Partners on the ANROWS Research Program project Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia, Dr Cathy Vaughan from the University of Melbourne and Dr Adele Murdolo from the Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health (MCWH), speak with us about how the project was conceived and why collaboration between researchers and service providers is so important.

What attracted you both to this project; how did it come about?

**AM** We were pleased that there was going to be a project on this topic because we both knew that there wasn’t a lot of research in this area in the Australian context, and most of it is quite old or based on quantitative research. We felt that there were gaps in being able to draw a picture of what violence against migrant and refugee women actually looks like and what it means to women in their lives. Understanding that properly is a really important and central first step in developing meaningful programs, even such crimes from happening again.

**CV** We’ve worked together before on research around female genital cutting and our organisations have a history together. The centre here has an advisory group, and MCWH has sat on that advisory group for a long time. I suppose they know who we are, we know who they are, and we’ve worked together before. This project is one that screams for partnership. I thought it would be great to do together because this sort of research needs a really community-engaged, participatory approach. I know what an asset the bilingual health educators are, they’re a service that’s quite unique. To be able to offer women the opportunity to talk to researchers in their own language, with someone from their own culture, is really important. That was why I was keen to work with MCWH.

**AM** When you look at research on violence against women more generally, there’s usually a reason why the researchers haven’t been able to interview migrant women for their research. They weren’t able to access them or even if they did they only had English language surveys or English speaking interviewers. Our bilingual interviewers expand the scope of the project and allow us to reach women who haven’t been reached before. That’s a real strength, and something our organisation does bring to the partnership, and the university brings that rigour and research expertise. It’s a really fantastic relationship in that way, and we each bring those very important strengths.

**CV** It’s about valuing those kinds of knowledge that MCWH has, and that researchers have, equally. I value practice knowledge and the knowledge that comes when you engage with people for a long period of time. I think we both respect where we’re coming from, and that we both have something equally valuable to offer.
How will the participatory methods be applied to this research?

CV “On a general level, for participatory research we put in a proposal for what we plan to do, but the actual research will be shaped by consultations with the community, service providers and the relevant sector/s.

As Adele said, lots of research on violence against women has under-represented migrant and refugee women. Here we are looking specifically at migrant and refugee women, so we need to find out how communities will trust you and how they can engage with you. Lots of community leaders are men, so you can’t just go to community leaders, you need to find out who the women trust. There are community leaders who are perpetrators of violence, for example.

How do you go about that?

CV “We’ve started by consulting service providers, both domestic violence and settlement, migration and refugee type services. From there then you start to find out who the community organisations are.

Once we find out who they are, we can meet with people, and find out how they talk about relationships and families, and the strain that migration puts on family life. We can use that as a starting point.

AM “Lots of support work has been going on since the 70’s in migrant communities as well. We learn about the feminist movement and the refugees, but within communities, very strong and active women have also been supporting women experiencing domestic violence. As long as you know the right people, or find out the right people to speak to, you can find out that there has been lots of activity. And it has been done in ways that suit that particular community. That’s really important information to have.

As a community organisation we’ve done lots of work with communities over the years already, so we’re building on existing relationships. We’re building this project by starting with some of the existing relationships that we’ve built over time.

CV “The bilingual health educators, they’re bilingual and bi-cultural, so they’re members of communities themselves. The fact that they are part of our team, they’re trusted by communities. They know the language that will open doors. If you start talking about certain types of violence as violence in the first breath, people might not understand it in the same way which could close down a conversation. But if you start by talking about pressures or strains on relationships then that’s a way of opening a door to talking more openly.

Are there communities that you’re particularly wanting to engage with?

CV “We want to get a mix of well-established communities that migrated to Australia some time ago, and more newly arrived communities. Also a mix of women who are skilled migrants or here on spousal visas, and women who have come through the humanitarian program (migrants and refugees) as their issues are different.

We’ve taken a geographical approach. One reason we did that was informed by the female genital cutting research that we started in inner Melbourne. People raised concerns about the needs of communities in regional centres who had been resettled through the Immigrant Regional Resettlement Program in Victoria which had very few services. For established service providers, it was something that they’d never had to deal with before, and there was very little training around.

Another reason is that geography matters; where you live affects the kind of services you can access. We look at inner-metropolitan, outer-metropolitan and regional services in both states (Victoria and Tasmania); rather than a specific cultural community, and which communities are important in those sites. And there will be some overlap.

How do you think this project will help service providers? How do you hope the outcomes will influence policy and practice?

AM “We develop policy and programs based on the knowledge that we have, or what we think we know about violence against women. That has been a limited knowledge to date because it hasn’t included migrant women, Indigenous women and women with a disability among others. In a broad sense, I would hope that [this project] will expand the knowledge base upon which we develop our policies and programs, to ensure they are much more inclusive and reflective of the needs of the population.

CV “We haven’t started the data collection yet, but already the consultations with community members and service providers have raised structural factors that would be good for government to consider (e.g. the impact of immigration policy and visa status on the vulnerability to violence) as well as other issues like making sure all services have an adequate budget for interpreters.

I’d also like this project to encourage more thinking around how we define family violence. There tends to be a focus on intimate partner violence, for good reason. But for migrant and refugee women, where it might be multi-perpetrator violence, where you might have in-laws in the household and/or multiple generations living in one house. Or it might be siblings; brothers policing the behaviour of young women. It’s still violence against that woman, but it’s not captured in that definition of violence, or our policies and programs.

AM “Another example is international students in housing. They’re very vulnerable. In other work we’ve done we’ve heard of women being asked to exchange rent for sexual favours, and men who particularly seek out international students to come and live with them for sex. Technically it’s a domestic setting, it’s their home, but it’s not a family setting. It’s not on the radar.

“Dr Adele Murdolo

“It’s a really fantastic relationship in that way, and we each bring those very important strengths.”

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**CV** It's a bit like people with a disability in residential care; it's their home, but it's not captured in many of our definitions around family or domestic violence, and intimate partner violence. In terms of policy that could be the difference between someone getting support or not.

**How will Photovoice contribute?**

**CV** Photovoice is a fairly well established participatory research method where you work with a group of people to depict their own lives/worlds through photography and then talk about those photographs. The photographs are presented with accompanying text based on discussion of those photographs.

I have used it a range of communities who might have difficulty articulating how they feel about something to a white middle-class researcher, whether that's young people or people with a disability, for example. Here we're hoping to use it not so much around depictions of family violence, because there are ethical issues, but how we might be able to engage with community leaders, women and men, to talk about their place.

The advocacy potential of visual methods is enormous. People don't always read text but they do look at photos, they engage with photos. If we're looking at contributing to community-led action, and cultural community-led action, which as Adele said is already happening, photography is a way of engaging people and getting support for that work.

**How important is a strong partnership between researchers and community organisations to the work that you do?**

**AM** As a community organisation we can't achieve alone what we can achieve as a partnership. Once the research is done, we will share that information with different sectors. For Cathy that will be promoting the research to an academic audience, and for us it will be speaking to our colleagues in the community sector on what that research might mean to them. So it's a way of widening the influence of your work. Both those elements are really important.

**CV** We couldn't do this sort of work in isolation either. If you come blundering into a community without understanding the context, sensitivities and politics of that place, you can make things considerably worse. So doing this work together is a much stronger approach to the research.

I'm keen for this research to be useful. I think a project like this can contribute to social theory and to the development of research methodology, but it should also make a difference for women.

**AM** Sometimes academic and community partnerships are based on funding being provided to the researcher, and the community organisation sitting on an advisory group or providing in-kind support. It creates a strain on the community organisation, they're not being funded to do it, so it can cause harm to the sector. Valuing the knowledge that comes from a community approach, and matching that with a funding allocation, is really important. It is ethical practice. And that's a special part of this partnership.

**You're in the early stages of this project. Would you like to share any early observations on the project?**

**CV** Many people have asked how we're going to get some of the communities to talk to us, that they're quite closed. But actually they're not, they have lots to say. While of course there are specific cultural practices and norms for certain groups, there's more commonality than difference. People talk about cultures in migrant and refugee communities being the problem, well surely the culture in Australia is the problem too. It's the culture around masculinity and power, so it's not that different. I think we understood that but it has definitely been confirmed.

People have been interested, supportive and engaged, from all sorts of sectors including the police and community organisations. It feels like people have been wanting this research.

**AM** I haven't been surprised by findings as yet, but it has been great to learn a bit more about the complexities of the work and different approaches. People we have talked to in the same geographical location had different views about how to approach the issue in their community. Like every community there are different ways of approaching an issue, especially one that's as controversial and important as violence against women, so I knew we'd get diverging opinions. But it has been interesting to find out exactly what those opinions are, and thinking through how we're going to negotiate that.

**CV** And the differences between Victoria and Tasmania as well. The challenges in Australia where there is state based funding with an overlay from the Commonwealth can constrain people trying to work in communities. It can be confronting sometimes. Tasmania has a different approach to policing, for example, and how that specifically impacts on migrant and refugee women is something we want to learn more about.

**AM** Most of the migration in Tasmania is quite new, unlike in Victoria where there are established communities. Because it's so small and so new, most services are mainstream. There are very few specific services for migrant and refugee women.

**CV** The proportion of migration through the humanitarian program is also higher in Tasmania. You have people who might have access to some supports and benefits, but they've come because they are refugees. So they've had difficult experiences and they have brought difficult stuff to deal with into a context like Tasmania with very high unemployment and welfare dependency and real challenges. It will be interesting to see how that is reflected in research.

It has been great getting to know the University of Tasmania. There are some terrific service providers down there who are very passionate and work incredibly hard. The nice thing about this project is that we get to meet people who are doing difficult work on the smell of an oily rag. Or even less than that. You can't help but be inspired by them.