

Supporting U

Leveraging on the leadership capacities of women within multicultural communities



In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, research indicates that there have been several shadow pandemics – one specifically being the escalation of Domestic and Family Violence (DFV).

SSI's Supporting U is an innovative project that leverages on the strengths within CALD communities to address this pressing issue. Women leaders within their CALD communities who can use their influence to provide accurate and relevant information to support victim survivors are trained as **social responders**.

Through intensive training in DFV and ongoing participation in Learning Circles these leaders are provided with tools, information and knowledge that assists them in translating and nuancing information through the lenses of culture, community functioning, infrastructure and language to support and connect with women in their communities.

The power of the project is by engaging such "go to" women, gaining buy-in and commitment that leads to effective initial support for victim survivors of in CALD communities.

80% of women disclose their experiences of DFV to family members, friends or community leaders.



A social responder's role is to listen, to prioritise the immediate safety of a victim-survivor disclosing instances of DFV and to refer to appropriate services. They are not a counsellor or caseworker, but a trained person of influence who is aware of the resources available to help victim-survivors of DFV.

Overview

Refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants experience DFV at the rate of others with additional cultural complexities and forced by lack of trust of services to report experience of DFV to women community leaders. The project trained women community leaders to gain understanding of DFV; knowledge of support strategies and avenues for referral.

Regular Learning Circles increased the capacity to spot red flags and confidence in making appropriate referrals.

Leveraging on SSI's regional footprint, and the shift to operating online due to COVID19, the project was extended to Coffs Harbour in response to identified need.

The participants

- 36 women participants from 16 countries of origin
- 25 different languages (many spoke up to four languages). Common languages were Arabic, Hindi and Dari

The activities

- Two 3-day accredited DFV Training – ECAV in Sydney, DV ALERT in Coffs Harbour
- 23 Learning Circles – 13 in Sydney, 8 in Coffs Harbour and 2 combined sessions
- 85% retention rate
- Average attendance at Learning Circles was 67% due to shift work, study, community support and family commitments

Case study

In the middle of the night our SSI DFV Practice Specialist (DFVPS) received a photo of a woman, her face bleeding and with heavy bruising. The message and request for urgent help was from **Nahid***, a **Supporting U** woman leader.

Amira*, the injured woman, had run to her neighbour after her husband had left for night shift. Amira had only arrived in Australia four months earlier and had been kept under lock and key. The neighbour knew **Nahid** who speaks several languages and is well known amongst community leaders for the way she assists women in crisis – especially those facing DFV.

Nahid and our DFVPS together supported the neighbour and Amira to go to hospital for treatment and to record the injuries for a report to the police. Amira was then taken to a family she had recently and briefly met in Covid quarantine – but whom she trusted. This family lived far away from the abuser and in a very diverse area of migrants, but where there were few from Amira's own culture.

The next day our DFVPS went to the police with Amira who made a full statement. Our DFVPS also supported the caring family. Within a few weeks Amira was accepted by Linking Hearts who supported her with case work.

As Amira was a temporary visa holder, Immigration Advice and Rights Centre (IARC) was quickly engaged to commence the application process for a visa that made her independent of her husband's visa. After continued advocacy Amira received a permanent visa within four months. The Immigration Department recognized the danger that the abusive husband posed to Amira.

Nahid's connections, capabilities and actions were vital to supporting this woman at risk.

**Names have been changed*

Unexpected project outcomes:

- Connecting beyond NSW – interstate and overseas
- Opportunity to support regional needs
- Designing information sessions for Supporting U leaders to deliver to womens groups
- Working in collaboration with religious leaders
- Creating a network of the women as a group to tap into for other activities and support
- Self-initiated WhatsApp group so that the women can support one another

Vignettes

SSI identified that the women participants had much to share but also that the collective learning from the learning circles should not be lost. In response we have created six short video 'Vignettes' and one promotional video as a lasting legacy of the project.

Reflection

Community ties are very strong and varied. They function across the diaspora and are much less locally based than we might think. Supporting U women leaders are careful not to promote their 'services' which could expose them to risk. Their role inside women's groups is invaluable as it is a space where it is possible and safe to discuss sensitive family and cultural matters.

The Supporting U project has been successful and far-reaching – creating a network of connected and empowered social responders who will lead support for their communities into the future.