Local Government Preventing Violence Against Women Projects

**Rural Challenge**

**Macedon Ranges Shire Council**

**Project Process:**

The initial activity of the Rural Challenge project was to establish a project steering group made up of the five project partners. The project steering group would meet every two months to provide direction and advice on key aspects of the project. Tasks the steering group focused on included: developing a Terms of Reference; identifying engagement strategies; developing project protocols for disclosures of family violence and support; identifying members of the Women’s Advisory Panel; promotion support; input into workshop design; and input into the development of the Rural Challenge Toolkit. The steering groups input at each stage of the project were always constructive and invaluable in understanding the community organisations and developing the best approach to working with them.

A simultaneous activity was the recruitment of a Rural Challenge project officer. This role was responsible for leading the design and development of project materials and supporting the delivery of the project in both municipalities. The project was fortunate to recruit Dr Jessica Crofts, who had previously worked on a number of collaborative partnership projects and had a doctorate focused on gender relations. Within Macedon Ranges Shire Council, this role was supported by an internal working group consisting of the Community Partnerships Officer and the Manager, Community & Culture.

In addition to the input provided by the project steering group, the Rural Challenge project officer met and consulted with a range of organisations to help develop and design different aspects of the project. This included meeting with Women’s Health Loddon Mallee and Centre for Non Violence on protocols for dealing with disclosures of family violence, counselling support, workshop design and safe ethical practice; Sports Focus on workshop design and the development of the action plan template; Associate Professor Sue Dyson on workshop design and content development; Dr Juliet Watson on workshop design and ethical practice; Steve Henwood, a participant from the CHALLENGE project (the model for the Rural Challenge project), on his experiences of engaging in that project, as well as City of Greater Bendigo, CFA District 2 and AFL Central Victoria on general project development and delivery.

Another key process was the establishment of the Women’s Advisory Panel. Twenty women were identified and invited and fourteen accepted and became the panel. The panel were given three key tasks: review the action plan template; review and critique the draft action plans; and review the Rural Challenge toolkit. As part of reviewing the action plans a number of panel members attended a workshop in Bendigo to critique the plans as a group. This format allowed for a more group discussion and generated a number of key insights.

A key aspect of the project process was to ensure that the workshops were delivered in a safe and ethical manner. Protocols were developed on responding to disclosures of family violence, a list of counselling services were provided to participants, posters for local family violence support services were placed in toilets at all venues and family support workers were present at all workshops for both men and women in case the content triggered the need to talk to someone during or after the workshops.

The Rural Challenge project aimed to work with a small sample of community organisations to pilot the materials. The project had seven CFA brigades and three football-netball clubs participate in the project. Between two and six people attend the workshops from each brigade or club. Overall there were 34 participants across the two municipalities complete the project. This was an ideal number of organisations and participants to ensure productive group discussions whilst also allowing for in-depth support and mentoring. Across the two municipalities, the project delivered two information nights, twelve capacity building workshops, four action planning sessions, a Women’s Advisory Panel workshop and a celebration dinner.

Macedon Ranges Shire Council resources invested in the project included the support of the Community Partnerships Officer one day a week, the use of Council laptops, projectors, screens for delivering workshops and vehicles for travel. City of Greater Bendigo Council also contributed a worker for half a day per week.

**Project achievements and successes:**

The Rural Challenge project was successful in achieving its four stated outcomes. The project used a community development approach to increasing gender equality most of the achievements are in the community organisations and community partners who participated on the project.

At the brigade and club level, the ten participating groups have a better understanding of gender equality and preventing violence against women and also have a strategic ‘roadmap’ and commitment to make organisational change. These structural changes should contribute to cultural and behavioural change and ensure that gender equality principles are embedded in each organisation. In addition, there is a focus on community engagement and communication as part of the action plans and it is anticipated that the key messages and changes will be communicated within local communities to create more awareness and positive change.

In addition to this, an unanticipated success has been the connections made between groups, particularly the CFA brigades. This is particularly an issue for the women who were often staying behind after workshops to talk about their shared experiences and the different strategies some women had used to make changes. This highlighted the need for an informal or formal community of practice to be established to allow the sharing of knowledge, strategies and solutions between the brigades.

The project partners also have a better understanding of embedding gender equality in community organisations and have explicitly articulated on ongoing commitment to achieving this outcome. CFA District 2 in particular are keen to develop a peer-mentoring support model whereby the participants from the Rural Challenge use the toolkit to educate and support other brigades in their region. This will be explored at the final steering group meeting. The project has also highlighted where the CFA brigades need ongoing operational support on embedding gender equality at the brigade level and District 2 are committed to developing better internal processes to support brigades on this issue.

From a Council perspective, the project has greatly strengthened our internal understanding of how to work with community organisations on preventing violence against women and embedding gender equality principles. This includes a broader and deeper understanding of the conceptual material, an understanding of the right level and how to pitch the material to community organisations, a confidence in a best practice safe and ethical approach to working in this space and an awareness of new areas and issues to explore and consider in future PVAW/gender equality work.

Another achievement of the project has been how it has demonstrated the way Council can be a leader in working on preventing violence against women and increasing gender equality. Council used its cross-sectoral position and investment in community development to bring together diverse partners from a range of sectors to take a community development approach to this work. Its unique position allowed it to lead the facilitation of the steering group and to collaboratively develop the program and materials with a number partners.

In terms of relationships, both participating Councils have developed positive relationships, trust and credibility with the CFA brigades and football-netball clubs from their own municipality. Similarly, both Councils have developed very good relationships with the other project partners including Women’s Health Loddon Mallee, CFA District 2, AFL Central Victoria, AFL Goldfields, Sports Focus and the Centre for Non-Violence. Attendance and participation at the steering group meetings has been excellent and all partners have stated their positive view of the Rural Challenge project.

In addition, other community organisations have become aware of the Rural Challenge project and are interested in using the toolkit and working in this space. Macedon Ranges Shire Council met with the Health Promotion Officer from Castlemaine District Community Health (CDCH) to talk about the project and using the toolkit. CDCH are in the process of developing their four-year health promotion plan which has a strong focus on preventing violence against women and is keen to work with community organisations such as CFA brigades and other sporting clubs. Council is also planning to meet with Cobaw Community Health in Macedon Ranges Shire to talk about the project and the availability of the toolkit.

**Project challenges and issues:**

A key challenge throughout the project has been the limited timeframe to develop and deliver it. It was anticipated that many of the external facilitators brought into the project would be responsible for developing the content of their workshops. However, often the Rural Challenge project team were heavily involved in developing content to make sure it was consistent and sequential to the overall workshop program design. Another time issue was the need for a strong investment of time in relationship building to ensure positive participation. Strong relationships are the cornerstone of a good community development approach and therefore require time in making sure that partners and participants feel engaged, listened to and updated.

The tight timeframes were also exacerbated by a change in the project methodology. The original project methodology focused on working with male leaders exclusively as most CFA brigades and football-netball clubs were dominated by men in positions of power to make structural change. Acknowledging this, the project had built in measures to ensure greater accountability to women (the Women’s Advisory Panel and a focus group with women from the participating clubs/brigades). However, executives are not all exclusively male and by not including the minority of women leaders in the workshops and action planning it would further disadvantage them. In addition there was an awareness that women may not necessarily have a better understanding of gender equality principles and practice than men and therefore needed to be given similar exposure to the theory and issues. It was therefore decided that a parallel stream of workshops for women needed to be developed as a best practice approach to working on gender equality with community organisations. The women’s workshops would be open to all women, including leaders and general members, and could also function as a leadership and capacity building model, as well as supporting a formative community of practice. The addition of these workshops greatly increased the logistical pressures and time restraints but it was felt that it was a necessary and fundamental aspect of the project.

The time challenges were managed and mitigated by additional support from the Community Partnerships officer at Macedon Ranges Shire Council, increasing from half a day per week to one and a half days per week. In addition, the Rural Challenge project officer worked an additional 80 hours of overtime to ensure that the materials were developed and delivered.

The limited time for the project also impacted on partners’ ability to directly contribute to the project outside of specific consultation meetings or steering group meetings. Documents were created and revised within very short timeframes before and between workshops which restricted opportunities for input from all project partners. In addition, the geographic coverage of the project, combined with the limited time, meant that travel between the two Council offices was kept to a minimum so that the majority of time could be devoted to developing the project materials and delivering the workshops. On reflection, better joint governance processes could have been developed, such as regular teleconferences and/or Skype meetings.

A slightly different timing issue was the limited window in which the project was available to participants. It had been originally intended to be offered to coincide with the time before AFL football pre-season training starts but because of funding delays it coincided with pre-season training and the start of the full football season. In addition, the eight workshops and two action planning sessions in each municipality all had to take place in a two-month window. Both of these issues led many clubs to feel they could not commit to the project which is partly the reason for the slightly lower than expected participation of football clubs.

Given the ambitious nature of the project, its responsiveness to the needs of participants and the availability of clubs and brigades the project needed to be developed and delivered with a minimum of 12 months to allow for adequate preparation, engagement and support.

Another challenge has been engaging with councillors and the Council Executive Management Team on the project goals and outcomes. This has been mainly due to the timing of Council elections and a busy legislative requirement delivery timetable for newly elected Councils e.g. Council Plan, Budget, Health & Wellbeing Plan etc. The new Councils were briefed on the project and it is planned to share the project evaluation results with Councillors as well.

**Advice for other councils:**

A key lesson of delivering this project is that it is essential to work with both women and men simultaneously as part of embedding principles of gender equality. As stated, the project aimed to work with male leaders as it was assumed that they held the majority of power (which was predominantly true) and that they were the barrier for making change. However, it should not be assumed that all women are excluded from power, or at least influencing power, nor that all women are aware and committed to making structural changes to embed gender equality in organisations. This latter point may reflect their own position of privilege or investment in existing gender relations, a lack of understanding and awareness particularly regarding structural gender disadvantage, or a protective feeling towards men in their own organisations. Linked to this is the ethical practice of excluding women from any work on gender equality reinforces their lack of privilege and disadvantages them more.

While working with women and men together is essential for the gender equality to be advanced, another key lesson is the need to work with women and men separately *and* together. In the Rural Challenge project, the three workshops developed were almost identical for women and men but it was felt separate workshops would create a safe space for discussion and open reflection to occur. However, it is also important for women and men to talk to each other, for men to hear women’s voices and vice versa, and therefore all participants were brought together for the action planning session to share their insights and learnings together having all been exposed to the same theoretical material. As an anecdotal example of this, the project team were unsure whether to run the ‘Gender Stereotypes, Masculinity and Male Privilege’ workshop for the women’s groups. We therefore asked them what they thought in each municipality and we realised that not only were they interested but it would help illuminate why women’s disadvantage is often not noticed or acted on by men and what barriers women may face in making change in male-dominated institutions.

Other advice on implementing the project is how to promote and ‘pitch’ the project to participants. The Rural Challenge project had an emphasis on both preventing violence against women and promoting gender equality. However, in practice, the project team felt a smaller focus on preventing violence against women (whilst talking about it and making the link to gender equality) and greater emphasis on gender equality would be more effective and have more relevance for the clubs and brigades. Participants stated in initial conversations that their interest in the project was to increase gender equality in their organisations. Since increasing gender equality would directly contribute to preventing violence against women the team felt more time spent talking about and promoting gender equality would not only be more effective but also engage more people in the project and in the organisations themselves.

Linked to this is the appropriate level to have discussions about gender equality. Simplistic binary concepts around gender stereotypes, masculinity, and femininity were not helpful, and in many cases were barriers, in having positive discussions with the participants. There needed to be much more conversation about the plurality of masculinities and femininities, about alternative, positive masculinities and problematizing ‘toxic’ masculinity. In the workshops, men and women were disengaged in the discussions on gender stereotypes (men are like this, women are like this) but more engaged and reflective in the discussion on ‘toxic masculinity’. With hindsight, we could have taken this further to talk in more sophisticated ways about the mosaic of gender identities and performance of masculinity/femininity that may have resonated stronger with the participants.

Other advice would be to allow plenty of time for delivery of workshops to enable maximum participation from community organisations. A possible approach may be to have longer gaps between workshops so it is not as an intensive commitment for participants. It is also necessary to work with the schedules of the particular community organisations and avoid their peak periods of activity. The Rural Challenge project was limited to do this, not just be the funding timeframes, but by the two groups it was working with. The peak period of the fire season coincided with the quiet period of the football season and vice versa which made finding a mutually suitable time difficult. Alternatively, another approach may be to have more flexibility to work one-on-one or in small groups with community clubs or brigades. However, this would have lessened the impact of the bigger group discussions and participant interaction, which were seen as positive and beneficial particularly for women in terms of networking and sharing strategies.