

# **Facilitating Collective Healing for African Refugee Men in Australia: Identifying Challenges, Cooperative Approaches to Men's Groups**

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## **Abstract:**

This article assesses Men's Behaviour Programs in Australia, with a specific focus on the programs' therapeutic aspect for African men, particularly those from refugee backgrounds burdened with significant trauma. The article discusses challenges faced by this group and the absent integration of healing elements. It then identifies the cooperative strategies facilitators can employ to promote positive engagement among African refugee men. Case studies are used to illustrate effective and ineffective facilitation approaches and highlight how misguided facilitation can detrimentally affect the group.

## **Keywords:**

Refugee, Trauma, Healing, War, Alienation, Attentive Listening

## Introduction

In recent years, the influx of refugees from Africa settling in Australia has seen a noticeable surge. In the 2020 census, more than 400,000 individuals residing in Australia indicated their African origin. This demographic constitutes 1.6% of the total Australian population and 5.1% of the nation's overseas-born populace. The majority, accounting for 58%, are white South Africans, while the remaining 42% comprise black Africans hailing from sub-Saharan nations (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Nonetheless, the focal point of this paper resides in the experiences of black African men from countries within Africa that have grappled with war, displacement, and civil unrest. The African continent has borne witness to ethnic conflicts, political violence, and armed conflicts across various regions, invariably leading to migrations and the coerced displacement of community members due to the burden of trauma and the absence of safety nets (Fisher, 2013).

Given the profound instability and turmoil that accompany conflicts and wars, the health and general well-being of affected populations undergo significant repercussions. These events have the potential to inflict lasting trauma upon those who have either directly experienced them or been witnesses to their occurrence (Neuner et al., 2004; Bonanno, 2004). Events of this nature, deemed potentially traumatic, encompass occurrences such as wars and personal incidents that subject individuals to extraordinary levels of stress, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013). During the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s, refugees exposed to potentially traumatic events sought refuge in countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States (US) (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, 2013). Notably, the migration of African refugees to other global regions, including the United States of America and Australia, experienced a surge between the 1960s and 2000s (Anyieth & Abur, 2022).

The migratory streams of both migrants and refugees have persisted over time, with the remaining African refugees, originally hailing from Somalia, making their way to Australia during the 1980s (Jakubowicz, 2010). Subsequently, a marked upswing has been observed in the influx of African refugees originating from conflict-ridden nations across the African continent. This cohort encompasses countries such as Burundi, Congo Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and South Sudan (Hugo, 2009). Their integration into Australian society often follows harrowing experiences of trauma and adversity within their countries of origin (Hugo, 2009; Jakubowicz, 2010). Unmistakably, the echo of their pre-migration lives, entailing encounters with traumatic events connected to warfare and forced displacement, continue to reverberate in their present existence (Fisher, 2013; Anyieth & Abur, 2022).

The mental well-being of refugees who have confronted the ravages of war within African nations is intrinsically intertwined with the potentially traumatic incidents they underwent amidst these conflicts. Instances of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugee men dwelling within refugee camps situated in Guinea serve as poignant examples, with reports surfacing of emotions such as vulnerability and powerlessness—profound psychological ramifications that commonly accompany the aftermath of war-induced torture (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Similarly, in the refugee camps of Kenya, individuals originating from strife-torn regions like Sudan, Somalia, Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Burundi, all of whom have fallen prey to torture, bear the heavy burden of extensive trauma and persistently grapple with the enduring psychological repercussions borne from their distressing encounters (Pokhariyal et al., 2013). Comprehending both the prevalence and far-reaching implications of potential traumatic events stemming from warfare, alongside their conceivable connection with instances of family violence perpetration, holds pivotal significance. Equally imperative is an exploration of suitable avenues for intervention and prevention. This approach is paramount in facilitating the development and execution of targeted, trauma-informed interventions and preventive measures tailored to address the specific needs of former African refugee men (Zelechowski et al., 2013; Anyieth, 2021).

Facilitating groups for men who employ violence, it is imperative for facilitators to possess a full comprehension of the multifaceted challenges experienced by former refugee African men, and to approach these issues in a manner that acknowledges their complex traumatic experiences prior to migration. This approach should aim to foster healing, mutual respect, and knowledge, all while working towards the core objective of these groups – the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for violent behaviour by the men involved. In the ensuing sections, I will expound upon these approaches, examining both successful and unsuccessful strategies, and elucidating the transition from a facilitator-centric approach to one marked by collaborative engagement between facilitators and the men within the groups. Subsequently, I will provide two instances from my own experience of co-facilitating similar groups, highlighting what proved effective and what did not. Finally, I will conclude the paper by emphasising key discussion points and offering suggestions to enhance the impact of men's groups. This amalgamation of insights collectively forms the intricate fabric of men's groups.

### **Interventions for Men Who Use Violence: Family and Domestic Violence**

Within the Australian context, studies such as those conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) have revealed that one in four women faces instances of family

and domestic violence at the hands of current or former partners. Similar to the broader Australian community, family and domestic violence is also present within former African refugee communities, hampering the smooth transition and settlement process (Fisher et al., 2020). Notably, women are most often victims of violence, while men constitute the majority of perpetrators, as supported by statistical evidence. While gender inequality often frames the social backdrop for occurrences of family and domestic violence in Australia, the African Australian former refugee communities exhibit a complex interplay of factors that contribute to such violence.

Similar to interventions for mainstream perpetrators, strategies aimed at addressing former African refugee perpetrators also encompass men's behaviour change programs. These programs, known as Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs), primarily adopt a group-based approach and are designed to engage men, assisting them in recognising their violent conduct and formulating strategies to curtail their use of violence. Men's Behaviour Change and community-initiated Men's Groups are dispersed throughout the Australian state of Victoria. These groups are a blend of those that have been set up under court directives and those initiated by community professionals and leaders. However, it's noteworthy that a significant proportion of the time, the facilitators who spearhead these groups aren't sourced from the communities themselves. Across several Australian jurisdictions, including Victoria, specific minimum criteria are in place, necessitating intervention programs such as the Men's Behaviour Change Program (MBCP) to adhere to governmental directives for accreditation and facilitation of these groups. While these directives do not explicitly mention the engagement of individuals from Africa and former refugee backgrounds, they do underscore the significance of perpetrator interventions being culturally sensitive (Vlias et al., 2017). Nevertheless, a scarcity of culturally tailored men's behaviour change programs prevails, coupled with a lack of comprehensive guidance on adapting interventions to optimise participation, healing, and the cultivation of positive transformation among men from former African refugee backgrounds.

### **Facilitations Trajectory**

While the core intent of men who use violence groups is to instigate behavioural transformations and provide a platform for the examination and challenging of beliefs, it is essential to acknowledge that most men entering these groups do so with reluctance. Central to these efforts is the aspiration to hold men accountable for acts of violence perpetrated against their family members. However, as emphasised in the introductory section, the

primary focal point of this paper is the facilitation of men's groups for former African refugee men.

Typically, the orchestrators behind Men's Behaviour Change Programs manifest as white middle-class men, though there exists a scant minority of male facilitators from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. This often stems from a constellation of factors, chief among them being issues related to accreditation, coupled with a lack of pertinent experience within the realm of family and domestic violence. Moreover, there's a notable dearth of familiarity in working with individuals who have both endured violence and trauma, as well as those who have exhibited tendencies towards employing violence. However, a notably select few, such as myself, women, participate as co-facilitators alongside male counterparts. These instances of female involvement are largely confined to a specific subset of groups—typically those propelled by grassroots community initiatives and characterized by self-referral tendencies. In essence, the introduction of women as co-facilitators into the mix is an infrequent occurrence, one that often emerges in response to the inherent necessity of preserving a gender-balanced dialogue within the group dynamic.

Throughout numerous groups that I have either co-facilitated or participated in as an observer, I have garnered firsthand experience of a recurring trend: the instructional principles and contextual frameworks utilised in men's groups draw significantly from the Duluth Model. This feminist-rooted psychoeducational approach posits that male aggression towards intimate partners is rooted in patriarchal ideologies, reinforced by societal endorsement of men's authority and dominance over women (Boxhall & Birch, 2022; Bates et al., 2019; Bernardi & Day, 2015; Blatch et al., 2016). The Duluth Model's central tenet revolves around mitigating the power and control that perpetrators wield over their partners, providing constructive avenues for transformation – an acknowledgment crucial for effective intervention. Nonetheless, the experiences of former refugee African men within certain groups have yielded negative impressions. These impressions arise from the foundational premise of programs like Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs) and other perpetrator interventions, which hinge on the notion of choice, assuming that men consciously opt for family violence and can readily opt for non-violent alternatives (McPhail et al., 2007).

As posited by McPhail (2007), the core thrust of these programmes is to encourage men to take full ownership of their actions rather than attribute their conduct to external or internal traits, life histories, or external influences. However, this perspective, while valid to some extent, neglects the fact that numerous offenders struggle to perceive their actions as personally directed reactions to situations. Unravelling implicit beliefs and narratives that

endorse violence-supporting attitudes can be a prolonged process (Vlias et al., 2017). While this path towards embracing responsibility is undeniably important, there exists a risk that it might become disentangled from its context, engendering an undue emphasis on individual actions. This can inadvertently divert attention from the broader societal dynamics, psychological underpinnings, economic disparities, and cultural elements that mould such decisions.

Hence, it is imperative for both program designers and group facilitators to appreciate the profound impact of pre-migration encounters like warfare and trauma, processes of acculturation, shifts in gender norms, and the structural manifestations of patriarchy in shaping the choices of former refugee African men. While individual accountability remains pivotal, it must be contextualised within a broader framework that accounts for the societal, cultural, and psychological influences driving violence towards women among former refugee men. Therefore, the efficacy of these groups for African former refugee men is contingent upon the intent and facilitation of the groups. The manner in which facilitators broach the topics of violence, patriarchy, power, and control, particularly during the group's nascent stages, can decisively shape the trajectory of the group's evolution.

### **Causes of Fight or Flight Response in Group Settings**

Numerous African former refugee men originate from war-ravaged regions in Africa (Khawaja, 2008). A significant proportion of them have endured life in internally displaced and neighbouring countries' refugee camps, mastering the art of survival with meagre resources (Khawaja, 2008; Fisher et al., 2020). Owing to their pre-migration ordeals, compounded by challenges encountered during post-migration settlement, a considerable portion of these men grapple with feelings of societal stigma, condemnation, and alienation. At times, even their own community and family's distance themselves due to their history of violent conduct. Consequently, when approaching the group setting, many are poised in a 'fight or flight' stance, a manifestation stemming from the apprehension of being judged and the anxiety it ignites.

Within this context, the group, ostensibly 'led' by a sufficiently disaffected participant(s) capable of influencing collective thought, behaves as if under imminent threat, instigating a response of fight or flight. The fight/flight dynamic manifests through a dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them', where a man or group of men project their heightened apprehensions onto an 'out-group'. In the groups we facilitate, the perceived adversaries often encompass "her", "the women", the legal system, the broader societal framework, and even us as facilitators, who

are integrated into a system that appears to inadequately address these men's need for healing.

Of course, fight/flight responses are not solely relegated to the domain of collective dynamics; they are rooted in individual predispositions. We are all inherently biologically wired with this fundamental self-defence mechanism, akin to the fight or flight response activated when facing a figurative "sabre-toothed tiger." Fight responses may manifest as abrasiveness, heightened aggression, intense anger, disruptive confrontations, or contentious interactions. Conversely, flight responses might manifest as withdrawal, concealing oneself within the group, delving into tangential topics, or evading personal or communal anxiety and distress by retreating into individual or shared introspection.

The activation of fight/flight responses is contingent upon specific triggers. While the term "triggering" has, regrettably, fallen prey to fashionable overuse and its association with diminished responsibility, the crux lies not in the occurrence of triggers, as we all possess this inherent capacity, but in the contextual factors that elicit such responses. This encompasses anything transpiring within the group that catalyses this mechanism, including facilitator actions. It is imperative for group facilitators to refrain from engendering fear through their actions or group structure, as many participants are already grappling with heightened trepidation. Instead, facilitators should remain receptive to adapt and readjust their approach to create an environment where participants feel acknowledged and at ease. This, in turn, fosters a culture of constructive engagement.

### **Overthrow the Leader**

An additional reaction that I have both observed and encountered from group members in response to facilitators positioning themselves as privileged instructors who hold authority over the participants is what I term as an "overthrowing the leader" response from the men within the group. "Overthrowing the leader" refers to instances where mental dynamics spiral out of control, leading to the derailment and subsequent takeover of the group. This act undermines and "overthrows" the authority and influence of the group facilitators in the process. This type of response often manifests as an act of rebellion against leaders or facilitators who adopt a top-down approach to group facilitation.

This phenomenon typically emerges under the influence of several factors. It can occur when things do not proceed as the participants desire, instead exacerbating their fears and anxieties. In such situations, the group might initiate an "overthrow" of the current leader,

seeking to replace them with new leadership. The individual assuming this unique, self-proclaimed leadership position often presents themselves as saviours, capable of rescuing the group from its turmoil. In colloquial terms, they position themselves as the ones who will lead the group out of the predicament.

Various informal descriptions exist for this phenomenon, and I leave it to the reader to identify their preference among them. Recuperating from this scenario proves challenging in groups like Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs) due to the time constraints placed on facilitators for recovery. Their ability to address the challenge posed by disaffected participants and rebuild a secure and trusting environment where genuine progress can occur is constrained. Unlike the initial stages of a group, where facilitators commence from scratch, they now find themselves back at square one but with fewer sessions at their disposal. Consequently, facilitators and members often find themselves superficially skimming the surface, both exercising caution and playing it safe, as it becomes one of the few viable paths forward.

I once initiated and conducted a group that encompassed participants, predominantly men, hailing from regions globally affected by war, refugee camps, and natural disasters. The group composition was diverse, incorporating men from Africa, Burma, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Despite varying countries of origin, these individuals shared significant commonalities – experiences of conflict, displacement, refugee journeys, and the complexities of trauma. It is notable, through this group and comparable ones, that the individual who most bears the brunt of psychological and emotional wounds typically spearheads the "overthrowing-the-leader" movement. To clarify, the term "psychologically injured" here encompasses those who might be deemed "manipulative" - invoking the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) classifications surrounding complex trauma (Aaron & Beaulaurier, 2017) or certain personality disorders as potential explanatory avenues on clinical grounds. It's essential to recognise that this could also serve as a means to rationalise facilitator inexperience or inefficacy, and maintaining receptivity to this possibility is crucial. Notably, there is no insurmountable divide between these perspectives. What binds them is the facilitators' role, and it is this facet that intrigues me most because, ultimately, similar to the men we work with, the aspect over which we exercise the most influence within the realm of change is ourselves.

To elucidate the impact of the facilitator's approach on group dynamics, I will furnish two examples: one wherein the men rebelled against the approach, and another wherein the group thrived, predicated upon the facilitator's approach to group facilitation.



## Two Examples: What Works and Doesn't Work

The first instance pertains to a group my colleague and I facilitated in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. This gathering comprised voluntary participants, primarily men, who hailed from regions scarred by war, refugee experiences, and natural calamities. In the initial stages, we adhered to a psycho-educational format, emphasising structure and education. However, by the third week, the group exhibited resistance, prompting us to deviate from our session plan. Instead, we queried them about their concerns, their expectations from the group, and their preferred mode of facilitation. Their response was both enlightening and retrospectively reasonable: they desired attentive listening, an opportunity to share their stories (both contemporary and historical), and individual respect. In essence, they were expressing dissatisfaction with being overlooked, stereotyped, and objectified. My colleague and I concurred with their perspective. Subsequently, we shifted the focus from discussing violent behaviours to addressing individual and familial experiences. We transitioned from violence-oriented conversations to discussions about respectful relationships, both in their home countries and their current lives in Australia within their communities and families. By doing so, we regained their respect, subsequently unlocking access to insights into their violent tendencies and the underlying factors. These lessons were invaluable. We gleaned that 1) embracing a gentle, open-minded approach that fosters a willingness to listen is paramount in creating an environment where men feel comfortable initiating conversations; 2) regardless of our qualifications and experiences, we are not the ultimate experts—these men possess expertise in their own lives, pre- and post-migration; 3) addressing violent behaviour requires establishing a secure space for discussing social disparities, economic hardships, environmental influences, and psychological struggles contributing to their perpetration of violence; and 4) through unscripted yet respectful dialogues, underlying triggers for their aggression begin to surface. This approach does not seek to excuse or disregard violence and its repercussions on victims. Instead, it elucidates the driving factors within these men's lives, opening avenues for constructive change.

The second illustration concerns a group on the Eastern side of Victoria, in which I participated as an observer to glean insights into different facilitation approaches. The demographic primarily comprised working-class individuals from less privileged backgrounds, a realm with which was well-acquainted. The two non-African male facilitators seemed to embark on this journey with little prior knowledge or interaction with the men. Funding constraints often foster a uniform approach that leaves service delivery agencies disinclined to allocate resources for comprehending the men's backgrounds and associated contextual nuances. This oversight leads to perceiving the men as abstract stereotypes rather than genuine individuals.

In the first week, with the facilitators and participants unfamiliar with one another, the facilitators delved into discussions of gender and “male privilege”, offering minimal context regarding its implications, how it manifests in violence, and its relevance to the men present. However, the concept of “male privilege” failed to encompass the breadth of their experiences and primarily focused on violence. Due to the multifaceted nature of “male privilege”, especially in culturally diverse contexts like that of former refugee African men, the group swiftly resisted. The facilitators lost control, leaving them disheartened (though the group continued with new facilitators the following week).

Another layer of the issue is how the facilitators initiated the group. The program coordinator, along with the facilitators, attributed the group's rebellion to the facilitators themselves rather than scrutinising the facilitation approach or the content on male privilege. This perspective failed to resonate with the men's experiences. The solution of merely replacing the facilitators while neglecting to address content and approach-related issues proved ineffective. As I observed this progression, my sympathy extended to both the inadequately prepared or supported facilitators and the men. Neither men nor women appreciate being objectified or demeaned. I questioned whether the facilitators comprehended the irony of their actions. While lecturing the men on male privilege, the facilitators overlooked their own privilege - be it organisational, race, hierarchical, or class-based. I am inclined to use my privileged position to build trust and credibility within the group before traversing contentious territory. Moreover, acknowledging differences in privilege and recognising that identifying as a man does not inherently confer privilege is essential. While gender theory and male privilege play a vital role in explaining and understanding male violence, program coordinators and facilitators should recognise the value of a soft, trauma-informed approach that prioritises healing over a gender theory-centric approach. This methodology could prove instrumental in achieving the intended goals of these groups: supporting men in acknowledging the harm caused by their violent actions, cultivating healing, and implementing appropriate intervention and prevention strategies.

## **Conclusion**

Men's Behaviour Change Groups (MBCGs) and other similar gatherings for men who engage in violent behaviours inherently come with anticipated challenges, particularly when the group is mandated or predominantly so. Acknowledging and addressing these challenges is crucial. Facilitators must earn their authority by showcasing their ability to manage the anxieties of the participant(s) and ensure that fear and trauma doesn't hinder engagement, all while remaining committed to the group's overarching purpose. Achieving this demands

that facilitators possess the meaningful capacity to connect with participants, empathetically listen (since this forms the bedrock for constructive confrontation), and effectively contain any apprehensions they might harbour about their facilitation role.

In this context, a group that poses challenges also tends to be the one that genuinely cooperates. The notion of compliance, beyond being uninspiring, hints at an unconscious collusion between the group members and the facilitators. Here lies the irony and, indeed, the concern – as facilitators tighten their grip on the reins of leadership, the space for expansive explorations and thought-provoking discussions tends to contract. Consequently, there's an increased risk of latent collusion between the participants and the facilitators. Establishing rapport and gaining trust within the group is paramount for facilitators. They must traverse the emotional, intellectual, and cultural terrain of the participants, ensuring their alignment while mitigating the likelihood of evoking a fight-or-flight response or inciting an "overthrowing the leader" dynamic.

Facilitators responsible for groups comprising former refugee men, myself included, must remain acutely aware of these men's migration backgrounds, their settlement experiences, and the social isolation they often endure in Australia. This knowledge is the bedrock for initiating a change process that is trauma-informed, centred on healing, and provides a platform for dissecting and challenging entrenched patriarchal belief systems.

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