



**Challenging myths about
culture and violence in
migrant and refugee
communities**

Acknowledgement of Aboriginal sovereignty

The Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH) acknowledges and pays respect to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, on whose land this guide was written. Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded.

We recognise that as migrants to this country, we live on stolen land and benefit from the colonisation of the land now called Australia. We have a shared responsibility to acknowledge and end the ongoing harm done to its First Peoples and to work towards respect and recognition.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience disproportionate rates of both family and institutional violence, and violence that is more severe and more complex in its impacts. They are also deeply impacted by colonial settler narratives that link culture and violence. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been active leaders in the Prevention of Violence Against Women in Australia and our work should be accountable to the same aims.

About this resource

This resource is an outcome of the Safer and Stronger Communities Pilot project, funded by the Victorian government. MCWH worked in partnership with Our Watch and inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence, to support five organisations to design prevention activities with migrant and refugee communities: MiCare, South East Community Links, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District, and Diversitat. The University of Melbourne conducted project evaluation.

Throughout the project, conversations with project workers and partner organisations reflected the need for a practical resource to support people to challenge harmful assumptions linking specific communities and violence.

Challenging myths is intended as a starting point for anyone who wants to challenge some of the harmful ways people sometimes use cultural background or identity to explain or excuse particular experiences of violence. It is written to be a practical and accessible tool for thinking and speaking differently about the relationship between culture and preventing violence against women and people of all genders.

We readily acknowledge that *Challenging myths* is not a definitive resource and we are all at different stages in our understandings of these issues. We welcome feedback and hope this resource will complement others, including those listed in the reference section.

Introduction

Violence against women and gendered inequality exist across all Australian communities. Some groups of women in Australia are known to be at a higher risk of experiencing gendered violence due to particular social and systemic circumstances. However, there is currently no evidence that any one community, migrant or otherwise, is more or less violent than any other (Vaughan et al. 2016).

When violence against women occurs in migrant and refugee communities, the cause of violence is often connected to simplistic or unfounded assumptions about that community's 'cultural' attitudes to women or violence. Using the idea of culture in this way, as an explanation of violence, usually leads to either unfairly blaming and shaming a community or excusing perpetrators for their actions or attitudes. Neither of these outcomes prevents violence against women or makes migrant and refugee women safer.

Prevention work is about changing the culture of violence and gendered inequality that exists globally. As part of this work, we need to challenge the myths in our everyday lives that support violence against migrant and refugee women.

Migrant and refugee communities are not the only groups who are perceived or portrayed unfairly in relation to violence. This document focuses on the harmful effects of narrowly defining culture in relation to perceptions of ethnic background or race. However, **all forms of stigma and discrimination are harmful.** Many people experience discrimination and injustice based on perceptions of ability, sexuality, indigeneity, religious beliefs, class, age, gender identity, employment, living situation and more. To end violence, we must stand together against all inequality.

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What we mean by culture

The term 'culture' is difficult to define. Culture usually describes the broad collection of common behaviours and attitudes of a group of people in a certain place and time. Cultures can exist among a small or specific group, like a workplace, or a group of music fans. Cultures can also exist across a very large population, like a country or an age group. However, being familiar with, or belonging to a culture doesn't automatically mean we agree with or follow everything that is part of a culture.

A culture is not one-dimensional. It always intersects with, and is shaped by, systemic and structural power. It is not the same thing to all people and it is not the same thing at any given moment or in any given situation. It changes over time and place. So, we mean many things when we talk about culture. In this resource, we want to talk about why, and how often, people like to use the word culture, as if its meaning was understood and agreed on.

ARE YOU REALLY TALKING ABOUT CULTURE?

Given how many different ways there are to understand the word 'culture', it can be useful to clarify what you or someone else means when they use the term, particularly in conversations about preventing violence against women. Is there another way of saying what you are trying to say? Is 'culture' really relevant to the conversation at all?

What we mean by migrants and refugees

This document uses the term 'migrant and refugee communities' to describe people living in Australia who were born overseas or whose parent(s) or grandparent(s) were born overseas in a predominantly non-English speaking or non-Western country. This definition does not perfectly describe everyone with overseas heritage who might experience racism, or the many ways that people can identify as being part of a particular community of culture.

Equally, we can say that everyone living in this country who is not a First Nations person is from a migrant background. However, the way that the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are commonly used and understood in Australia is almost always in connection to people with non-Anglo-Celtic heritage.

Like most social categories, terms like 'migrant and refugee' are produced and influenced by political, economic and historical forces. How someone identifies with these terms is not fixed or given, and narratives about migrants and refugees continue to change over time.

The way specific migrant, refugee and asylum seeking communities are framed in relation to the dominant culture in Australia can lead to their vastly different experiences, and can depend on many factors, including whose definitions we choose to accept.

Differences in the ways people talk about violence

Although violence is committed in all parts of society, there are differences in the ways violence is represented or talked about, depending on who committed or experienced the violence.

When a man of migrant background commits violence, or when family violence occurs in migrant communities, public commentary and media often frame the violence as a consequence of culturally specific attitudes to gender or an indicator of widespread problems within that community. (Murdolo and Torres-Quiazon 2016).

By contrast, when men who are perceived to be part of the dominant culture in Australia commit violence, public commentary and media often report the individual's relationship to their victims, state of mind and other external factors as a context, or even explanation for, their violence. Their attitudes to gender or violence are not described as a 'cultural issue'.

This is an example of what is sometimes called the 'invisibility' of dominant culture or 'whiteness' (Moreton-Robinson 2000). Dominant cultures represent themselves, through government and institutions, public commentary and media, and many other social codes, as what is normal for everyone.

For people who accept the dominant culture as 'natural' or 'normal' or 'just how things are', the idea of 'culture' becomes something that belongs to people who are seen as 'outside' the dominant culture or 'norm'. 'Whiteness' is used as a neutral and natural standard by which everything else is measured.

In general, when people talk about the dominant culture in Australia, they are thinking specifically of Anglo-Australian, middle-income, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual families. If the word 'culture' is used to talk about the use of violence among Australians who are seen to belong within this idea of the dominant culture, it usually only describes specific sets of attitudes and behaviour (sub-cultures) that condone or encourage gender inequality (eg. 'drinking culture,' 'sexist workplace culture' or 'locker-room culture').

These differences in the ways that violence is talked about, depending on who committed or experienced the violence, can lead to further discrimination and harm.

This document focuses on the harmful effects of narrowly defining culture in relation to ethnic background or race. However, people from migrant and refugee backgrounds experience many other forms of stigma and discrimination, which are equally harmful, including ableism, homophobia, ageism, classism and heteronormativity. Many migrants and refugees are also lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, people with disabilities and people of First Nations.

AREN'T WE ALL CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE?

Find ways to make dominant Australian culture more visible in your discussions about preventing violence, particularly if you are hearing statements that refer to ideas about what is 'normal', or draw comparisons between 'we' or 'us' and 'they' or 'them'. Let's challenge the messages in our everyday lives that label people in harmful ways and stop us from asking the right questions.

People who explain family violence in migrant and refugee communities by naming culturally specific values or practices often base their understanding on generalisations, assumptions and cultural stereotypes. This understanding rarely reflects the evidence or lived experiences and attitudes of the communities being named.

Some examples of ways that generalisations and assumptions about culture are used to stereotype communities as violent or 'explain' violence are:

- Describing women from a particular community or faith as being 'more' oppressed than another (usually the Anglo-Australian community),
- Describing men from a particular community or faith as being 'more' conservative or violent than another (usually the Anglo-Australian community),
- Describing particular communities as being more 'used to' violence than another (usually the Anglo-Australian community).

Even when we identify with a specific group or cultural background, our personal experiences or views do not necessarily reflect or represent those of the entire community. Some examples of generalisations, assumptions and cultural stereotypes that people use to excuse violence within their community are:

- Denying that violence happens at all, or if it does, arguing that the specific behaviour is not considered violence within their community, and is therefore acceptable,
- Condoning or excusing violence on the basis that it is either legal or still commonly occurring behaviour in the person's home country or community,
- Describing violence or gendered inequality as essential to maintaining particular cultural practices or traditions.



Why framing violence against migrant and refugee women as a 'cultural' issue can be harmful

Connecting someone's experience or act of violence to their cultural background can increase the risk of harm to individuals and their communities. **Here are three reasons why:**

1. Blaming 'culture' perpetuates racial stereotypes and disempowering narratives about migrants and refugees and specific migrant communities

Violence against women is a risk in all communities in Australia. There is no evidence that people from particular communities are inherently more or less violent or more or less likely to perpetrate family violence than others because of their cultural background or race, including people who are accepted as part of the dominant white culture in Australia.

The misperception that people from some communities are inherently "more violent" than others because of their cultural background or race, generates and reinforces harmful racist stereotypes and disempowering narratives, which have far-reaching, and sometimes life-threatening consequences, particularly those from the communities or cultures that are targeted.

For example, George Floyd, an African American man, was killed by police in the United States in 2020. His death reignited momentum for the global Bla(c)k Lives Matter movement, because it highlighted an ongoing pattern of law enforcement racially profiling African American men as criminals or threats. In Australia, the movement also increased national awareness of many Aboriginal deaths in custody, including Ms Dhu, Tanya Day, David Dungay and Rebecca Maher, and their families' ongoing fights for justice.

Many people have been targeted, imprisoned and have lost their lives as a direct result of racist and cultural stereotypes imposed on men, women and non-binary people from specific communities. Frequently, the same stereotypes that describe particular communities or cultural groups as "more violent" are used to hide or sanction violence committed against those communities by the dominant culture.

These stereotypes are deeply destructive and increase inequality, injustice and undermine the rights of all people. They have been used to legitimise centuries of violence against First Nations people in Australia, and more recently used to justify the excessive detention and brutal treatment of asylum seekers.

As US scholar Leti Volpp writes, "we must remember that myriad forms of power—the geopolitical, the structural, the economic—shape cultural practices." (2011, p. 102). Culture is not one-dimensional. It always intersects with, and is shaped by, systemic and structural power.

Public commentary and media in Australia frequently feed on and fuel negative and racist representations of migrant and refugee communities, especially Muslim and Black African communities. These representations undermine and damage migrant and refugee people's mental and physical health, confidence in prevention initiatives, and access to safe services and support.

Why framing violence against migrant and refugee women as a 'cultural' issue can be harmful

2. Blaming migrant and refugee 'culture' hides the real drivers and causes of violence

Representing immigrant communities as inherently 'more violent' because of their cultural background or race, often shifts focus away from the real drivers and causes of violence against women: gendered inequality, and the perpetrators of violence themselves. Neither the drivers (inequality) nor the causes (perpetrators) are specific to any one community. They exist and persist in all parts of Australia and the world.

Gendered inequality and other forms of social inequality drive negative attitudes towards women and increase the risks of family violence across all communities and groups (Our Watch, 2019).

Both the structural and material conditions through which people experience inequality, and the attitudes and behaviours that reinforce forms of discrimination—such as sexism, ageism, racism, ableism, classism, heteronormativity and homophobia—are shaped and experienced in different and changing ways across all communities. Our governments and institutions, markets and social movements, conflicts, countries and climates all contribute to global and national shifts in power, which in turn shape and redefine the inequalities we experience and the attitudes and values we accept or dismiss.

Broadly blaming someone's 'culture', as if the values and influence of that culture were decided and agreed by everyone, takes accountability and focus away from the material conditions, systems and institutions that produce and reinforce inequality and discrimination. Many of the gendered and social inequalities that migrants face are based in or increased by structural conditions and policies related to immigration.

Consequently, blaming 'culture' diverts energy and resources away from seeking effective and sustainable solutions that will end violence for everyone, and too often leads to problematic and ineffective approaches to prevention.

Using culture as an excuse for violence can also be used as a way of excusing perpetrators' behaviours. Blaming culture can "create a situation where accountability is taken away from the perpetrator and put onto this [abstract] thing called culture that we can't put our hands on anyway." (Elizabeth Lang, Diversity Focus) Regardless of our cultural backgrounds, committing violence is a choice. So is the decision to change our personal and cultural attitudes.

Why framing violence against migrant and refugee women as a 'cultural' issue can be harmful

3. Blaming 'culture' can increase the risks of violence for migrant women and reduce their opportunities to seek help and support

Women from immigrant and refugee backgrounds are less likely to access support and seek help from violence (DSS, 2015), and for that reason may experience more prolonged or severe forms of violence.

Blaming culture can negatively impact on migrant women's ability to report an experience of family violence (Vaughan, 2016). Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds experiencing violence may delay seeking help because they fear that:

- reporting or seeking help for violence will not be taken seriously or believed, because of assumptions people make about them on the grounds of their race, ethnicity or faith.
- reporting or seeking help for violence will position them as representative of a specific community, in ways that do not occur for white Australian women who report violence.
- reporting or seeking help for violence will reflect negatively on their community and/or reinforce harmful stereotypes about other men and women who share a migrant or refugee background.
- reporting or seeking help for violence will bring judgement from people within the community for damaging the reputation and safety of the community.

All these fears are well founded and have been documented. Migrant women seeking help have reported experiencing discrimination from justice and response service providers, as well as negative outcomes both direct and indirect for themselves and their communities (Vaughan, 2016).

While many white Australian women experience barriers to seeking help that must also be addressed, they are not positioned or judged as representative of all white Australians through their actions. Shifting the narrative away from 'cultural' explanations is a step towards supporting women from migrant and refugee to seek help if they need it and to be believed and fairly heard when they do.

Asking people not to blame culture, is not the same thing as asking people not to critically interrogate and address issues that may exist in a particular group or society. It's up to each of us to change cultural attitudes and structural inequalities, wherever we find them, and to look to those who are most directly affected for leadership and solutions.

Challenging the myths

When we describe the cultures to which migrant and refugee women belong as a cause of, or explanation for violence they experience, we make assumptions and reinforce myths about belonging to cultures that don't make sense. Here are three common myths about culture that underpin assumptions people often make.

MYTH

Belonging to a culture means the same thing for everyone.

FACT

Everyone experiences culture in a different way.

MYTH

Cultures do not change.

FACT

Change is essential to culture! History is the story of cultures changing both dramatically and gradually, both by choice and by force.

MYTH

Preventing violence against women and gender equality is a Western concept.

FACT

Throughout time, people all over the world, especially women, have actively challenged gender inequality, violence and oppression.



MYTH

Belonging to a culture means the same thing for everyone.

“Everyone in that/my community thinks women should do everything their husbands ask.”

Being part of any community, large or small, means sharing and becoming familiar with common experiences, practices and values, which we sometimes call a ‘culture’. Australia, for example, is said to have a strong ‘sporting culture’ because many people grew up playing sport, were made to play sport in school and like, watch or play a sport.

However, not every person in Australia likes, plays or is able to play a sport. Moreover, when Australian’s talk about their ‘sporting culture’ they usually include specific sports and exclude others. Whether we were taught to play these particular sports at school, were physically able and allowed to play, had access to a swimming pool or sporting field or beach, could afford equipment, lessons, or tickets, or were encouraged to play, all impact the ways that we are able to participate in, or identify with, Australia’s sporting culture. This changes our experience and connection to that aspect of Australian culture, but it doesn’t invalidate it. We experience it differently.

Misunderstandings arise when we make assumptions about someone based on our perception of that person’s connection to a culture. Someone’s actions and ideas are often shaped by cultural knowledge and practices. However, coming from, or participating in, a community, does not determine any individual’s beliefs or behaviour.

FACT

Everyone experiences culture in a different way

“That is not my experience or perception of what everyone thinks, and I’d like to understand why you think that.”

As much as we are shaped by culture, we also shape it through our everyday actions. We participate in cultures, without being defined by them. We only need to think about the ways in which we are similar and different from our family members, our friends, and our neighbours, to understand the diversity of views and behaviours within any group that shares culture.

We may identify with our cultures in some ways, but not others. However, disagreeing with some cultural values, or not participating in some parts of culture is still a way of being part of a culture. Across history, many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have chosen or been forced to leave their home country because the dominant culture in that country at that time was in conflict with their own values and practices.

WHO DECIDES WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AUSTRALIAN?

Understanding the complexity of our own feelings of belonging to a culture can help us to avoid making sweeping judgements or generalisations about other people’s values, views or behaviours. It should also help us not to expect an individual to represent or speak for a community.

MYTH

Cultures do not change.

“In that/my culture, it has never been the woman’s role to make decisions.”

Many communities have cultural practices and traditions that seem to have stayed the same over time. These traditions are often what people associate with cultures, because they have been part of the culture for so long.

However, culture is not static: it is constantly changing and dynamic. Cultural practices change and adapt to political, economic, social and natural forces. Perhaps we notice traditions because they are symbols of continuity in the middle of constant change.

History shows us clearly how cultural attitudes and practices can and do change. It also shows us that working together, we can change culture and we can end violence.

FACT

**Change is essential to culture!
History is the story of cultures changing both dramatically and gradually, by choice and by force.**

“Change and opposition is as essential to culture as tradition. Look how quickly we changed our behaviours to respond to COVID-19 across the world.”

In the last two centuries alone, this country has experienced both radical and gradual cultural change. For example:

- In 1788, British invasion and colonisation began, leading to the violent and ongoing imposition of British culture and attempted destruction of First Nations peoples, land and language. This was met with a continuing culture and history of First Nations' resistance, resilience and sovereignty.
- Since the 1970s, many attitudes relating to marriage, divorce, couples, women's roles and families have changed significantly.
- According to the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), between 2013 and 2017 the proportion of people who believed men make better political leaders than women dropped significantly by 13 percent.

DO YOU KNOW YOUR HISTORY?

To challenge essentialist attitudes to culture, it can help to notice and discuss how accepted practices and attitudes change throughout history, shaped by external, political and natural forces; and how accepted practices are questioned, challenged, ignored and opposed every day.

MYTH

Preventing violence against women and gender equality is a Western concept.

“Men from that/my culture treat women really badly.”

In recent years, we have seen a promising shift in Australia's attitudes and efforts towards preventing violence against women (NCAS, 2019). Australia even led the world with the first national framework for the primary prevention of violence in 2015 (Our Watch, 2015). It is exciting to notice this cultural change reflected in many government policies and initiatives.

We should always celebrate the progress we have made towards gender equality in Australia. However, we should always remember that our successes build on the efforts of so many advocates over time, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people and migrant women, living in Australia.

If the path to equality seems clear, it is because we stand at the end of a long history of countless individuals, groups and movements, in Australia and overseas, that have spent lifetimes challenging inequality and taking action to prevent violence against women, both publicly and privately.

FACT

Throughout time, people all over the world, especially women, have actively challenged gender inequality, violence and oppression.

“All cultures are patriarchal, not more or less, but differently” (Volpp, 2011)

Suggestions that women from a particular cultural group are somehow more submissive, or men from a certain community are more conservative, ignore or erase the histories of activism, women's leadership and women's heroism that have and continue to inform our work, as well as the inspiring everyday challenges to gender inequality that take place across and within communities globally.

While people may view some communities as closer to reaching gender equality than Australia, and others as further behind, the measures by which we judge progress are often limited by how much or little we understand a particular culture and its history, and are also influenced by gendered, colonial histories and notions of white superiority.

A more useful approach is to recognise that “all cultures are patriarchal, not more or less, but differently” (Volpp, 2011). The solutions to ending violence against women and gendered inequality are cross-cultural.

THERE ARE MANY PATHS TO GENDER EQUALITY

Spend time asking and learning about the many diverse histories of women's activism in our own and other countries. Learn about the strategies, movements, activists and organisations working right now across the world to end violence, discrimination and inequality.

Challenging the myths starts with deepening our understanding of the links between violence, gender inequality and racism.

These references and recommended resources can help:

Chen, J. (2017) *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women*, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH).

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Qu, L. (July 2020) *Families Then and Now: Having Children Research Report* Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Our Watch (2018) *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*, Our Watch, Melbourne.

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Volpp, L. (2011). Framing cultural difference: Immigrant women and discourses of tradition. *differences*, 22(1), 90-110.

Webster, K., Vaughan, C., Yasmin, R., Diemer, K., Honey, N. ... & Ward, A. (2019). Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women and Gender Equality Among People from Non-English speaking Countries: Findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey (N-MESC).

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Multicultural Centre for Women's Health

MCWH is a national, community-based organisation led by and for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Established in 1978, MCWH's mission is to promote the health and wellbeing of migrant and refugee women across Australia through multilingual health education, research, advocacy and training.

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