

Research Brief

Faith-based communities and family violence in Victoria

Introduction

Recently, the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre undertook research to examine how and to what extent the Victorian State Government has engaged with faith-based leaders and communities from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Victoria. This research also explored the visions, challenges and needs for faith-based organisations in engaging in family violence education, training and other prevention activities. The research findings will inform future endeavours to address the prevention of family violence in faith settings considering the intersectional factors that are pivotal to ensure that such work meets the needs and interests of faith-based communities and their leaders.

The research was undertaken with faith leaders and those who play key roles within faith-based organisations, representing four culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Victoria.

Of particular interest to the researchers were the following themes:

- How do faith-based organisations respond to family violence within their communities?
- What support, if any, has been provided by the Victorian State Government in the prevention of family violence since the creation of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV, 2016), which called on the Victorian State Government to engage with faith communities in the context of family violence prevention?
- What, if any, difficulties and challenges have faith leaders and communities encountered when implementing family violence prevention within their communities?
- What do faith leaders and communities need to take into consideration when contending with victim-survivors or perpetrators of family violence?

The gendered drivers of violence in faith settings

According to Vaughan et al. (2020), the key factors that contribute to creating or strengthening the gendered drivers of violence in faith settings are as follows:

- A failure of secular institutions to engage with faith leaders and communities where faith-based organisations and leaders were viewed as a hindrance rather than a help in addressing family violence issues.
- Certain understandings and/or interpretations of faith teachings and language that contributed to normalising violence against women along with the promotion of prescribed gender roles and identities.
- Structured gender inequality within faith-based organisations or traditions, such as gendered leadership hierarchies.

- Barriers to divorce or separation based on religious teachings or beliefs that prevent women from leaving violent relationships.
- A tendency for some faith-based communities to deny the occurrence of family violence within their communities and avoid engaging in conversations about family violence issues.
- The intersection between religion (or religious identity) and migration experiences and other forms of discrimination such as racism.

Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV)

In 2016, the RCFV was established and 227 recommendations were made, which were all accepted by the Victorian State Government in terms of implementation. On 28 January 2023, Ros Spence, the Victorian Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, announced that the Victorian State Government had implemented all 227 recommendations to transform Victoria's family violence services and the family violence system as a whole, including the judicial system (Victorian State Government, 2023).

There were three recommendations made by the RCFV that were pertinent to this research, as they related specifically to faith-based settings. These recommendations were as follows:

163	The development of training packages for faith communities	Within three years
164	A review of Department of Families, Fairness and Housing standards for specialist family violence service providers	Within two years
165	The establishment of a response process by faith leaders and communities	No time period allocated

The Importance of Engaging with Faith Communities in the Family Violence Context

The high-level summary data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics for Victoria (2021) shows that 60.7% of Victorians are affiliated with a faith. Faith communities, therefore, have important social, economic and political roles within communities. Research has highlighted the positive and negative effects that such communities can have on outcomes for victim-survivors (Pepper & Powell, 2022; Truong et al., 2022; Vaughan et al., 2020). It was found that victim-survivors often go to their faith leader or someone else in their faith community when they begin seeking help. The way in which the faith community responds to their disclosure of violence influences how the victim-survivor perceives their own experience and whether they seek additional and ongoing help (Truong et al., 2022).

Research has shown that various religions often condone family violence. At the same time, it has been found that faith leaders do little to break down religious structures, which are rooted in patriarchy and thus structurally enable family violence (Truong et al., 2022). However, research has also shown that the absence of adequate support for faith-based communities serves as a significant factor contributing to family violence within faith settings (Vaughan et al., 2020). This issue stems from the fact that these communities have not received sufficient resources to

prevent and address family violence. Additionally, they face challenges related to limited capacity, resources and funding, which hinder their ability to effectively document and evaluate the initiatives they undertake to prevent and respond to family violence within their own context. As a result, there is a lack of substantial evidence-based knowledge regarding effective strategies to prevent and address family violence issues particularly within faith settings (Vaughan et al., 2020).

Author: Hyein Ellen Cho, Liana Papoutsis and Shona Smith (2023)

For further inquiries: arts.monash.edu/gender-and-family-violence

Initial findings from the study

We found that victim-survivors found it difficult to reach out to faith leaders directly and tended to disclose in private conversations with people they were close to in the faith community. Participants also noted they faced limitations in effectively addressing or managing family violence experiences that occurred within their respective faith communities. The participants recognised that religious or spiritual contexts might present challenges in dealing with family violence, and they identified areas where additional support and resources could be helpful for their communities. While all participants noted they did not have access to sufficient information on where to refer people in crisis, they acknowledged that they needed to receive help from professional services. There was a general desire from participants to receive information and learn more about professional family violence services.

Some participants noted that the RCFV had successfully created ongoing conversations among CALD faith-based communities. Newly emerging communities, however, expressed that there had been no or little engagement with the Victorian State Government. For example, participants from smaller and emerging communities were generally unaware of the RCFV.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Future policies and practices should strive to include faith-based communities and diverse voices, ensuring emerging communities are also engaged. While the leadership and efforts of the Victorian State Government to end family violence must be appreciated, as Fitz-Gibbon and Buys (2023) stated, family violence is a much larger problem that cannot be solved by one government reform cycle, and the government as a matter of priority should continue to invest sustainably in its efforts to address and prevent the scourge that is family violence.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Snapshot of Victoria: High-level summary data for Victoria in 2021*. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/snapshot-vic-2021#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20average%20number.decrease%20from%2070.8%25%20in%202016>.
- Fitz-Gibbon, K., & Buys, R. (2023, January 31). Victoria has implemented all 227 recommendations from its royal commission into family violence – So was it a success? *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/victoria-has-implemented-all-227-recommendations-from-its-royal-commission-into-family-violence-so-was-it-a-success-198762>
- Pepper, M. & Powell, R. (2022). Domestic and family violence: Responses and approaches across the Australian churches, *Religions*, 13(3), 270–290. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030270>
- Royal Commission into Family Violence. (2016). Reports and recommendations. <http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Report-Recommendations.html>
- Safe & Equal (2023). Understanding family violence. Available at: <https://safeandequal.org.au>
- Truong, M., Sharif, M., Olsen, A., Pasalich, D., Calabria, B. & Priest, N. (2022). Attitudes and beliefs about family and domestic violence in faith-based communities: An exploratory qualitative study, *The Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 0(0), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.210>
- Vaughan, C., Sullivan, C., Chen, J., & Vaid Sandhu, M. (2020). What works to address violence against women and family violence within faith settings: An evidence guide. The University of Melbourne. Retrieved from https://mispgh.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/4018583/FaithLeadersevidenceguide.pdf
- Victorian State Government. (2023, January 28). Landmark Royal Commission Recommendations [Media Release]. Available at: https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/230128-Landmark-Royal-Commission-Recommendations-Implemented.pdf?utm_source=miragenews&utm_medium=miragenews&utm_campaign=news