

FAITH COMMUNITIES ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND FAMILY VIOLENCE: WHAT WORKS

This tip sheet summarises what works for faith settings addressing violence against women and family violence. It is based on the best evidence currently available. For more information about what causes violence against women and family violence in faith communities, and how you should respond, please read the “Technical Paper: Faith communities supporting healthy family relationships”ⁱ and “What works to address violence against women and family violence in faith settings: An Evidence Guide.”ⁱⁱ

Why address violence against women and family violence in faith settings?

Violence against women and family violence occur in all communities and settings, including within faith communities. Faith is central in many people’s lives. We look to faith and faith leaders for social, moral and ethical guidance and support. Through faith we can also form strong social networks based on shared beliefs and respect.

Faith-based communities have great potential and capacity to prevent violence against women and family violence and support women and children who experience violence. However, like any community, faith leaders and faith-based communities sometimes promote, follow or reinforce norms and relationships that drive or condone violent behaviours.

Evidence shows that gender inequality is the key driver of family violence, which is reinforced by:

1. Condoning violence against women
2. Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence
3. Stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity
4. Disrespect towards women and male peer relations that emphasise aggression

In faith settings, some specific factors that can reinforce gendered inequality are:

1. Lack of support and faith-oriented resources from secular services to prevent and address violence
2. Interpretation of scriptures and faith teachings that condone or support violence against women
3. Rigid gender roles and limits to women’s leadership and decision-making in faith settings
4. Barriers to divorce in some faith settings
5. A culture of denial, silence and silencing about family violence in faith settings
6. Other social or cultural norms not specific to but held within the faith community

Creating the change we need to prevent family violence before it starts will take long-term commitment and support from everyone involved in faith settings.

KEY TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE PREVENTION IN FAITH SETTINGS

These tips are based on “What works to address violence against women in faith settings: An evidence Guide.”

1. Prioritise people’s safety

Ensuring that woman and children are safe must be everyone’s highest priority when discussing or addressing family violence and violence against women in faith settings. Putting other concerns (such as the sacredness of marriage, reputation of family or community, or particular interpretations of sacred texts) above the safety of those experiencing family violence or violence against women is ineffective, and potentially dangerous or harmful. Interventions to address violence must support faith leaders to make a public commitment to prioritise women’s and children’s safety above all.

2. Training and collaboration

Faith leaders cannot and should not be expected to meet all the complex needs of victims of family violence and violence against women. Leaders in faith communities should receive training to respond to community members who disclose violence and safely and effectively refer them to appropriate information and support. To do this, faith leaders also need to know and maintain up-to-date and accessible referral pathways to services. This includes faith leaders who are working in Australia temporarily on Religious Worker Visas.

Collaboration between organisations with expertise in violence and faith communities is vital to prevent and respond to violence against women and family violence in faith settings. Building trusting and productive relationships requires a long-term investment of time and energy on both sides. Specialist services should also be trained about working well with faith communities and develop resources and materials that are faith oriented or faith sensitive.

3. Co-design and co-delivery

Planning, developing, implementing and evaluating activities designed to prevent violence should take a collaborative approach that involves a representative range of members and perspectives within particular faith settings. Involving the community in design and delivery ensures resources are appropriate to local faith contexts, actions are relevant, and community is engaged.

4. Promote gender equality

In many faith communities, leadership roles are predominantly held by men. This can reinforce notions of rigid gender roles and gender inequality. Activities designed to prevent violence against women and family violence should model equality and respectful working relationships between men and women. Interventions to address violence against women and family violence in faith communities – such as training, public statements and sermons – should be jointly delivered by men and women, modelling respectful collaboration and equal contribution.

It is important that prevention and response efforts in faith communities centre on the perspectives of women from the community and recognise and build on women's leadership. This may involve establishing women's groups, creating opportunities for women to hold formal leadership roles, and ensuring that women have at least equal input into decision-making and consultation around the design and delivery of violence prevention interventions.

5. Be prepared to address resistance

Changes or challenges to our social norms and deeply held values can be confronting and provoke resistance or even backlash. Efforts towards gender equality and changes in gender norms can create strong responses in both men and women, regardless of their faith or background. In faith communities, negative feelings about gender equality initiatives can sometimes be reinforced or justified by interpretations of scripture and rigid gender roles in faith contexts. Resistance is, therefore, to be expected, but can potentially lead to harm and further violence against women. Prevention initiatives should plan for backlash and develop strategies to address the negative effects of backlash, particularly for women, in response to gender equality initiatives and women's leadership. (See VicHealth's (En)countering resistance Guide for more help).

6. Be aware of the ways other forms of inequality impact gender inequality

Faith communities in Victoria are highly diverse, with members from a range of ethnicities, language groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and migration pathways. Members of faith communities bring different experiences, knowledge and attitudes related to gender equality and violence against women. Efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and family violence in faith settings must consider the different ways that gender inequality intersects with other inequalities (such as those that may arise because of racism, homophobia, poverty, visa status, and discrimination based on ability, religion or sexual identity) and how that shapes people's experiences and opportunities within faith communities. This approach is sometimes called intersectional. Planning for and listening to the diversity of people's experiences of gender and violence will help ensure that activities are inclusive and relevant.

7. Take a multifaceted approach to prevention

There can be multiple ways to build faith leaders' capacity to prevent and respond to violence against women. Choosing the most effective approach will depend on the particular circumstances, context and needs of the faith community. Peer mentoring and approaches that involve face-to-face conversations, with regular 'refresher' activities, have been found to be effective in producing changing attitudes and behaviours relating to violence against women and family violence. Some studies also suggest online approaches can support faith leaders with limited time. Effective and promising activities and messages require extended time, thought, preparation and careful testing with their intended audience. Evaluating activities is vital for increasing our understanding of what works.

8. Ensure early and ongoing engagement of senior leadership

Engaging senior leadership early in prevention strategies in faith settings where there are clear, hierarchical governance structures has shown greater investment of organisational resources, community wide awareness of prevention interventions and reduced potential resistance. However, more research is needed to understand the most appropriate and sustainable approach to engaging leadership in non-hierarchical and decentralised faith communities.

9. Build the evidence-base

There are still many gaps in our knowledge about what works to prevent and respond to violence across a range of faith settings, particularly in non-Abrahamic faith communities. More research is needed. Faith communities should be properly resourced and supported to develop tools and frameworks for measuring and sharing learnings about short, medium and long-term impacts of efforts to build faith leader and faith community capacity, including appropriate strategies for engaging, and changing the behaviour of, religious men who use violence. New research should be shared widely so that prevention activities in faith communities can continue to be informed by current and new evidence as it becomes available.

ⁱ Vaughan, C., Sullivan, C. (2019). *Technical paper: Faith communities supporting healthy family relationships: A Participatory Action Research project with the Multifaith Advisory Group*, Parkville: University of Melbourne.

ⁱⁱ Vaughan, C., Sullivan, C., Chen, J., Vaid Sandhu, M. (2020), *What works to address violence against women and family violence in faith settings: An evidence guide*, Parkville: University of Melbourne.