



A.B.N. 27 084 251 669

# Family violence within the Southern Sudanese community

## Project evaluation report

December 2008

## Executive Summary

In 2007 and 2008, the Migrant Information Centre (MIC) carried out a program with the Southern Sudanese community in Eastern Melbourne to develop and implement culturally appropriate prevention and intervention family violence approaches. The project used an action research and community development model to achieve this, regularly consulting and working alongside two critical reference groups (comprised of Southern Sudanese men and women), community elders and leaders and representatives from local community services. The action research process proved to be beneficial for the project as project workers could reflect on actions implemented, consult the community and change approaches as the project progressed.

The project included the implementation of four different components. These were:

1. **An intervention approach** for working with men, women and children who had experienced or were at risk of experiencing family violence. A family counselling model was originally piloted; however, it quickly became apparent that this model was not appropriate for the community. Using the action research approach, a new model based on traditional Southern Sudanese family mediation was implemented. Practitioners, who were both male and female and from Southern Sudanese and non-Southern Sudanese backgrounds undertook the 'mediation', which included a mix of counselling, education and shuttle and couple mediation. The focus in each case was to ensure the safety of women and children, through undertaking risk assessment, advocating for women and children and condemning violence in all circumstances.

Five men and five women participated in the program, which was piloted for six months. While most feedback (from practitioners, clients and members of the Southern Sudanese community including community elders and leaders) was largely positive, some community members were resistant to the program, believing that family matters should not be discussed outside the family or tribe.

2. **A prevention approach**, implemented as a community education and awareness raising program. This series of information sessions was developed on a range of issues identified by the critical reference groups as issues that can cause conflict and lead to violence in families. Whilst participants provided feedback suggesting that they enjoyed the sessions, it was apparent from the discussion and questions during the sessions that some community members found some topics confronting and are not ready to change their ideas, attitudes and behaviours for fear of losing their cultural identity.
3. **A therapeutic support group**, named the *Sisters Together Group* for Southern Sudanese women who were experiencing or at risk of experiencing family violence. The evaluation of the group found that some women were starting to recognise their new positions in society in Australia, others were reluctant to speak out publicly against violence or take action that would go against cultural norms but ensure the safety of themselves and their children. Some women will require ongoing support to feel empowered to take positive action that will ensure their safety and that of their children.
4. **The creation of a training manual and DVD** titled "*But here, life is different...*" for service providers, documenting the learning gathered throughout the project. The resource was developed in consultation with the Southern Sudanese community and officially launched by the MIC in December 2008. To date, over 300 copies of the resource have been distributed across Australia and feedback from service providers and community members has been largely positive.

The project will continue in 2009, through the development and implementation of training workshops for community service practitioners based on the learning gathered by the MIC. A second community education and awareness raising program will also be developed to assist in the prevention of family violence within the Southern Sudanese community. The mediation model will be continue to be practiced under the Humanitarian Relationships program at the MIC

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# 1. Introduction

Settling in Australia can be a long and difficult process for refugee families. Many people from refugee backgrounds have experienced repeated exposure to traumatic events prior to their arrival in Australia, including torture, time spent in dangerous refugee camps and loss or separation from close family members. In addition to this, the process of settlement and adjustment to a complex and unfamiliar society is often a baffling and stressful experience for families. This places huge demands on families who are also struggling with coming to terms with a different set of societal and cultural rules. Such pressures can contribute to family conflict and relationship breakdown.

The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) received funding from the Australian Government, Office for Women to develop and implement a project to draw on the knowledge and strengths of the Southern Sudanese community around issues of family violence. As a newly arrived refugee community, the Southern Sudanese have identified family breakdown as a significant issue that is impacting on family relationships within the community. Coupled with this is the apparent lack of understanding amongst some members of the Southern Sudanese community around Australian laws and practices and community services available to assist with family conflict and family violence.

Through the development and implementation of the project, both prevention and intervention approaches to working with the Southern Sudanese community were piloted between August 2007 and November 2008. This paper evaluates the processes taken to develop the various aspects of the project and the effectiveness of the approaches taken through their implementation. The MIC acknowledges that these approaches are a contribution to the learning within the field in Australia, building on the knowledge to overcome family violence within the Southern Sudanese community.

## 2. Project Outline

### 2.1 Project Aims and Objectives

The project aimed to work alongside the Southern Sudanese community to:

- use an action research model to develop culturally appropriate service response models that support Southern Sudanese families in the prevention and intervention of family violence
- provide support to women experiencing or at risk of experiencing family violence so they can make informed decisions that ensure their safety and the safety of their children
- document the learning of the project in a manual and DVD for service providers, demonstrating best practice approaches

### 2.2 Project Service Approaches

The project included the development and implementation of four different components. These were:

1. An intervention approach for working with men, women and children who had experienced or were at risk of experiencing family violence
2. A prevention approach, implemented as a Community Education and Awareness Raising Program

3. A therapeutic support group, named the *Sisters Together Group* for Southern Sudanese women who were experiencing or at risk of experiencing family violence
4. The creation of a training manual and DVD for service providers, documenting the learning gathered throughout the project

The project was undertaken by a team of workers from the MIC, including:

- a community development worker from a non-Southern Sudanese background
- a social worker/family support worker from a non-Southern Sudanese background
- a psychologist/family mediator from a non-Southern Sudanese background
- three project workers from Southern Sudanese backgrounds (who undertook Level 1 and 2 Family Mediation Training in June 2008)
- a project supervisor/community development worker from a non-Southern Sudanese background
- a counsellor/family therapist from a non-Southern Sudanese background (who resigned from the MIC in March 2008)

## **2.3 Project Development**

The project targeted men, women and children from Southern Sudanese backgrounds living in the Eastern Region of Melbourne. The different components of the project targeted specific groups of people from Southern Sudanese backgrounds. The action research model involved two critical reference groups, one with Southern Sudanese men and the other with Southern Sudanese women, a project steering committee and consultations with Southern Sudanese community elders and leaders.

### **2.3.1 Critical Reference Groups**

The reference groups were split by gender to allow for topics covered to be discussed openly, without bias or shame. These groups met monthly with project workers from the MIC. One bi-cultural worker was also present at every meeting, to act as an interpreter and assist with facilitation. The bi-cultural workers also contributed to the discussion and were able to elaborate on issues raised and explain cultural understandings. The reference group members provided much useful knowledge, direction and feedback on each component and phase of the project. There were 12 men's and 12 women's critical reference group meetings in total between September 2007 and December 2008.

The purpose of the critical reference groups was to:

- identify the settlement and cultural issues impacting on families that can contribute to family violence
- provide an overview of Southern Sudanese culture and traditions in the prevention and treatment of family violence in the Sudan
- identify culturally appropriate prevention and intervention service responses within an Australian context of migration and resettlement
- provide feedback on the development and implementation of each phase of the project including the development of the training DVD and manual

Critical reference group members were chosen to predominantly represent two Southern Sudanese tribal groups, Dinka and Nuer, which are the largest within the Eastern Region of Melbourne and were therefore thought to be the most appropriate tribal groups to include in the project. There was also a smaller representation of Equatorial tribal groups on the reference groups, as there are also people identifying as Equatorial in the Eastern Region of Melbourne. Seven women and seven men from Dinka, Nuer and Equatorial tribal groups were invited to participate in the critical reference groups and each person was reimbursed for his/her time.

Over the sixteen month period, some of the women who participated in the critical reference group changed. Four women were no longer able to attend meetings because they moved out of the area, had changes in work commitments or became pregnant and found it difficult to regularly attend meetings. In June 2008, four additional women were invited to become participants and they attended meetings between June and December 2008. The seven men remained constant for the duration of the project.

Critical reference group participants were selected on the basis of skills which are outlined below and their commitment to contribute to the project, meet monthly and support families in the prevention and treatment of family violence. The skills required for critical reference group participants included:

- a knowledge of Southern Sudanese and Australian cultural responses to family violence
- good analytical and critical thinking skills
- good communication skills
- good life skills and wisdom
- commitment to working with the community and supporting their settlement
- an openness to change and an awareness of the social cost of not tackling family violence in the community
- an understanding and opinion about the negative impact of family violence on families and the community

### **2.3.2 Steering Committee**

Local community service providers were invited to join a steering committee for the project, which met bi-monthly between September 2007 and December 2008. Service providers represented on the steering committee included:

- Centrelink, Box Hill
- Child Protection, Department of Human Services
- Eastern Access Community Health Service (EACH)
- Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC)
- Eastern Domestic Violence Outreach Service (EDVOS)
- Family Relationships Centre, Ringwood (FRC)
- Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service (IWDVS)
- Ringwood Magistrates Court
- Sudanese Community Association of Australia
- Victoria Legal Aid (VLA)
- Victoria Police (Nunawading Police Station)
- Women's Health East (WHE)

The role of the steering committee was to:

- provide expertise, advice, recommendations and support for each phase of the project
- plan and assist in the development and implementation of culturally appropriate service responses to overcome gaps in the service system as identified by the Southern Sudanese community
- share resources, knowledge and skills
- reflect on the learning and information gathered from the critical reference group meetings
- promote the development of the project to interested parties (e.g. own agencies, clients, relevant networks, etc.)
- give feedback and endorse the manual and DVD

- allow each member to feedback and give direction on the structure of the project to assist in monitoring and evaluation

Steering committee members were also approached to assist with other aspects of the project, including making presentations at community education sessions and community elder training sessions.

### **2.3.3 Consultations with Southern Sudanese Community Elders and Leaders**

At each stage of the project, project workers worked with Southern Sudanese community elders and leaders to gain advice and feedback on the various components. This was sometimes done informally, with project workers phoning elders and leaders to ask for their advice and/or assistance at particular stages of the project. Other times, formal meetings were organised with several elders and leaders where various ideas or aspects of the project were discussed with the group. Community elders and leaders also assisted in promoting the project within the Southern Sudanese community, including organising meetings with influential community leaders where project workers could explain the intervention models and facilitate discussions about the models.

## **3. Evaluation Methodology**

Project workers recorded minutes and attendance lists at all critical reference group and steering committee meetings. Minutes and attendance lists were also recorded at the community elders meetings and attendance lists and observations were recorded by project workers during the Community Education and Awareness Raising Program and *Sisters Together Group* sessions. During one of the Sisters Together Group sessions, the family counsellor facilitated a focus group discussion about what participants enjoyed about the group and why attending was important to them. Participants were also asked to complete an evaluative questionnaire in the final group session.

In November 2008, evaluative focus groups were held with the critical reference group participants. During the meetings, project workers asked a series of questions and participants engaged in discussions around their participation in the project.

It was anticipated that a similar evaluative focus group discussion would be held at the final meeting of the steering committee held in November 2008. As only two participants attended this meeting, an evaluative questionnaire was developed by project workers and distributed electronically. Despite several reminder emails, only five of the fifteen participants completed and returned the questionnaire.

Community elders and leaders and project workers also gave verbal feedback at various stages of the project. Verbal and written feedback following the launch of the manual and DVD was also collected by project workers.

Throughout the project, the MIC team met regularly to discuss and debrief on all aspects of the project. Through these meetings, workers from Southern Sudanese backgrounds were able to offer much valuable knowledge as they explained particular cultural idioms and ideas and assisted the other workers to interpret the information gathered using a Southern Sudanese cultural framework. The meetings also gave an opportunity for the practitioners to discuss with community development and project workers their experiences and findings through the implementation of the service models (both the counselling and mediation models) and the affects that they could see these having on clients. Notes were taken at these meetings and were

analysed by project workers at all stages of the project, following the action research model.

## **4. Service Model Development and Implementation**

### **4.1 Implementation of the Family Counselling Model**

The action research model used throughout the development of the project allowed for critical reflection and implementation of changes as the piloting period progressed. A culturally appropriate service model, using a family therapy/counselling framework was initially developed to assist families experiencing or at risk of experiencing family violence, to stop violence and ensure the safety of women and children. The model was strongly endorsed by community elders, the steering committee and the critical reference groups, as it was based on the Southern Sudanese model of resolving family disputes including relatives and community elders from within the community. This model was piloted for four months, between December 2007 and March 2008.

The service model relied on self referral or referral by an elder, family member or service provider for counselling for clients outside of the legal system and referral from police, family violence services or local courts for those accessing legal services. Upon attaining a referral, the counsellor would talk to the person referred to the program and obtain their consent to contact their spouse. The counsellor would then ask the client to nominate community elders and/or relatives who they would like to participate in a group counselling session with the counsellor and the couple.

The objective of the group counselling session was to address the issues of family violence and family conflict, in a forum that recognised and respected traditional roles and responsibilities. In each case, a risk assessment was undertaken by the family counsellor to determine whether contacting the spouse of the client who presented and their nominated community elders and/or relatives would be safe. Six referrals were made by women who became aware of the project and contacted the MIC for assistance. One referral was made by a settlement worker at the MIC.

### **4.2 Barriers to Participation**

Many barriers were faced in successfully implementing the family therapy/counselling model, these were:

- **Men were unwilling to participate in this model.** In six cases, Southern Sudanese women approached the MIC, wanting to participate in the program. In every instance that the husband was contacted and the service was explained, the husbands were unwilling to participate. The critical reference groups (both men and women) had been involved in the development of the model and expected that the men would be willing to engage with this program. These groups included elders who also were supportive of the model.

Southern Sudanese culture is based on a patriarchy where men are the head of the family and they have the responsibility for disciplining their wives and children. These practices are viewed as *normal* within Southern Sudanese culture and were widely practiced in the Sudan. Critical reference group members reported that some Southern Sudanese men in Australia view Australian laws, which uphold human rights and hold men accountable for violent behaviour as a challenge to Southern Sudanese culture and their cultural identity. Some individuals view Australian culture as biased towards women and undermining to male authority.

As a result, it was difficult to engage violent men in the program as this appears to require a significant cultural change in perceptions and the roles and



responsibilities of both men and women in the family as well as elders and relatives. The Community Education and Awareness Raising Program was included as part of the project to assist this change and those who participated indicated that they understood and accepted that change was necessary in Australia. However, this shift in thinking and the processes involved in defining cultural identity as distinct from the right to safety and non-violent relationships will take time.

- **Support for women and children.** When the men refused to participate in the counselling model, follow up support was offered to the women through the family support services and family violence counselling services. Children's services including counselling and participation in group programs were also offered to women with children where appropriate.
- **Community elders and relatives were unwilling to participate in the group counselling sessions.** The primary reason identified by the counsellor and bilingual project workers for the nominated elders' refusal to participate was that the husbands, relatives and elders nominated by these women had not participated in the Community Education and Awareness Raising Program and community elders training and were consequently not familiar with the project. As a result, they were not ready to challenge their own or other men's behaviour and their role in the family.

Critical reference group members suggested that community elders and relatives may have been unaware of the intentions of the program and may have felt threatened by it or thought that it intentionally tried to break up families. One elder reported to the family counsellor that he felt it was not his place to participate in assisting a particular family within the proposed framework and thought that by participating in the program he would be putting his own family at risk of stigmatisation or harm from others within the Southern Sudanese community.

Further, all of the women who sought assistance from the program nominated relatives and/or community elders from the Equatorial region of Sudan. The project specifically targeted community members from the Dinka and Nuer tribes residing in the Eastern Suburbs of Melbourne (who were invited to participate in the Community Education and Awareness Raising Program and the Elders Training sessions). This was because people identifying as Dinka and Nuer are the largest groups settling in Eastern Melbourne. Consequently, Equatorial elders and relatives who were nominated by presenting clients were not familiar with the project and often resided in other regions of Melbourne.

- **Western counselling and therapeutic responses are not widely understood within Southern Sudanese culture.** The traditional Southern Sudanese method for overcoming family conflict is based on a mediation model, where issues are addressed in a concrete manner, behaviours are challenged and individuals are offered advice and suggestions for overcoming their grievances.

For elders and relatives to participate effectively in therapeutic interventions, understanding the issues underlying family violence and implementing knowledge of these within a therapeutic environment would be necessary. This would require each individual to undertake extensive education and training including family violence issues, therapy and counselling practices and confidentiality and privacy laws.

It was originally anticipated that the Elders Training Program delivered by MIC in December 2007 and January 2008 developed for community elders living in the local area would cover these issues, however, most elders who were called upon to participate in the group counselling sessions were not living in the local area and had consequently not participated in the training. Further, given the limitations of the project, the training program delivered was insufficient to cover the training needs of the community elders and other community members who were called upon to attend counselling sessions.

### **4.3 From Counselling to Mediation**

In order to overcome some of the challenges faced in implementing the original model, the critical reference groups were consulted. Through suggestions made by bi-cultural workers, MIC practitioners and critical reference group members, it was decided that a shift from the therapy/counselling model to a model of mediation was necessary. Mediation is more understood within a Southern Sudanese cultural framework and is a short term intervention that could achieve safety for women and children.

Critical reference group members identified that families would be more responsive to mediators from Southern Sudanese backgrounds, rather than mediators from non-Southern Sudanese backgrounds. Consequently, bi-cultural project workers completed Level 1 and 2 Family Mediation Training at the Family Mediation Centre in Moorabbin in 2008. Southern Sudanese mediators and the family counsellor worked in partnership to ensure the safety of women and children.

In the mediation model, the bi-cultural workers adopted the role originally appointed to community elders and relatives in the counselling service model. The mediation model consequently allowed the bi-cultural workers to work with clients within a framework that recognised traditional Southern Sudanese culture, whilst having an ability to critically assess and challenge inappropriate behaviours and ideas. The mediation model was piloted for seven months between April and October 2008.

### **4.4 Working Alongside the Community to Promote the Project**

Whilst the mediation model was being piloted, critical reference group members suggested approaching more community elders and leaders from all Southern Sudanese tribes, including leaders of Southern Sudanese tribal and community associations and church groups across Melbourne to further promote the project and gain wider support within the community. The critical reference group participants advised project workers that as elders and leaders become aware of the project and voiced their support of it, men might feel more comfortable to participate.

Consequently, the President of the Sudanese Community Association of Australia was approached and he assisted project workers in organising a series of meetings for community elders (including community association leaders, religious leaders and respected tribal elders) to learn about the project. During the meetings, the critical reference group members spoke about their involvement in developing the mediation model and bi-cultural project workers explained the practical implications of implementing the model.

Although many community elders present at these meetings expressed their support for the project and encouraged the use of the mediation model generally within the wider Southern Sudanese community, there were no referrals made by community elders into the program at any point during the project. When this was explored with

the critical reference group participants, it was suggested that many people still felt that the relatives and elders should be approached to seek assistance with any kind of family conflict and only if the conflict could not be overcome should the case be referred to the MIC. Participants explained that some community elders may feel defeated or embarrassed in referring a case to the MIC, as they should have been able to assist the family to overcome the problem themselves. This and the short time frame for the pilot phase may have contributed to the lack of referrals by elders.

#### **4.5 Launch of the Manual and DVD**

On 12<sup>th</sup> December 2008, the official launch of the manual and DVD resource, *“But here, life is different...”* was held at the Box Hill Town Hall. During the launch, the community development worker gave an overview of the project, including outlining the process that the project had taken to develop the prevention and intervention approaches. Two critical reference group members then gave brief presentations about their involvement in the project, including their roles in developing and appearing in the DVD. The President of the Sudanese Community Association of Australia officially launched the resource, praising both the resource and the project. The DVD was then screened in its entirety, and then a panel made up of the five project workers led a discussion and answered questions from the audience. Eighty-five people (including several members of the Southern Sudanese community) attended the launch and each was offered a resource to take with them.

### **5. Feedback and Discussion**

#### **5.1 Critical Reference Group Participants**

There were 12 men’s and 12 women’s critical reference group meetings held between September 2007 and December 2008. During the meetings, participants gave information on issues impacting on family violence within the Southern Sudanese community in Australia, traditional ideas around use of violence and family roles, how family conflict and family violence is traditionally overcome in Southern Sudanese culture and how family conflict and violence is currently being overcome by Southern Sudanese community members in Australia.

Critical reference group members assisted in the development of the counselling/therapy model which was piloted from December 2007 to March 2008. Participants gave many suggestions as to why this model was not effective and why men and elders were refusing to participate. Critical reference group members were also consulted about the revised model, using family mediation and explained how family mediation is used in traditional Southern Sudanese culture to assist families where there has been family conflict and/or violence.

##### **5.1.1 Responses**

Participants in the men’s and women’s critical reference groups participated in an evaluative focus group during the final critical reference group meetings in November 2008. Four men and three women participated in the two respective focus groups. As none of the women who attended the focus group meeting were original members of the critical reference group involved in the development and implementation of the original counselling model, project workers phoned three other women and asked the same questions over the phone. The female bi-lingual worker assisted with interpreting the responses. Project workers were only able to contact one of the three women after several attempts.

Participants were mostly very positive about their experiences participating in the critical reference groups. There was a reoccurring theme from both male and female

participants that the critical reference group was a great learning experience for participants. This is evident from the comments given:

*“If I just stay at home, I won’t learn anything. But coming to the group has meant that I can learn new things and talk about different things.”*

*“It has been a good experience. It really taught us how to resolve conflict in our community. We learnt new tools and it gave us experience about teaching these things to our community as well.”*

*“We learnt steps we can take if problems arise. Now we know what to do and there is this program that can help us.”*

There was also feedback about the critical reference group being a space for reciprocity of learning between the MIC and participants.

*“It is good to share ideas and opinions for different people – the more you (MIC) ask, the more you learn. I learnt a lot from you and you learnt from me. Together, we can share ideas and other things.”*

*“The group was good because you wanted to teach us about the new culture in Australia but also you want to learn about our culture, back in our country.”*

Participants in the critical reference group volunteered to appear in the DVD. Three participants were interviewed about their experiences in coming to Australia and three participants appeared as actors in a case study scenario. Participants who appeared in the DVD reported that doing so allowed them an opportunity for personal development.

*“I have never acted before and since doing the DVD, I think my self-esteem has improved. I feel confident and it has given me hope that I can achieve more things in my life in the future. I feel much more comfortable now in front of other people and I would like to do more things like this now.”*

When asked what the worst thing about the critical reference group was there were mixed responses. All of the women reported that there was nothing bad about the group.

*“...nothing was the worst thing because this project is what we need; you supported us and gave us a good orientation to all of the issues.”*

The men however did have some feedback. One participant was particularly critical of the MIC for not doing more to challenge the role of the police in Australia or pressure the government to give more autonomy to community elders and leaders to ‘solve’ family problems within the Southern Sudanese community.

*“I am not happy because we told you about our culture and you didn’t take it all in this model. The police are still involved and this should not be the way.”*

When this comment was made, another man within the group quickly refuted this participant.

*“No, that is wrong. The MIC did take our culture and then they put it into the model, with mediation and everything... We cannot contradict the Australian laws and system.”*

From these comments and the exchange between the two participants, it is apparent that there is still resistance amongst some men within the critical reference group (and within the wider Southern Sudanese community) to accept Australian laws and systems. Similarly however, there are other men who are willing to accept and respect the system and its underlying ideology and challenge other men who are resistant to change.

Some male participants also commented that the representation of tribal groups within the critical reference groups was uneven within the group, which may have deterred some community members from engaging with the project.

*“Most people who have been involved in this group have been from Dinka (tribes). Because other people in the community have seen this, they just think that it is a Dinka project, then they don’t think it is for them.”*

*“In this group we were all Dinka and Nuer. We are the biggest groups, but we need to include others too. There are some Equatorian people in this area, we should include everyone so that no one feels left out.”*

When asked about the impacts that the project has and will have on the Southern Sudanese community, there were very positive responses.

*“I am very grateful for this group – it did a good thing for our community. We told you that we have a different culture and many different cultures from different tribes. Australians will now be able to... understand about our culture. We have a right to explain our culture to you and to Australia. The DVD will be good for our people and Australian people.”*

*“I think we have really helped our community by setting up this program. We come from different communities and different tribes but this information and this program is for everyone.”*

*“This will really help the South Sudanese community – we know this, especially for those who really follow what is on the DVD.”*

Some of the women expressed concern about how the project and their participation within the critical reference group is being seen by some members of the Southern Sudanese community.

*“Some people in the community think that we have spilled the secrets of our community, by telling you about what is happening in our families.”*

*“For us as women, talking about other Southern Sudanese women suffering, some people think we are reporting on our men. They don’t think we are solving problems but think we are causing trouble. They think that we are supporting women to do bad things, like leaving their husbands or going to services like the MIC.”*

*“Some people think that we might be encouraging women to leave their husbands with this project. It will take a long time for people to understand that this is not what we are doing.”*

There were largely positive responses to the development and implementation of the mediation model including the shift from a counselling/therapy model to a mediation model, from both the men and the women.

*“Counselling is not really good in our community. It is hard for us and not something that we used to do. But having someone helping to solve problems through mediation, this is what we do and this is what we know. Mediation is much more familiar. We know about this and how to help other families and how to solve problems, so this is a really good model and it was good to change from the counselling model.”*

Nevertheless, some of the women expressed concerns about the Southern Sudanese community still expecting women to use the traditional systems before accessing the MIC mediation service.

*“In Australia, when we face problems, many women go to their in-laws. The elders are happy with those kinds of women. They think that they should follow the traditional methods. They think that if you go to the Police first, you are causing trouble. But they also think that if the in-laws and the elders cannot solve the problem, then you can go to the MIC and participate in this mediation. They see MIC mediation as one step better than court, so people prefer to use this model at that point.”*

*“You are supposed to go to your in-laws first, if there is nothing they can do, you can go to the MIC. If you go to the in-laws first and they can't help, they will usually assist you to go to MIC for mediation.”*

From these comments, it is evident that accessing a service for assistance with family conflict and/or family violence is new and will not be accepted by all members of the Southern Sudanese community. Consequently, women face pressures by people close to them such as relatives, friends and elders not to access services or seek the assistance of the police if they find themselves experiencing family violence. This places women in very difficult, compromising situations as following traditional methods do not always bring the best outcomes for women. This was noted by one participant as she claimed:

*“The in-laws often agree with the man. They don't confront him and tell him that he is wrong, they just tell you to go back to him and everything will be OK. But this is not good. If you make a mistake and no one tells you that it is wrong, you will not learn that it is wrong... and that is why our men do not change.”*

Despite these comments, there was a general feeling amongst the female participants that traditional attitudes will shift over time and men (and the wider Southern Sudanese community) would come to accept the project.

*“But some men also think the project is good. The rest of the community will change and have this opinion too, it will just take some time.”*

From the responses gathered it is evident that most reference group participants found the experience positive, as it gave an opportunity for learning and exchanging information with project workers. It also allowed for some participants to act or be interviewed in the DVD, which some found an experience that built self confidence and self esteem.

Although most participants thought that the mediation model is a good model and will assist the Southern Sudanese community, some of the men are reluctant to accept that the police should be involved in incidents of family violence and that men should be held accountable by the Australian legal system for violence against their wives and children. Similarly, some women are concerned that some members of the Southern Sudanese community, including community elders believe that women are only justified in seeking assistance from the MIC after traditional methods (such as seeking assistance from in-laws and community elders) have been exhausted. However, in some cases, following Southern Sudanese traditional methods can compromise the safety of women and children and men are not made accountable for their violence. Consequently, this places great pressure on women, as they have to choose between seeking the assistance of the police or community services which may lead to stigmatisation within the community or following traditional methods which can have adverse consequences for themselves and their children.

## **5.2 Steering Committee**

Fifteen people from local family violence, family support services, police, courts and legal services participated in the steering committee, as well as a representative from the Sudanese Community Association of Australia. The steering committee was chaired by three project workers from the MIC. Nine steering committee meetings were held between September 2007 and November 2008. Steering committee participants gave direction on how the new models could work within Australian legal frameworks and within the family violence sector in Eastern Melbourne. Attendance at the beginning of the project was good, however, this declined over the course of the project. Attendance at the meetings was 11, 14, 8, 5, 9, 5, 4, 4, 4 respectively, including MIC project workers.

Many steering committee participants were unresponsive to emails and calls for feedback on various aspects of the project, including chapters of the manual that were circulated for comment. This was difficult and sometimes frustrating for project workers, who were trying to ensure that the chapters contained the relevant information and portrayed useful and appropriate information for workers in the sector.

In February 2008, an electronic questionnaire was developed and distributed to all steering committee members to gain feedback on their involvement with the project to date and to ask participants to identify aspects of their involvement with the steering group that could be improved. Only two questionnaires were completed and returned to project workers, despite several reminder emails and comments during steering committee meetings.

In November 2008, an evaluative focus group was planned to be held in the final steering committee meeting for the project. Project workers were curious to find out why many participants had not engaged with the project, had been unresponsive to emails and had not participated consistently in meetings. Only two participants (not including MIC project workers) attended this meeting. Consequently, a short discussion rather than a focus group was held with the two participants and an evaluation questionnaire was developed by project workers and circulated to all steering committee participants (see appendix 1). Five questionnaires were completed and returned to project workers.

### **5.2.1 Responses**

During the discussion in the final steering committee meeting, the two participants present stressed that the lack of participation in the steering committee was not a

reflection on the project but due to the numerous commitments and time restraints of the committee members. Many of the steering committee participants are managers and team leaders who already have numerous meetings and networks in which they participate. Participants at the meeting suggested that this project may have been less of a priority for some members. To increase participation in a steering committee such as this in the future, these participants suggested trying to have time set aside during existing network meetings (such as the Regional Family Violence Network) in which many of the steering committee members already participate, to discuss the project.

Responses from the questionnaire reflect those of the discussion, indicating that time constraints weighed heavily on the participants. This is evident from some of the responses which stated:

*“Generally it was the challenge of struggling with multiple demands.... people are busy, we are stretched already.”*

*“In the family violence sector there has been lots going on – new systems in place, training on these and other commitments. They may see this project as less important.”*

*“I thought it was a great project just too much to do and so little time, so often other issues became a priority.”*

Other participants noted that the lack in participation may be due to how the project progressed. In the initial stages of the project, MIC project workers drew on the knowledge and expertise of steering committee members to assist with the development of the intervention model. Project workers tried to utilise this knowledge and expertise in the later stages of the project, but participants were unresponsive. One participant noted:

*“Perhaps people thought that there was more of a role for them at the beginning, when the model was being developed – looking at how it would fit within Australian laws and systems. Perhaps they think that there is less of a role now.”*

Another suggestion was:

*“We are a very re-active sector, we are not good at planning and thinking about new things, so maybe people thought this project was less important.”*

All participants who completed the questionnaire stated that they were ‘neutral’, ‘satisfied’ or ‘extremely satisfied’ in response to steering committee meeting times, regularity of meetings, location of meetings, relevance of topics discussed and meeting structure and procedures. One participant commented:

*“No problems with meetings or the structure and running of same. Well put together with a great outcome.”*

Most participants rated the steering committee ‘very successful’ or ‘successful’ at achieving most of its aims. Some aims were rated ‘neutral’ by one participant. None were rated ‘unsuccessful’ or ‘very unsuccessful’ (see Appendix 2).

When asked how participants thought the project would assist the community service sector in Melbourne, many positive responses were given.



*“Providing knowledge, assistance and encouragement to a topic that has been difficult to deal with in the past.”*

*“Potentially fill a gap in organisation/practitioners understanding of how to work with the Sudanese population.”*

*“Provide insight and alternative work approaches.”*

*“This project will assist the community service sector by addressing family violence through developing a culturally appropriate best practice service model at both prevention and intervention stages, allowing the Southern Sudanese community to work together with service providers for the benefit of their families.”*

*“I think it will be beneficial to highlight issues around the Sudanese community and foster better understandings.”*

Positive responses were also given when asked how participating in the steering committee had benefited individuals and the agencies where they work.

*“Enhanced knowledge, triggered reflection on the model and the challenge of developing a culturally appropriate response.”*

*“... benefited through active participation and contribution to this project as well as through gradually acquiring the knowledge about the Sudanese community, its issues in Australian society and culturally appropriate responses to family violence within the Southern Sudanese community.”*

Although this feedback is largely positive and indicates that many workers did not participate fully due to time constraints and other commitments, feedback was only received from 5 (33%) of participants. The 5 participants who completed the questionnaire were also those who attended meetings regularly and responded to requests for comments and feedback. Consequently, the reasons as to why the other 10 (66%) of participants did not participate as actively remains somewhat unclear.

The Sudanese representative on the steering committee was only able to attend one meeting due to work commitments. However, he actively participated by participating in the community education program and assisted in organising meetings with community elders and leaders. He was also available for consultation throughout the life of the project and provided feedback and comments at all stages of the project.

### **5.3 Working with Community Elders and Leaders**

Throughout the project, project workers kept in close contact with community elders and leaders, who gave advice and feedback on many aspects of the project. Project workers held training for community elders and leaders in December 2007 and January 2008 on the counselling/therapy model. Fifteen people attended the first meeting and 10 people attended the second. Despite holding this training, when the counselling/therapy model was being piloted, none of the elders or relatives nominated to participate in the group counselling sessions with couples experiencing conflict had attended the training, making many sceptical of the model. Similarly, no referrals into the program were made by community elders and leaders.

In May 2008, a meeting was arranged with the President of the Sudanese Community Association of Australia. During the meeting the model was explained and the President was asked if he could organise a meeting with influential elders and leaders where the model can be explained and endorsed by the Association. A meeting with community elders and leaders was held on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2008. Eighteen people attended.

During the meeting, critical reference group members gave a presentation outlining the project and explained how the mediation model was developed. The Sudanese mediators spoke about their role in the program and how the mediation process could assist families who were experiencing family conflict or violence. The President of the Sudanese Association of Australia gave his public endorsement of the project during the meeting and encouraged those present to tell others within the community about the project and encourage those who they knew had 'family problems' to come to the MIC to use the mediation program. Two additional meetings were held with community elders and leaders in June and July 2008, to inform more people about the mediation program and encourage dissemination of the information within the community.

A draft of the DVD was shown to the President and office bearers of the Bor Community Association of Australia and the Sudanese Community Association of Australia, who also showed it to their executive committees. Their comments and feedback were incorporated into later versions of the DVD.

These two Presidents also attended the launch of the manual and DVD in December 2008 and each gave a short presentation, in which they both praised the project and commented on how each thought it would assist the Southern Sudanese community in Australia.

#### **5.4 Working with External Agencies**

In June 2008, project workers met with two teams of workers at Child Protection, Department of Human Services in Box Hill. At the meeting, project workers gave a presentation about the project and explained when it would be appropriate to make referrals. This has consequently resulted in referrals to the MIC programs including the family violence program and family support program.

In March 2008, project workers met with workers at the Ringwood Court to discuss referrals to the program. Following the meeting, project workers prepared a brief for Magistrates to encourage them to consider the program and make referrals for clients when they were in court. A flyer for court workers was also prepared for officials to hand out to clients when offering a referral into the program. The brief was also sent to Duty Lawyers and Police on the Steering Committee, who have distributed it to appropriate staff working in the Eastern Region of Melbourne.

In May 2008, project workers met with the Registrar at Dandenong Court, a worker from South East Region Migrant Resource Centre and a lawyer from Monash-Cardinia Legal Service to discuss the project. All agreed to make referrals into the project where appropriate. A brief was prepared for all present and copies of the flyer for potential clients were sent to all for distribution.

Following the launch in December 2008, there was much positive feedback from community service workers who had not been involved in the development of the project. Project workers received several positive phone calls and emails. In emails received following the launch, attendees stated:

*“Congratulations to all at MIC for the wonderful Sudanese project. Book is so impressive. The launch program was excellent. Proud to know you all.”*

*“...wanted to say how much I enjoyed the seminar last Friday and indeed how informative I found it as well. I hadn't known for instance about arranged marriages within that community. Look forward to your next seminar!”*

*“...congratulations on the resource and all the work that obviously went into it. The DVD was amazing - really high quality and professional - produced sympathetically and not too simplistic. I had a great sense from the launch that the community really 'owned' all the work and had driven its direction, not just been 'consulted' on it.”*

## **5.5 The Mediation Model**

### **5.5.1 Model Design and Development**

The mediation model was piloted from April 2008 to November 2009. During this time MIC practitioners worked with five women and five men. From these clients, one woman accessed the service but her husband refused to participate, three couples participated in shuttle mediation and one couple participated in joint mediation. The latter couple began participating in shuttle mediation until it was assessed appropriate and safe for them to meet together to discuss the issues affecting their lives. This couple had five joint mediation sessions with two mediators.

In most cases, women presented at the MIC voluntarily, seeking assistance with issues that they were having with their husbands. When a woman presented, the team of project workers met together to discuss the case and what the appropriate action would be. In most cases, the worker who had the initial contact with the woman would meet with her to hear about the issues affecting her life and to undertake a risk assessment. The MIC team would then meet again to assess whether it would be appropriate to contact her husband. The women who presented were usually referred to the family support worker (if she was not already involved with the case), who offered extra support to the woman as she was going through the mediation process. This included both practical and emotional support.

In every case, a slightly different method for engaging with the husband was used. In the original model, a non-Southern Sudanese worker was contacting husbands; however, it was found that men would not engage this way. After consulting the critical reference groups, it was decided that men should be contacted by the Southern Sudanese mediator (where appropriate). In many cases, the Southern Sudanese mediator phoned the husband and then arranged a meeting at the man's house or in a public place. In most cases, in the first meeting with the husband, the mediator would begin discussions with general topics about families, asking non-threatening questions<sup>1</sup>.

Later, once rapport and trust had been built, the mediator could begin more specific discussions about the client's family situation and the issues that he was experiencing. In most cases, the mediator did not mention that he had spoken with the client's wife. Rather, the mediator sought permission from the man to do so before acknowledging meetings with his wife.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a culturally appropriate approach to communication within the Southern Sudanese community.

Although this method of engaging with men may appear unconventional, it appears to be a culturally appropriate approach. Within traditional Southern Sudanese culture and within the Southern Sudanese community in Australia, when a couple separates, members of the community (particularly elders and leaders) will approach the husband and wife and offer them advice on what they should do to 'solve' their problem without being asked. Consequently, it does not appear unusual for the Sudanese mediator to approach men in this way, as he can also offer a solution through participating in mediation at the MIC. This is the way that the MIC initially engaged with most men in the program.

In one case, the Ringwood Magistrates' Court referred a couple who were refusing to engage with Child Protection into the program. The couple were strongly recommended by the court to engage with the MIC mediation program. The Southern Sudanese mediator firstly contacted the man and met with him to discuss the issue. The mediator then contacted the wife and met with her separately, to hear about the conflict from her perspective. It appeared that the couple, who were living together, was willing to engage with the mediation program largely to ensure that Child Protection would no longer be involved with their family.

After several separate meetings with the man and the woman, the MIC team of practitioners determined that it would be safe and appropriate to conduct a joint mediation session, with the husband and the wife together. The couple met with the psychologist and the family support worker in a joint mediation session on five occasions and the practitioners were able to assist the family by exploring the conflict in the family, the violence that had occurred and by offering education about the role of Child Protection, the police and the impacts of violence on children.

In the other cases, after the mediator had met with both the woman and the man two or three times each, the MIC team would meet again to assess whether it would be safe and appropriate to organise a joint mediation session with the couple together with a mediator. In some cases, it was assessed that it would be inappropriate and joint mediation sessions were not suggested. With the exception of one case, four men refused to participate in joint mediation sessions when offered to them.

Critical reference group members suggested that the men may have refused to participate due to numerous reasons, including:

- A lack of understanding about the intentions of the mediation model and the practitioners. It was suggested that some men may believe that the MIC would take the side of the woman and not believe the man.
- Some Sudanese men may feel confronted by the laws within Australia, which uphold human rights and condemn use of violence in all circumstances, so did not want to participate in a program which will hold men accountable for their violent behaviour.
- Some men may have preferred to follow traditional practices for overcoming family violence consulting their relatives and community elders (as this sometimes brings about better outcomes for men) and therefore saw the MIC mediation model as unnecessary.
- Some men may not have wanted the practitioners at the MIC (who they may know) to learn about the violence that had occurred and/or may have been concerned that practitioners would not keep confidentiality and their personal affairs would be spread within the community.

### **5.5.2 Role of Practitioners**

Project workers from Southern Sudanese backgrounds gave much insight at each stage of the project, advising non-Southern Sudanese workers on directions for the project. Southern Sudanese workers gave additional information, building on the knowledge given by the critical reference groups on traditional Southern Sudanese culture including practices around family structure, gender roles and responsibilities. Southern Sudanese project workers also wrote case studies based on community members who they had assisted with family conflict in Australia. One worker wrote a paper outlining the differences between traditional Southern Sudanese family mediation and Australian styles of family mediation. Both the case studies and the paper on comparisons appear in the manual.

Within the team of practitioners there were workers from both Southern Sudanese backgrounds and non-Southern Sudanese backgrounds. As marriages in Southern Sudan are a contract between two families, there is a strong expectation from the families and the tribe that men and women remain together. As a result, family violence is seen as an outcome of a problem or dispute that will stop once this problem is fixed. Non-Southern Sudanese workers were able to ensure that Southern Sudanese workers always understood that safety was the first consideration in mediation rather than maintaining the family unit at all cost.

In contrast, Southern Sudanese workers could define Southern Sudanese cultural values that may be influencing the decisions both men and women made throughout the mediation process. This ensured that non-Southern Sudanese practitioners maintained an understanding of Southern Sudanese values that motivated choices so that they could focus on safety within a cultural context.

Frequently, the major challenge for non-Southern Sudanese practitioners was managing cultural 'clashes' where women appeared to place themselves and their children in harmful situations. Through discussing this danger with women, safety plans could be developed for both women and children including in some cases referrals to Child Protection if children were deemed to be placed in danger.

The roles and responsibilities adopted by practitioners in implementing the model were different to the role traditionally undertaken by family mediators within Australia. Practitioners noted that although clients stated that they wanted 'mediation' and were comfortable engaging with the service under this title, it often became apparent that counselling and/or education was what the clients sought. In traditional Southern Sudanese family mediation, education, support and advice are offered under the title of 'mediation'. Consequently, clients did not always clearly distinguish their need for counselling, education or practical social support from 'mediation'.

Both the mediators and/or the family support worker sometimes took on the role of a counsellor, offering emotional support and discussing different issues and options with the clients. Other times, both the mediator and the family support worker offered psycho-education to clients as they were going through the mediation process. When practitioners assessed that on-going counselling would be beneficial for women, they made referrals to the family violence counsellor.

Clients approached the service with different intentions and preconceptions about the service that they wanted and who would offer that service. Some women who approached the service requested a female worker, some requested a Southern Sudanese worker, some requested a non-Southern Sudanese worker and others did not mind. In the latter case, it appeared that so long as the practitioner demonstrated an acknowledgement and understanding of traditional Southern Sudanese culture

and the issues and difficulties faced by the client, the practitioners' cultural background was not a concern.

Although in many cases it was useful for the male worker from a Southern Sudanese background to initially make contact or engage with men, it was not always necessary for this worker to carry out all of the mediation sessions. Similarly, many of the women who approached the service were not averse to working with a mediator from a non-Southern Sudanese background. This meant that in some cases, the mediation was undertaken by mediators from a non-Southern Sudanese background and other times by the mediator from a Southern Sudanese background.

Some women who approached the service directly contacted the family mediator (who was a male from a Southern Sudanese background) and others directly contacted the family support worker (who was a female from a non-Southern Sudanese background). Often, the practitioner who had the initial contact with the client made an assessment as to who would be the most appropriate worker to undertake the mediation.

When the family support worker had been undertaking practical case management support for the family, she would refer the woman to the family mediator to undertake the 'mediation' and would continue in her practical support role. This included assisting women to find alternative accommodation, speaking to teachers at children's schools, referring children into children's support programs, attending court hearings and making safety plans with the women. The family support worker also assisted in offering emotional support to the women.

If the client did not wish to be referred to a Southern Sudanese worker, the family support worker would undertake the 'mediation' in consultation with the family mediator and the MIC team. When the family support worker knew the family or had been involved in the case, she sometimes attended the mediation sessions with the family mediator and the client(s).

### **5.5.3 Challenges Faced by Practitioners**

As discussed by Waldegrave (2006), all people learn and develop their ideas, attitudes and behaviours within particular social contexts that influence which of these are acceptable and which are not. Such ideas are learnt through modelling and explanation within these contexts and by adopting these, Waldegrave argues that people feel a sense of belonging that helps shape identity (Waldegrave, 2006). For community service practitioners from Southern Sudanese backgrounds working with individuals and families from the same culture, practitioners have to be constantly wary of their own identities and interpretation of information, including the attitudes, ideas and behaviours that they are modelling for clients.

When undertaking the mediation project, the practitioners from Southern Sudanese backgrounds had to be mindful not to 'slip' back into using Southern Sudanese frameworks by which to assist clients, which would place women and children at risk. It was hence useful to have a mix of both Southern Sudanese practitioners and non-Southern Sudanese practitioners, as they could discuss and ensure that all were using an Australian framework by which to make decisions and interpret information about different families who accessed the service rather than a Southern Sudanese framework, which has specific ideas and expectations about roles of different members in a family. Having regular meetings and case conferences was useful to assist practitioners with this.

It was at times difficult for Southern Sudanese practitioners to respect Southern Sudanese culture and traditions whilst ensuring the safety of women and children. Waldegrave (2006) argues that many western community service programs value individual self-determination over collectivism and community or familial processes to assist in overcoming difficulties which are used in many other non-western cultures. When working with Southern Sudanese clients, this became evident, as Southern Sudanese practitioners were sometimes faced with assisting clients in ways that were in opposition to traditional culture, traditional family problem solving approaches and community expectations in order to promote and uphold the safety of women and children.

This was evident when practitioners offered women alternative options other than accepting their violent husbands back into their homes after some other issue had been overcome and the Southern Sudanese community would have expected the couple to reunite. Practitioners also had to inform clients that if they thought that the children were at risk of harm, Child Protection would be notified.

Similarly, in Southern Sudanese culture, confidentiality is understood to mean that information should be maintained within a tribal or family group or amongst those who are affected by that information. Consequently, there was an expectation from some clients that practitioners could disclose information about their partner to them. This was sometimes difficult for Southern Sudanese practitioners, who challenged traditional practices by maintaining confidentiality (as understood from an Australian perspective) and educated clients about confidentiality in Australia.

#### **5.5.4 Feedback**

Although none of the clients who participated in the mediation program were interviewed for evaluation purposes, it appears as though the program has had positive outcomes for clients, evident anecdotally from the comments made by clients to project workers and practitioners. One couple who participated in joint counselling sessions reported to practitioners that the mediators had become “*..like our new parents*”. Another participant commented:

*“I like the mediation model because it really aims to solve our problems so that we can lead a happy family life”.*

Evidence that the mediation model is accepted and welcomed by the Southern Sudanese community was also validated through the feedback that project workers received from critical reference group members and community elders. Comments about the model from critical reference group participants included:

*“This is a good model because we have mediation in our culture – we did this back home through our elders.”*

*“In Australia, there are mediation services, but they do not always understand our culture and many Sudanese people do not know about this, so this is a good thing to have.”*

Similarly, at the launch of the project, the Presidents of both the Sudanese Community Association of Australia and also the Bor Community Association of Australia each gave short presentations praising the mediation model.

Due to the positive responses from clients, the Migrant Information Centre will incorporate the mediation program into its service, through the Humanitarian

Relationships Program. This service has been promoted through regional newsletters and is available to all Southern Sudanese families.

### **5.6 Manual and DVD “*But here, life is different...*”**

The manual and DVD was completed in November 2008. The final draft of the DVD was seen by members of the critical reference group, community elders and leaders (including the President of the Bor Community Association of Australia and the President and executive committee of the Sudanese Community Association of Australia). Comments made on the DVD and manual were largely very positive and critical reference group members and community elders commented that the DVD was a good representation of the Southern Sudanese community in Melbourne presently.

Within the critical reference groups, there was a feeling that although the DVD and manual are primarily aimed at service providers, once the Southern Sudanese community became aware of the DVD, community members would begin to understand more about the issues leading to family violence. The critical reference group members were very enthusiastic about the DVD and manual and gave much positive feedback on both the finished product and the way that project workers consulted participants about the script and drafts of the DVD.

*“The DVD is good because it is true of our community.”*

*“The Australian community will see that we have a strong culture and that we are not always violent. Sometimes the Australian community might think things about us because they don’t know about the culture. Like back home, women are always in the house, they stay in the house all day. That is our role there. Australian people need to learn about this, to know us.”*

*“The DVD really helps to explain the kinds of problems within our families and the conflicts in our community. It will help the Australian community to know these things about us.”*

*“We don’t want the DVD to say anything bad about the community, so it is good for us to watch it and help with the script and tell you what to change.”*

*“It was good that we helped with the script and watched the draft. This was a very good way, because we could add our ideas and make it like real life, a real story.”*

Only some steering committee participants saw drafts of the DVD, as it was screened at meetings that were poorly attended. Project workers tried to organise individual meetings with steering committee members to gather feedback on the DVD, but few participants responded. Similarly, project workers sent out all chapters of the manual to steering committee participants for comments and feedback at various times throughout the duration of the project, however, few participants responded.

Following the launch there was very positive feedback about the resource. Project workers handed one resource out to every person who attended the launch; however, after watching the DVD during the launch, many participants approached project workers wanting additional copies. To date, 300 copies have been distributed to service providers across metropolitan and rural Victoria and Queensland. One bi-lingual worker also sent a copy to a former colleague in Southern Sudan, who is working in a community service.



## **5.7 Community Education and Awareness Raising Program**

The community education and awareness raising program was implemented in February and March 2008. The program gave an opportunity for the Southern Sudanese community to gain specific knowledge on issues and topics identified by the critical reference groups as issues that can cause conflict and lead to violence in families. Through the opportunity to actively engage with topics presented, participants appeared to gain an awareness and understanding of some of the issues that may ultimately lead to family violence. Providing this information in an informal, comfortable setting created a forum whereby traditional, cultural ideas of male dominance and female subordination could be challenged, whilst providing accurate information to the community about the rights and options that are available to them in Australia.

During the sessions, it became apparent that some participants found changing ideas and attitudes difficult and confronting. When this was discussed with critical reference groups and bi-lingual workers, it appeared that changing these core beliefs can feel like a loss of identity and belonging. Consequently, it may take a long time for some people to accept new ideas and laws within Australia. A full evaluation report of this program has been written (see appendix 2).

## **5.8 Sisters Together Group**

In September 2007 to December 2008, a therapeutic support group for women from Sudanese backgrounds, the *Sisters Together Group* was implemented by the MIC. The Sisters Together Group provided a safe and supportive environment for Sudanese women who had experienced or were at risk of experiencing family violence to explore options to ensure their safety and that of their children. Building from previous groups implemented with Southern Sudanese women by the MIC, participants were given an opportunity to discuss ideas about abuse and were given tools to develop alternative narratives for themselves particularly in relation to their role in the family within a new cultural environment.

Although it appeared that some participants were beginning to understand their positions within society, their rights and their own abilities to make informed decisions about their lives, many were still resistant to taking action or to publicly acknowledge their support of particular ideas or practices. Consequently, it became apparent that changes in attitudes and perceptions of the role and status of Southern Sudanese women within the wider Southern Sudanese community would take a long time. Groups such as the Sisters Together Group are an important process to support this change both in the short term for those women who are prepared to act quickly on their learning to ensure their own safety and that of their children as well as for those who are reluctant to do so. As a result, there is a need to continue these groups to empower Sudanese women on an on-going basis. A full evaluation report of the Sisters Together Group program has been written (see appendix 3).

## **6. Future Directions**

In 2009 the MIC will continue the work of the project through the development and implementation of training workshops for service providers based on the learning represented in the manual and DVD. The MIC will also implement another community education and awareness raising program for the Southern Sudanese community in Eastern Melbourne to assist with the prevention of family violence within the community. The family mediation model developed has been incorporated into the core services of the MIC under the FaHCSIA funded Humanitarian Family Relationships program. The MIC is seeking additional funding to undertake a

comprehensive evaluation of the mediation model, documenting case studies and intervention approaches taken by practitioners to more closely examine the effectiveness of the model for families.

## **7. Conclusion**

The utilisation of an action research model proved to be greatly beneficial for the project. The action research approach enabled project workers to work alongside men and women from Southern Sudanese backgrounds at every stage of the project. Project workers were able to reflect on and refine approaches implemented until workable models were found and the learning could be documented in the manual and DVD. Although particular approaches were developed and implemented, the MIC acknowledges that these approaches are a contribution to the learning within the field and not definitive answers to overcome family violence within the Southern Sudanese community. It is hoped that the action research approach will continue as the work of this project is built upon by other community service agencies in the future.

Establishing and regularly consulting participants within the critical reference groups also became a reciprocal process, with many participants reporting that they enjoyed both sharing information and learning from project workers. Similarly, working with community elders also allowed for information to be shared and for the project to be formally acknowledged within the Southern Sudanese community. Although the steering committee appeared less engaged with the project, particular individuals were extremely helpful and encouraging and gave useful advice and feedback.

The mediation model itself, although yet to be fully evaluated appears to be bringing positive outcomes for clients. Practitioners have learnt to be flexible and that having workers from both Southern Sudanese and non-Southern Sudanese backgrounds can be beneficial. Sometimes, clients may feel more comfortable and willing to engage with a Southern Sudanese practitioner and others will prefer a non-Southern Sudanese worker. In some cases the background of the practitioner has not mattered to the client, as long as the practitioner displays an understanding and acknowledgement of traditional culture. Similarly, others in the Southern Sudanese community, including community elders and leaders have been very supportive of the model.

By continuing the implementation of the mediation model, it is hoped that best outcomes can be attained for women and men from Southern Sudanese backgrounds, whilst the safety of women and children is always upheld. The continuation of the family mediation model will also allow for the MIC to continue working alongside the Southern Sudanese community, including women, men and community elders and leaders to assist with the prevention and intervention of family violence within the Southern Sudanese community in Australia. Similarly, through the distribution of the DVD and manual to community service providers across Australia, it is hoped that service providers can draw on the learning gathered by the MIC and continue to work positively with the Southern Sudanese community in Australia.

## 8. Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Steering Committee Evaluation Questions

1. How many Steering Committee meetings did you attend (approximately if you do not know)?.....

2. There was quite a low attendance rate at the Steering Committee meetings. Was there something that prevented you from attending more meetings? Please comment.

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3. What would have encouraged you to attend more meetings?

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4. Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the items below using the scale below by placing the corresponding number next to each item. with each of the following items using the scale below and tick the corresponding box:

	Extremely Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
A. Meeting times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B. Regularity of meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C. Location of meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D. Relevance of topics discussed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
E. Meeting structure and procedures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comments:

**5. The Steering Committee was established to achieve the following aims. Please rate how successful you believe the Steering Committee to have been in achieving these aims.**

A. To provide expertise, advice, recommendations and support for each phase of the project

Very successful	Somewhat successful	Neither successful nor unsuccessful	Unsuccessful	Very unsuccessful
1	2	3	4	5

B. To plan and assist in the development and implementation of culturally appropriate service responses to overcome gaps in the service system as identified by the Southern Sudanese community

1	2	3	4	5
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C. To share resources, knowledge and skills.

1	2	3	4	5
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D. To reflect on the learnings and information gathered from the critical reference group meetings.

1	2	3	4	5
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E. To promote the development of the project to interested parties (i.e. own agencies, clients, relevant networks etc)

1	2	3	4	5
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F. To endorse the Manual and DVD.

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G. To give direction and participate in monitoring and evaluation of the project.

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**Comments:**

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**6. How do you think this project will assist the community service sector in Melbourne?**

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**7. How did attending the Steering Committee for this project benefit you and/or your agency?**

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**8. In what ways could the Steering Committee have been more effective for you and your agency?**

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**9. Was the dissemination of information and consultation process by the MIC adequate to meet your needs and to keep you informed about the project? Please comment.**

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**10. How could this have been improved?**

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**11. Other comments about the Steering Committee and/or your involvement with the project?**

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## Appendix 2

### Community Education and Awareness Raising Program for the Southern Sudanese Community

#### Evaluation Report

##### 1. Background

The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) received funding from the Australian Government, Office of Women to pilot an innovative project aimed at establishing culturally appropriate service responses for the prevention and intervention of family violence in Southern Sudanese families.

Through community consultations and case work with newly arrived families from Southern Sudan, MIC staff have identified that family violence is a significant issue that is impacting on family relationships in the Southern Sudanese community. This has also been identified by other research, see for example, "A Study of Domestic Violence among Women attending a Medical Centre in Sudan", (Ahmen A.M. and Elmardi A.E., *Le Revue de Sante de la Mediterranee Orientale*, Vol 11, No 1/2, 2005 pp164-174), "Two Cultures: One Life" (Mitchell J., Kaplan I. and Crowe L., Community Development Journal Advance Press, 2006: pp. 1-17). Family violence amongst Southern Sudanese families has also been identified as a significant issue within the community by Police and women's refuge workers as well as by community agencies and support groups.

Southern Sudanese culture is a patriarchal culture where men are the head of the family and as such they are responsible for providing for their family. The women's role is to maintain the home, cook for the family including extended family members and care for the children. As the head of the family, men have a responsibility to discipline their wives and children. Although forms of discipline vary from family to family, generally acceptable discipline is methods that do not cause what the community considers *serious harm*, which includes broken bones or injuries that cause bleeding. Hitting or striking to cause bruising is generally acceptable.

In Australia, some men particularly those with low English proficiency are struggling to secure employment, find affordable secure housing and provide sufficient money to maintain their family in food, clothes and other necessities. In community consultations and in Men's Groups held at the MIC, many men have expressed frustration that Australian culture empowers women because Australian laws forbid them to discipline their wives and children, supports and encourages family breakdown through family violence laws and pays child support money to mothers rather than fathers even when the family is living together. In addition, anecdotal evidence from Southern Sudanese women, Settlement Workers, Victoria Police, teachers and refuge workers indicate that there has been an increase in family breakdown due to family violence.

Traditional Western approaches appear not to be meeting the needs of these families. Members of the Southern Sudanese community are often unfamiliar with counselling and they are reluctant to talk about family matters to a "stranger" who does not understand their culture. The women do not understand that Australian laws represent human rights

and they are entitled to expect a safe home environment where they are not subject to abuse - verbal, financial, emotional, sexual or physical from their husbands and other male relatives. They equate Australian laws with Australian culture and compare them to Southern Sudanese culture and many women try to use Australian laws to gain some power in their family and stop men from abusing them.

The community education and awareness raising program was developed to complement the implementation of a new family mediation service, which is being piloted as part of the project. While the mediation model has been developed to assist Southern Sudanese families who have experienced or are at risk of family violence, the community education and awareness raising program is a preventative strategy, designed to initiate a shift in thinking amongst members of the Southern Sudanese community in Melbourne.

The aim of the community education and awareness raising program was to increase community understanding of the impact of family violence on women and children, the rights of all people to safety and alternative ways for couples to interact with one another within a new cultural and legal environment in Australia. The objectives of the program were to:

- challenge the idea of unconditional male dominance and authority and the subordination of women
- dispel myths or misunderstandings that may be held within the Southern Sudanese community around various aspects of Australian culture in relation to Australian laws, gender roles and human rights
- raise awareness amongst members of the Southern Sudanese community on the role of community and legal services that can assist families who may be experiencing family conflict or family violence
- to raise awareness amongst members of the Southern Sudanese community on issues that may impact negatively on families and how to overcome and/or avoid these

## **2. Program Outline**

Session topics were developed in consultation with members of the project's critical reference groups, comprised of members of the Southern Sudanese community living in the Eastern Region of Melbourne. The topics reflect issues the critical reference group participants identified as problematic or misunderstood within the Southern Sudanese community in Melbourne at present. Topics identified include:

- Victorian Family Laws and the Victorian court and judicial system in relation to family violence, marriage relationships and custody of children.
- The role of the Police in Australia, including when it is appropriate to call the Police to intervene in family affairs.
- The division of Centrelink payments between husbands and wives and why some family members receive higher payments than others.
- How families can budget their money for the best possible outcomes for the whole family.
- How families can overcome problems without resorting to violence.

From these topics, four information sessions were developed. Speakers from local health, community and legal agencies were approached to give presentation on various topics during the sessions. The sessions were held on Wednesday evenings each fortnight for eight weeks and each session was scheduled to run for 2.5 hours. All sessions were held

at the Migrant Information Centre, except for one, which was held at the Ringwood Magistrates' Court. The session titles and speakers who participated is outlined below.

<b>Session Title</b>	<b>Topics Covered</b>	<b>Speakers</b>
<i>1. Family Problems and Victoria Police: Working Together for the Benefit of the Sudanese community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The role of the Victorian Police in attending and assisting with family violence incidents.</li> <li>• What to do if you or someone you know is in a family violence incident and when to call the Police.</li> <li>• Explanation of a new program at the MIC to assist Sudanese families experiencing family conflict or family violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Violence Advisor, Region 4</li> <li>• Chief Inspector, Region 4, Victoria Police (Nunawading Police Station)</li> <li>• Bi-lingual project workers from MIC</li> </ul>
<i>2. What happens in court? A trip to the Ringwood Court</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background on the family court system and structure.</li> <li>• How and when to apply for an Intervention Order and what happens if an Intervention Order is taken out against you.</li> <li>• The role of VCAT and how to access VCAT services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Magistrate</li> <li>• Registrar</li> <li>• VCAT officer (Ringwood Magistrates' Court)</li> </ul>
<i>3. Managing money as a family team in Australia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanation of various Centrelink payments and the division of payments between husbands and wives.</li> <li>• How to write, manage and stick to a weekly or monthly budget, working together as a family team.</li> <li>• Loans and borrowing money.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centrelink Social Worker and Customer Service Officers (Centrelink, Box Hill)</li> <li>• Financial Counsellor (Eastern Access Community Health Service)</li> </ul>
<i>4. Family Relationships: Happy and healthy families in Australia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The role and services of Family Relationship Centres.</li> <li>• Conflict resolution and anger management strategies; examples of how to overcome conflicts experienced between husbands and wives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Relationships Centre (Ringwood)</li> <li>• Family Counsellor (MIC)</li> </ul>

### **3. Community Engagement and Participation**

Best practice methods to undertake when engaging with the community were investigated by project workers to encourage maximum participation at the sessions. Critical reference group participants advised not to make direct reference to family violence or family problems in the promotion of the sessions. Participants commented that the stigma surrounding family violence within the community and the shame attached to admitting that there is conflict or violence within one's family may deter people from attending a session that makes direct reference to these. Consequently, language used by project workers was simple and non-threatening, making no reference to family conflict or family violence.



Invitation flyers were developed and translated into Sudanese (Juba) Arabic and sent to all Southern Sudanese clients known to the MIC (around 200 individuals) by post. MIC staff members were also asked to promote the sessions to Southern Sudanese clients and through their professional networks. Flyers were also posted on notice boards around the MIC. Participants of the critical reference groups were asked to promote the sessions through their personal networks. As sessions were held in the evenings, a light dinner was provided at the conclusion of each session. This was advertised on the flyers.

To encourage maximum participation, community elders and leaders who live in the Eastern Region were also contacted and asked to promote the sessions. Flyers were given to elders and leaders to distribute amongst community members who they thought would be interested or benefit from the sessions. Project workers made reminder phone calls to individuals who expressed interest in attending the sessions and to people who had attended the preceding session. There was a greater attendance when follow up phone calls were made to individuals on the day of the session, to invite people again to attend and to remind those who may have forgotten that the session was on to come along.

An informal atmosphere was created to allow for people to feel comfortable and for discussion to flow freely during the sessions. This was done through having tea and coffee available during the sessions, which project workers invited participants to make at anytime, allowing people time to mingle together with each other and with project workers before the presentations began and by setting up the rooms with chairs in a casual fashion, in small rows that allowed for participants to turn to face each other as well as facing the presenters.

In the final session, 6 children were present. The children were given paper and coloured pencils and encouraged to sit at a table at the back of the room and draw while their parents participated in the session. A project worker sat with and attended to them to allow for their parents to concentrate on the session.

Previous work with the Southern Sudanese community has shown that people are not always familiar with Western concepts of timeliness and thus do not always arrive places on time. Subsequently, additional time was scheduled for each session, to allow for people to arrive late and not miss too much of the presentations. Presenters were made aware of this. Sessions mostly started approximately 30 minutes after the scheduled starting time.

Attendance lists, where community members were asked to write down their contact details were kept at the sessions and these details were used to contact individuals by phone to invite them personally to future sessions. Project workers found that where reminder phone calls were made to community members, there was greater attendance at the sessions. Attendance at the sessions was 12, 20, 7 and 14 respectively. The 6 children present in the final session have not been included as participants on attendance lists.

At the conclusion of presentations, time was allocated for participants to ask questions. Participants were also encouraged by presenters to participate during some sessions, offering examples from their own experiences on topics and issues being discussed. Southern Sudanese culture incorporates an oral tradition, where people enjoy and

encourage discussion and debate on different topics. This was evident during sessions, as participants engaged well with presenters, always asking numerous questions and offering examples. Participants also appeared to enjoy the opportunity to speak with each other on topics presented in the formal environment of the information sessions. Individuals sometimes answered each other's questions or gave others advice and suggestions to assist in overcoming problems that were presented.

Some participants expressed disappointment that the second session, *What happens in court? A trip to the Ringwood Court* went overtime, not leaving sufficient time for participants to engage with presenters and one another in discussions on the topics covered. This feedback was relayed to workers at the Ringwood Court, who have since invited members of the Southern Sudanese community back to the court for a second session, where participants were invited to share ideas and information about issues affecting the Southern Sudanese community in the Eastern Region and on traditional Southern Sudanese laws and methods of problem solving.

#### **4. Evaluation Methodology**

Feedback sheets were developed and distributed at three of the four sessions. As some of the Southern Sudanese community have low levels of literacy (both in English and in their first language) a simple, rating scale feedback sheet was developed, with pictures to indicate levels of satisfaction with the sessions, how much new information was attained and usefulness of the information presented. Some short answer questions were also asked to allow for further comments and feedback on the parts of the sessions that participants found most/least useful, how sessions could be improved in the future, the best time of day for information sessions to be held and other comments about the session. Each feedback form was slightly different to allow for specific questions relating to each session to be asked (Appendix 1).

Notes and reflections were kept by project workers who attended the sessions and by a community development worker from the Ringwood Family Relationships Centre who attended three of the four sessions.

#### **5. Community Feedback**

At the completion of each session, participants were asked to complete a feedback form, which was designed to measure the success of each session. Feedback forms were not distributed at the conclusion of session two, *What happens in court? A trip to the Ringwood Court*, as the session ran overtime and the bi-lingual project workers advised that participants wanted to leave and it would not be appropriate to hand out feedback forms. The session went overtime partly due to having to interpret into two languages, both Sudanese Arabic and Dinka (a Southern Sudanese tribal dialect), as not all participants spoke the same language. This was not anticipated by project workers and this was the only session in which one interpreter was insufficient.

Although most of the feedback gathered with the feedback forms was positive, project workers observations of participants' responses sometimes appeared contradictory to their written responses. An analysis of the feedback and observations gathered is discussed below.

#### **Session 1. Family Problems and the Victorian Police: Working Together for the Benefit of the Sudanese community**

In this session, all 12 participants completed and returned the feedback sheets. The feedback indicates that 75% of participants learnt 'a lot of new information' about the role of the Police in Australia. Participants provided the following comments regarding what they found the most useful and interesting about the session.

*How laws apply when it comes to family violence.*

*Laws and conflict in Australia.*

*The information provided was useful and it develops a sense of leadership and fully understanding of our laws and comparing them with our culture.*

The feedback on the new MIC program to assist Southern Sudanese families was also positive, indicated by 75% of participants who stated they thought the new family violence program would be 'very useful' for the community. Comments and feedback about the new service model is indicated below.

*This program is the best for our people within the community.*

*The program is working with our community, so we should support this model.*

*I have to say thank you for your program, it should help our people in the community. So thank you very much.*

*This is best work. Thank you.*

Overall, 100% of participants stated they were 'very pleased' with the session and similarly, 100% stated that the information presented was 'very useful'. Nevertheless, when engaged in discussions with the Police officers, there were many oppositions and challenges to the information presented. It appeared that for some community members, despite having the Victorian Laws and the role of Victoria Police explained clearly to them, they were reluctant to change their attitudes towards women, their right to discipline their wives and who should be involved in family affairs. Some participants commented that the Police should let the Sudanese community deal with issues and problems within families, with some participants challenging the notion of Police involvement in domestic issues all together.

From the comments made, it appeared that some male participants saw the challenge to male dominance and authority in families in Australia as a direct attack on Southern Sudanese culture. However, this was not the attitude of all participants, evident as other participants present challenged the views of these men, reinforcing the notion of abiding by the law in Australia and allowing the Police to do their job. Some of the participants who challenged the men were community elders, recognised and respected members of the Southern Sudanese community in Australia, whose advice and guidance is usually highly regarded. Consequently, it appears that while some members of the Southern Sudanese community have changed their attitudes towards male dominance and the Australian law, for others, this may take more time.

Comments made on how the session could be improved indicate that participants recognised this session as important and worthwhile.

*Invite more people to attend. This is a very important session.*

*If we can have case studies to prove or endorse arguments, that can give us a closer look at the issues.*

*Find out through research about our people.*

### **Session 2. What happens in court? A trip to the Ringwood Court**

This session had the largest audience, with 20 people in attendance. Although a Sudanese Arabic interpreter was available for this session, there were some participants who spoke neither Arabic nor English. During this session, a participant from the critical reference group who is a trained interpreter volunteered to interpret into Dinka (Southern Sudanese tribal language) for these participants. Having the information presented in three languages meant that the session went for longer than anticipated. At the conclusion of the session, bi-lingual project workers advised that it would be inappropriate to hand out feedback forms, as participants wanted to leave.

Discussions between project workers and participants following the sessions indicated that participants found a lot of the information new and much of it useful. Some participants advised project workers that they were annoyed that the presentations had run overtime and there was less time for discussion and questions.

Reports from staff at the court indicate in the 3 weeks following the session, there was a significant increase in the number of Sudanese women presenting at the court to apply for Intervention Orders. This may be an indication of an increase in knowledge of different options available to women through the courts as was presented during the information session, however, it is unknown whether there is a direct correlation between the session and the rise in Intervention Orders. The number of women presenting at court to apply for Intervention Orders has since decreased.

### **Session 3. Managing money as a family team in Australia**

Seven people attended this session and 6 people completed the feedback forms. Although the attendance was low, participants appeared to engage well with the speakers and the issues presented during the session. One hundred per cent of participants reported that they were 'very pleased' with the session overall. Seventy-five per cent of participants stated that they found the information presented by Centrelink 'very useful' and similarly, 100% of participants reported that they found the presentation on budgeting to be 'very useful'. This is evident in the comments noted by participants when asked what they found most useful about the session.

*I learnt how to manage money and be cleared from debts.*

*Getting to know the cost of a loan and my rights regarding paying it back.*

*We learnt good new information today and information to help me in my life.*

A community development worker from the Family Relationships Centre who observed the session commented that participants appeared "...*curious and engaged*" with the speakers and the topics presented. The worker commented that the small attendance did not affect the success of the session. This was also evident in the numerous questions that were

asked of both speakers during their presentations and comments made about the session overall.

*Thank you it was very educative and informative.*

*I would like to come again to learn more good things for my life.*

When asked how the session could be improved, most comments focussed on having longer or more frequent sessions, indicating a need or want for the information to be further disseminated or more deeply explored within the community.

*Holding workshops frequently or on a weekly basis.*

*Offer more time or make it a little bit longer to get the most information.*

*Teaching people at home and telling them how to contact you.*

#### **Session 4. Family Relationships**

The fourth session focussed on family relationships, including family conflict and family breakdown. Fourteen people attended the session, but only 6 feedback forms were completed. Most participants (83%) commented that they found the presentation from the Family Relationships Centre 'very useful', and 66% claimed that they learnt 'a lot' of new information. Despite this positive feedback from the participants, presenters from the Family Relationships Centre were not convinced that their presentation was well received.

*At the conclusion of our presentation, we found that there were very few questions from the Sudanese community members in regards to our presentation... I left the evening wondering whether the information we provided about the Ringwood Family Relationship Centre was possibly so far removed from the life experience of the Sudanese, that what we had to say wasn't at all accessible for this community.*

The presentation, which focussed on services available to couples post-separation through the Family Relationships Centre, may have been inaccessible to the Southern Sudanese community due to the cultural understandings and expectations of marriage relationships. In Southern Sudanese culture, divorce is rare and frowned upon by the wider community. Similarly, the dowry system dictates that children who are born as a result of marriage 'belong' to their father, meaning that if divorce does take place, the man wins automatic custody. Although the information presented may have been difficult to understand or contextualise, some community members found the presentation delivered new information about a service that they did not know existed.

*The presentation from the Family Relationships Centre helped people to learn about a service that they did not know existed before. People learnt that there is that place where they can go to get help. – Bilingual Project Worker*

The second presentation on conflict resolution was practical and interactive, which participants responded well to. Through practical examples, the family violence counsellor presented a range of conflict resolution strategies for families to implement at home. When asked if participants would use the conflict maps and other conflict resolution

strategies presented in the session, 66% responded 'yes, definitely' (the remaining 33% did not respond to this question).

There were a number of unexpected outcomes from this session, which are not recorded on the feedback sheets. To demonstrate how a husband and wife might overcome conflict in the family, a fictional scenario was created, whereby the wife wanted to buy a new sofa while the husband wanted to save the money for the future. Conflict resolution strategies were explained and there was much discussion around how the couple could overcome the conflict. Although most participants engaged well with the topic, one participant commented that the conflict resolution strategies presented were not culturally relevant to the Southern Sudanese community. When this was explored further, it became apparent that this participant was using a Southern Sudanese cultural framework, whereby husbands and wives do not stand on a level playing field when addressing family issues.

Traditionally, and for many families in Melbourne, Southern Sudanese husbands are seen as the head of the family and are therefore the people responsible for decision making within the family. Consequently, if the husband in the example decided that the family needed to save money, the wife should agree rather than argue with him. The presenter challenged this idea, focussing on the wants and fears of each party, explaining that if only one party makes the decisions to which the other party disagrees, one party will always be left feeling unhappy, which may lead to further conflict. It was explained that instead, the wants and needs of both husbands and wives need to be considered in building a happy marriage and family life in Australia. There appeared to be mixed responses to this.

When participants were asked to identify another problem where the conflict resolution strategies could be used, one participant identified a scenario which was happening in her family. The participant explained that her mother was dying in the Sudan and needed the family to urgently send money for medical treatment, however, the family faced a dilemma, as the husband's mother was also dying and the money needed to be sent to her, in a different part of the Sudan. The participant asked the presenter how to solve this problem. Through examples such as these, it is apparent that the challenges faced by some Southern Sudanese families in Australia that may lead to instances of family conflict or family violence are large, human rights issues, which may not be overcome with the conflict resolution strategies presented. When this issue was explored further, it was discovered that the truth had been embellished and each mother was sick, but neither seriously ill nor near death. From this, the presenter explored strategies of compromise that could be implemented that enough money could be sent to each mother in turn.

From this discussion, it became evident that participants sought immediate solutions that solve problems on the spot. It also appears that individuals may embellish or exaggerate the truth in order to attain their desired outcome. Bi-lingual project workers confirmed that this often happens within the Southern Sudanese community, individuals trying to make their cases stronger by bending the truth. Abstract concepts of couples and families working together to build their relationships over time or creating certain, positive patterns of behaviour in the present that may result in better outcomes in the long term appear unfamiliar to participants. Similarly, challenging cultural constructions of identities, roles within families and the way things were done in the Sudan also appeared a difficult process. Nevertheless, participants gave positive verbal and written feedback to project workers and gave much praise of the session on the feedback sheets provided.

## **8. Conclusion**

The community education and awareness raising program gave an opportunity for the Southern Sudanese community to gain specific knowledge on issues and topics that they may have previously known little about. Through the opportunity to actively engage with topics present, participants appeared to gain an awareness and understanding of some of the issues that may ultimately lead to family violence. Providing this information in an informal, comfortable setting created a forum whereby traditional, cultural ideas of male dominance and female subordination could be challenged, whilst providing accurate information to the community about the rights and options that are available to them in Melbourne.

## Appendix 3: Sisters Together Group Evaluation Report

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## **1. Background**

The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) received 12 months funding from the Australian Government, Office for Women to develop and pilot culturally appropriate service models to prevent and respond to family violence in Southern Sudanese families.

The project utilised an Action Research model, regularly consulting with members of the Sudanese community through the establishment of two Critical Reference Groups – one with women and the other with men. These groups provided invaluable insight into Sudanese culture, assisted in the promotion of the program amongst Sudanese elders and families and contributed to the development of culturally appropriate prevention and intervention responses in addressing family violence and maintaining the safety of women and children.

The *Sisters Together Group* was one component of the project, providing an opportunity to develop and implement a group program to provide support, education and a chance for discussions to assist Sudanese women who had experienced, were experiencing or were at risk of family violence.

Other components of the project included a family mediation program incorporating both Sudanese and Australian mediation models, a community education and awareness raising program and working with Sudanese community elders and leaders to increase their knowledge of Family Law in Australia, promote the mediation program and encourage families at risk of or experiencing family violence to seek mediation and access the program.

The women's group program commenced in October 2007 and was completed in December 2007. The program built on the significant work of three previous groups facilitated by the Migrant Information Centre for Sudanese women who were at risk of, experiencing or had experienced family violence. Many of the women who participated in the Sisters Together Group had participated in at least one of the three previous group programs. The development and implementation of the group, including topics covered and methods of engaging with participants in the Sisters Together Group built on the learning attained from the three previous programs. This report is an evaluation of the program from the perspectives of the women who participated in the program and the group facilitators.

## **2. Target Group**

The program targeted Sudanese women who had participated in at least one of the three previous Migrant Information Centre group programs during 2006 and 2007 and other women who had approached the MIC for participation in the family mediation program. The Sisters Together Group was also advertised amongst service providers and Sudanese community groups in the Eastern Region of Melbourne to encourage other Sudanese women who had experienced or were at risk of family violence to attend.

Once the group had commenced, participants also advertised the group to their friends and relatives and encouraged isolated women within the Sudanese community to attend sessions.

Previous experience working with the Sudanese community indicated that the issue of family violence was culturally sensitive. The Sudanese community is a small and emerging community and many are related to each other. It was important that the

community viewed the group positively. There is a perception generally held by the community (particularly by men) that the Australian service system is geared towards supporting women and assisting them to leave their husbands.

To minimise a negative community response to the program, the MIC promoted the program as *Creating Peace and Love within Families: Sudanese Women's Discussion Group*. It was important that community members did not perceive the group as promoting family breakdown as husbands and relatives would not allow the women to attend. In addition, given the strong acceptance within Sudanese culture that women should be submissive and respect and obey their husband and other male relatives, it was important to the women themselves that they did not attend a group that promoted family breakdown.

To further decrease stigma within the community for attending a women's group focused on family and relationships a respected community leader was employed as the interpreter and bi-lingual worker. She provided insight into the cultural understandings of concepts and ideas discussed in the group.

### **3. Participants and Attendance**

The group was co-facilitated by a family counsellor and two project workers, one of whom was a bi-lingual worker who also acted as an interpreter, interpreting into both Sudanese Arabic and Nuer (the tribal dialect spoken by some participants). The family counsellor set the topics for each session and led the group discussion. The two project workers assisted in the provision of the logistical, administrative and organisational support to the group and assisted in facilitating some parts of the discussion and activities during sessions.

Although the role of the bi-lingual worker was primarily to interpret, she often participated in the sessions, asking questions and making comments along with participants. This appeared to make participants feel more comfortable within the group and rapport between this worker and participants was developed immediately. It also allowed for the bi-lingual worker to engage some participants in further discussions or debriefing both before and after the sessions, where she spent time casually socialising with participants, speaking in Sudanese languages.

The program was originally scheduled to run for 8 weeks, however, an additional session was held to make up for the session in week 3 when the family counsellor was away sick. During week 3, a general discussion was held around how family conflict was overcome in the Sudan and how it could best be overcome within the Australian context.

The group was held every Thursday from 5.30pm to 7.30pm. The day of the week was chosen according to the availability of the venue and location of childcare facilities as most of the women registered for the group had at least 3 children each. There was a degree of continuity and familiarity for the women, as the same venue was used as for the previous three groups. The program was held at Eastern Access Community Health Centre in Ringwood. Due to the large number of children, three childcare workers were employed, one of whom was Sudanese.

All women who attended the group had attended at least one of the preceding groups facilitated by the MIC. Attendance over the nine sessions was 7, 8, 6, 6, 5, 5, 3, 6, 6 respectively. Two women only attended one session each. One participant attended the first 5 sessions, but then stopped attending as her car broke down and she had no other transport to attend the group. All participants were phoned by the bi-lingual worker on the day of the group, to remind them about the session that evening and

encourage them to attend. Sudanese culture is essentially an oral culture and utilising 'word of mouth' by ringing people each week is culturally appropriate to promote attendance at meetings.

#### **4. Aims and Objectives**

The aim of the Sisters Together Group program was to support, empower and assist Sudanese women to make informed decisions to enable them to create a safe family environment for themselves and their children.

The objectives of the program were to:

- promote safety of women and children
- create an environment where women who are experiencing, or at risk of, family violence feel safe and able to seek support
- assist participants to identify and favour new narratives that focussed on self actualisation
- empower participants through allowing a space for leadership, self-expression and ownership of personal space
- allow an opportunity for regular reflection on personal situations, sharing ideas and allowing time for discussion for participants

#### **5. Program Development**

Learning from the three group programs held by the MIC was used in the development and implementation of the Sisters Together Group. Key knowledge and learning gathered included:

- Direct approaches used in family violence groups to generate discussion about family violence were not appropriate for women from Sudanese backgrounds. The program needed an indirect approach of impersonal general discussion of family violence to build trust amongst the women and encourage them to talk about their own experiences.
- Confidentiality has a different meaning in Sudanese culture. In Sudanese culture, confidentiality involves maintaining family problems within the tribe. It is culturally unacceptable to talk about family problems outside the extended family or tribe. For groups that include women from different tribes, there is a need to define what is meant by confidentiality within an Australian context at the commencement of each group. However, it takes considerable time for participants to trust each other and believe that information disclosed during the group will not be spread widely amongst the community.
- Eight weeks was not sufficient time to empower Sudanese women to make informed choices about their lives. A number of cultural issues impacted on the program i.e. the cultural differences and understanding of 'abuse' and the need to provide a flexible group environment that enabled women to develop trust and confidence in talking about their experiences and responses.
- A minimum of eight weeks is required to increase participant's understanding of family violence as a human rights issue rather than a cultural issue i.e.

many women believed that family violence was acceptable in Sudanese culture but not acceptable in Australian culture.

- Childcare was essential for Sudanese women to attend group programs, as it is common for Sudanese women to have numerous children in their full time care.
- Group programs for women that require interpreters need a minimum of double the time planned for an English speaking group to explore the same issues and strategies that could empower participants to make informed choices to ensure their safety and that of their children.
- Participants often arrive late and enjoy spending time casually socialising together before the group commences. This provided an opportunity for regular social interaction that many participants lacked in their lives, consequently decreasing social isolation for some participants.

### **5.1 Theoretical Underpinnings**

Sudanese culture is one of dominant patriarchy. This is based on the Sudanese cultural traditions of definitive gender roles, where the man is the head of the household and is responsible for making decisions for the entire family. Women, whose responsibilities include caring for children, cooking, cleaning and domestic duties in the home are thought to be 'good' (by men and women) if they are submissive to their husbands and do not object to the decisions that they make. These ideas are reinforced through the cultural practice of dowry payment, whereby families of men pay a dowry or bride price (usually using the currency of cows but in Australia cash is also used) in exchange for a wife.

Even though these cultural ideas were understood, the group was conducted from a feminist perspective recognising the right for all women to be empowered to make informed decisions about their lives. This was done within a framework that provided alternative options and ideas on the roles of men and women.

The family counsellor was white and male. Facilitators were able to use this to model positive interactions between men and women through the male counsellor and the female project workers collaborative work during group sessions.

The therapeutic approach deemed most appropriate for the development and implementation of the Sisters Together Group was narrative therapy using a social construction theoretical framework. Narrative therapy was chosen for its usefulness when working cross culturally as it respects different stories and acknowledges the participant's expertise regarding their own life stories. This shifted the focus away from the counsellor's expertise and opened the way for increased collaboration in the therapeutic process.

The social construction theoretical framework considers the ways in which people's social and interpersonal reality is culturally constructed. Social constructions can be defined as the beliefs, values, customs, labels, laws, division of labour, in essence the social reality of the group. In this way societies construct the lenses through which their members interpret the world.

Participants in the preceding groups had identified that they were fearful to go for help, if at risk at home. Women reported being fearful of increasing their husbands' aggression and violence if they went to a community service or the Police if they were at risk. The family counsellor provided participants access to new knowledge

which allowed for alternate ways of expressing themselves and provided information about what to do and where to go if they felt at risk or wanted additional support. This also allowed facilitators to shed some light on possible alternative voices of resistance to this dominant cultural discourse. This was achieved in the group by thickening new narratives and promoting their circulation amongst group participants.

## **6. Program Structure**

Building on the learning from the previous three groups, the Sisters Together Group incorporated three distinct sections which were implemented as part of each session. The three components included a discussion topic, relaxation exercises (including breathing and visualisation exercises, aromatherapy, use of candles and use of soft music) and gentle physical exercises (stretches and strength exercises).

The learning from the previous groups in regards to time was important in the development and implementation of the Sisters Together Group. Designing a very structured, inflexible program would have been inappropriate, so facilitators relied heavily on intuition to gauge the tempo in the group each week and varied the session accordingly. Although the group was due to start at 5.30pm, the group usually did not formally begin until after 6pm. Each session started with the women casually socialising with the bi-lingual worker and each other. This became an important part of the group, as it enabled peer group support through group discussions. It also set a comfortable and safe mood for the sessions and allowed a chance for otherwise socially isolated participants to have regular social contact with other women. Consequently, facilitators ensured there was always time allocated for this informal engagement and support amongst participants before each session formally commenced.

As there was no strict structure to the sessions each of these components could be used interchangeably by the family counsellor. The program was designed to give participants some control over the group process - participants often given a choice by facilitators at the beginning or during sessions about the order that the different components would be undertaken during that session.

### **6.1 Discussion Topics**

The purpose of the topic of discussion was to stimulate critical thought processes in the group and allow for new ideas and narratives around personal safety to emerge. Reflections by the women during the first session confirmed they enjoyed learning new things, as in the previous groups this had proved beneficial to them in their relationships and their lives. Consequently, psycho-education during group discussions was implemented to enable the group to think critically about different topics and issues affecting their lives and to develop skills in reflective thinking.

The family counsellor encouraged participants to speak generally about issues to help create a sense of safety. As the group progressed, some participants began to feel comfortable enough to speak explicitly about issues and incidents that they were experiencing within their relationships with their husbands.

As there is a different understanding of confidentiality within Sudanese culture, the Australian definition of 'confidentiality' was often discussed to help reassure participants that they could disclose information to services without that information spreading through the Sudanese community.

During the first session, participants selected themes they wanted to explore in greater detail in later group sessions. The three topics that participants chose to explore were:

- Raising sons in Australia
- Conflict resolution
- Anger management

Other topics were included by the family counsellor to create the eight-week program as facilitators became aware of issues experienced by participants (See Appendix A). Some topics were explored over two or more sessions and many were revisited as the program progressed. The additional topics included:

- Family origins and family life in Australia
- Emotions and emotional intelligence
- Risks and safety

The discussion generated from these sessions is summarised below.

### **6.1.1 Raising sons in Australia**

When asked about their children, all the participants present had at least one son and some had several. The women commented that in Sudan boys have privileged positions in the household. They described boys as generally being more honored than girls in the house; they are less likely to be disciplined than girls and can have more power than either their sisters or their mother. Participants advised that boys are also less likely to listen to mothers and are often closer to their father. Sisters alternatively are taught to respect their brothers and are treated like 'guests' in the household.

Participants commented that the biggest change in the way that Sudanese families were raising their boys in Australia was in relation to discipline. In the Sudan, it is common for parents to beat their children when they misbehave. The main difference in parenting style is that they are not beating their sons as they are aware that this is against the law. There was a general feeling in the group that because boys are not being beaten in Australia, they are not being disciplined. Some participants commented that they were unsure about how to discipline their children without using physical force and were worried that their children were not learning right from wrong as a consequence.

When asked about other differences between Sudan and Australia the group advised that in Sudan there is often more support from the community as parenting is shared and there is a shared form of child care as family members, relatives and friends assist with raising children.

A number of the women talked about the challenges they experienced in raising boys in Australia and expressed a yearning to "learn Australian styles of parenting". The women gave three examples of the challenges they were experiencing in their parenting.

The first was of a 14 year old boy who did not listen to his mother when he was asked to do simple chores such as cleaning his room and washing himself. Another example was a young boy who refused to get out of bed in the morning as he wanted to "be like dad and sleep in" and the last example related to a six year old boy who did not want to clean up his mess as he claimed it was a "girl's job".

There was a consensus in the group and a sense of frustration at the lack of control the women had over their sons. Participants commented that they often “worry” about many of the young Sudanese boys, particularly the 12 to 14 year old age group in Melbourne, as they are skipping school early and hanging about in Noble Park. Another concern was those “boys who do not come home at night”.

To try to help the women to understand boy’s different relationships with their mothers the concept of the “masculine mystique” was introduced; when at the age of six years old boys begin to identify themselves as different from their mothers. This normalised the feelings the women were raising in the group as they could be understood as part a typical mother son relationship. The difference for these women is that in Sudan the responsibility for disciplining the child rests with the whole community and this had changed for them in Australia.

Regarding what things would assist the women in managing their sons’ behaviours the influence of a positive male role model was generally seen by the group as being especially beneficial in assisting their sons to develop positive behavior. Participants reported being worried about their sons, as the responsibility for parenting generally rested largely with mothers and the boys have very few positive male role models.

As participants gave examples of challenges that they had with their sons, they asked facilitators for practical ways of overcoming their issues. It appeared that participants were after on the spot solutions that they could replicate at home to overcome challenges immediately. To assist participants, facilitators provided a practical strategy around reducing their sons’ exposure to negative, aggressive imagery such as violent television programs and video/computer games, which may be a possible contributory factor in the exaggeration of male stereotypical behaviours. Monitoring their children’s exposure to these things gave these Sudanese women a concrete strategy that they were able to take away from the group and practice at home, which participants appeared to appreciate.

Participants commented that they found it useful to talk about the common experiences that they had with parenting in Australia, as it had helped them to think differently about their relationships with their sons.

### **6.1.2 Family origins and family life in Australia**

The Family Tree Model Activity was introduced in order for the group to look at the interrelationships in their own families and begin to see the family as a whole system rather than just a group of individuals. Facilitators felt this was important in order to move on to the topic of conflict and conflict resolution in families in future sessions.

The purpose of this exercise was for the women to begin to think about their own family as being greater than the sum of its parts and to identify and think about what factors influence the family positively and what factors create problems for families. For this activity, participants were encouraged to draw their own ‘family tree’, where each part of the tree symbolised a different meaning for the women.

Before creating individual family trees, the group discussed each part of the tree together and facilitators encouraged participants to give hypothetical examples of the kinds of things that may be considered for each section of the tree. The sections of the tree were:

- The roots of the tree: the cultural origins of the family
- The trunk: the skills and abilities in the family
- The branches: the family’s hopes and dreams



- The fruits: the gifts from ancestors and family achievements
- The leaves: important people in the family
- The bugs: problems that come into families
- The storms of life: the pressures or problems for families

Colored pens and butchers paper were provided and participants each drew their own family tree. The women were then given the opportunity to talk about their families and their family's journey to Australia. It appeared that some participants may have found this exercise too confronting or inappropriate in some way, or the exercise was not fully understood.

When it came to discussing each section of the family tree as prescribed in the exercise all but one participant chose not to comment on the different aspects of their own families. While this one participant engaged very well with the exercise and shared many parts of her family life, other participants only spoke generally about families and did not disclose any personal information. Others did not participate at all.

### **6.1.3 Conflict resolution**

The idea of conflict maps was introduced to the group as a way of looking at conflict escalation in the family. The group was advised that it was sometimes useful to think about how a conflict can appear and to look at strategies for resolving conflict. The ideas and techniques covered in the group were not being introduced to encourage participants to stay in violent or difficult relationships but rather as an alternative way of thinking about confronting situations. Participants were requested to be mindful of their own and their children's safety and not to view these strategies as an alternative to seeking a place of safety if they found themselves at risk.

The conflict map exercise began with a general discussion around the kinds of problems in families that may lead to conflict. Participants were asked to identify possible problems that may occur in their families. The group was quite responsive to this, listing a number of potential family conflicts that may arise including:

- "unwanted thoughts in your mind"
- "financial problems"
- "no love in families"
- "having to mother children of all different ages"
- "hearing news from back home in Sudan"
- "thinking about things back home"
- "hearing problems but feeling powerless to do anything about it in Australia"
- "feeling stressed about everything"

Participants commented that having these thoughts and feelings can contribute to conflict as it makes you feel angry and aggressive. They further advised that their lack of supports in Australia and their remoteness from their friends and relatives in Sudan made them feel a sense of isolation more acutely, making problem solving more difficult.

Using an apple the family counsellor then introduced the group to the notion of conflict resolution. Cutting the apple, in various ways, the family counsellor used the apple to demonstrate win-win, lose-lose and lose-win situations and stressed that in resolving conflicts the central component in any conflict resolution situation is communication. Without talking about the difficulties, it is impossible to understand

how each person feels and without this empathy there can be no possibility of resolution.

After the facilitator provided examples of ways to resolve conflict, participants were asked to draw their own conflict maps on butcher's paper, using a conflict that had arisen in their own families. When the exercise was explained to the group, some participants began drawing the conflict map template and engaged well with the topic, giving examples and making comments, others however, appeared somewhat distracted or disinterested. Few of the women completed the exercise or filled out the maps with their own conflict issues. As many participants were not engaging with the exercise, the family counsellor went through the exercise on the board, as a group and asked the group to give examples. Some women participated in the exercise this way. It was later commented that some participants have very low English and/or literacy skills, and could therefore not complete the exercise, as it required writing so they were distracted or disengaged as a result.

#### **6.1.4 Risk and safety**

The last three sessions focused on the issues of risk and safety. In the final session the group talked about developing a safety plan and the participants were given a sheet of "safety tips" and information about the contact numbers for different agencies they could approach if they found themselves at risk. None of the participants took the document home. Participants commented that if their husbands found the document, it would cause more problems for them.

Facilitators discussed this with participants and they agreed that they could approach any of the three facilitators at the MIC if they required assistance or felt unsafe at home. Facilitators also suggested that a copy of the document be kept at the MIC and participants could access it if they required assistance, which participants agreed was a good idea.

#### **6.2 Expressing Feelings**

In the final four sessions, a 'feelings' section was introduced, where participants were encouraged to take turns in sharing how they were feeling at that time. The family counsellor was keen to allow the women to embrace a narrative that included a more developed sense of themselves and their own agency. It was hoped that this would empower participants to be more open to talking about issues of personal risk and safety and would give them the knowledge to make informed decisions about how to proceed with taking the appropriate action if required. During this exercise, participants were encouraged to share as much or as little as they felt comfortable. This meant that while some participants shared deep personal stories, others disclosed a single word to describe their current mood.

Often when speaking about personal experiences or feelings, participants spoke in Arabic or Nuer, even if they had high levels of English language skills. Participants may have used their Sudanese languages as a protective barrier, to make personal disclosures to English-speaking facilitators less confronting. Speaking in Arabic or Nuer may also have been used by participants to ensure that they could adequately express themselves and that meanings were not lost in translation. It is often difficult for people to express deep emotions in their second language regardless of their level of proficiency.

#### **6.3 Relaxation and Gentle Exercise**

The relaxation and exercise components were intended to be fun activities which would allow the group to bond and feel safe. After session four, participants were

encouraged to take turns to volunteer to lead the group through the physical and relaxation exercises each week. Many participants took up this opportunity and encouraged quieter participants to have a go. Having different participants take on the role of leader for these components created a fun and light mood, whilst allowing an opportunity for self expression and empowerment for the women. Having a relaxation component allowed participants to take time to relax and concentrate on themselves.

## **7. Evaluation Methodology**

Focus group style discussions were undertaken with participants in part of session six. Participants were asked a general open-ended question, "What is important to you about this group?" This discussion, facilitated by the family counsellor, allowed participants to explore the aspects of the group that they most enjoyed and to articulate how the group was assisting them.

An evaluation and feedback sheet was developed by facilitators and implemented in session eight. As some participants were illiterate or had low English language skills, the evaluation sheet included seven closed-answer questions, where participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with various aspects of the group. This was done through the use of rating-scales where 10= very good and 1= not good at all. The final question asked participants to select from a list and rate in order of importance the six aspects of the group that they most enjoyed.

To ensure a level of objectivity, the family counsellor and the project worker left the room whilst the bi-lingual worker facilitated the completion of the evaluation sheets, explaining the purpose of the giving feedback, translating each question and assisting participants to complete the questions. It was also requested that the sheets remain anonymous to encourage honesty.

## **8. Feedback**

During session six, when asked why being part of a group was important for them one comment made by participants was that the content of the group discussions was valuable. Some participants advised that they enjoyed learning things and discussing new issues. Some participants also commented that learning things had changed their lives and they would like to learn more practical things that they could do at home to improve their quality of life. Other responses included:

- "meeting people"
- "sharing stories"
- "talking together"
- "talk help" (the name participants put to talking through individual problems within the group and coming up with practical solutions)
- "keeping families together"
- "no relatives in Australia, so this group is my only support"
- "advice and ideas"
- "happiness"
- "exercise and relaxation"
- "discussions on different topics"

The group process was regarded as being particularly important as one participant identified that when participants are socialising together outside of the group and someone is upset, angry or frustrated, group members support each other and encourage that person to practice the ideas and techniques learnt in the group.

Evaluation sheets were completed by six participants. Some participants did not complete all questions. The questions each had a rating scale where 10 = very good (or very useful), 1 = not good at all (or not useful at all). All feedback given on the evaluation sheets was very positive. The feedback indicates that overall, participants mostly enjoyed taking part in the group, illustrated by the high ratings that participants gave (Figure 1).

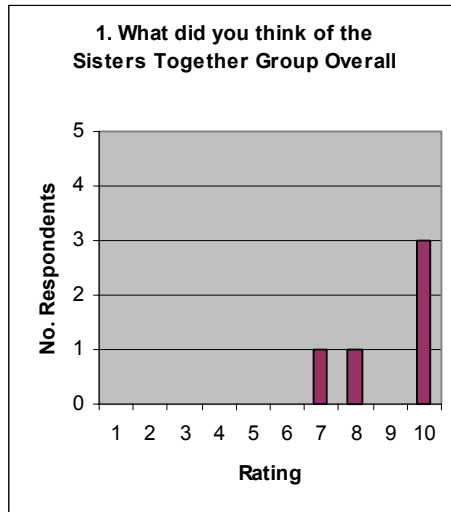


Figure 1

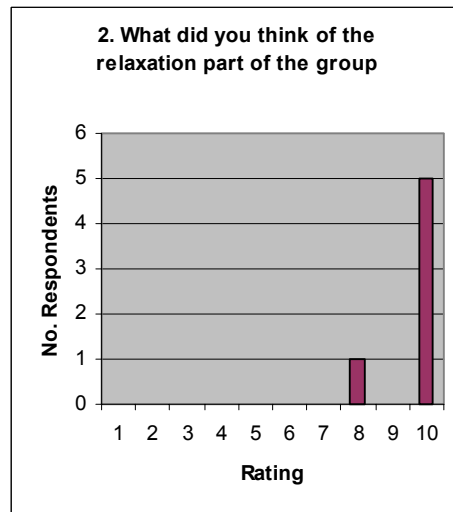


Figure 2

Participants reported enjoying the physical exercise and relaxation components (Figures 2 and 3) and rated the discussion and topics as largely very useful in assisting participants with the issues that they face (Figure 4).

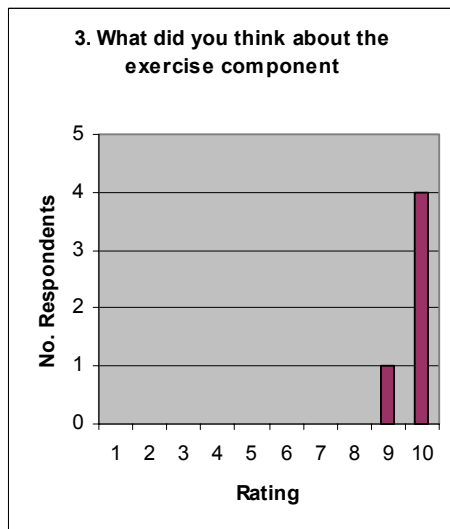


Figure 3

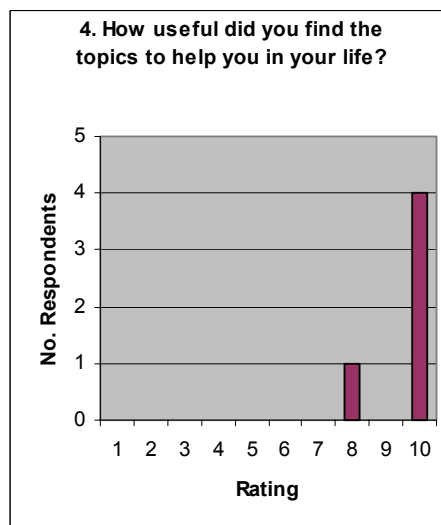


Figure 4

Participants claimed to enjoy talking with other group members and sharing ideas with the group (Figure 5). All participants who answered the question rated having a male facilitator very highly (Figure 6). Similarly, the same number of participants also

scored the activities undertaken during group sessions, such as the family tree and conflict maps exercises with the highest rating (Figure 7).

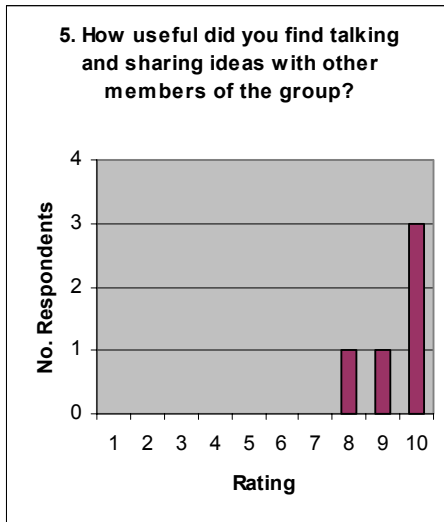


Figure 5

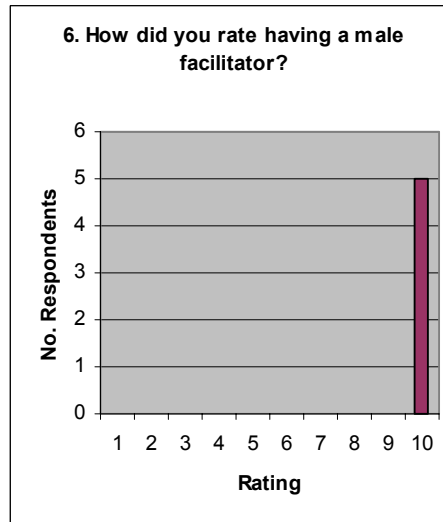


Figure 6

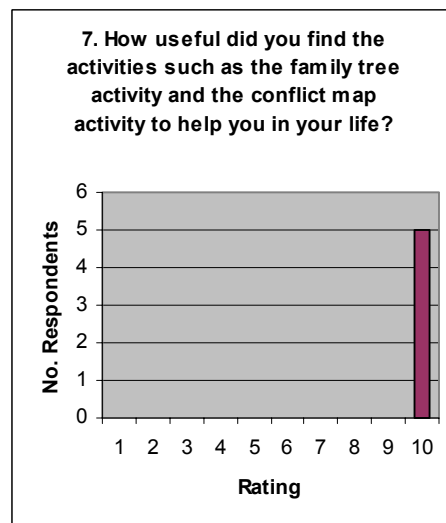


Figure 7

When asked to rate in order of preference the things that participants liked most about the group, participants chose:

1. meeting people and talking together
2. talking about safety
3. gaining advice and ideas
4. 'talk help' (the name participants put to talking through individual problems within the group and coming up with practical solutions - see Figure 8)

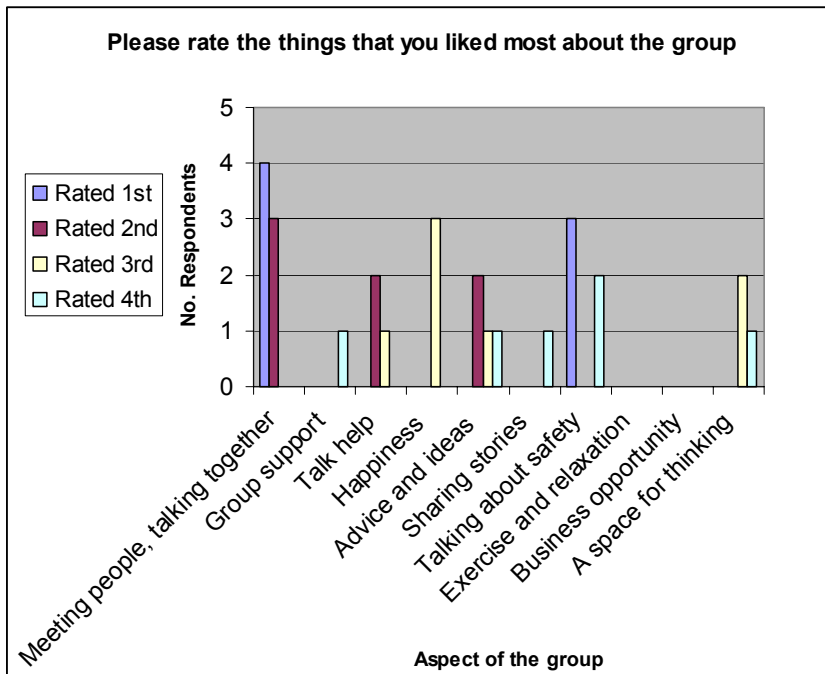


Figure 8

## 9. Key Learning

The Sisters Together Group had an advantage over other groups for Sudanese women in that it was an already established group, developed to work with women who were familiar with some of the issues surrounding family violence. Similarly, as all participants had attended at least one of the previous MIC group programs in the past, all had some idea about what to expect from the group and the topics discussed. This allowed facilitators to use a more progressive approach than they would have otherwise done if working with a group of Sudanese women for the first time who had experienced or were at risk of family violence.

Despite this, facilitators still approached topics carefully and ensured that discussions around violence, although pursued, were facilitated in a way that was not going to deter women from participating. Facilitators became aware that participants responded well to clear, concise ideas about practical, tangible strategies that they could implement within their lives.

Within the group it was vital to have a confident interpreter who was not only able to interpret proficiently but also understand the issues presented and the approaches taken by the facilitators. This was important so that the interpreter did not participate in a way that may have been unhelpful or contradictory to that of the facilitators i.e. offering unhelpful 'advice' to participants about how to resolve problems.

Because of the stressors that emerged for many women within previous groups, a relaxation component was included in the development of the Sisters Together Group. Participants engaged well with this component and were always attentive to facilitators during relaxation (breathing and visualisation exercises) and gentle physical exercises. Upon the suggestion of participants, candles, incense and soft music were also introduced within the group to create a soft, relaxing mood within the room when participants arrived for the session.

Facilitators were able to use these mechanisms to introduce to participants the notion of having time set aside to take care of oneself. Within traditional Sudanese culture, as women are expected to take care of their children, the household and their husbands and relatives, they often have little time set aside for self care. The idea of 'self care' was well received as some participants were eager to have the physical exercises and breathing exercises written on paper so they could practice them at home when they were feeling stressed or upset.

In traditional Sudanese culture, community elders, relatives or friends often instruct individuals what to do within particular situations, giving practical advice to assist them in 'solving' problems. Facilitators learnt that participants usually engaged well when a similar approach was taken within the Sisters Together Group. Often, practical examples of 'real life' scenarios were described to illustrate ideas and draw out discussions. Sometimes participants offered their own examples or experiences from their own lives. Other times, particularly if the issues being discussed were explicitly about incidents of violence, the facilitators created fictional characters and situations. From the scenarios presented, facilitators were able to encourage dialogue around different options that the women in the scenario (and consequently the participants) have available to them. This exposed participants to new ways of looking at situations and allowed an opportunity for education, which assisted to empower participants through the acquisition of comprehensive knowledge.

It was evident that when facilitators used metaphors or discussed topics that were too abstract or intangible, participants often became disinterested, speaking to others around them or leaving the table to make cups of tea or coffee. This was illustrated in some of the group exercises implemented by facilitators. In the *Family Tree* exercise, participants were required to draw a tree on butcher's paper, where each part of the tree represented a different aspect of family life (see Appendix A, Session 4). Although all participants appeared happy to draw their trees, when it came to discussions around what each part of the tree meant for individual participants, very few were willing to disclose personal information. The bi-lingual worker later informed the other facilitators that some participants did not understand the purpose of the exercise, so chose not to participate.

Similarly, when participants found topics too confrontational, there were similar distracted behaviours demonstrated. This indicated to facilitators that the discussion was not progressing in a way that was appropriate or digestible for participants, so a change in fact had to be quickly implemented, using alternate approaches to engage with the issues presented. This was invaluable learning for facilitators, who discovered that a great element of flexibility had to be used in order to maintain concentration of participants.

As the group progressed, it appeared that participants were more willing to undertake discussions that were more confrontational. Participants took more risks within the group as they disclosed personal stories and current problems within the 'feelings' section of sessions. When speaking about personal issues and disclosing information to the group, many participants chose to speak in Sudanese languages, even though they were proficient in English. This appeared to create a protective barrier between themselves and the facilitators and made it easier to speak publicly and honestly about personal issues and attitudes.

The group members acknowledged that at the end of the Sisters Together Group that they would continue to offer each other emotional support. When the family counsellor explored this further the participants noted they could offer advice and encouragement to each other, but they could not offer each other accommodation in

their homes as it would look bad in the community. Participants advised that if they allowed another woman to come to stay at their house their husband would be in trouble with the husband of the women in need and they themselves would be seen as 'troublemakers'. Women advised that they could go to seek safety in the house of their in-laws, but not at the house of a friend.

The women identified another way they could support each other through offering assistance with children. Often fathers did not assist their wives with looking after children. Participants reported that if they needed to go out or do something, without their children they could approach other women from the group for childcare assistance.

## **10. Conclusion**

The Sisters Together Group provided a safe and supportive environment for Sudanese women who had experienced, were experiencing or were at risk of family violence to explore options to ensure their safety and that of their children. Building from previous groups, participants were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of abuse and develop alternative narratives for themselves particularly in relation to their role in the family within a new cultural environment.

By providing practical strategies for alternative ways of behaviour, participants were able to learn new personal skills that they could implement in their lives to enhance and enrich their relationships with their children and for some their husbands and relatives.

Although it appeared that some participants were beginning to understand their positions within society, their rights and their own abilities to make informed decisions about their lives, many were still resistant to taking action or to publicly acknowledge their support of particular ideas or practices. Traditional Sudanese culture is based on the notion of collective responsibility and consequently collective control. Individuals are expected to assume particular roles within both the family and the wider community. Deviating from these roles often causes widespread criticism and stigmatisation because of that individual's failure to maintain the social order within the community.

It was evident within the Sisters Together Group that some participants were struggling with the notion of behaving as a 'good' wife and mother should (being submissive to their husbands) and their new found right for themselves and their children to live in safety, free from violence and abuse. This placed great pressure on participants, many women feeling stuck and not knowing how to proceed.

It sometimes appeared that the group had become stuck and was seemingly unwilling to shift from their culturally conditioned thinking. This, at times was frustrating for facilitators. Some women were clearly choosing to remain in unsafe, violent relationships, feeling too scared of the retributions they would undoubtedly face from the Sudanese community if they left their husbands.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, facilitators believed that a change in attitudes and perceptions of the role and status of Sudanese women within the wider Sudanese community would

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<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the role of Sudanese mediators is to identify "blame" when resolving family problems. This often results in finding causes for why family violence has occurred and the belief that changed behaviour of women in particular will ensure their own safety and that of their children. As a result, family breakdown is seen as the last resort and requires the support of the extended family to be justified and socially acceptable.



take a long time. Groups such as the Sisters Together Group are an important process to support this change both in the short term for those women who are prepared to act quickly on their learning to ensure their own safety and that of their children as well as for those who are reluctant to do so. As a result, there is a need to continue these groups to empower Sudanese women on an on-going basis.

## 11. Appendices

### Appendix A: Weekly program outlines

#### Session 1: Introduction to the group and identification of possible themes

- Introduction and welcome
- Introduction to relaxation exercises
- Identifying possible themes and discussion topics for the group – brainstorm activity
- Choosing a topic to discuss next week
- Close

#### Session 2: Thinking and talking about boys:

- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
- Gentle physical exercises
- Introduction of discussion topic: Raising boys in Australia
  - o Has the Sudanese way of raising sons changed since moving to Australia?
  - o Would you consider Australia to be a violent society?
  - o Think about the games your children play and the TV programs your children watch.
  - o Do you think it's important for boys to have close ties to a male figure? Why is this important for them? If you were to identify a positive role model for your children what attributes would that person have?
  - o What are the needs of boys and what happens for boys as they grow up?
  - o Introduction of the 'masculine mystique'
- Reflections on discussion and group process
- Close

#### Session 3:

As the family counsellor was away sick, this was a non-therapeutic group.

- Relaxation exercises
- Physical exercises
- Information sharing by project workers and general discussion about a new MIC family mediation program currently being developed to assist Sudanese families who have experienced conflict or violence
- Close

#### Session 4: Family origins and family life in Australia: *Family Tree* exercise

- Introduction of the family tree exercise. In this session the facilitator introduced the model of the family tree. The purpose of this exercise was to help participants to reflect on their current situation and to identify their strengths/skills/hopes/dreams and those of all members of their families.

- Participants were encouraged to draw a tree on butcher's paper, where each part of the tree represented a different aspect of family life.

The family tree model:

- o The roots: family history and ancestors
- o The trunk: skills and abilities of the family
- o The branches: hopes and dreams of the family as a whole and of each individual family member
- o The fruit: The gifts and strengths the family have received from other people - ancestors and the community and the family's achievements
- o The leaves: important or influential people in the family
- o The bugs: problems that come into families
- o The storms of life: pressures encountered by families
- o The forest of life: the family as part of a community
- Discussion around individual stories and families
- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
  - o Candles
  - o Incense
- Gentle physical exercises
- Close

#### **Session 5: Conflict resolution: *Conflict Map* exercise**

- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
  - o Candles
  - o Incense
- Gentle physical exercises
- Discussion around conflict how, when and why it arises and personal safety
- Introducing conflict maps exercise, looking at process of conflict, different stages of conflict and how conflict impacts on disputing parties
- Discussion around factors that may contribute to conflict happening such as financial pressures, sadness, loss and grief issues, the impact of past trauma
- Discussion around leadership of physical and relaxation exercises
- Election of an exercise facilitator for this week and next week
- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
  - o Candles
  - o Incense
- Close

### **Session 6: Mid-program reflection and evaluation**

- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
  - o Candles
  - o Incense
- Pose the question to the group, “What is important to you about this group?”
- Feelings: Introduce this concept to the group and invite women to talk about how they are feeling
- Gentle physical exercises
- Election of an exercise facilitator for next week
- Close

### **Session 7: Naming the group and Emotions map**

- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
  - o Candles
  - o Incense
- Discussion topic: Identifying and talking about different emotions
  - o Introduction of *emotional intelligence*
- Working towards the end of the group and closure for participants
- Gentle physical exercises
- Election of an exercise facilitator for next week
- Close

### **Session 8: Feeling unsafe? Seeking safety? What does it mean for us? (Part 1)**

- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
  - o Candles
  - o Incense
- Naming the group
- Discussion topic: What sorts of things place me at risk?
  - o Impact of family violence on children and young people.
  - o What sorts of things can I do to make myself safer and my children safer?
  - o What things do you need to think about and what options have I got?
  - o New model talked about in session 3, is this a viable option?
- Working towards closure and extra session to make up for session 3 – celebration in the final session?
- Completion of evaluation sheet
- Close

**Session 9: Feeling unsafe? Seeking safety? What does it mean for us?  
(Part 2)**

- Relaxation exercises
  - o Breathing exercises
  - o Candles
  - o Incense
- Discussion topic: What are some of the supports available to you?
  - o What happens to you and your family when family violence comes into your lives?
  - o Does your husband have a choice to use violence?
  - o What options do you have to keep yourself and your children safe?
  - o Safety tips
- Feedback/closure
- Gentle physical exercises
- Party time! End of group celebration - cake and dancing
- Close

## 9. References

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3. Waldegrave, Charles., "Cultural, Gender and Socio-economic Contexts in Therapeutic and Social Policy Work" A paper given to the National Family and Parenting Institute *Parent and Child Conference*, London, November 2006, The Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit, New Zealand