

EXPLORING LIFE, CULTURE, AND
RELATIONSHIPS WITH BOYS AND MEN

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION REPORT

JULY 2023



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

South East Community Links acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands that we work on. We pay our respects to the Woi Wurrung and the Boon Wurrung language groups of the Kulin Nations. We pay respect to their cultures, their elders past, present and emerging, and to all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

04	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	11	KEY FINDINGS
05	WHO WE ARE	16	BARRIERS
06	INTRODUCTION	17	SOLUTIONS
07	BACKGROUND	19	KEY LEARNINGS
08	METHODOLOGY	20	CONCLUSION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a comprehensive consultation to understand men's and boys' experiences, perspectives, and attitudes concerning gender roles and violence against women. South East Community Links (SECL) engaged 70 men and boys from the Dandenong and Casey regions across various age groups and cultural backgrounds.

The overarching themes and key findings provide valuable insights into men's and boys' beliefs and behaviours:

- Men expressed pride in traditional cultural values, particularly providing for and protecting their families.
- Societal expectations often prevent men from seeking help, leading them to rely on close family members and religious figures.
- Pressure to conform to cultural expectations contributed to stress and mental health issues.
- The shift in power dynamics during resettlement in Australia was a source of tension within relationships.
- Factors contributing to violence included societal pressures, financial stress, mental health issues, and substance abuse.

Although most agreed that men could play a role in preventing violence against women, barriers like cultural attitudes, lack of understanding, and fear of judgment hinder their active engagement.

The report makes the following recommendations for targeted prevention strategies:

- Conduct culturally appropriate awareness programs and discussions about healthy masculinity
- Provide equal access to information on men's and women's rights
- Normalise seeking help and expressing emotions for men
- Foster safe spaces for men to discuss personal issues
- Engage younger generations who are more open to change
- Provide cultural awareness training to law enforcement and legal institutions
- Feature male lived experience speakers who can share their personal journeys.

Incorporating men's perspectives and experiences is vital for creating effective prevention strategies to end violence against women and girls. The report acknowledges the need to consider the intersection of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion when addressing these issues. It also highlights the importance of working with community champions who support gender equality. SECL is committed to continuing its work with diverse communities and utilising these findings to further its prevention efforts.

WHO WE ARE



South East Community Links (SECL) was established in 1970 with the vision that every person counts and every system is fair. We work alongside multicultural communities to offer real and meaningful solutions that are trusted, place-based, and people-centred.

For over 50 years, SECL has provided a range of services to the communities in the South-East Melbourne region.

SECL is guided by the core values of equity, inclusion, compassion, dignity, diversity, and choice.

We value and embrace the skills, perspectives, and experiences that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities bring to our organisation and wider society.

Alongside communities, we also work with government agencies, and partner organisations to provide sustainable services that are culturally responsive, coordinated and effective in meeting the needs of clients. SECL always puts the community at the heart of our work and is dedicated to finding and closing the gaps that affect our communities.

SECL has a team of experienced staff who are dedicated to delivering high-quality services to the communities they serve alongside students and volunteers. We are committed to building strong and inclusive communities that are resilient and able to respond to the changing needs of clients and the community.

Spanning across multiple locations, our services include:

- emergency relief
- case work
- community programs and support
- youth and family services
- homelessness and housing support
- financial counselling
- employment support
- family violence support
- settlement services.

These services have continued to promote the social, economic, and cultural wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities, whilst fostering social cohesion and inclusion.

Our Vision: Every person counts, every system fair

Our Mission: Achieving better social and economic outcomes for people in our community

INTRODUCTION

South East Community Links has played a leading role in the primary prevention of violence against women and children within Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities in the south-eastern region of Victoria. SECL has worked alongside organisations including the Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) and Our Watch to implement primary prevention projects that are tailored to the unique needs of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Over the years, we have partnered with community groups, ethno-specific associations and community leaders to co-design and deliver prevention activities and in-language resources.

In recent years, there have been growing discussions about the lack of and need to include men and boys in the design and delivery of family violence prevention initiatives if we are to see systemic and generational change in the attitudes, perceptions and behaviour of men about violence against women and children. SECL's prevention team has been making deliberate and stronger efforts to work with men and boys in the development of community-led initiatives that address gender inequality, unhealthy relationships, and family violence. We are mindful that to see attitudinal change, we must engage people for more extended periods of time to truly understand the impact of our primary prevention initiatives. Current government funding and workplan restraints limit organisations like SECL from implementing long-term programs, which may result in stronger outcomes in the prevention of violence against women and children.



BACKGROUND

Men and boys are critical in preventing and addressing violence against women and girls. While most men do not use violence against women, it is largely perpetrated by men when such violence occurs. Additionally, social and cultural constructions of masculinity support some men's use of violence against women (Flood, 2003). This violence harms the very women and girls men say they love. Furthermore, it negatively impacts all men, including those who do not use violence and will only improve when there is a culture in which violence against women and girls is unacceptable. Given this, all men have a role to play as does society with the language, stories and messaging that shapes versions of how men and women behave or should be.

In recent years, there has been a gradual shift in thinking where men have traditionally been perceived as perpetrators of violence to allies and advocates for ending the culture of violence against women (VAW). To foster gender equality and respectful relationships, we need to engage with men and boys to address issues on men's use of violence. The main goal of our consultation with boys and men was to better understand their perceptions, attitudes and experiences relating to gender equality, healthy relationships, healthy/unhealthy masculinity, social norms and to explore their interest in participating in a prevention project. It was necessary to understand from men and boys, their current knowledge of these social issues, their experiences of gender stereotypes and pressures of conforming to social expectations and how this impacts their wellbeing and relationships with others.

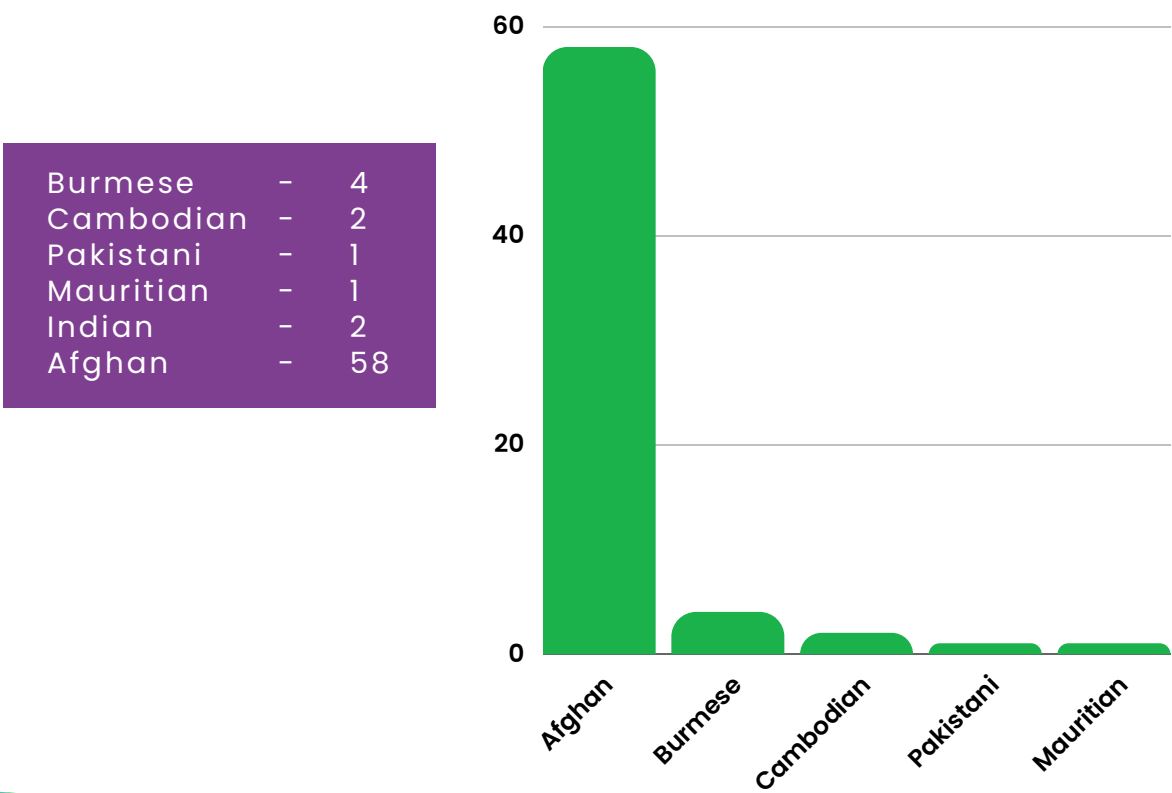
A further key objective of our community consultations was to share our learnings with SECL's partner agencies and primary prevention organisations to shed greater light on the unique challenges, needs and barriers experienced by men from CALD communities, in particular the experiences of growing up as a man in their new Australian home country.

METHODOLOGY

A set of 12 questions were carefully constructed in line with the consultation objectives, along with key decisions regarding the age groups, the varying levels of English literacy and the environments in which we would be conducting the consultations. The questions were designed to obtain qualitative responses that helped capture men’s voices and experiences authentically, enabling us to understand the prevalence of deeper issues impacting them. For some of the men engaged, it may have been their first time in which they spoke of their experiences. SECL consulted with The Men’s Project, an initiative of Jesuit Social Services, to advise on working with men and boys in the prevention of violence against women. This led to a further refinement of our consultation questions to ensure we captured the life experiences of men and boys respectfully and sensitively.

The community consultations engaged close to 70 men and boys across a wide range of age groups (14- 55) and while the majority of the boys and men were of Afghan background, there were also Indian, Mauritian, Pakistan, Cambodian and Burmese boys and men consulted. We connected with these men and boys across various settings including sporting clubs, youth leadership groups and schools in the Dandenong and Casey regions.

CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF BOYS AND MEN CONSULTED





SECL practitioners had strong support from community leaders who recognise a strong need for these conversations in their community. Through the trusted relationships these community leaders have with their community, we were able to create a safe environment where boys and men felt they could be open and share their experiences. Conversations were held where groups were already meeting or were familiar with the space, again recognising the need for safety of group members.

A combination of both large and small group discussions took place given varying settings and time restraints. As much as the larger group discussions were safe spaces for people to share, it was evident that boys and men were more comfortable talking openly about their experiences in smaller group settings. We are unsure whether this was due to them not feeling as confident to speak in front of a large group or maybe fearful of being judged by many. Still, we find this trend quite common with any group of individuals when discussing sensitive topics.

Initial overarching themes:

- Men wanted to know specifics of statistics provided (which communities the women who were killed from) and therefore this problem is not seen as serious or rife in their community.
- Talking about 'traditional' masculinity as a negative thing was seen as offensive as these norms and traditions have helped keep families alive and succeed.
- Men feel that in Australia they are not treated equally to women, that women are believed, favoured in systems such as legal system (courts).
- Men are on the bottom of the priority list, which was described by a participant stating the order of priority is '1. children, 2. women, 3. pets, 4. men.'
- There were questions asked from most men and boys particularly about "violence against men". This was about violence perpetrated by women or their wives, partners, and mothers.
- Social pressures and expectations of being a real man can also have benefits, such as "it makes us do better in life."
- Men need to be convinced that the problem exists and is serious about being part of the solution in preventing violence against women.
- "Provide and protect the family as part of their culture" was a consistent response when discussed about "social expectations". The trait of providing and protecting isn't seen as pressure but instead as "a role to fulfill" that they take pride in.



KEY FINDINGS

The consultation sought to understand the following experiences of men and boys:

1. Values young men and boys are taught by their family as they grow up.

The boys and men surveyed took pride in sharing their cultural values and beliefs around the different roles they share or experience across their family, work, school, and/or as a community member. Men expressed a great sense of pride in sharing the value of “providing and taking care of family”. This was affirmed by many men and boys who stated that this value was a critical part of their male identity. Furthermore, these values were reaffirmed by their different responsibilities, such as being the financial provider to family members who are still living overseas and their family members living here in Australia.

Some boys and men felt that in relation to respect, “there is no violence inflicted and no domination” while other men shared that “to have control over their family is a way to maintain their family unit”. Furthermore, about 45% of the boys and men believed that “protecting their family” was extremely important with some stating that “for us to protect my family, I need to know what is going on in my family.”

2. Help seeking for men when they are worried about things in life.

The responses to this question remained relatively consistent, where most men and boys stated that they sought support from their mother, siblings, God, and sometimes a teacher at school, and/or partners/wives.

About 75% of the boys and men stated that “men are seen as weak if they express their emotions”.

One man in the group shared that men from his community are often told by their peers, family, and community to keep their emotions to themselves such as “men are asked to suck it up.” This was supported by others who expressed similar experiences and thoughts such as:

“It’s shameful for men to talk about their problems and they are expected to sort out the issues themselves.”

One man said, “fathers are the last resort as they don’t believe in mental health issues.”

One of the boys shared that he and others don’t reach out in the community because of the fear of how it may negatively impact upon their family. He stated, “You don’t share 100% of the issue with your partner as we don’t want them to be worried, how would they take it, who will look after them then”.

3. Social expectations men and boys experience today to behave or act in a certain way.

Boys and men surveyed shared a wide range of beliefs and views that shape their identity as a male. "To be the provider" and "protect family" was a strong view held by many of the men and boys. As one example, supporting their parents especially as they age, is a common expectation of men and boys in the community, which is seen as an obligation and a duty rather than a burden. These expectations are viewed positively as they believe it benefits them and their family. Men and boys often see the desire to be seen as respectful and hardworking in their fathers, grandfathers, uncles and so forth.

Nearly 55% of the men and boys stated that they are expected by their parents, families, and community in general to practice their faith and religion "to be a good man". One man shared that according to Islam, men receive 2/3 of the inheritance to look after their families including their parents and female siblings at a later stage."

A young man said:

"TO BE A GOOD MUSLIM IS TO READ THE QURAN, EVEN IF I DON'T WANT TO."

"TO BE SUCCESSFUL, MEN ARE EXPECTED TO BE RICH, POSSESS WEALTH, COMPLETE THEIR EDUCATION, OWN A HOUSE AND A CAR".

Approximately 45% of the boys and men shared that some of the social expectations that are placed upon men and boys are connected to broader community expectations which in turn puts a lot of pressure on them to conform to those social expectations and live a certain way that impacts their thinking, beliefs, and their overall wellbeing.

One man shared an example of such experience:

"THERE IS A LOT OF COMPARISON THAT HAPPENS WITH OTHER FAMILIES, FOR THE SAKE OF REPUTATION."

4. Impacts of cultural and social pressures that men and boys feel and experience.

One of the strong responses expressed by most men and boys was feelings of “I am not good enough” when they did not conform to the social expectations of who a real man is. This also resulted in feeling stressed, anxious, and confused.

One young man shared that they have had friends who felt like they were “dumb” and at times felt “suicidal” when they did not live up to societal standards and family expectations.

Nearly 55% of participants stated that the expectations of conforming to gender norms and roles set in from a very young age such as taking on responsibilities and looking after their families in different ways.

Others responded that men “tend to hide their true selves and can’t be who they want to be”. This response was affirmed by a few others who stated that “this leads to men becoming angrier and lashing out.”

“EVEN AS THE YOUNGEST SON, I AM EXPECTED TO LOOK AFTER MY OLDER SISTERS, AND PROTECT THEIR SAFETY. IN MY CULTURE, THIS IS VERY COMMON.”

Experiencing social pressures is at times also viewed positively in some communities as they feel it allows for men to live up to the standard that is set by the family and the community such as “carrying different responsibilities for the family as the man of the house” enabling them to be better versions of themselves.

A few younger men stated that when they are expected to do things in life against their wishes or desires, it leads to the person developing a stubborn attitude that negatively impacts their wellbeing such as feelings of “I don’t care” about life.

A few of the others stated that when men and boys do express their feelings, they are quickly shamed and looked down upon and sometimes are pitied from their peers and social groups which leads to men feeling even more frustrated with some stating that “they don’t like to be pitied”.

Some men shared that they knew of people who had also experienced alcohol and other drug issues.



5. Different ways respect is shown to female figures in men's lives such as wives/mothers/sisters.

Participants shared that respect towards women in their lives is shown in different ways such as through "being kind and taking care of them, protecting and providing for them". Others shared that "being supportive and not controlling them" would be some other ways they demonstrate respectful behaviour in their relationships. These responses were further elaborated on by others such as "During Eid celebrations, it's the mothers, wives and sisters that receive gifts and presents".

One man commented that "knowing their partner's or wife's whereabouts helps them be more aware of where they are just in case something happens to them". This man believed that this was not considered disrespectful, but that it was part of their responsibility that comes with "being a man of the house". This response was agreed by most men in the group.

Some participants responded that the level of respect varies across women, for example some of the men stated that their "mothers are more respected than their sisters, wives, or female friends".

A young man commented on "consent and respecting boundaries" in all types of relationships with the women. He further stated that these concepts were taught at school and believe it is very crucial in demonstrating respectful behaviours towards women and girls.

6. Causes of violence against women and girls

The responses varied from “arguing with each other, men get angrier quickly and they lack patience, financial stress, mental health issues, unemployment, and loss of control due to misuse of alcohol and other drugs”.

While 75% of the men and boys stated that “social pressures in life gets them to act in a violent way such as when those expectations are not met, for example if they can’t provide for the family, they get angry and lose control”.

35% of the men and boys shared that the Islamic faith and religion teaches them about performing different roles and duties based on gender. When these religious teachings are not followed, disagreements and conflicts at home ultimately lead to violence and abuse towards their wives and partners.

According to 55% of the participants, how men and boys are raised strongly influences their attitudes towards violence and disrespect. This includes teachings on family values, respect and adhering to religious and cultural values and further stated that this was a strong reason why some families or relationships don’t experience or suffer from abuse and violence from their husbands.

About 55% of the men stated that their gender identity is challenged as “the man of the house” when they begin their resettlement journey in Australia. These men believe that women receive all the information and are given more rights and opportunities such as attending English classes and social activities, which creates a change in their family roles. The shift in power leads to men developing anger and frustration towards their wives and partners.

Furthermore, a view strongly shared by about 25% of men and boys from the community was that the programs and services are designed and available to meet the needs of women only. One such collective experience shared by these men was that “the police listen to only one side of the story and hear only the women’s experience”.

Adjusting to a new life in Australia, adapting to the new culture and environment, language barriers and the lack of family support were some of the reasons boys and men gave for the causes of violence against women.

7. Men and boys to be part of the solution to prevent violence against women.

Most agreed that men and boys can be part of the solution to reduce and PVAW but were unsure of their role and what can they do about it.

Identified barriers include:

- The way women's empowerment challenges men and boys' identity as a man. Examples shared were "women securing work faster than their husbands, learning how to speak English, establishing new connections and networks and being aware of services that can help them in times of need." The new life skills learnt by women seemed to harm their relationships and were seen as a threat to their role as "the man of the house."
- Community attitudes discourage people from getting involved in personal matters relating to others in the community. A participant shared "it is against my culture to interfere in someone else's private matters."
- Religious leaders are often resistant to being engaged in preventing violence against women. A participant shared that "religious leaders need a push to be educated on matters like this." This is because of the lack of knowledge and understanding of participating in initiatives and programs.
- Men feel they are never listened to, and no one believes them including the systems and services and so they do not see a value in engaging in community initiatives and programs.
- One participant stated, "there is emotional damage and danger when we always talk about respecting women"
- Some current attitudes that "men are not wrong" continues to exist and is held very strongly in some families.
- There is a fear of judgement from the community and concerns of what people will think if men and boys are part of such initiatives. Some reasons that seem to drive this thinking is the idea that if men are part of programs that promote gender equality and respectful relationships it is seen as a threat to their own position as a man in their family, community, and the broader society.
- Most men in the community aren't interested in addressing family violence concerns as they believe it does not apply to them or impact the women in their lives.

Solutions:

- Ongoing awareness raising programs that are culturally appropriate and delivered in-language.
- Focus on the positives, showing how the healthy aspects of male identities and traditional forms of masculinity has helped many families live in safe and respectful relationships.
- Strengthen understanding of the impact violence against women and children can have on children's developmental progress, educational outcomes and overall health and wellbeing.
- Provide equal access to information and opportunities on men's and women's rights.
- Normalise help-seeking attitudes and behaviours such as "it is okay for men and boys to show their emotions".
- Provide a safe space for men to discuss different life issues. Services to be more compassionate, unbiased and provide cultural support for CALD men and boys.
- Engage with the younger generation who tend to be more open to learning new ways and modern approaches and more adaptive to new settings and environments. One participant stated, "you can break a wall, but you cannot break into the mind of an older person and expect them to change their behaviours".
- Provide ongoing cultural awareness training to police and legal institutions to increase their awareness of the nuanced experiences of CALD community members.
- Invite lived experience male speakers who can share about their own experiences and journeys about growing up in a household where violence was normalised, how they navigated the strict rigid norms and expectations and the impacts it has had on them to conform to the expectations both from families and from the broader community.



8. Interest in learning about “Healthy Masculinities”

Most participants seemed to have not been aware of the concept of healthy masculinities. The facilitators had to explain what “masculinity” means for the participants to understand the idea of healthy masculinity and shared examples of different views society has about how men should behave. It was observed that while some participants did not respond to the question, others expressed an interest in learning and understanding about what healthy masculinity is and its positive impacts on their health and wellbeing.

Some appeared to be uncomfortable with the discussion around traditional and healthy masculinities with a few participants asking such questions as:

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH TRADITIONAL MASCULINITY, I THINK THOSE QUALITIES ARE GREAT TO BE A RESPECTFUL MAN IN THE FAMILY AND IN THE COMMUNITY”.

It is therefore believed that the traditional gender norms and roles that men have been practicing and holding onto have benefited them to be able to earn that respect and position in the family and the community and that also has assisted in the successful functioning of taking care of their family as part of their resettlement journey in Australia.

Some other comments were particularly around the hesitancy of men willing to engage in conversations on healthy masculinities. Some shared:

“THEY NEED TO BE CONVINCED THAT THERE IS A PROBLEM WITH TRADITIONAL IDEAS OF MASCULINITY.”

On the other hand, some young men and boys were more open to learning about the concept and benefits of healthy masculinity and how they can embrace this in their everyday lives.



KEY LEARNINGS



- Men and boys want to see the actual data, the statistics relating to family violence incidences and deaths specific to their communities, to better understand the prevalence, impact and harm caused by violence against their partners, wives and children.



- It is important and valuable to acknowledge and create space for community conversations about intersecting forms of discrimination including gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and religion and this should be incorporated in the program design and delivery to enrich the conversation and understanding of men's experiences of perpetration of violence and their overall view about violence against women and girls.



- As part of the conversation, there is huge benefit in having the presence of boys and men from the community who support gender equality and role model these respectful relationships towards women and girls. It is hugely valuable to show boys and men what it looks like in real life with people they identify with and respect.



- Normalise and allow the feelings and emotions of men and boys to be expressed in comfortable and safe ways.



- Creating a culturally safe environment that allows men's life experiences including their interactions with different systems in Australia and how they have been supported in their resettlement journey is important for fostering respect and greater understanding.



- Programs that target fathers focusing on “positive and healthy parenting” were viewed favourably as they placed religious and cultural values at the centre of relationship while providing information and strategies that support families’ settlement in Australia.

CONCLUSION

Through prioritising cultural safety and inclusivity, the male identity and men's position in the family needs to be carefully considered when working and building relationships with men and boys from CALD communities. While men's experiences and perceptions share some commonalities across the various cultural communities, the importance they place upon holding a respectable position within the family and community and being the 'provider and protector' was an overarching theme across the consultations with men and boys. These values of male identity and masculinity need to be considered in a way that supports their mental health and wellbeing and provides opportunities to work towards achieving healthier views and perceptions relating to women, women's empowerment and gender equality. Conversations and future prevention work must incorporate the settlement experiences of men and boys and understand the correlation this has upon their acceptance or resistance of the 'new thinking' about women, women's rights and how gender equality is practiced in the adopted new country of Australia.

The consultation provided greater insights and learnings into the experiences of boys and men who came to Australia as migrants, seeking refuge and protection, including the issues and challenges experienced by them. It helped SECL understand how the role of a man was practiced and acknowledged in all areas of their lives. These consultations have reassured SECL to continue working with diverse communities in culturally safe ways while placing the experiences and voices of men and boys in the centre of family violence prevention initiatives. This project has enabled SECL's prevention team to establish new relationships with groups of men and boys and identify some potential male champions in the community that can work alongside us with new prevention initiatives. SECL is committed to focussing our prevention efforts on working with men and boys. We will continue to reflect upon our learnings, pivot in our practice and communicate our insights and outcomes as we collectively work with our partners and CALD communities to prevent violence against women and children.

