



**Best practice principles for working with  
men from refugee backgrounds who use  
domestic and family violence:**  
*Key findings and future directions*

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

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ANROWS Research to policy and practice papers are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This is an edited summary of key findings from the ANROWS research project "Best practice principles for interventions with domestic and family violence perpetrators from refugee backgrounds". Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project and the full project report: Fisher, C., Martin, K., Wood, L., Lang, E., & Pearman, A. (2020). *Best practice principles for interventions with domestic and family violence perpetrators from refugee backgrounds* (Research report, 09/2020). Sydney: ANROWS.

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ANROWS research contributes to the six National Outcomes of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. This research addresses National Plan Outcome 6—Perpetrators stop their violence and are held to account.

#### **Acknowledgement of Country**

ANROWS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present, and future, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We are committed to standing and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, honouring the truths set out in the Warawarni-gu Guma Statement.

IN BRIEF

# Best practice principles for working with men from refugee backgrounds who use domestic and family violence

This project developed a set of best practice principles for interventions with men from refugee backgrounds who use domestic and family violence.

## KEY FINDINGS

When working with men from refugee backgrounds who use violence, it is important to:

- understand violence in the context of refugee trauma
- understand violence in the context of settlement challenges
- recognise refugee family and community structures.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Engage with refugee communities to develop programs that align with best practice principles.
- Build connections between refugee services and the broader domestic and family violence service system.
- Explore the development of service delivery models that do not necessarily involve family separation.

# Men from refugee backgrounds who use domestic and family violence

A refugee is a person who has fled his or her own country and cannot return due to fear of persecution. In recent years, over 15,000 refugees per year have resettled in Australia (Department of Home Affairs, 2018, 2019). People from refugee backgrounds are likely to have experienced significant trauma such as loss of and separation from family members, shortages of food, and the destruction of their homes. Refugees will sometimes have been subjected to torture, impacting their mental health.

Upon arrival in Australia, refugees may experience a range of settlement challenges including mastering a new language, navigating government bureaucracies, finding appropriate housing, securing employment, and dealing with racism and discrimination.

In refugee communities, as in every community in Australia, domestic and family violence is gendered: most people who experience violence are women, and most people who perpetrate violence are men. Gender inequality sets the social context in which domestic and family violence is perpetrated.

Research has shown that the primary drivers of violence against women are:

- condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence
- stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity
- disrespect towards women and male peer relations that emphasise aggression (Our Watch, ANROWS, & VicHealth, 2015).

When working with perpetrators of violence from refugee communities, it is useful to consider these gendered drivers of domestic and family violence in the context of both pre-migration and post-settlement refugee experiences.

# Best practice in perpetrator interventions

Perpetrator interventions include men's behaviour change programs (group-based programs which may additionally include individual case management of men, and support for partners and children), justice system responses (civil and criminal), interventions from agencies that a perpetrator might come into contact with (such as mental health and alcohol and other drugs services), as well as informal interventions from peers and community.

At the national level, Australia's National Outcome Standards for Perpetrator Interventions ([NOSPI](#)) were developed to guide programs and support consistent measurement of their effectiveness (Department of Social Services, 2015). Several Australian jurisdictions also have minimum standards in place that programs are required to meet in order to become accredited and receive government funding.

While these guidelines do not make any particular reference to working with people from refugee backgrounds, they do note the need for perpetrator interventions to be culturally responsive. Yet few culturally specific men's behaviour change programs exist, and guidance is limited as to how interventions might be tailored for maximising the engagement of men from culturally and linguistically diverse and/or refugee backgrounds.

## “Best practice principles for interventions with domestic and family violence perpetrators from refugee backgrounds” by Colleen Fisher, Karen Martin, Lisa Wood, Elizabeth Lang, and April Pearman

This project was conducted in Western Australia with the goal of developing a set of best practice principles for interventions with domestic and family violence perpetrators from refugee backgrounds. The project involved:

- literature review
- in-depth interviews with 20 men and 20 women from refugee backgrounds, including men who had perpetrated and women who had experienced domestic and family violence (countries of birth were Burma, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq and Iran)
- two focus groups with service providers working in men’s behaviour change programs, women’s services, women’s health, refugee services and domestic and family violence services.

Based on the findings from the research phases described above, proposed best practice principles were developed. The proposed principles were then tested with a panel of people, recruited from across Australia, who were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and had expertise in domestic and family violence among refugee communities. Using a structured interaction methodology (Delphi technique), the panel confirmed the validity of the proposed best practice principles.

Quotes from the interviews and focus groups undertaken are included in this paper. See the full report at [anrows.org.au](http://anrows.org.au) for more detail on research methodology.

# Key findings

This research project identified several elements that are important to consider when developing and implementing interventions for men from refugee backgrounds who use domestic and family violence. They are presented here in three sections.

## Understanding violence in the context of refugee trauma

Men who come to Australia from refugee backgrounds are likely to have experienced trauma as a result of a range of occurrences including torture, political unrest, conflict, environmental degradation, oppressive governments, death of family members, famine, loss of personal property, and detention or time in refugee camps (sometimes spanning many years). It is important that perpetrator programs acknowledge these experiences, while taking care not to allow men to use their trauma experiences as an excuse to avoid taking responsibility for their violent behaviours.

Understanding the trauma they [perpetrators from a refugee background] have gone through and then addressing this trauma, and addressing what's behind that violence, what's causing them to be that way ... (Service provider)

So what I found out is that those that I spend more time with in one-on-one counselling before taking them to the group ... they change [more] easily [than those who do not have this contact] ... The people you spend time with and listen to them, listen to their journey, listen to what they have gone through, and then help them to understand what they've gone through then it's easier to stop. (Service provider)

## Understanding violence in the context of settlement challenges

Men who arrive in Australia from refugee backgrounds not only deal with the impact of past trauma but also face practical challenges of settlement such as learning English, finding accommodation and securing employment. They must learn to navigate the Australian service system, manage racism and discrimination, and undertake a process of acculturation (adjusting to a different social environment).

Compared with the countries of origin of most refugees, Australia is a highly individualistic society with greater gender equality. Men arriving from refugee backgrounds may perceive that Australian service providers prioritise the needs of women and children over the needs of men.

These settlement stresses can increase the frequency and severity with which men perpetrate domestic and family violence.

People in our community feel scared of anything related to women and children rights. Also we don't have clear understanding what those services do. Are they related to police? Are they going to take our children away from us? Are they going to punish men and put them in jail? A lot of uncertainty about those services. (Male community member)

According to my knowledge of my community, we do not want tell our problems to Australians. They might think that we are bad people. It's enough for us that those Islamist extremes made us look as bad people in the eyes of the Australians and now if we share with them our problems they will think that we are all bad people. We are still suffering from stereotyping. Now, I believe when men know that those services [domestic and family violence perpetrator interventions] are individual and safe, they might go seek help. (Male community member)

## Recognising refugee family and community structures

Programs to address violence perpetrated by men from refugee backgrounds need to take account of the diversity of family and community structures that exist within refugee communities. It is important for workers to maintain a reflective practice to ensure that they are not working from the basis of unfounded assumptions or unconscious biases.

In particular, it is important for service providers to understand how marriage is conceptualised in the community, the meaning of family to individual identity, the range of family roles and responsibilities that exist, and the expectations that are placed on various family members. Service providers should also recognise the potential existence of multiple perpetrators of violence (i.e. in patterns of family violence outside of an intimate partner relationship), and of practices (such as dowry) which may be used in an abusive way.

In my community, the woman who experience domestic violence is afraid to report because that will put them at severe risk. They're being threatened by their husband's family that if they reported domestic violence to others or any authorities, then they would be at risk of death. Therefore ... they stay silent and do not disclose the domestic violence even to their own families. It is also considered unacceptable for a woman to share their issues with any other people. The reason for that is fear. The women who got beaten up by their father, by the father-in-laws and brother-in-laws because they think they have the right to do so. (Female community member)

When developing programs, service providers need to appreciate the community leadership structures that exist within refugee communities, acknowledge the diversity of views that leaders might hold in relation to violence and gender equality, and work within community structures to develop programs that are tailored to the community.

During the development stage, you have to meet people from the community; I mean a lot of people. [Name of country] in Perth are not too many. You have to make every family feel that they have been asked. All people in the community should have to be heard. Let the people feel that this program is from them and for them. I know this will be a tough job and expensive one but this is how we do things. (Male community member)

# Best practice principles for working with men from refugee backgrounds who use violence

Given the complexity of the findings described above, this project developed a set of best practice principles to guide policymakers and practitioners in their work with refugee men who use violence.

The best practice principles, presented in full in [the research report](#), comprise three overarching principles, 12 principles, and 34 sub-principles.

If there is tension between the overarching principles and any other principle, then the overarching principles must take precedence. For example, if there is tension between *Principle 1: Respecting diverse family structures, values and strengths* (including respecting a family's desire to maintain the family unit) and *Overarching Principle 1: The safety of women and children is given highest priority*, then Overarching Principle 1 of prioritising safety must prevail.

## THREE OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

1. The safety of women and children is given highest priority in all aspects of domestic and family violence responses, including perpetrator interventions.
2. Perpetrator interventions hold perpetrators responsible for their behaviour.
3. All domestic and family violence interventions with individuals, families and communities from refugee backgrounds are trauma-informed.

## TWELVE BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

1. Perpetrator interventions respect diverse family structures, values and strengths.
2. Perpetrator interventions work to empower women.
3. Perpetrator interventions recognise issues that can impact on men's levels of engagement.
4. Perpetrator interventions recognise and respond to complex individual needs.
5. Perpetrator interventions account for diversity in understanding of domestic and family violence and Australian responses.
6. Agencies delivering perpetrator interventions are integrated in the broader response to domestic and family violence.
7. Perpetrator interventions recognise and respond to community complexity.
8. Perpetrator interventions recognise intersectionality.
9. Perpetrator interventions explicitly address pre-settlement experiences.
10. Perpetrator interventions build community capacity.
11. Perpetrator interventions position, acknowledge and recognise the role of communities as service providers.
12. Perpetrator interventions embed tenets of the Australian legal framework.

# Implications for policymakers and practitioners

## Engage with refugee communities to develop programs that align with best practice principles

The process of developing perpetrator interventions that align with best practice principles requires a significant level of community engagement. Building enduring partnerships with refugee communities and services takes time and resources, and this needs to be adequately reflected in organisational and program budgets.

## Build connections between refugee services and the broader domestic and family violence service system

Currently a range of human, health, justice and legal services are integrated into a formal system response to perpetrators of domestic and family violence. Refugee services (including specialist torture and trauma services and settlement services) should be considered as part of this integrated response. Building connections between refugee services and the broader domestic and family violence service system would allow for:

- the development of referral pathways
- the possibility of joint delivery of perpetrator interventions
- upskilling of refugee workers regarding domestic and family violence, and of domestic and family violence workers regarding refugee issues.

## Explore the development of service delivery models that do not necessarily involve family separation

Many refugees arrive in Australia having lost family members through a range of distressing circumstances, including death or separation, and the desire to retain a sense of “family” can be strong. Interventions that are seen to break up the family unit are not always best placed to actively and positively engage people from refugee backgrounds. Interventions that could enable families to stay together, when this is what all family members desire and it is safe for women and children to do so, warrant exploration.

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# Further reading and resources

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## ON WORKING WITH MIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

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## UPCOMING ANROWS RESEARCH

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Please note that there is the potential for minor revisions of this paper.

Please check the online version at [www.anrows.org.au](http://www.anrows.org.au) for any amendment.

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