GROWING THE FAMILY TREE: CONNECTING GENERATIONS IN MULTICULTURAL FAMILIES FORUM

Summary of Key Issues and Recommendations

Background

On Thursday 3rd May 2012, the City of Sydney, Relationships Australia NSW and the Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW presented a discussion forum on intergenerational conflict in multicultural families. The forum was held at NSW Parliament House and was hosted by the Hon. Victor Dominello MP and facilitated by SBS Journalist Peta-Jane Madam.

The event featured a panel of speakers from diverse backgrounds including Co-ordinator of Relationships Australia NSW Humanitarian Entrants Program Rahat Chowdhury; former refugee from Iraq Sam Almaliki; Founding Advisor of African Women Australia Inc. Juliana Nkrumah; Executive Officer of Auburn Diversity Services Tia Loko; Argentinean born diversity and leadership trainer, migration professional and social activist Bea Leoncini; and writer Benjamin Law (See Appendix A for further details).

Above: (Right to Left) Peta-Jane Madam, Rahat Chowdhury, Sam Almaliki, Juliana Nkrumah, Tia Loko, Bea Leoncini & Benjamin Law.

Conflict between generations is a significant issue in multicultural families. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2006, 26% of people born in Australia had at least one overseas-born parent (ABS 2008). Of these, 44% had both parents born overseas (ABS 2008). Although intergenerational conflict is not unique to multicultural families, research shows that the migration or refugee experience can have a profound impact on family dynamics. Raising a family in a new environment and growing up in a society with different values, cultural norms and expectations to one's parents can be major stressors and cause tension within the family home (Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW 2011b).

The Growing the Family Tree forum was designed to address these challenges by giving families and communities a personal voice, providing an opportunity to share strategies and raising awareness about available services. The event was attended by over 130 community members, families and services providers. Participants came from diverse age groups, cultural backgrounds, immigration and refugee experiences and organisational sectors. Participants engaged in lively discussion and highlighted key issues within their families and communities. Participants proposed strategies to raise awareness of these issues, improve available services and enhance existing support networks and community strengths. Participants also made recommendations for future directions in the feedback collected following the event.

The forum presents a rich source of information regarding issues which have a significant impact on family relationships in multicultural communities. The first half of this paper presents a summary of the key issues identified in the forum. The second half of this paper draws together recommendations for policy, service and family & community responses from the forum discussion, participant feedback and existing research.

Key Issues Identified in the Forum

CONFLICTING NEEDS WHEN NEGOTIATING A NEW CULTURAL IDENTITY

Participants identified that conflict arose from the different needs of parents and children when negotiating their cultural identity in a new environment. Some parents spoke of feeling "rejected" when their children expressed their desire to "fit in" to the mainstream Australian culture. They also voiced their fear of being "left behind" by their children and the loss of their relationship due to differences in values, lifestyle and life aspirations. At the same time, participants shared how as children, they struggled with issues of racism and spoke of their parents' lack of understanding around their need to belong and the complexity of living in between two cultures.

Participants identified that children tend to be acculturated to the Australian culture at a faster rate than their parents. Some participants spoke of how as children, their desire to "be Australian like everyone else" led to a shift away from their cultural heritage. Some shared personal stories of how their need to belong manifested in a context of racism and evoked shame around their cultural identity. In contrast, parents believed that it was important to preserve their language and values in their family and expressed strong concerns about the loss of their culture in Australia.

ROLE CHANGES IN THE FAMILY

Participants identified that parents often rely on children to help navigate the new culture. Being an interpreter for their parents when they were children was a common experience amongst participants; stories were shared of completing forms or acting as interpreters during medical appointments and parent–teacher interviews. Some young people reflected on how they felt they "had to grow up faster" and were teased by their peers as a result of assuming adult roles and responsibilities.

Service providers expressed that these role changes can have a profound impact on family dynamics. Practitioners spoke of how common it was to see parents experience a loss of power and for children to feel confused by their adult responsibilities.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Institutional racism was a major concern for participants.

Barriers to Employment

Parents voiced the structural barriers they faced in securing employment as their qualifications and skills were often not recognised in Australia. Highly skilled migrants spoke of how unemployment was a "loss of dignity" and the impact it had on their self–esteem.

Racism at School

Other participants reflected on experiences of racism from teachers and peers when they were at school and the impact this had on their identity. One panel member highlighted how these struggles during the settlement process can be major stressors and cause dysfunction in the family unit.

SHORTAGE OF CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SERVICES

Practitioners identified that there is currently a shortage of culturally appropriate services for families to cope with challenges of the settlement process. Some community members spoke of the stigma in asking for help as it is seen as a "compromise to the family and communities' dignity and pride" in their culture.

Some workers observed that language barriers and a lack of knowledge of available services can prevent families from accessing services. Others noted that past experiences of political persecution can impact on families' perception of services, particularly police and child protection services.

OTHER ISSUES

Some families identified that the challenges of adapting to a new environment placed strains on family relationships. Some participants and panel members clearly recalled their parents taking up intensive low-skilled labour. As a result, their parents were unable to spend time with them when they were children.

Summary of Key Issues

- **Parents and children have conflicting needs when negotiating their cultural identity in a new environment.**

- **Navigating a new culture produces changes for the roles of parents and children in the family.**

- **Institutional racism has a significant impact on family relationships.**

- **There is a shortage of culturally appropriate services for families.**

- **The challenges of adapting to a new environment places strains on family relationships.**

Recommendations[1]

1. POLICY RESPONSES

1a. Challenge Racism

The forum discussion highlighted a strong need to create opportunities for employment and facilitate increased representation of multicultural and refugee communities across all sectors of Australian society. As stated by one panel member "everybody has skills".

From July 2012–2015, the Australian Federal Government will implement the new National Anti-Racism Strategy (see Australian Human Rights Commission nd). Government departments could provide funding to programs such as the Skilled Migrant Mentoring Program (see Sydney Community College 2012) to ensure that all individuals, regardless of immigration or refugee background, are afforded equal rights and opportunities.

1b. Promote Multiculturalism

Forum participants emphasised the need to promote the value of multiculturalism and to validate the stories of multicultural families. Some participants also expressed the need for initiatives which provide opportunities for communities to interact with Australian society and reduce social inequalities.

Future initiatives could build on existing programs such as the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program (see Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2012).

2. SERVICE RESPONSES

2a. Proactive Approach to Service Delivery

Practitioners spoke of the need to take an active role in reaching out to families and being sensitive to social and cultural barriers. Workers suggested strategies such as promoting services through community events, providing information in community languages, arranging for interpreters and honouring families' stories.

2b. Increase Culturally Appropriate Services

Practitioners identified the need for more training to increase cultural awareness amongst workers. Workers noted that it is important to understand families' experiences in their cultural context; for example, in some cultures, it can be a source of pride for children to gradually take on responsibility in the family. Practitioners also proposed best practice strategies such as using bicultural workers as cultural consultants to build trust and safety with families.

Forum participants identified that the loss of extended family networks and community support in a new country was a significant issue. It was noted that in many cultures, families traditionally rely on their community for social support. Participants advocated for services to be responsive to this cultural need. For example, it was suggested for services to adopt a "more personal" approach to their service delivery.

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[1] Please note that these are the recommendations of the organising group of agencies, based on the discussion at the forum.

2c. Strength-Based Approach to Supporting Families

Forum participants universally argued for services to affirm the existing strengths of families. Practitioners highlighted the importance of "empowering families to transfer their existing skills to a new context".

There are a number of existing practice models which emphasise the strengths of families. Workers for example, can adopt a strength-based and solution-focused approach to acknowledge the resilience of multicultural families (for e.g. see Walsh 2004; Yee & Mjelde-Mossey 2007).

2d. Holistic Approach to Supporting Families

Practitioners emphasised that both parents and children require support to cope with the challenges of the settlement process; children require support to negotiate their cultural identity and their need to belong. Parents need to be supported through their experiences of grief and trauma.

Workers proposed a holistic approach to supporting families to address these issues; family services can support parents to build on their existing parenting skills. Youth workers can actively promote youth services in schools and communities and encourage children to access support.

2e. Promote Diversity in Schools

Community members and workers from the education sector suggested that schools need to play a key role in promoting diversity and challenging racism.

Some parents underscored the importance of community language programs in schools for the maintenance of culture. Forum participants suggested that additional community language programs would be beneficial in promoting cultural awareness and preserving cultural heritage. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2011) argues that the teaching of community languages ensures a stronger sense of identity for children.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities' Anti-Racism Policy (2005) requires all NSW government schools to actively challenge racism. Teachers could draw on existing resources such as the 'Racism. No way!' website (see NSW Department of Education & Communities 2010) and the 'Making Multicultural Australia for the 21st Century' website (see NSW Department of Education & Communities ndb).

In addition, schools can play an active role in empowering parents to challenge racism and informing them of their rights. Under the NSW Department of Education and Communities' Anti-Racism Policy (2005), every NSW government school has an Anti-Racism Contact Officer (ARCO) who assists parents, staff and students who have complaints regarding racism (see NSW Department of Education and Communities 2009). Schools can inform parents of the identity and role of the ARCO through school newsletters and websites and invite ARCOs to P&C meetings. Information on the rights of children and parents is available in community languages on the NSW Department of Education and Communities website (see NSW Department of Education and Communities 2012). These resources can be distributed via school newsletters or incorporated into school websites.

2f. Support for Children in Schools

Some participants reflected on the critical role teachers played in developing their confidence when they were children. It was suggested for teachers to actively support multicultural and refugee children both academically and emotionally to assist them through the challenges of settling into a new environment.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities offers a cultural awareness training program, 'Cultural Points of View', to equip staff to work effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse populations (see NSW Department of Education & Communities nda). Teachers could attend this training to build their capacity in supporting multicultural and refugee children.

3. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

3a. Involve Parents in Children's Lives

Some young people highlighted that their relationship with their parents was enhanced when their parents were involved in their lives. Some young people proposed for parents to support children's aspirations as this enables parents to better understand their children's world. One parent shared her experience of leaving a high profile job to spend more time with her son to "be there for him" and how this strengthened their relationship.

3b. Identify Core Values

Some young people identified aspects of their cultural heritage which may be transferred and preserved across a new cultural context, including faith, language and life values. It was suggested for parents to identify and pass on key aspects of their culture while also allowing children the freedom to explore their interests and aspirations in the Australian culture.

3c. Future Forums to Promote Understanding between Parents and Children

The forum discussion pointed to the need for more dialogue between generations. Feedback from participants indicated a need for future forums which give more of a voice to both parents and children and which explore family issues from all angles including societal influences, cross-cultural contexts and broader systemic issues.

Future forums could build on existing initiatives such as the See it my Way project (see MYAN 2011a) and the Growing the Family Tree forum.

Summary of Recommendations

POLICY RESPONSES

- Challenge institutional racism; create opportunities for employment and representation
- Promote the value of multiculturalism and celebration of diversity

SERVICE RESPONSES

- Proactive and holistic approach to service delivery
- Increase culturally appropriate services
- Strength-based approach to supporting families
- Promote diversity in schools
- Support multicultural and refugee children in schools

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

- Involve parents in children's lives
- Identify core values in the maintenance of culture
- Develop future forums and projects which promote dialogue

Further Information

An audio recording of the Growing the Family Tree forum is available via:
http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/podcasts/CityNews/default.asp

For further information, please contact:

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Appendices

APPENDIX A – PANEL SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Rahat Chowdhury
Rahat is the Co-ordinator of the Relationships Australia NSW Humanitarian Entrants Program. Rahat arrived in Australia in the skilled migrant visa category, with her husband and two little boys. As the Co-ordinator of the Strength to Strength refugee program Rahat works predominantly with families from Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan as well as other Humanitarian entrants, providing counselling and casework support.

Sam Almaliki
Sam arrived in Australia with his family as a nine-year-old refugee fleeing a Saddam Hussein-controlled Iraq. After a testing eight months spent in the Villawood Detention Facility, the family were granted permanent residency. Sam is involved in a range of community organisations and is currently a Commissioner on the NSW Community Relations Commission (CRC). He is employed by Cricket New South Wales and is interested in cricket as a connection point for integration and engagement with Australian culture and; conflict and difference within multi-cultural families.

Juliana Nkrumah
Juliana was born in Ghana, arriving in Australia in 1988 with her one year old daughter to join her husband who was a student. She brings her experience as a mother, spouse and leader in her own Ghanaian community and broader African community across Australia, as well as extensive community development experience in the CALD community to bear on this forum. Besides her day job in both state and Commonwealth public sector agencies, Juliana commits a lot of time as a voluntary worker on projects to enhance the status of African communities, specifically African women. Her work in community development continues to impact the lives of many families and communities.

Tia Roko
Tia arrived in Australia at the age of 10 with her family from Fiji. She is now the mother of three children aged 21, 16 and 15 years and has her own experience of navigating questions of culture and identity. Tia is currently the Executive Officer of Auburn Diversity Services and has worked extensively with young people, families and communities. She is also Chairperson of the NSW Council for South Pacific Communities and Vice-Chair of Settlement Services International. Tia also writes on the experience of people from Pacific Islander backgrounds living in Australia.

Bea Leoncini
Beatriz was born in Argentina and came to Australia as a 12 year old in the early 1970s. Her personal experience of migration and settlement as a teenager, as well as being a mother, partner and carer to her parents and children provide her with valuable insights about being part of a migrant family system which spans four generations. Her experience in the community sector, particularly with CALD communities include working with Migrant Resource Centres, Community and Neighbourhood Centres, Community based legal Centres in Victoria and NSW, and as a Senior Ethnic Affairs Advisor for the NSW Department of Community Services. Beatriz now works as a consultant in the area of vocational and diversity training, organisational development and in Migration Law.

Benjamin Law
Benjamin is a Brisbane-based freelance writer and a senior contributor to Frankie, The Monthly, Q-Weekend, Sunday Life, Cleo, Crikey, The Walkley Magazine, The Big Issue, New Matilda and the Australian Associated Press. His work has been anthologised in The Best Australian Essays (2008 and 2009). Benjamin has written an autobiography of life growing up in Queensland's Sunshine Coast as one of five kids in a Chinese Australian family. The book is titled The Family Law and was published by Black Inc. Books in 2010.