

TOGETHER FOR IMPACT

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES
PARTNERSHIP CASE STUDY



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS

Acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Safe and Equal and *Multicultural Centre for Women's Health* are based on Wurundjeri Country.

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work, and we pay respects to Elders past and present.

We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded, and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters and community.



Connecting Communities is supported by the Victorian Government

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PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHANGE

This resource outlines processes and insights from the *Connecting Communities* partnership between the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health and Safe and Equal. This case study has been developed to share key learnings and good practice from the partnership process to help inform future partnership practice between mainstream organisations and those that specialise in working with multicultural and faith-based communities.

Social change rarely happens in isolation, or as a result of any single action or initiative, but through ongoing coalition building and collaboration. We know that work to end violence against women, and family and gender-based violence more broadly, cannot be undertaken in a silo. It requires partnerships between organisations to initiate collective action, leverage resources and expertise, and interrogate the systems and structures needed to create change.

Partnerships are intentional relationships between two or more organisations that involve an ongoing process to examine how organisations work together—not just what they do— across the life of a project. If we are to do the 'how' well, we need to engage in open conversations where power, privilege and inequality are acknowledged and openly discussed.

Partnerships are a crucial tool for the proliferation and strengthening of good practice drawn from community-led prevention work with multicultural communities, by bringing together the expertise of mainstream prevention organisations with specialist community-based organisations. When done well, partnerships encourage innovation, reflection and learning that extends the impact and reach of these projects.

For organisations that deliver primary prevention activities in multicultural and faith-based communities, partnerships or collaborative working arrangements are becoming common. This is due in part to growing awareness within the sector that collaborating with organisations that specialise in working with multicultural communities is essential to valuing their expertise within prevention work, improving service delivery, and engagement with multicultural communities. However, many of these partnerships and collaborations are implemented unsustainably due to limited budgets, a lack of ongoing funding or timeframes that are closely tied to the program's design. For many organisations, including multicultural community organisations, there is a strong desire to partner as a way of extending visibility, reach, impact, expertise and influence. However, this goes alongside growing demand for better, more equitable partnership practice.

Participants in the *Connecting Communities* program have expressed a desire to promote the growth of meaningful and equitable partnerships that interrogate power dynamics and foster transparency, to support their work preventing violence against women, and family and gender-based violence.

In this case study, we document some of the learning from the process undertaken in the *Connecting Communities* project, where the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH) and Safe and Equal have developed a mutually beneficial partnership working in primary prevention with multicultural communities. This resource aims to share key learnings about good partnership practice and importantly, advocate for the benefits and impact of focusing on equitable partnership work in prevention projects.

THE PARTNERSHIP PROCESS



The *Connecting Communities* program was initiated in 2021 to provide capacity building to 33 grantees funded through the Victorian Government's Supporting Multicultural and Faith Communities to Prevent Family Violence grant. As the grants were established, the Victorian government through Family Safety Victoria (FSV) in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) approached MCWH and Safe and Equal to deliver a capability building program for grant recipients, which included events, workshops, and Communities of Practice. MCWH was chosen for their expertise in prevention with multicultural communities, and Safe and Equal for experience in statewide workforce development. FSV expressed interest in a wrap-around capacity building program that Safe and Equal had experience delivering, strengthened by MCWH's expertise working with multicultural communities. After some initial conversations, Safe and Equal and MCWH put forward a successful proposal for funding, in partnership.

From the outset, the two organisations committed to co-design and shared ownership of the project and to work together to actively counter power imbalances between the organisations. The *Connecting Communities* project team engaged in a formal partnership process model set out by the [Partnership Brokers Association \(PBA\)](#), which was pitched and resourced in the initial joint application. The team allocated time and funding as part of the project to enable this.

The team also decided that the partnership itself should be an important outcome of the project and something to be evaluated and prioritised alongside the project's capability building activities. Learnings from the partnership could feed into new, effective approaches for capability building, and strengthen the evidence base about what works in prevention with multicultural communities. Specifically, the project team was interested in documenting how equitable partnerships can build good practice, improve the capability of mainstream organisations to support multicultural communities, and strengthen the role of specialist, grassroots organisations who champion community-led approaches.

Partnering is much more than collaborating towards common goals and ensuring the deliverables of a program are achieved. Focusing on the quality of the partnership itself is key, and institutionalising the process...needs to be discussed.

**AUORE DELCOURT, FORMER
MANAGER AT MCWH**

Both organisations recognised that engaging in a formal partnership process was critical to addressing power imbalances between mainstream and community organisations, that often manifest in various ways and can inadvertently reproduce inequities that projects are working to overcome. For MCWH, a community-based organisation that has been operating and partnering with mainstream organisations for over 45 years, these inequities often present as unrealistic timeframes for project delivery, extractive and reactive communication, tokenistic consultation, misconception and bias about capabilities, limited decision-making power, and inadequate compensation for their contributions.



Formal partnership brokerage provides the framework, the language and the permission for us to explore challenging and uncomfortable things together, to then better deliver the work.

AMELIA DITCHAM, MANAGER AT SAFE AND EQUAL

Partnership brokering was essential, given the ways in which the difference in positional power between MCWH and Safe and Equal may result in these same problematic partnership practices emerging in the *Connecting Communities* project, unless addressed. A facilitated partnership brokered process and transparent agreement would support the partners to work through these dynamics in a safe, transparent, and transformative way. The brokering process included conversations about how the partnership fits into broader political and institutional context of the Victorian prevention sector. It explored how sources of power are varied, and can be set amongst a landscape of historical, social, political and economic oppression, and reinforce systems of power, both at an organisational and community level. The brokering process was able to assist in explicitly acknowledging these sources of power and helped gain insights into the structural barriers faced by specialist organisations.

Meaningful partnerships require accepting challenging and brave conversations, as well as thriving on the willingness to assess together the gaps and strengths of both organisations.

AUORE DELCOURT, FORMER MANAGER AT MCWH



It really helped that the project team could engage in frank and fearless discussions about power and privilege, and the work the project needed to be doing to address the sexism, racism and colonialism that workers experience in undertaking this type of work.

FORMER CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TEAM MEMBER AT MCWH

PARTNERSHIP WORKSHOPS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AGREEMENT

In August 2022, the *Connecting Communities* team engaged an external partnership broker from the PBA to help create a formal partnership agreement. The broker met with the project team individually, and as a group, to learn more about how the partnership and project was progressing. Safe and Equal team members had worked with the PBA and advocated for their expertise to support the partnering process. Particularly, the PBA were chosen for their existing experience working in the Victorian prevention sector and a means-tested approach to brokering. To learn more about the PBA, visit their website at partnershipbrokers.org.

These early conversations were about creating space to explore differing interests across both organisations, to arrive at a robust common goal. The broker provided the newly established project team with time to unpack assumptions about each other, risks or fears they may have about working together, and the individual interests driving them. These included naming the historical issues with partnerships between mainstream and specialist organisations in the prevention sector; concerns that MCWH's expertise would not be appropriately acknowledged or valued; and excitement about building transparency and, trust between the two organisations.

The broker emphasised that addressing expectations and fears was key to building a transparent partnership based on mutually beneficial practice. Having challenging conversations at the beginning of the partnership helped to create a stronger partnership, better prepared to navigate conflict.

The table below summarises the outcome of these conversations.

	MCWH	SAFE AND EQUAL
Who are we?	A community-based, not-for-profit organisation that enables migrant and refugee women opportunities for health and wellbeing in Australia.	The peak body for Victorian organisations that specialise in family and gender-based violence across the continuum, including primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery.
What do we want from the partnership?	For MCWH's expertise in working with community to be recognised and prioritised by Safe and Equal, and for MCWH's work to be better understood by the peak and the sector.	To improve Safe and Equal's organisational ability to support practitioners and organisations who work with multicultural faith communities
What do we bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise in intersectional primary prevention policy and practice • Knowledge of best practice in engaging migrant and refugee communities in prevention programs • Capability building expertise, resources and frameworks • Connection to community members and grassroots community organisations • Connection to multicultural communities across Victoria and experience working with prevention practitioners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise in specialist primary prevention policy and practice in mainstream settings • Experience with wrap-around capability building, resources and frameworks • Connection to broader prevention sector and Safe and Equal membership base • Peak body understanding of prevention system • Organisational resourcing to support project delivery

With support from the broker the team was able to identify and navigate these conversations and create equitable ways of working that were then documented in a Partnership Agreement. The Agreement included information about the project and delivery context, a list of key principles and responsibilities, project management guidelines, an overview of the strategic relationship between MCWH and Safe and Equal, and the objectives of the partnership, for each organisation and the partnership as a whole.

The Agreement also outlined a commitment to several ongoing partnership maintenance tools, including:

- Quarterly partnership check-ins with the project team
- 6-monthly 'health' checks with the project team and members of the executive team from both organisations, as needed.
- Annual Partnership Agreement reviews
- Induction processes for new team members



The key principles underpinning the *Connecting Communities* partnership agreement were:

- Create a partnership that delivers the project effectively and recognises and addresses historical and systemic power imbalances between the two organisations.
- Recognise that this work is emergent practice, and the partners need to maintain trust and vulnerability with each other to continually interrogate and explore the work and the partnership.
- Maintain a united and shared approach, 'having each other's backs,' particularly in managing the external relationships and navigating conflict or disagreement between the partners.
- Prioritise time to get to know each other as people, alongside knowing how to work together professionally, to build trust, confidence in each other's judgement, flexibility and advocacy for each other.
- Practice generosity and understanding when assessing each other's workloads and deciding together how to get the most out of the combined resources.
- Strive to build and maintain a 'one-team' approach that supports the co-design and co-delivery of the project.
- Document emerging partnership issues and needs in a systematic way and highlight effective ways of working together.

Adapted from *Connecting Communities* Partnership Agreement, October 2022



We held an initial workshop to really get into some big discussions about what we were worried about, what we each wanted out of this work together, and what we shared. That seemed to set important foundations for an honest and mutually beneficial partnership at the outset, but those big discussions didn't stop there.

MEGHAN COOPER, MANAGER AT SAFE AND EQUAL

Building team capability for partnership work

In addition to the workshops and direct support of the broker, both organisations invested in training with the PBA for members of the core project team to build their skills around partnership approaches and frameworks. This helped to build a basis for shared language and a process for maintaining the partnership.

The project team increased their understanding of key partnership mechanisms and the nature of different working relationships. They built a shared understanding of how to acknowledge and address systematic discrimination and oppression within the project and clarified future expectations through the partnership process.

The project team learned the importance of creating a specific partnership for *Connecting Communities*,

noting that it could not be a replication of pre-existing partnerships that reinforced inequitable partnership practice. Committing to this partnership approach was important because of the challenges and opportunities that surfaced through the process, and how the approach could inform the capacity building activities that the partnership was formed to deliver. As an area of emerging practice, the project team agreed that ways of working needed to enable creative ideas and efficient decision-making. This required high levels of trust, vulnerability and openness to continually interrogate the work and admit shortcomings or areas of uncertainty – ways of working that were established through the partnership process.



One of the key lessons I took from the PBA training was that not every relationship or collaboration between two or more organisations is, or needs to be, a partnership...It's okay just to be a consultant, collaborator or contractor—those relationships have value too—just don't call it a partnership, because doing so can hide or minimise all the work that genuine partnerships take.

LUCY PECKHAM, ADVISOR AT SAFE AND EQUAL

PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE

The team found that putting in the required time and resourcing to maintain the partnership, while also delivering a full suite of wrap-around activities for the funded organisations, was challenging at times. However, the team delivered their activities on time and to a high standard, supported by the practices and tools developed through the Agreement process. In fact, the open and generous knowledge sharing between the two organisations resulted in more robust, creative and nuanced capacity building offerings.

Remaining accountable to each other within the project was part of putting the partnership values into practice. The two project leads from both organisations met at the start of every week to check in, jointly prioritise tasks and delegate actions. Project leads would actively re-prioritise throughout the week, despite the technological barriers to communication created by working across two organisations. In response to this, the team established several shared platforms and project management tools, supported by the operations team at both organisations.

Committing to these communication channels was essential to managing workloads and to putting the principle of shared decision-making into practice. With very few exceptions, the two project leads would make decisions and troubleshoot issues together. In the case of more complex problems, such as managing relationships with external stakeholders, the project leads would convene to decide on a shared strategy, usually followed by team or one-on-one debriefs. Trust built within the partnership meant that in the situation where shared decision making was unrealistic, there was mutual understanding that decisions would be made with the best interest of the partnership in mind. Disagreements were dealt with diplomatically, and transparent communication was always used.



The way we support each other—learning, advocating, and sharing truths—reflects the grace and empathy with which conflict has been navigated. It is a breath of fresh air to be able to “think aloud” and have conversations that challenge each other, and to be in a place where this means only that we’re trying to improve the outcomes for the practitioners we work with.

NAOMI TARANTO, PROJECT COORDINATOR AT MCWH

Partnership maintenance

Clear communication channels and successful implementation of the principles in the Partnership Agreement meant that the 6-monthly health checks were deprioritised. The team were flexible and agile in adapting approaches and decided the quarterly partnership check ins were meeting the team’s needs. These check-in were important opportunities to reflect specifically on the partnership, rather than just focussing on the broader capacity building project. Some key themes and lessons that emerged across the check-ins included:

- **Working flexibly and responsively requires trust.** The project team needed to trust in each other’s skills and ensure that information and power is being shared transparently and boldly to make quick, informed decisions. The team delegated work in a “divide and conquer” way, and workshops, events, panels, and



Communities of Practice were a collaborative effort that required trust in each other's skills and capabilities.

- **Partnership work is not static.** The partnership evolves with the project and requires constant upkeep, both in terms of maintaining processes and updating key documents (like a Partnership Agreement).
- **A Partnership Agreement is only as strong as it is in practice.** The challenges of balancing the needs of the partnership with shifting organisational contexts can be navigated with transparent communication and robust monitoring mechanisms.
- **Documenting partnerships builds the evidence-base for emerging good practice.** Keeping thorough records of check ins and discussions about the partnership project was essential for both MCWH and Safe and Equal to take learnings into the future of their work.
- **Strong partnerships lead to strong advocacy.** Better relationships and greater understanding of each other's work enabled new opportunities for collaborative advocacy between MCWH and Safe and Equal beyond *Connecting Communities*, such as a focus on uplifting community-led prevention across the sector for Safe and Equal.
- **Partnerships allow organisations to achieve more together than they could alone.** The project team consistently acknowledged that this project could not have been delivered as effectively or appropriately if either organisation had taken the contract independently.



Values in practice

The *Connecting Communities* partnership was put to the test with a high level of staff turnover across project teams at both organisations, between September 2022 and January 2024. In response to the organisational change MCWH was going through, Safe and Equal created the time and space for MCWH to navigate these challenges and keep on track with deliverables. The Agreement and an explicit focus on induction and handover also helped to make these transitions smoother. The team's commitment to building relationships was central to onboarding new team members into the project, allowing them a sense of identity and ownership within the work.

The principles of transparency and addressing power dynamics as set out in the Agreement also informed process and practices throughout project delivery. This was the case with Safe and Equal's management of the project budget, where MCWH had total visibility of the financial records, and equal say in financial decision making. Both project leads would work together to make decisions about budget expenditure and often would share the work of seeking quotes and receiving invoices.



My most memorable experiences working on this project have been developing real friendships between officer-level workers that outlasted the project...I'll never forget the shared power and genuine care I felt in our moments of solidarity, where we validated each other's experiences and showed up for each other with love and rage.

SANGWON LEE, FORMER ADVISOR AT SAFE AND EQUAL

The team had continuous discussions to ensure that financial management decisions did not reinforce power imbalance or inequities that often exist when one organisation financially supports the other. Both organisations acknowledged that maintaining financial transparency in the partnership was essential to redressing the inequity of how funds have, and continue to be, distributed between mainstream organisations and community organisations.

Transparency and addressing power dynamics were also important in managing the external perception of *Connecting Communities* and MCWH's visibility in the project. A side effect of Safe and Equal holding much of the logistical work was that in early stages of the project there was a perception from some external stakeholders that *Connecting Communities* was a Safe and Equal project, with MCWH acting as a consultant or junior partner. To address this, the team worked together to develop several strategies, including the design of a unique *Connecting Communities* brand utilising visual elements from both organisations, a shared email inbox for grantees to communicate with the team, and a more intentional approach to ensure the visibility of both partners in external communications.

Role modelling good practice

Participant feedback collected through survey data and focus groups has shown that the *Connecting Communities* program consistently meets its objectives of deepening practitioner knowledge and confidence around primary prevention work and connection between practitioners themselves. When asked specifically about how the two project leads hold space for participants in sessions, one Community of Practice participant shared that they “think [the team] has done well to avoid...creating a negative power dynamic”.

MCWH noted that role modelling good practice was particularly important in the context of prevention with multicultural communities. The project team heard from participants that their organisations were often asked to “partner” with large, mainstream organisations who did not value their expertise or connection to community and worked with them in tokenistic or harmful ways.

The *Connecting Communities* team expressed a hope that the partnership and learnings from it may support other organisations to advocate for more time and resourcing to be allocated to establishing robust relationships, typified by transparency, accountability, and an alignment in values and goals.

What works well about our partnership is the commitment to hold space for reflection and discussion, the commitment of seeking nuanced ways of approaching and framing the collective issues we face across... our sector: short-term funding, tight timelines, casualisation, systemic gender and racial inequality—I think this practice is unique.

CAROLINE R DIAS, FORMER MANAGER AT MCWH





Since we started the partnership with MCWH I have seen Safe and Equal stop and assess our power and positionality in thoughtful ways, referencing learning from the partnership with MCWH as a reason for doing so...and the importance of amplifying the expertise of community organisations as leaders.

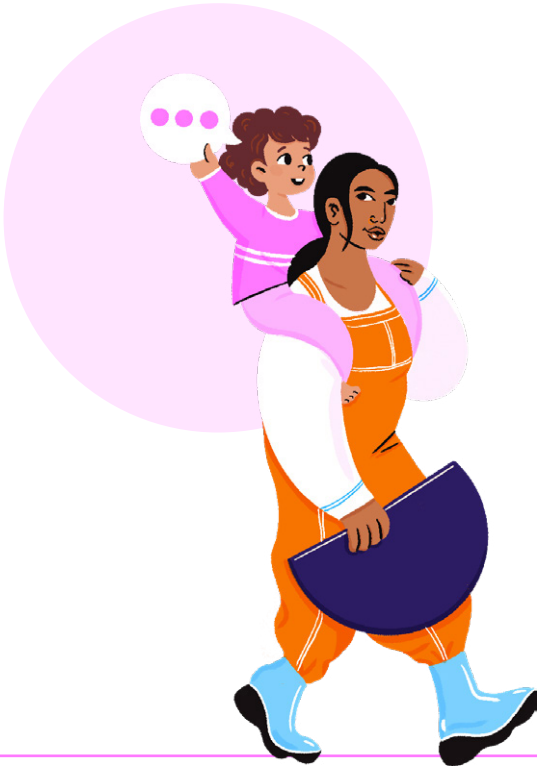
MEGHAN COOPER, MANAGER AT SAFE AND EQUAL



Key lessons from the *Connecting Communities* partnership

The *Connecting Communities* team, and MCWH and Safe and Equal by extension, have learned a tremendous amount about partnership work in both theory and practice. Some key lessons that have broader application for prevention partnerships include:

- **Make the partnership a core but distinct part of a project.** This means budgeting for and evaluating partnerships alongside other deliverables.
- **Create space to talk about each organisation's expectations, concerns and capacity without making assumptions.** This involves open and bold discussions of objectives as individual organisations, as well as the objectives and principles for the partnership as a collective. This, for example, included conversations the team had when drafting resources for publications, where they were able to challenge each other's thoughts and grapple with different opinions, to arrive at a theory of good practice that was mutually agreed upon and ultimately stronger.
- **Commit to open and transparent communications and ways of working.** A partnership agreement is only as good as the bold and upfront conversations that inform it, and the willingness of teams and organisations to honour it.
- **Ensure that the partnership thrives beyond key individuals involved.** Partnerships can become a living part of how you work both at a team and organisational level, but this takes commitment to an ongoing process.



NEXT STEPS

After two years working together, the project team is excited for the opportunity to reflect upon the positive outcomes of this partnership, including a strengthening of MCWH and Safe and Equal's relationship, and the successful delivery of the *Connecting Communities* project to date. The team is confident that the learnings of this partnership will be sustained and enable a much more collaborative approach well beyond *Connecting Communities*. The team plans to continue to socialise the partnership across both organisations, by sharing their learnings, drawing out similarities in their strategic plans, and facilitating connections between colleagues across both organisations.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the *Connecting Communities* partnership, both MCWH and Safe and Equal have reflected that neither organisation would have been able to facilitate this project as successfully if they were working alone. Working together has been mutually beneficial for us as workers, our organisations and the practitioners we support.

The partnership has strengthened our respective capacity – organisationally and individually – to enable us to leverage resources and expertise, gain valuable knowledge, and advocate for the ongoing interrogation of systems and structures needed to end violence against women, and family and gender-based violence with multicultural and faith-based communities. The partnership has laid the groundwork for future collaboration and a lasting alliance between our organisations beyond this project.

We hope that the lessons in this case study will support other organisations to advocate for intentional resourcing towards partnerships, as a way of elevating good practice and lasting impact across our sector.

FURTHER READING

- 📖 Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2018). [Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Project with Action Research initiative: Cultural safety principles and guidelines](#). ANROWS.
- 📖 Carman, M, Fairchild, J, Smith, Y, Cooper, M & O'Connor, B. (2022). [Pride in Prevention Partnership Guide](#). Rainbow Health Australia. Melbourne
- 📖 Carman, M & Farha, T. (2023). [Safe and Equal's Commitment to Intersectionality in Primary Prevention](#). Safe and Equal. Melbourne
- 📖 Multicultural Centre for Women's Health. (2017). [Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women](#). Melbourne
- 📖 Tennyson, R. (2011). [The partnering toolbook](#). The Partnering Initiative
- 📖 Vic Health. (2016) [The partnerships analysis tool](#). Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. Melbourne.
- 📖 Additional resources can be found in the [Partnership Brokers Association resource library](#)

ABOUT CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

[Connecting Communities](#) is a partnership program between the [Multicultural Centre for Women's Health \(MCWH\)](#) and [Safe and Equal](#) to support the learning and professional development needs of the [Connecting Communities](#) network, a network of organisations working with multicultural and faith-based communities to prevent violence against women. The [Connecting Communities](#) program is funded by the Victorian Government through the [Supporting Multicultural Communities to Prevent Family Violence](#) program.

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