the client with culturally appropriate services.
- Ensuring that the services provided are relevant to clients and respect their cultural and religious beliefs. (Bullen 2003 cited in Bonar & Roberts 2006 pp. 24-25)

Disability issues

The term disability refers to a wide range of conditions and levels of severity. The ways in which an individual is treated depends, in part, on how their disability is viewed. Some people who live with a disability describe feelings of being 'invisible' and others of being seen only as a problem – rather than as a person who happens to have a problem. In the recent (2008) Victorian Report *Building the Evidence* the project team noted that:

Women with disabilities are not being identified and counted in our data collection processes on violence. This means the incidence of violence against women with disabilities is invisible. (Healey et al 2008)

It is clearly important to be appropriately responsive to individuals' needs without defining them by their disability. It is also important to keep in mind that the range of cultural variables discussed in this paper, for example, age, gender, geographical location, ethnicity etc. will impact on a person with a disability just as they do for able bodied people.

In terms of the family violence response system, it is important to note that women with disabilities experiencing violence are not 'all the same'. Women with disabilities experience a multiplicity of different functional impairments and the concomitant myths and social attitudes relevant to each specific impairment. Furthermore, most people with disabilities live with impairments that are multifaceted, which defy a single categorisation such as 'physical', 'sensory', 'cognitive' and 'mental health'. (Healy et al 2008)



Research about the treatment of people with a disability reveals some alarming information. In a recent collaborative project aimed at assisting women with disabilities in the ACT, the following findings are reported.

...Compared to non-disabled women, women with disabilities:

- Experience violence at higher rates and more frequently
- Are at a significantly higher risk of violence
- Have considerably fewer pathways to safety
- Tend to be subjected to violence for significantly longer periods of time
- Experience violence that is more diverse in nature; and
- Experience violence at the hands of a greater number of perpetrators.

(PDA et al 2009 p. 2)

Women from a NESB background who also have a disability are at an even greater disadvantage than other women with a disability. In a current report from the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW they note the need to dispel some myths about NESB women with disabilities. These include:

- There are very few people from NESB with disability in Australia because they are not allowed into the country* - Despite restrictive immigration policies the prevalence of disability among people from NESB is comparable to the Anglo-Australian community.
- The experience of disability is the same in all cultures* – The way disability is experienced and understood vary greatly in different cultures although there is a high level of stigma associated with disability in all communities. ...The response to the question 'do you have a disability?' might vary, due to the person's cultural understandings of disability. There are many people who do not identify themselves as a person with disability.
- People from NESB prefer to seek support within their community/extended family and refuse to receive services outside their community* - The reality for many women from NESB with disability is that they and their families also face discrimination within their own communities. (MDAA 2010 p.13)

The report also noted that 'people from NESB with disability are gravely underrepresented in government funded services. This disparity in service usage reflects the current Anglo–Australian model of service provision which inadequately caters for the cultural and linguistic needs of people from NESB' (p.13). Such information starkly indicates the need for action and awareness on a whole range of fronts.

The skills needed for responding appropriately to people with a disability, in fact, mirror the skills that are advocated throughout this package. They involve: being respectful; developing keen skills of noticing potential needs (and strengths); and offering or facilitating a 'protective cocoon'. It is possible that this sense of being safe within a protective cocoon can be created during a relatively short interaction. It comes from a certain quality of response and presence of the person offering support.



Gay and lesbian issues

Jeffries and Ball (2008) argued that the Australian criminological and social science research community has largely been silent on the issue of same-sex domestic violence (SSDV). Pitts et al. (2006) conducted an online survey with 5,476 Australians who identified as GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender) and described family violence as a hidden issue in the gay and lesbian community. Indeed, the authors suggested that 'many GLBT people do not identify family violence when they experience it because of a lack of recognition of its existence in same sex relationships' (Pitts et al. 2006 p 51). Notwithstanding this limitation, the report found that 33 % of respondents had been in a relationship with an abusive partner, although it was not clear whether this was within the context of a same-sex relationship. In a later study of 390 Victorian respondents, 31 % of GLBT respondents had been in a same sex relationship where they were subject to abuse by their partner, with lesbians more likely than gay men to report such abuse (41% to 29%; Leonard et al. 2008). A recent study has found that the prevalence, types and contextual triggers of violence in male same-sex relationships parallel abuse in opposite sex relationships (Kay & Jeffries forthcoming).

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) noted that one form of violence which is specific to GLBT relationships is the abusive partner 'outing' or threatening to 'out' their partner to family, friends, colleagues or the general community (WHV 2009). Irwin (2008 p 208) found that the lesbians she interviewed were unsure about 'what was acceptable, unacceptable or normal behaviour' in such relationships. In addition, same sex domestic violence victims may be particularly vulnerable due to isolation from their support networks and may feel that acknowledging the existence of the violence may further feed any homophobia (WHV 2009).

One issue of concern to Pitts et al. (2006) was the lack of referral options for female perpetrators and male victims within mainstream services. Leonard et al. (2008) found that only six % of GLBT people who reported same-sex partner abuse to police were referred to advice or support services. In 2006, Victoria Police reported that there were no publicly-funded family violence counselling agencies to which they could refer male victims of same sex partner abuse and Leonard et al. (2008 p 50) inferred that 'domestic and sexual violence services may not be meeting the needs of victims of same sex partner abuse'.

Domestic violence in GLBT relationships is harder to identify, both for the victims and for the services offering support, because 'mainstream' services for domestic violence do not always recognise domestic violence in same sex relationships and are rarely experienced in dealing with its specific aspects.

For women in same-sex relationships, abusive partners can rely on homophobia or heterosexism as a tool to control their partner. This type of abuse can involve:

- 'Outing' or threatening to 'out' their partner to friends, family, police, church or employer;
- Telling their partner that she will lose custody of the children as a result of being 'outed';



- Telling a partner that the police or the justice system will not assist because the legal justice system is homophobic;
- Telling a partner that the abusive behaviour is normal within gay relationships and convincing the abused partner that she does not understand lesbian or gay relationships and sexual practices because of heterosexism

Issues of family violence for the GLBT community have added dimensions to those in mainstream heterosexual society. These dimensions include:

- Isolation*: Silence about domestic violence within the LGBT community further isolates the victim, giving more power to the batterer. Added to this is the problem of limited community space within LGBT networks: privacy may be difficult to maintain, and leaving made more difficult.
- Heterosexist manipulation*: A batterer may threaten to 'speak out about' a person's sexual orientation or gender identity to friends, family, co-workers, or a landlord. In addition to this, existing services may require an individual to 'come out' against his or her will.
- Gender myths*: People assume that two men in a fight must be equals. Similarly, Gay, bisexual and transgendered (GBT) men often reject the idea that they can be victims.
- Context of historical oppression*: LGBT people often approach shelters, social service agencies, domestic violence service-providers, police, and the courts with great caution. LGBT victims may fear re-victimization through homophobia, disbelief, rejection and degradation from institutions that have a history of exclusion, hostility and violence toward LGBT people.

Some issues for working in rural and remote areas

As in all areas of diversity, it is difficult to generalise because so many individual variables exist. However, there are some issues for people living in rural and remote areas that have potential relevance for responding appropriately in the area of domestic violence.

All of the issues surrounding diversity, for example ethnicity, disability, age, gender and sexual identity have particular impact in rural and remote areas. One alarming example of this is the disproportionate number of suicides in rural areas among immigrants to Australia.

A recent study into the prevalence of intimate partner abuse in a mining area of Central Queensland (Nancarrow et al 2009) has concluded that although the prevalence of abuse does not appear greater in mining communities than in any other community, the help-seeking by the women is not comparable. Less than half the women who had been physically abused, and only about one third of the women who had experienced other types of abuse, went to support services. These findings indicate that there needs to be greater promotion of support services in rural/remote areas.



The obvious issue of limited access to services is an ongoing problem, and in addition, the experience of 'difference' in some communities can be felt acutely. Although there are many accounts of the support and closeness that occur in country communities, the other side of the coin is that it can be difficult to access support for issues that carry social stigma – and domestic violence is clearly one such issue.

Tually et al. (2008) have noted that research is required into the extent and impact of family violence in remote communities and the capacity of regional family violence services to meet women's needs. Critically, research in this area should be formulated in a way which determines necessary service requirements for prevention and response outcomes in rural and remote settings, in accordance with Strategy 6.3.4 (NCRVWC 2009). And, as Wundersitz (2010) has noted Indigenous violence is of ongoing concern with many factors involved but it is still unclear which factors should be addressed first.

There is more limited research available about rural men and family violence and a dearth of perpetrator programs in such settings (NCRVWC 2009). Jamieson and Wendt (2008) recently examined men's perpetrator programs in small rural communities and found that there was an urgent need for an holistic approach to address family violence in such settings, as well as for funding for transport to enable rural men to attend perpetrator programs in other locations.

Wendt (2009) has noted that isolation, beliefs about rural masculinity which encourage stoicism and repressed emotions, and limited access to, and use of, medical and health facilities all indicate that rural men require different assistance to men from urban areas to understand and address their use of violence against their partners and families. They argued that further empirical research is needed to explore the connections between family violence and rural ideologies and masculinities.

Children and diversity

As has been argued above, it is not helpful or useful to ascribe characteristics to whole categories of people as if they are the same and frozen within that way of being. The same can be said about children. Even the very concept of what constitutes a child has changed during European history where they have been variously regarded at different times as: small adults, wild things in need of taming, possessions, units of labour, and more recently, persons with rights.

The concept of a child having unique individuality that needs to be encouraged, expressed and catered for, is a very recent historical development in Western societies, as is the whole consumer culture that markets to children products such as children's food, children's toys, children's fashion and so on.

Even the age range that defines what a child is can vary, depending on the context, e.g. when 'full fare' applies, when a child can be defined as legally (or socially) responsible, or when driving age applies. There was a radio discussion in Adelaide in July 2004 about whether a parent was negligent in not providing 'child care' for his fifteen year old son – who



had left his unsupervised home and got into some sort of trouble. The debate was prompted by a proposition from WA that parents should take financial responsibility for compensating victims of their children's crimes. All such examples of attitudes towards children demonstrate that how we see (and therefore interact with) children is to do with how they are socially constructed. And these constructions are different, depending on historical time, social needs, place and context.

Despite historical, cultural and individual differences, there are some commonly held assumptions and stereotypes about children and young people. (Even using this language differentiation between 'children' and 'young people' conveys a particular construct in play, namely, that at some point, children become adolescent (young people), and then adult – yet when these boundaries are crossed is by no means clear, fixed or universal).

Some of the assumptions and stereotypes that are readily available in Western cultures are, for example, that:

- Adolescents are tribal and rebellious, potentially dangerous (often unwelcome in public places such as shopping malls)
- Small children are sweet and kind
- Boys and girls (by virtue of their sex) have distinctly different interests (many toys and books therefore can be classified on gender lines)
- Adolescents like 'to party' – the wilder the better
- Children are oblivious to adult concerns such as parents' money worries or anxiety about a family member
- Children are not usually able to make important decisions.

The list could easily be added to – and there may well be disagreement between people about whether some of these are common assumptions or not. But it is interesting to note that young people who do not meet expectations of how they 'should be', can readily be defined as 'problems'. An adolescent, for example, who does not enjoy going out with their own age group, or a young child who seems to prefer atypical gender activities, is likely to come under notice as a potential concern. These examples serve to further demonstrate the socially constructed nature of social and cultural expectations. What is interesting about these social constructions is that they often come to be regarded as truths or absolutes, which in turn of course, informs responses and interactions surrounding them.

These issues relate to some important questions about diversity and difference. When, and on what basis, for example, might a front line worker judge that a young person's behaviour is worrying? Is it possible to generalise about such a question or might it always depend on the context?

Such questions are part of the reflective process that helps to develop and refine considerations of what would constitute the most helpful interventions and responses to children.



Some guiding principles

A key issue in working well with diversity lies in the balance between being open to the uniqueness of particular contexts and what is important in them, without drawing on stereotypes and generalisations.

As Kelly (2002) put it, it's about exploring rather than presuming differences.

Everyone can make a difference. Even the simple act of interacting with someone respectfully can have enormous and long-term impact.

Seeing people's behaviour as resulting from a particular context and recognising that we may not understand that context, rather than seeing behaviour as intrinsic to the person, enables a less judgmental opinion.

Power is a significant aspect of all human relations. Power (and the lack of it) is a dynamic that is exercised not only within systems and structures but also in everyday interactions. Particular power imbalances can sometimes be observed where there are differences of gender, ethnicity, age and disability, for example. However, power does not exist in fixed places or identities – power is fluid and is exercised from innumerable points in a myriad of ways. For example, there are a myriad of power relations involved in the interaction between a white professional woman, a social worker for example, working with a male Aboriginal elder to discuss youth and safety issues in his community.

In attempting to work effectively and appropriately with people whose experiences are very different from your own, it helps to be aware of your own cultural assumptions and their possible effects, as well as being alert to aspects of a different culture. There are as many individual differences between people from other cultural groups and contexts as there are within your own.

Responding in a culturally appropriate way is not about learning a formula. Rather, it is about an approach. It involves being open to the process of understanding the meanings that others make and connecting with the 'stories' they tell that inform these meanings.

Relevant skills

'Cultural responsiveness' in the context of service provision is the active process of seeking to accommodate the service to the client's cultural context, values and needs. Sawrikar and Katz (2008) suggested that 'culturally competent service providers are those who are aware of differences without making people feel different' (p. 14). They argued that cultural competence requires that service providers develop several capabilities:

- Staff should be aware of cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices within a cultural group



- They need to be able to respond sensitively to clients with an understanding of how cultural diversity expresses itself among individuals within a cultural group
- Staff should also be conscious of their own cultural norms and that of their professional practice (Sawrikar & Katz, 2008).

The AVERT Training Resource has highlighted the importance of family law sector workers being as informed, open and reflective as possible. It is vital that people who take this approach to their work also acquire skills and partnerships that will develop abilities and confidence to respond specifically and appropriately. As well as enhancing individual skills, it is also important that partnerships and collaborations are developed.

In almost all settings there will be other agencies or groups that will have an interest in the health, welfare, safety and education of women and children. There are also likely to be groups who work specifically with cultural issues – for example, Indigenous agencies or groups working with particular ethnic communities. There may also be single-parent support groups, youth organisations, disability action groups and representative organisations of lesbian and gay people.

It is extremely helpful to find out who is working in the community and what they do. Meeting with people to share information about roles and needs provides invaluable information and contact possibilities for positive collaborative action. Instigating communication with such groups out of an interest and desire to work well together is usually very much appreciated and respected. It develops possibilities for long term professional relationships that are informed by commitment and interest – rather than from an immediate need for help to solve a particular problem.

Respect – what is it?

When we take someone seriously, we don't dismiss their views and experiences. And, in important matters, if we are unsure of what they are saying or doing or experiencing, we don't simply shrug our shoulders. Rather, we will ask questions or be willing to discuss the issue and respect their views even when we do not always agree with them. This can be 'risky business', especially when sensitive issues such as family violence are involved. But it is precisely because it is such an important area, that it is necessary to make decisions about when to act, and to think about the consequences of not acting.

In a particular situation, a worker in the family law system might judge it important to ask a question. For example, a CCS worker, having doubts about the safety of one of her clients at home, may ask a question about that client's home life. It is possible that this could 'go wrong' in that it could cause resentment. However, part of being respectful involves taking that person seriously enough to notice and to bother to ask about her wellbeing. It offers an opening, and if it is perceived as a non-judgmental opening, it may be taken up at another time. Even if it is rejected outright and the worker is left feeling that it was a mistake to raise it, it is important that the effort was made. There is a danger of being paralysed into non-action by a fear of 'getting it wrong'. Mistakes in working with such complex issues are inevitable. Ideally they should become part of the family law worker's reflective practice. The CCS



worker in the above scenario would hopefully not conclude that she would never ask such a question again, but she might reflect on issues such as:

- Did she phrase the question in the best way?
- Did she unwittingly imply something?
- Was the timing of the question OK?
- Had she listened properly to the client's concerns, before raising new ones?
- What was the basis for her concerns about this client's safety – were they reasonable?

Reflection on such issues is a fundamental part of professional development in the area of appropriately responding to family violence.

Finding support

It is often useful to have someone with whom it is possible to discuss the sorts of issues discussed in this *Responding to Diversity* Paper. It can be useful to arrange times particularly for that purpose, because some of the issues can be de-briefed 'in passing'. It might also be helpful to talk to colleagues about how these issues could be raised more widely within the organisation. And if a situation exists where there is no personal support for such discussion, it might be worthwhile to think about points of intervention within existing structures of the organisation – for example a policy unit, staff development opportunities, an access and equity unit, or in discussion with a particular manager.

Conclusion

It can be helpful to recognise that it is completely understandable that workers may sometimes feel confronted when working with people whose lives seem to be very different from their own. What is important here is to allow that such feelings occur and reflect on the most useful ways to work positively in the situation. It is a situation where dialogue with peers, additional learning, being able to ask for assistance or conversation with an appropriate colleague can be invaluable. From the point of view of a person whose context is unfamiliar to you, it is likely that being treated with respect and offered respectful interest in their concerns will be far more positive than a response that distances and labels.

Perhaps the main challenge in working with diversity is that being effective may require additional effort and imagination if you are to engage with perspectives that are unfamiliar and possibly confronting. However, a key assumption underpinning this resource is that it is vital that family law sector workers be able to respond to the diversity that characterises Australia – and recognise that those who are marginalised within it may well be the people most in need of respectful assistance from the community.



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