

Criminalising coercive control in South Australia – implications for multicultural women and communities

A summary of initial consultations

On 28 November 2022 the Department of Human Services (DHS) held an initial consultation with multicultural community leaders, to discuss the implications of criminalising coercive control on women from multicultural backgrounds and multicultural communities. The Hon Katrine Hildyard MP, Minister for Women and the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, attended the opening of the session and Ms Helena Kyriazopoulos, Chief Executive of the Migrant Communities Council of SA (MCCSA) facilitated the session.

Prior to the session, participants were provided with discussion paper – Criminalising coercive control in South Australia for women from multicultural backgrounds and their communities. This paper provides a definition of coercive control, explains the unintended consequences that legislation may have on women from multicultural communities and asks a number of questions for participants to consider.

This is a summary of the key themes and issues raised by participants.

Terminology statement

The term ‘multicultural backgrounds’ will be used throughout this document to refer to people from diverse cultural, ethnical, religious and linguistic backgrounds and migrant and refugee women and children, including those on temporary visas.

Please be aware that the content in this document may be distressing or raise issues of concern for some readers. There are a range of services available if you require support after reading this paper. Lifeline provide 24/7 crisis support and can be contacted on 131 114. Beyond Blue also provide support services and can be contacted on 1300 224 636. Confidential information, counselling and support services can also be accessed through 1800RESPECT.

How is coercive control understood in multicultural communities?

Participants agreed that coercive control is not well understood in multicultural communities. The term 'coercive' is seen to be abstract and will need to be thoroughly explained, along with education around family and domestic violence (FDV) in Australia more generally, with particular emphasis on non-physical forms of FDV. Some participants felt that many communities do not view non-physical forms of violence as abuse. This view is not restricted to older age groups. Participants expressed concerns about messaging that young people are receiving through mainstream social media that promotes controlling behaviours in relationships that normalises it.

Participants agreed that religion and culture do not promote violence, but that controlling behaviours are rooted in older patriarchal tradition, and this will need to be addressed sensitively. Patriarchal beliefs and practices from countries of origin can and do change, but change takes time, patience. More education about what domestic violence is and in Australia and Australia's legal system was viewed as important.

Many of the participants suggested that many men across different communities:

- who were raised in patriarchal cultures may see it as their duty to take care of their family and keep them safe – and that this can sometimes lead to controlling behaviours.
- can feel left behind in a new culture that does not generally view the man as the head of the household or the main breadwinner of the family.
- often need more and different supports to end their controlling behaviours.
- will benefit from community education around respectful relationships and healthy masculinities – ideally communicated by other men with lived experience.

Participants spoke about the importance of the family unit for many multicultural communities and noted that education about coercive control needs to stress that the aim of legislation is to make it safer for everyone in the family.

What are some of the core issues multicultural communities are facing with respect to coercive control?

Participants suggested that for across many communities, separation is the last resort and that families want to stay together. They agreed that men's groups work well as an education mechanism.

Concerns were raised that young people are experiencing sexual coercion and sexual abuse in their relationships or engaging in sex for favours. Some people highlighted that young people are getting their information about respect and relationships from social media and that some of the content is very damaging. Messaging needs to be clear that being in a controlling relationship is not a sign of love or respect.

What does good communication with multicultural communities about the introduction of this legislation look like?

Participants highlighted the following messages as important:

- Any education campaign must be targeted to specific communities, in a thoughtful and culturally respectful manner.
- Messaging would be well received if it was delivered by a peer – young people should be educated by other young people, older people by their respective peers.
- The importance of respect for culture is a common theme and that engagement with different communities will be valuable and important.
- Communication from government must be clear that legislation is not a threat to culture and messages should be developed with different with communities that promote mutual respect and trust.
- The need for more education more broadly around the legal system and service system.
- Resources are available in multiple languages, and should be delivered on a wide range of mediums including ethnic press and ethnic radio.

How do we raise awareness about what will change when the new law comes into effect?

Participants agreed that communities should have education about the process after reporting coercive control or FDV, including what to expect when a person attends a police station, and what will happen in court. This education must also make it clear that coercive control is a form of domestic violence which is not physical violence and promote what healthy relationships look and feel like.

Many recent migrants, or visitors on student or bridging visas will have legitimate concerns about their future if messaging does not clearly explain what might happen when they report coercive control or domestic violence. Participants also agreed that communities will benefit from clearer information about visa types and how visa status can affect what happens after a police report is made.