

Policy Insights: Mobilising faith and community leaders for DFSV prevention and early intervention in migrant and refugee communities

November 2025

Introduction

This policy insights paper presents key opportunities for enhancing the mobilisation of migrant and refugee communities in the prevention of, and early intervention in, domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) across Australia. Specifically, it reflects on the critical role of multicultural faith and community leadership.

Insights have been drawn from findings of a comprehensive national consultation undertaken by Settlement Services International (SSI) in partnership with the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (AMWA) auspiced by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) as part of the *Train, Engage, Connect and Support* (TECS) program, funded by the Australian Government under the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*. The consultation was undertaken to inform the development of learning resources to enhance the capacity of faith and community leaders in preventing and responding to DFSV in migrant and refugee communities across Australia.

Beyond identifying crucial considerations for the development of learning resources, the consultation offered important evidence related to leveraging the connections, influence and commitment of faith and community leaders in the pursuit of equitable safety outcomes for migrant and refugee victim-survivors of DFSV.

Policy context

The *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* identifies the need to build sector and community capacity to identify and support women and children at increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence and to intervene early to stop violence from escalating. Enhancing migrant and refugee community and faith leader capacity here is crucial, as acknowledged in the investment in the TECS program under the *National Plan's First Action Plan (2023-27)*.

As the sector and government look towards the development of the Second Action Plan, there remains opportunity to harness the potential, and further strengthen the role, of migrant and refugee communities in preventing and responding to DFSV in their own community contexts.

Introduction

Such an approach to activating multicultural communities in prevention is supported by Recommendation 3 of the 2024 *Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches*, which notes the need to prioritise experiences of communities who face intersecting forms of marginalisation, including migrant and refugee communities, and to implement genuine and sustained co design approaches in developing gender-based violence responses.

Insights derived from the TECS national consultation are shared here to inform the prioritisation of strategic policy and programmatic responses moving forward, in the interest of leveraging the role of community in enhancing safety access, equity and outcomes for migrant and refugee women and children.

National consultations

Between October 2024 and April 2025, SSI and project partner FECCA led a national consultation which engaged three stakeholder groups: faith and community leaders, service providers and community-based organisations, and people from migrant and refugee backgrounds with lived experience of DFSV. Participants were drawn from all Australian states and territories, with engagement across a wide diversity of cultures, languages and faiths.

In total, 47 consultation sessions took place, involving 295 participants nationally who self-identified as being from 60 distinct ethnic and cultural backgrounds and 18 different faith affiliations. Faith and community leaders self-identified as such, and varied in their leadership roles (both formal and informal).

Consultation Insights Report: The role of faith and community leadership in DFSV prevention and early intervention in migrant and refugee communities is also available and provides a more comprehensive overview of consultation findings.

The role of faith and community leaders in DFSV prevention and early intervention: consultation insights

This national consultation generated a wealth of valuable learnings and insights regarding social responses to DFSV in migrant and refugee communities, and how migrant and refugee women can be best supported by faith and community leaders. While there was general consensus regarding the important role of faith and community leaders in prevention (including primary prevention), consultation participants identified capacity building for early intervention as a priority need.

Nonetheless, these consultation insights provide broader implications for policy and program development moving forward, particularly in relation to effective approaches for activating individuals and networks of faith and community leaders as social responders to DFSV, with the support of the service sector. Summarised below, consideration of these factors is crucial to securing the optimal safety outcomes for migrant and refugee victim-survivors of DFSV.

There is broad consensus regarding the importance of community and faith leadership in DFSV prevention and early intervention

Faith and community leaders, migrant and refugee victim-survivors and service providers alike recognise the vital role that leaders can play in influencing attitudes, driving change and facilitating access to safety supports and services. Leadership, in this context, requires development of relevant knowledge and skills, and the proactive, visible demonstration of an attitudinal stance against DFSV.

Leaders are encouraged to:

- Establish and communicate a proactive position on DFSV, demonstrating courage and commitment to stand against it
- Be informed about the nature and spectrum of DFSV, and be committed to building skills to respond
- Provide compassionate, confidential and non-judgemental responses to disclosure
- Provide person-centred care that prioritises self-agency, with referral to professional services as relevant
- Offer ongoing emotional and spiritual care beyond the point of crisis
- Mediate communications across different stakeholder groups (e.g., with service providers); translating spiritual and cultural messaging and thereby facilitating greater mutual understanding.

The role of faith and community leaders in DFSV prevention and early intervention: consultation insights

Trust is critical to facilitating safety outcomes

Trust between victim-survivors and leaders, and between leaders and service providers is critical to facilitating safety outcomes. Trust building requires concerted effort and investment of time, relationship building and facilitation of both formal and informal partnerships. Leaders should play an active role in primary prevention to lay the foundations of trust that facilitate disclosure and effective social responses.

For victim-survivors, trust building requires leaders to:

- Make visible their commitment to DFSV prevention and proactively creating safe spaces for connection
- Acknowledge and accommodate gender, sexuality and other intersectional considerations, including ensuring women play a role in the provision of support, even where faith or community leaders are men
- Demonstrate courage, commitment and moral leadership regarding DFSV
- Demonstrate representative and accountable leadership that centres community voice, including the voices of victim-survivors
- Offer longer-term support for healing and recovery, including spiritual and emotional support beyond crisis
- Build connections and partnerships with local service providers.

A range of barriers and challenges must be addressed to support leaders to safely and effectively address DFSV and support victim-survivors

Appropriate support and training are essential to manage the unintended safety risks associated with community-led early intervention, such as the further isolation of victim-survivors from professional support or inadequate responses from overburdened leaders.

Strategies should consider and address:

- The need for tailored education for leaders on the dynamics of DFSV to respond to knowledge and information gaps, to challenge biases among leaders and community, and to support intersectional responses that recognise individual circumstances and identities of victim-survivors
- The safety and wellbeing of leaders themselves, in the context of boundary setting for leaders acting as social responders and the potential for community resistance or backlash
- Resources and information to support service navigation and facilitate appropriate referrals
- Resourcing the service sector to support leaders' confidence in service access and quality, including addressing underfunding of DFSV services as well as acknowledging and addressing systemic racism and intersectional barriers to equitable support.

The role of faith and community leaders in DFSV prevention and early intervention: consultation insights

Many practical supports and interventions can better enable faith and community leaders to prevent and intervene early in DFSV in migrant and refugee communities

These supports would be in aid of:

- Fostering partnerships and networks to leverage the cultural and spiritual expertise and community connections of leaders, together with the specialist knowledge and approaches of the service sector
- Facilitating access to tailored training and information resources for leaders as social responders to support trauma-informed DFSV prevention and response, as well as service navigation and systems literacy
- Demonstrated commitment among DFSV services to develop culturally responsive practice capabilities
- Facilitating access to peer support opportunities among faith and community leaders preventing and responding to DFSV.

Policy implications

Migrant and refugee communities, and leaders in the communities, stand ready to contribute meaningfully to DFSV prevention and early intervention. Consultation insights point to the role of leaders, and the types of capacity building supports that can enable and maximise their effectiveness within their local communities. Affirming social responses developed through community-based approaches are important to leverage the protective factors of culture, faith and community, and to activate networks of respected and well-connected leaders equipped with the knowledge, skills and resources to safely support others within their cultural and community context.

However, the significance of the potential impact of faith and community leaders can only be realised through systemic and sustained recognition and support for their role as key actors in the DFSV prevention and response ecosystem – they must be made increasingly visible in relevant national strategies and action plans in order to facilitate programmatic responses that consolidate prior investment and learning. Building sustained capability for safe, community-led and culturally responsive prevention and early intervention is crucial.

Beyond training, sustaining capability involves investment in the building of networks of multicultural faith and community leaders driving prevention through demonstrative leadership and those acting as social responders – to address potential isolation, to build confidence for continued and expanded application of knowledge and skills, and to foster peer learning and support.

Partnerships between faith and community leaders and service providers are also critical; both with the specialist DFSV sector and multicultural and settlement organisations. Intentional resourcing and fostering of long-term partnerships that build mutual understanding, role clarity and the sharing of complementary expertise will serve to facilitate access to professional supports through trusted points of entry in community for migrant and refugee victim-survivors.

At the same time, faith and community leaders will only be confident to act as social responders when they observe an appropriately resourced specialist DFSV sector – both in terms of service capacity to absorb referrals and capability for culturally responsive DFSV practice. These remain critical, systemic challenges and reflect the need for a holistic approach to resourcing the interconnected continuum from DFSV prevention through early intervention, response, and recovery and healing. Access and equity for migrant and refugee women and children require the embedding of cultural responsiveness and community voices throughout.

Key recommendations

Strengthening recognition and connections in systemic responses

1. Federal and State/Territory Governments should formally recognise the role of faith and community leaders within the DFSV prevention and early intervention ecosystem as enablers and facilitators of systems access for migrant and refugee victim-survivors. This requires enhanced visibility and resourced roles, defined in strategy, action planning and programming.
2. Federal and State/Territory Governments should identify opportunities to facilitate and resource partnerships between migrant and refugee communities and leaders and service providers (both in the specialist DFSV sector and multicultural and settlement organisations) to leverage complementary expertise and connections and to embed pathways from community to professional DFSV support for migrant and refugee victim-survivors.
3. Federal and State/Territory Governments and specialist DFSV service providers should commit to uplifting capability for culturally responsive practice across the specialist DFSV workforce to address structural barriers to service access and quality of service experience for migrant and refugee victim-survivors, and to support referral by social responders.

Enhancing and sustaining capability for social response in migrant and refugee communities

4. Federal and State/Territory Governments and the multicultural and settlement sector should prioritise enhancing and sustaining capability for social response in migrant and refugee communities. This will involve:
 - Ensuring that training available to faith and community leaders on preventing and responding to DFSV is accessible and responsive to their language, literacy and digital literacy needs.
 - Encouraging faith and community leaders to take a proactive approach to prevention activities as a means of influencing community attitudes and trust building with people at risk of DFSV.
 - Investment in establishing and activating social responder networks to address potential isolation, to build confidence for continued and expanded application of knowledge and skills, and to foster peer learning and support.
 - Encouragement of the engagement of women in social response to support safe and appropriate early intervention, even where formal community and faith leader roles are held by men.
 - Resourcing training and other initiatives to support the safety and wellbeing of leaders and other social responders to DFSV, facilitating role clarity, boundary setting, strategies for self-care and support to prevent and mitigate vicarious trauma.