

Family violence and sexual assault in Indigenous communities

“Walking the talk”

Monique Keel

Family violence and sexual assault are reported to be at crisis levels in many Indigenous communities. In response to calls from Indigenous people for change, a number of state and territory governments have established Task Forces, drafted policy documents, and held inquiries into the nature and extent of the violence. This Briefing Paper provides an overview of the key issues and findings from recent reports and research into family violence and sexual assault in Indigenous communities. Four sexual assault workers across the country also spoke to ACSSA about what is happening in their service areas to address sexual assault in Indigenous communities. An overview of the state and federal governments’ policies and reports into family violence are provided in an annotated bibliography.



This overview is not intended as a comprehensive or definitive review of policy statements, nor is it an attempt to assess or evaluate the impact of individual policy documents on Indigenous communities. Rather, it is intended to assist both Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers to navigate the issues identified in some of the key policy documents and areas of research.

“Sexual violence is not an Aboriginal-only problem, but unless it is more effectively dealt with, Aboriginal women and children will continue to be victims of sexual violence and communities will suffer. The silence has been broken and tentative, but encouraging steps forward have been taken. This process must continue as the future of Aboriginal people depends on the success we achieve in putting a stop to the violence.”
(Greer and Breckenridge 1992: 194)

In 1990, Judy Atkinson, an Aboriginal¹ academic, reported that violence against Indigenous women and children² appeared to be on the rise. Ten years on the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence* (hereafter “The Women’s Task Force”) reported that in Queensland “the harsh reality is that many families are now trapped in environments where deviance and atrocities have become accepted as normal behaviour and as such, form an



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The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault aims to improve access to current information on sexual assault in order to assist policy makers and other interested in this area to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent, respond to, and ultimately reduce the incidence of sexual assault.

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ACSSA is grateful to Sally Morgan for her permission to reproduce the image "Stop the Abuse".

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integral part of the children's socialisation" (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence 2000).

Two years later, in Western Australia, the *Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities* (hereafter "The Gordon Inquiry") reported that "the statistics paint a frightening picture of what could only be termed an 'epidemic' of family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities" (Gordon, Hallahan and Henry 2002: xxiii). According to Lievore's recent literature review of available statistics on reported and unreported sexual assaults, "anecdotal evidence, case studies and submissions to inquiries support the assumption that sexual violence in Indigenous communities occurs at rates that far exceed those for non-Indigenous Australians" (Lievore 2003: 56).

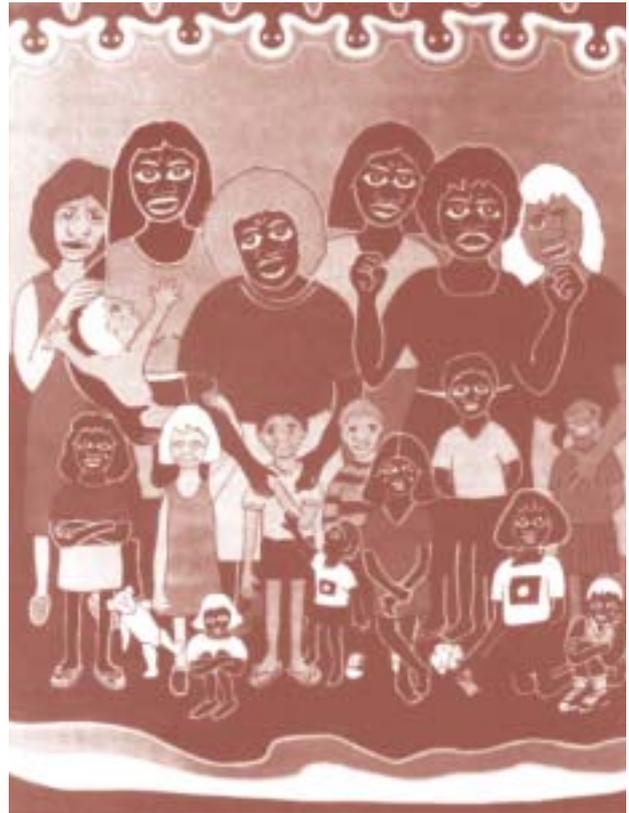
Over the past 15 years, the voices of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and academics have been far from silent. Indigenous women in particular have been raising their voices in solidarity to demand that governments no longer turn a blind eye to family violence. As they see it, "problems like these are chucked in the 'too hard basket' over long periods of time and no-one does anything about it, [and] they get worse and worse until they reach the kind of crisis levels we now face in family violence" (Huggins 2003: 5).

In answer to these calls, numerous reports, government inquiries, anti-violence campaigns and government policies have emerged describing the alarming levels of violence and destruction in many Indigenous communities (Atkinson 1990; Ferrante, Morgan, Indermaur and Harding 1996; Blagg 2000; Greer and Laing 2001; Memmott, Stacy, Chambers and Keys 2001; Weeks 2002).³

In writing this paper, we have drawn on this rich body of literature in outlining some of the key issues that have consistently been identified as critical to consider when addressing Indigenous family violence. However, we recognise that in a paper of this kind we inevitably fall short of being able to genuinely convey the enormous contribution made by Indigenous women and men who continue to raise community and political awareness of this issue. At the same time, it is hoped that the paper can provide a useful tool as an overview of the issues currently driving social and political agendas in this context, particularly for workers who are unfamiliar

with, or unable to access all the pages of all the reports discussed.

In writing this Briefing Paper I am certainly mindful, as a non-Indigenous writer and researcher for ACSSA, of our obligation to work collaboratively and consultatively with Indigenous women. The Women's Task Force in Queensland has noted that, "in providing a way forward, it was constantly stressed [to the Task Force] that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people must work together to halt the violence and reverse the long-standing disadvantages suffered by Indigenous Australians" (2000: xvii). In a similar vein, I am reminded of the words of an Indigenous colleague who once said to me: "Racism is a white person's problem so why should we [Aboriginal workers] always have to deal with it?" (Personal communication with Indigenous academic 2001).



"Stop the Abuse" – Courtesy of Sally Morgan

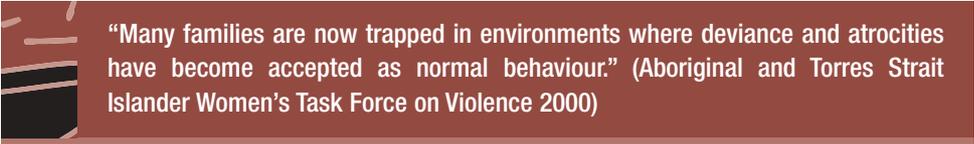
Moreover, Greer and Breckenridge (1992: 194) note: "Non-Aboriginal workers in mainstream services have an important part to play. It is crucial that these workers remember that because of previous adverse treatment it is hard for Aboriginal people to trust government workers, doctors, social workers, etc. In essence it is important for them to recognise the effects of institutional racism and their own internalised racism."⁴

In preparing to write this Briefing Paper, I spoke informally to a number of Indigenous workers and colleagues who helped to shape the scope and tone of the paper. Their advice was to speak to women "on the ground" who worked face-to-face with the issues, who were less inclined to know the minutiae of individual policy, but who were "walking the talk" in terms of taking action within communities to raise awareness, to provide counselling support, and to train and educate communities about stopping family violence. The approaches of four sexual assault workers are detailed in this paper, three of whom are Indigenous.

This paper also recognises some of the tensions that exist between non-Indigenous approaches to understanding and responding to violence, and those of Indigenous women and communities. To simplify, Indigenous approaches have revealed the damaging effects imposed by colonisation and dispossession on the relationships Indigenous peoples have held with their kin, their lands, and their communities (PADV 2001). The solutions to family violence are seen to lie in strategies that attend to the needs of all members of the community, particularly in "healing", rather than punishing the perpetrators. Non-Indigenous or mainstream approaches, that have relied more heavily on feminist analyses of violence, seek responses to the "crime" of family violence that advance the rights of women to be socially, legally and economically

supported should they decide to leave their violent partners. This point of difference in approach is often referred to in the drafting of policy statements and taskforce reports at a state/territory level, and is acknowledged by Indigenous people tending to favour recommendations that culminate in community responses to healing families, rather than in isolating and/or holding individual offenders accountable.

In this context, many Indigenous people have indicated their preference for using the term “family violence” over “domestic violence” to distinguish the nature of such violence in a post-colonial society (Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre 1998; Blagg 2000). While “domestic violence” has been the dominant language used by non-Indigenous or mainstream communities, for many Indigenous people the term “family violence” is preferable as it is able to “encompass all forms of violence in intimate, family and other relationships of mutual obligation and support” (PADV 1998, cited in Gordon, Hallahan and Henry 2002).



“Many families are now trapped in environments where deviance and atrocities have become accepted as normal behaviour.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000)

Harry Blagg, principal author of Western Australia’s *Crisis Intervention in Aboriginal Family Violence* report, also suggests the concept of “family violence” provides Indigenous people with “a story of family violence” that allows for a “retelling of the story of ‘settlement’ in ways which foreground its devastating impact on their culture” (2000: 3), rather than “being simply a term defining a discrete social problem or a specific set of power relationships” (2000: 2-3). According to the Queensland Women’s Taskforce report, using feminism as a theoretical tool to understanding family violence in Indigenous communities only further serves “to ignore the colonial conditions that also create a sense of powerlessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men as well as women” (2000: 58).

However, some Indigenous women are concerned that in using the term “family violence”, there is a sense of detracting from what we know domestic violence is: “The victims and the survivors know that it’s a partner, it’s somebody who supposedly loves somebody else who beats them regularly, puts them down and then sometimes murders them” (Greer and Laing 2001: 14). In a submission to the Gordon Inquiry, an Aboriginal community member stated that they “would prefer to see family/domestic violence called ‘violence against women’. ‘Family violence’ makes it sound nice” (Gordon, Hallahan and Henry 2002: 29).

Blagg himself also warns: “While it is crucial that service delivery agencies listen carefully to and respect Aboriginal women’s preference for the term ‘family violence’ over ‘domestic violence’, it is also crucial that the use of this term does not obscure the fact that Indigenous women bear the brunt of family violence” (2000: 12).

The first section of this paper aims to highlight what remains a dire situation posed by family violence on Indigenous communities and the increasing demand that flows to a handful of workers who are resourced specifically to respond to its incidence and effects. However, despite the sense of urgency and

desperation felt across communities, a sexual assault worker from the Northern Territory who spoke to ACSSA for the purposes of this paper (Personal communication, 15 July 2004) urges workers to remain optimistic about the gains being made:

“In the Northern Territory we listen to the messages and direction that we receive from Aboriginal Elders and we strive to work with communities in a respectful environment of mutual understanding. Communities are aware of our roles, our intentions and our responsibilities and they are supporting us and guiding practice so that it is more culturally appropriate, respectful and accepting. Consultations are taking place in communities regarding safety needs of women and children, and communities are communicating their needs, which are being documented and recorded so that women from marginalised groups have a voice.”

Incidence and responses to violence in Indigenous communities

“The Women’s Task Force report paints a frightening picture of violence that is increasing not only in numbers but also in severity (2000: xxiii). The Task Force was formed when the degree of suffering in many Indigenous communities had reached a crisis point.” (2000: ix)

Any discussion of sexual assault in this context must start by examining the wider issue of violence that occurs in Aboriginal communities. The statistics are nothing short of staggering. Blagg (2000) reports that Indigenous people are 4.6 times more likely to be the victims of violent crime than non-Indigenous people. Indigenous women are particularly at risk of violence, being 12 times more likely to be the victims of assault than non-Indigenous women.

This violence is often perpetrated by women’s partners or husbands. In 1996 the Aboriginal Justice Council reported that in 53 per cent of cases in a recent study, the offender was known to the victim, and in 69 per cent of these cases the offender was the spouse or partner of the victim (cited in Blagg 2000). Ferrante et al. (1996) also report that violence between Indigenous people is more likely to be directed at intimates than at strangers, with Indigenous women in rural and remote Western Australia being 45 times more likely to be a victim of domestic violence (by which they mean assaulted by their spouse or partner) than non-Indigenous women.

While the statistics may vary across states/territories and within individual communities, and may not always be available or methodologically reliable, Paul Memmott and his colleagues suggest that “the statistics that do exist are sufficient to demonstrate that disproportionate occurrence of violence in the Indigenous communities of Australia and the traumatic impact on Indigenous people” (2001: 6). Further they suggest that “violence in Indigenous communities has dramatically increased in certain regions, at least since the 1980s and in many cases from the 1970s” (2001: 6).

It is also important to respect and understand the diversity of peoples within and across Indigenous communities. Australia is a country of many nations of Aboriginal people who, while having a number of areas of commonality (not least a history of oppression, dispossession and marginalisation), also differ in their languages, culture and history. There are also marked differences between communities in their current situation in terms of violence. This fact is made



obvious in the statistics, which show that in Queensland the rates of sexual assault vary dramatically from community to community. Women in the far northern and northern police regions of Queensland are much more likely to be sexually assaulted than women in the rest of the state (Queensland Police Service 2003).

Finding reliable data that specifically addresses the nature and extent of sexual assault is extremely difficult. All current definitions of family violence used by Australian federal and state/territory governments and family violence services include sexual assault as a form of family violence. According to Indigenous women workers, locating sexual assault within the language of family violence allows workers to talk about sexual assault within the less taboo area of family violence. However, the tension here is that in locating sexual assault within the broader concept of family violence, and by not treating it as a separate issue, the incidences of sexual assault remain hidden within the statistics.⁵ According to Greer and Breckenridge: "It should be no surprise that in the same way sexual violence is shrouded in secrecy by the non-Aboriginal community, it is even more difficult to estimate with any accuracy the extent and experience of Aboriginal victims of rape" (1992: 189).

Edie Carter's groundbreaking report of 1987, *Aboriginal Women Speak Out*, was one of the first to provide a picture of sexual assault in Indigenous communities. Carter conducted 120 interviews in Adelaide, recording 59 cases of rape, ten of which were pack rapes involving 46 rapists. She found that 90 per cent of rape survivors were women, of which 17 per cent were pack raped. Seven per cent of rape survivors described continuous rape over time; 50 per cent of women were between 21 and 28 years old at the time of the rape; 42 per cent of the perpetrators were non-Indigenous, while 41 per cent were Indigenous men, and in 17 per cent of cases Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men acted together. In incidences where the rapes were by Indigenous men, the rapist usually knew the victim, while the non-Indigenous perpetrator was more often a stranger or known only by sight. Fifty-one per cent of rapes occurred in the home.

Although almost half of the rapes reported in Carter's study were by non-Indigenous men, most literature referring to "sexual assault in Indigenous communities" does not explore or state the race or cultural identity of the victims and perpetrators. This implies that not only are all members of "Indigenous communities" Indigenous people, but that both parties to the assault are Indigenous, which is not always the case. There are anecdotal references within the literature to Indigenous women being sexually assaulted by non-Indigenous men, often those in positions of power. These stories are usually in the context of providing reasons for women's reluctance to report sexual assault (Thomas 1993). However, in terms of reported violence, the New South Wales Police statistics for the year 2000, show that of the 102 sexual assaults reported against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 73 per cent of the offenders were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and of the 2000 domestic violence related assaults against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people recorded, 84.8 per cent of the offenders were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Fitzgerald and Weatherburn 2001).

The recently released report by Lisa Thorpe, Rose Solomon and Maria Dimopoulos, *From Shame to Pride* (2004) provides a detailed and compelling review of the problems concerning access to sexual assault services for Indigenous people in Victoria. Consultations with Indigenous women and men identified the following main areas as critical to understanding sexual assault in Indigenous communities:

- there is a “normalisation” of sexual violence that is now becoming intergenerational;
- the issues have to be addressed in a holistic way if any real outcomes are to be achieved;
- the issue is widespread and “endemic”;
- very few victims report the issue to police or seek assistance; and
- child sexual abuse is still very much hidden (2004: 22).

While the under-reporting of rape and other forms of sexual assault is common in all cultures and communities, Carter (1987) found that as many as 88 per cent of people she surveyed who were raped did not report the rape to the police. More recently, Denise Lievore (2003) has provided an overview of sexual assault in Indigenous communities and notes how the lack of reliable data is not only due to under-reporting but is being compounded by strained relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and the lack of culturally appropriate support services and research methods.

Some of the reasons why Indigenous women continue not to report sexual assault include: intimidation by authority figures and white people in general; closeness of communities leading to fear of reprisals or shame; the relationship of the survivor to the perpetrator; unfamiliarity with legal processes; and a fear that the perpetrator will be sent to prison (Greer and Breckenridge 1992; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000; Memmott et al. 2001; Moore 2002).

“Women’s patrols” and “sobering-up” shelters represent approaches to dealing with family violence that tend to take account of the historical, cultural and situational factors that currently challenge Indigenous communities.

The Women’s Task Force (2000: 98) found that: “Many cases of rape and sexual assault occurred in a domestic situation, yet these are rarely identified as rape by Indigenous women or addressed as rape by the courts.” Lievore (2003) notes that while in many instances sexual assault is not dealt with by the criminal justice system, and the police data greatly underestimate the rate at which women are being abused, Indigenous women are still over-represented as victims of sexual assault in the criminal justice system.⁶ The 1996 study undertaken by the Department for Women in New South Wales further attested to this when they reported Aboriginal women were ten times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be a complainant of a sexual assault.

A decade earlier, Lloyd and Rogers (1992) wrote of the particular difficulties that Indigenous rape victim/survivors faced in courts in Central Australia. As a result, they strongly advocated that courts be closed to the public, and that support people be allowed to accompany women on the days they were to give their evidence. They also argued for the courts to be more culturally sensitive and

allow for judges and juries to hear anthropological evidence. The report published by the New South Wales Department for Women (1996) further underlined how, in addition to the many barriers women often faced in terms of giving their evidence in court, Aboriginal women would further suffer the discriminatory practices of a criminal justice system that was: racist; often ignorant of Indigenous culture; and that disproportionately questioned their credibility, their alcohol and drug use, and their sexual behaviour. Elizabeth Moore (2002) also highlighted the particular problems facing Aboriginal women in rural New South Wales, noting how intimidating and culturally alienating the court system remains to Aboriginal women.

Any discussion of violence in contemporary Indigenous communities must also be located within an historical context. It is now increasingly being recognised that the experience of colonialism and the violence perpetrated against Indigenous people by white colonialists has had an indelible impact on Indigenous people.⁷ Blagg's 1999 meta-analysis of the literature identifies many "causes" of family violence in Indigenous communities including:

- marginalisation and dispossession;
- loss of land and traditional culture;
- breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law;
- entrenched poverty;
- racism;
- alcohol and drug abuse;
- the effects of institutionalisation and removal policies and;
- the "redundancy" of the traditional Aboriginal male role and status, compensated for by an aggressive assertion of male rights over women and children (cited in Blagg 2000: 4-5).

The solutions to family violence are seen to lie in strategies that attend to the needs of all members of the community.

Clearly the influence of these factors needs to be viewed as part of a complex historical picture of disadvantage and oppression rather than as individual, isolated causes of violence. Alcohol, for example, is acknowledged as a major contributor to violence in Indigenous communities (see the Women's Task Force report of 2000 for a more in-depth look at alcohol and other drug use). However, simply to state that alcohol "causes" violence is misleading: not all perpetrators of violence use alcohol, and many Indigenous people who drink are not violent (Atkinson 1991).

If alcohol is viewed as but one part of a complex picture of disadvantage and abuse, the impact of alcohol abuse makes more sense. For example, in many communities alcohol was historically used as payment in lieu of money, resulting in entrenched malnutrition, alcoholism and poverty. Alcohol also continues to be a source of funds for Aboriginal Councils through the canteen system. Canteens are alcohol outlets run by the Councils, rather than being privately owned enterprises. According to the Women's Task Force report, there are a few Councils who direct the money earned towards community initiatives such as child care and health programs; however in most areas there is little evidence that the money earned is used for any health or welfare projects. In any case, it is unlikely that the positive benefit of welfare/health programs –

where they do exist – outweigh the damage done by the consumption of alcohol in the communities. This situation has led to many Indigenous people calling for the abolition of the canteen system and for other sources of funding to be introduced by governments (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000).⁸

The examples offered by “women’s patrols” and “sobering-up” shelters represent approaches to dealing with family violence that tend to take account of the historical, cultural and situational factors that currently challenge Indigenous communities. The women’s patrols remove intoxicated men *from* the home but not *into* the criminal justice system, and therefore simultaneously keep women safe and men out of prison.⁹ There is also a greater emphasis on working with violent men and on strategies for intervention that maintain family relationships, and focus on “healing” the offender. Such a perspective sees violence in terms of men’s compensation for lack of status, esteem and value, and stresses the impact of the violence on the whole family or community, rather than solely on women and children (Blagg 2000).

The emphasis given to the notion of a loss of spirituality and the importance of healing as a response to family violence is a key feature of many of the research and taskforce reports and one that many non-Aboriginal people have difficulty understanding, respecting and accepting. Some reports refer to the extent to which Indigenous family violence stems from a trauma that affects every generation of Aboriginal people and, in order for change to occur, a process of healing must first take place. Judy Atkinson has spoken on this issue for over a decade, and discussed the approach used by Canadian Aboriginal people as part of their healing processes (see Atkinson 2002a). Marlene Burchhill (2003: 35) has also warned of the difficulties faced by Indigenous organisations in providing adequate social services when the workers themselves are suffering and in need of healing: “Aboriginal communities are still grappling with the effects of colonisation, and until the community can heal the effects of colonisation, self-determination will be difficult to achieve.”

Accordingly, many Aboriginal women turn away from accessing non-Aboriginal services given the role they are seen to have played in the destruction of Indigenous communities, in terms of imprisoning their men, in removing their children, and in alienating them from their lands and communities. Rather, Indigenous women and men place greater stock in strategies that aim to change violent men’s behaviour while also endeavouring to maintain family and community relationships.

According to Blagg (2000:3-4), interventions that reflect this approach are seen to be ones that:

- are tailored to meet the needs of specific localities;
- are based on community development principles of empowerment;
- are linked to initiatives on health, alcohol abuse and similar problems in a holistic manner;
- employ local people where feasible;
- respect traditional law and customs where appropriate;
- employ a multidisciplinary approach;
- focus on partnerships between agencies and community groups; and
- add value to existing community structures where possible.

While the relevance of traditional feminist theory appears marginal in this context, the importance of distinguishing “women’s” from “men’s” business is often central to how communities have separated the roles that both men and women will play in addressing violence. For example, women and men will often hold separate groups for healing (see Cummings and Katona 1995; Broken Hill and Menindee Rural Crisis Intervention Projects 2001).

Government responses to family violence

Each state and territory within Australia (except the Australian Capital Territory) has a domestic/family violence policy, and a number of states have *Indigenous* family violence policies and/or have produced detailed reports outlining the severity of the violence.¹⁰ However, government and community responses to these reports are not always viewed as adequate. As noted (Personal communication, 29 July 2004) by a woman working in the field:

“It is difficult to see the impact of policies such as the Northern Territory Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy out in the remote communities – the reality for many remote Aboriginal communities is that they have minimal access to services. While workers strive to provide services to women in remote communities, organisations are not funded to meet the demand. Sole practitioners are servicing many communities: this makes accessing the service difficult and is a major frustration for both workers and communities.”

The worker noted how few dedicated sexual assault services currently exist given the high level of need within the communities:

“The reality of what our services can provide is unfortunate. We have government policy guiding practice but we as workers do not have the people power or the resources to sustain the basic requirements and functions of our services. The result of this is that women work with women in remote communities but nobody is working to educate the men, and the women suffer further as a consequence. Women are learning about their rights and their attitudes and acceptance of abuse is changing. They are less accepting of violence now: women do go and get a restraining order. Men, however, are not receiving any education and as a result their attitudes and behaviour remain the same. As one woman said, ‘Women sometimes get restraining orders, this doesn’t really protect the women: men get drunk and smart anyway’.”

The Women’s Task Force report (2000: 120-121) details the image of what a best practice model to address family violence would look like in Queensland and stresses the need for community and government partnership in terms of giving it life. However, while state governments have continued to embrace the concept of “whole of government/whole of community” policy initiatives, particularly in terms of portfolios managing social and health issues like family violence, the “outcomes” are often difficult to distinguish and monitor. Hence, while there might have been an increase in the building of recreational facilities in remote areas which falls out of policy initiatives designed to develop and build communities, these strategies are unlikely to assist with the more immediate crisis in the lives of Indigenous women and children experiencing family violence.

Despite each of the major reports stressing the importance of victim safety, the levels of burn-out resulting from the unmanageable workloads of anti-violence

workers, and the need for trained, skilled and Indigenous-specific workers to be employed, the state governments have provided little money to address sexual assault directly. In effect, the “whole of government/whole of community” slogan means that almost any funding allocated to Indigenous communities is said to provide resources to address family violence.

For example, in its 2004 Budget, the Victorian Government’s “whole of community” response has meant that while \$10.2 million was said [in a media release] to have gone to an “Indigenous family violence strategy” (Department for Victorian Communities 2004), in reality only of \$4.1 million (over four years) will go to tackle family violence within Indigenous communities, specifically to implement key recommendations from the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce Report of 2003 (Yarram 2003).



In New South Wales, there are two main Government Departments that address family violence and violence against women in general. One is the Attorney General’s Department, which is currently implementing a state-wide, whole of government *Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women*. The strategy aims to develop and promote effective prevention strategies, and improve access to services.¹¹ The other Department that actively addresses violence is the Department of Health, which, through its *New South Wales Health Domestic Violence Policy*, has provided a state-wide government response to family violence. Within this Department, the Education Centre Against Violence (ECAV) has, since 1987, had a strong reputation in producing accessible information about family violence and sexual assault for adults and children through a range of media. The Aboriginal Health Training team consists of Senior Aboriginal Educators specialising in community-based projects, Certificate IV level training, and targeted training offered by ECAV. Implementing strategic directions for the delivery of education and training services and project development in Aboriginal communities is an important role of this team. As well as conducting training directly with Aboriginal communities, ECAV has produced a number of educational tools including the Internationally award winning videos *Big Shame*, which educates children about child sexual abuse within families, and *Who’s the Loser*, a video about family violence within Aboriginal communities. Both these videos come with material for teachers and community educators to use in conjunction with the video.¹²

The Western Australian Government’s response to the Gordon Inquiry has resulted in only minimal funds being directed towards sexual assault specific services. Seventy five million dollars (over five years) was allocated to the Gordon Implementation Secretariat, who manage the Government’s response to the Inquiry. Of this money only \$160,000 (over four years) has been allocated to expand the Sexual Assault Resource Centres (SARGs) (Department of Premier and Cabinet Western Australia 2004). A coordinated response between various agencies to child protection is also happening in Western Australia.

In Queensland, the Government’s response to the Women’s Task Force report was swift. However, again the response in terms of boosting service provisions to women survivors of sexual assault was minimal (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development 2000a, 2000b).

The *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence* (PADV) strategy, is the major Australian Government initiative to address family violence and encompasses the *National Indigenous Family Violence Grants Program*, which was allocated \$6 million over four years (1999-2003) to address Indigenous family violence. The overall objective of the *Program* is to provide practical and flexible support for grassroots projects and to trial new approaches to reduce family violence in Indigenous communities and includes training of counsellors, community education, leadership training and program evaluation (PADV no date).¹³

Indigenous workers “on the ground”

“Indigenous workers, despite being seriously under-funded and working with limited resources, are developing innovative models of responding to sexual violence in the communities they work within. It is critical that further work is done to document the pioneering work currently being undertaken, with a view to formally extending these initiatives and funding them to the level at which they require if they are to contribute to real long term change.” (Thorpe, Solomon and Dimopoulos 2004: 22)

Despite the overall inadequacy of governments’ responses in the face of what remains a dire situation, an important aim of this paper is to pay tribute to the innovative and inspiring work being carried out by workers on the ground, who are committed to ending violence in Indigenous communities.

This section details the views of three Indigenous service-providers, and one non-Indigenous service-provider, who work specifically in the area of sexual assault. Discussions with workers across the country led to the door of these women who are acknowledged by their peers to be working as educators, counsellors and advocates in ways that are both instructive and inspiring to others in the field. The interviews were conducted mainly via email, and we thank them for their clarity, their insights and their readiness to give their time to us.¹⁴



“Without community education, the existence of services, what they can provide and how they function may be unknown to the people who require their support.” (Nerida)

The interviews centred on four main themes: a description of the service/initiative in which each worker has been involved; the degree of willingness by members of Indigenous communities to talk about and address family violence; the kinds of innovative work being done and the challenges workers face “on the ground” in working with communities; and the impact, as the workers see it, of state/territory government policies on their work.

We began by asking the women about the organisations they worked for and their position within that service.

Service provision: What and how?

Dorinda, in Western Australia, works as the full-time Aboriginal Liaison Office at the Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) and is based in Perth. Her position arose out of the Gordon Inquiry, which has also resulted in the funding of two part-time Education and Training Coordinators. As the only Aboriginal worker

employed by the SARCs in Western Australia, her role covers the whole of the state and cuts across a diverse range of areas that include:

- *counselling* – crisis counselling and support for victims of recent sexual assault, one to one counselling for individuals and their families, outreach locations in the metropolitan area for counselling services;
- *education/training* – information seminars and workshops for information on sexual assault/abuse; most of these requests are made by the organisations for staff training/information and include visits to schools, the police academy, hospitals, drug/alcohol agencies and anywhere required; and
- *medical/forensic* – crisis medical intervention involving the collection of forensic evidence, screening for STI's, pregnancy, HIV or other matters resulting from recent sexual assault, three-monthly checkups for clients, and education and training for doctors/nurses.



Noeleen, from Queensland's *Gallang Place*, works in the only stand-alone Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counselling service in Queensland, which employs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counsellors for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Noeleen talked about the service and its purpose:

“Gallang is a word from the Jagera language and means healing. The late Jagera Elder, Neville Bonner, gave us permission to use this word. Gallang Place provides a supportive and caring environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, men and children to talk about social and emotional issues that are troubling them. While it does not exclusively focus on sexual assault, the counsellors do see many clients wanting counselling for family violence and sexual assault.”

Noeleen sees the specific focus of the service as being culturally appropriate counselling for the clients:

“Our counsellors receive mainstream training but adapt the skills and knowledge so they can apply it in a culturally appropriate way for their clients. The Indigenous workers understand the different cultural ways / protocols of their community. They know their own culture and family ways and are aware of and sensitive to the different histories, cultural backgrounds and emotional needs of their clients. Cultural issues are more important than mainstream issues in delivering a high standard of service delivery. For example, time is not an issue for us, whereas in many mainstream services you have a set timeframe for counselling.”

The worker in the Northern Territory has the sole role of providing counselling, education, advocacy and community development in her region, which is the size of Victoria.

Nerida, until recently, worked at the Victorian division of the Family Violence and Prevention Legal Service (FVPLS). The major response of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) to family violence has been the national development of 13 FVPLSs. The objectives of the FVPLSs are to: assist victims of family violence; reduce family violence through advocacy and community education; raise awareness of issues relating to family violence; and facilitate long-term solutions in communities. A key focus of Nerida's job was the

development of a training manual called “Responding to Sexual Assault” (2003) that could resource Indigenous community workers to respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual assault. According to (now former community educator) Nerida:



“Effective community education has the capacity to resource and support many existing community workers in various positions in their response to sexual assault. The work that occurred in collaboration with mainstream sexual assault services such as CASAs created the opportunity to learn from each other, challenge particular practices in relation to Aboriginal clients and increase accessibility and responsiveness of these services. Without community education, the existence of services, what they can provide and how they function may be unknown to the people who require their support.”

During the writing of this Briefing Paper, the funding for Nerida’s position was withdrawn by ATSIIS. Nerida sees the loss of community education in family violence as disastrous for Indigenous communities:

“Communities are just starting the process of talking about sexual assault and addressing it, and have repeatedly identified community education as a critical strategy in addressing family violence and sexual assault.”

Talking about family violence...

When asked about the willingness and readiness of Indigenous people to talk now about sexual assault, Dorinda was positive about the changes she has seen:

“On the ground, people are more willing to discuss the issues and would like to see more intervention and progression with services. There has been a great shift in their willingness to discuss sexual abuse/sexual assault in the last five years – I think in Western Australia especially, due to the Gordon Inquiry and the detailed information that was given about sexual abuse/assault. But there is still a long way to go.”

Noeleen in Queensland is of a similar view:

“We have found that both men and women are willing to speak about sexual assault and abuse. We have seen a trend where men are more willing to seek counselling for sexual assaults, family violence, anger management, etc.”

Nerida too, is optimistic about the willingness of Victoria’s Indigenous communities to address the issue of sexual assault:

“Women who have worked with other women experiencing sexual assault have spoken about the issue for a long time. The reluctance or discomfort for many people in speaking about the issue may have something to do with not having the capacity to respond in a meaningful way, for any number of possible reasons; lack of knowledge, confidence, resources or services. There are and have been so many priority issues in Aboriginal affairs. Australia’s Indigenous peoples’ lot has not improved in any significant way over the past 20 years. Let’s face it, until recently (albeit still inadequately) we have not been portrayed to the general public in a very favourable light. Without genuine commitment to confronting, addressing and adequately resourcing initiatives to address sexual assault within our communities, talking about sexual assault may feel like lifting the lid on yet another highly sensitive problem, risking more judgement by non-Indigenous Australians. Sexual assault, (according to available facts being predominantly

perpetrated by men and perpetrated against women/children) is an issue that may have been perceived as divisive within communities. This may be so, particularly in a national climate of undermining Indigenous representation, where there is an unequivocal need for unification of Aboriginal peoples. Despite the current political climate, I believe this perception is being replaced by one of sexual assault as a whole of community responsibility.”

According to Nerida, the contribution made by forums and processes of consultation held in recent years in opening up the issue has been particularly important:

“I don’t believe the consultations, round table and forum have been considered ‘just a talkfest’. Each step has led to a more in-depth discussion about sexual assault and appropriate responses. These initiatives have been pivotal in raising the profile and awareness of sexual assault and have provided reports to key-stakeholders and other mainstream agencies that would not have been accessible without Elizabeth Hoffman House leading the way. Their approach is always considered, respectful and client focused. The notion of a “talkfest” seems to be equated with all talk/no action. Perhaps such a negative connotation shouldn’t be attached here. Talking about sexual assault is important, and is just one step – the first in many steps needed.”

Meeting the challenge creatively

During the interviews, there was much discussion about culturally appropriate ways of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on issues related to sexual assault. Workers readily identified the importance of using visual images or artwork as a more culturally familiar and less confrontational way of talking about sexual assault.

In Perth the SARC is currently commissioning three artworks by an Aboriginal artist, to be hung in the office to make the space more user-friendly to Aboriginal people. They will also have an educative role, conveying a story to promote a message. Dorinda notes how culturally inappropriate it often is to use the words to talk and educate about sexual assault that mainstream service providers use. In talking about the paintings commissioned, Dorinda stressed that:



“The artwork is significant in the way that it shows ownership for Aboriginal people and a sense of acceptance within our service. The artwork we have currently is one of three pictures. It is called “Faith”, and it tells the story about how Aboriginal people are feeling before coming to SARC. I think that Aboriginal people will be quite interested in the painting and we hope that they will be able to relate to it in some way.”

There are also plans to appoint a male Aboriginal Liaison Officer to SARC in the near future, a change that Dorinda views positively. Sexual assault against men and boys is big problem, but not one readily recognised by Indigenous or non-Indigenous service providers:

“The new male ALO would have the same position as mine, hopefully to cater for men’s groups and forums to discuss disclosures and information about sexual abuse/assault relating to Aboriginal males. This from a cultural aspect is very important, as traditionally men’s business is discussed and attended only by men.”

In Queensland, Noeleen says that the cultural appropriateness of her service is also expressed through having specific roles for men and women:

“We have male and female counsellors for men’s business and women’s business. The only time we have a male counsellor see a female client or a female counsellor see a male client is usually at the client’s request, because they feel more comfortable with a person of that gender – for example, a male client who has been sexually abused by a male and prefers to speak with a female counsellor. The men who use the counselling service are often there for their own violence as perpetrators, although a lot of this stems from their upbringing and they come to recognise the influences of their past family life.”

The worker in the Northern Territory, being non-Indigenous, takes her cues from the Indigenous Elders she works with and uses artwork depicting stories of healing to assist her in her practice. Reflecting on the importance of working collaboratively with Aboriginal communities, the worker noted:

“[Aboriginal] communities participate in the development of services and the directions that services will take in the Northern Territory. That is our strength and it is what keeps workers motivated and inspired. There are many innovative ideas and projects that are being developed such as creating culturally appropriate resources to be used during counselling and educational sessions, and using music as a tool to heal and promote change. Further, by working with communities to conduct culturally appropriate interventions and resources, by consulting with communities to address the safety needs of the community, and by seeking input from communities when planning activities and events to increase access to services offered, we can offer a more culturally appropriate response.”

In her capacity as Community Education/Training Coordinator, Nerida (Victoria), facilitated the development of the first edition of the *Responding to Sexual Assault: Training Resource Manual* along with the Melbourne’s Centre Against Sexual Assault and Melbourne’s Aboriginal women’s refuge, Elizabeth Hoffman House. Two training sessions were held in 2003-2004, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants who work with Aboriginal clients:

“An open invitation was circulated to Aboriginal community organisations and workers throughout Victoria. Workplaces demonstrated their commitment by releasing their staff for three days and covering transport and accommodation costs. The training was free of charge. It was required that all participants attended for the entire three days of the training for a number of significant reasons. Firstly, the early sessions focus intensively on the need for self-care and debriefing and strategies for participants. Secondly, the nature of the training means that participants invest in many ways in the training and quickly develop a group trust. It would be inconsistent and disruptive for some not to make the same investment as others.”

Nerida also discussed the importance of making the training relevant to Indigenous people:

“All efforts were made to ensure the materials used and case examples are Indigenous-specific, relevant to the work of participants and acknowledging of the complexity and dilemmas of the community (who live and work together, unlike mainstream workers). Throughout, the training facilitation was provided by Indigenous and non-Indigenous women with direct sexual assault counselling

experience, and a counsellor was made available. The challenge sometimes arises of finding a balance between making learning possible and allowing people to debrief as [the training] may be first time they have spoken of abuse or the difficulties they face in their work in this area.”

The training has been a great success and there is further demand. A comprehensive evaluation has been conducted at the conclusion of each round of training and much has been learnt from this and the program adjusted accordingly. According to Nerida the learning that has come from the evaluations include:

- ensuring articles and information are relevant and up-to-date;
- monitoring the participant dynamics and being aware of the gender balance;
- the need to constantly review processes;
- following up with participants by conducting a refresher program that examines how workers have gone translating theory into practice in their work; and
- incorporating a male facilitator if men are participating.

Few dedicated sexual assault services currently exist given the high level of need within the communities.



While the *Responding to Sexual Assault: Training Resource Manual* is not publicly available due to funding constraints and copyright issues, Nerida believes the principles underpinning the development of the training may actually be of more use than the content. These principles include:

- where possible, use or develop Indigenous material, articles, scenarios, etc;
- establish clear partnership guidelines between Indigenous organizations and mainstream organisations;
- thorough and collaborative planning (who does what and how);
- always co-facilitate (Indigenous/non-Indigenous);
- ensure availability of appropriate counselling (outside of trainers/facilitators);
- provide quiet/private space for access to counselling;
- focus on self-care needs/strategies and what people need to do if they become distressed;
- develop evaluation tool for training; and
- where possible respond to recommendations in Evaluation-make changes to the training.

Nerida also spoke of her involvement in organising the recent Indigenous-only State-wide Forum on Sexual Assault. This forum was organised by Elizabeth Hoffman House with support from the Victorian Law Reform Commission and the Reichstein Foundation. According to Nerida, the importance of this event should not be underestimated:

“It was the first time only Indigenous people had come together to discuss sexual assault within our communities, the impact of this, and strategies to begin addressing it. The feedback from those in attendance (70 plus and a representation from both rural and metro regions) was that they could speak with more ease about sexual assault, that the environment was comfortable and safe considering the subject matter, because it was an Indigenous-only forum. On the whole, participants felt that the process undertaken leading up to

and throughout the Forum was good and this is very important for Indigenous communities. Given the often inappropriate or lack altogether of process used by non-Indigenous agencies to consult or engage Aboriginal communities in discussion, process is intrinsically linked with successful outcomes.”

The forum led to a number of recommendations that varied in their focus and nature. They included: a future men’s forum on sexual assault; development of education programs for community workers; development of effective perpetrator programs; and the establishment of an Indigenous state-wide Steering Committee on Sexual Assault (nominations were called for and taken at the forum and the committee was established. The Steering Committee now meets monthly to progress the issues articulated at the forum).

There was a mix of men and women participating in the Forum, which did not seem to inhibit the discussion. Nerida said:

“I think that while there are issues that will require men and women to talk separately, sexual assault is considered a whole of community problem and responsibility. Often discussions about problems within our communities can leave people feeling overwhelmed. Identifying the problems, what needs to happen to address them and the shortfall in services, resources and genuine commitment can make the job ahead seem enormous. From the Forum, however, there seemed to be a sense of optimism and hope.”

The impact of government responses

The impact of the various state/territory government reports is generally viewed as under-whelming. While there have been some recent changes, ACSSA had great difficulty in finding workers on the ground whose positions were specifically created by governments in response to the reports. Those we did speak to suggested an absence of any substantive change occurring that would result in any long-term or more ongoing program development. As mentioned above, Dorinda’s position came about as part of the response to the Gordon Inquiry and a male ALO will also be funded in the future. In Victoria, Nerida is highly critical of the de-funding of her position, which came about as a result of the demise of ATSSIS. Clearly, non-ongoing programs are wholly inadequate for responding to the issues that are repeatedly identified as requiring both immediate and serious attention.

According to Wendy Weeks (2002: 52): “Violence continues to be a sensitive area for social and cultural change activities. Intrusion can exacerbate anger, heighten conflict and perhaps bring violence to the surface. It takes a long time to build trust between people of different cultures. This is particularly reported by non-Aboriginal workers in relation to members of Aboriginal communities. One service claimed that provision of an effective and excellent crisis service is one way to prove their usefulness and trustworthiness to the Aboriginal community.”

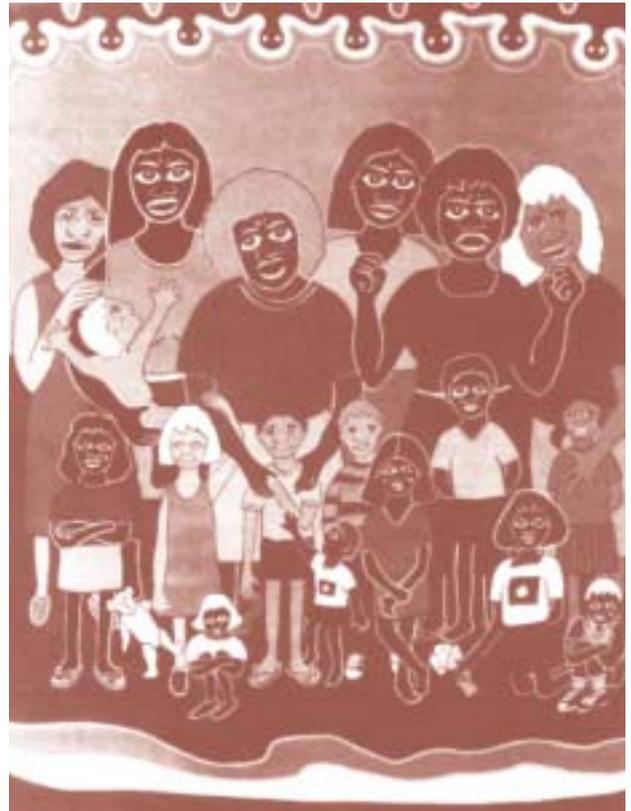
For Weeks (2002: 52), the emphasis must be on “building trusting and trustworthy relationships with and within Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities”, to work towards a situation where there can be “trusted relationships between workers (as relationships are experienced personally); and trusted practices between organisations (as protocols can facilitate appropriate assistance and referrals and access and equity in times of crisis and for ongoing collaboration)”.

Developing meaningful working relationships in this context is unlikely to occur through the short-term projects that are currently more likely to draw funding by governments.

The roads ahead – “Walking the talk”

An important feature of this Briefing Paper is the unique insights offered by women working at the coalface of abuse in Indigenous communities, each of whom was confident of the impact that could be made *if* policy initiatives were to translate into dedicated funding and the establishment of services and ongoing programs that were specifically aimed at addressing the issue of family (including sexual) violence in communities.

As the women see it, the dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities that is currently concentrated on implementing initiatives and strategies aimed at providing a future for women, children and men in rural, remote and urban communities free from family violence, must now be matched by a genuine commitment to act – by all levels of government, non-Indigenous services and the wider community. For them, the time has come for the various forums, reports, and policy initiatives to finally “walk the talk” where Indigenous family violence is concerned.



“Stop the Abuse” – Courtesy of Sally Morgan

Endnotes

- 1 The terms “Indigenous”, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)”, and “Aboriginal” are used interchangeably throughout this Briefing Paper.
- 2 The issue of child abuse and sexual assault of children is closely tied to the issue of violence against women in Indigenous communities. As a result, policy and research tends to address both issues simultaneously. Janet Stanley, Adam Tomison and Julian Pocock (2003) have recently written a comprehensive paper on child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities for the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Hence this Briefing Paper will focus specifically on sexual assault against adult women in Indigenous communities.
- 3 Examples of the state/territory government reports and policies can be found in the annotated bibliography at the end of this Briefing Paper.
- 4 Hannah Moran, a non-Indigenous sexual assault worker in the Northern Territory has recently written a paper, “Finding Your Place: A Reconnaissance for Working with a Remote Indigenous Community”. In this paper, which is enormously valuable for people who work in Aboriginal communities, Hannah discusses the processes that she went through in developing a working relationship with Indigenous people in the community. The paper will be published later in 2004.
- 5 In a recent ACSSA publication, Melanie Heenan (2004), has also explored the reluctance of researchers, services and legislators to respond to male partner rape.

Historically, mainstream domestic and family violence workers have seen rape as requiring the services of specialist sexual assault services, while sexual assault services have tended to refer women who are still in violent relationships to domestic violence services. This often leaves women who experience male partner sexual assault falling through the service cracks.

- 6 It is not possible within this Briefing Paper to focus any comprehensive attention on Indigenous women's experience of the criminal justice system. However, there are a number of reports detailing statistics and discussion on this issue that are useful reading for service providers who work to support women accessing the system (see Lloyd and Thomas 1992; Department for Women in NSW 1996; Women's Services Network 2000; Loh and Ferrante 2003). There are also a number of recent papers on restorative justice that may be of interest to those exploring alternatives to the traditional criminal justice models (Atkinson 2002b; Moore 2002; Stubbs 2004).
- 7 A number of historians and authors have written of the violence perpetrated by white people against Indigenous peoples since colonisation, from detailing the early massacres and enslavement, to the removal of peoples from their traditional lands, to the destruction of Aboriginal families and the removal of Aboriginal children at a very early age, as documented by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing them Home* report of 1997 (Greer and Breckenridge 1992; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence 2000; Gordon, Hallahan and Henry 2002).
- 8 A number of anti-violence projects have been designed around the removal and/or control of alcohol in Indigenous communities with one of the major responses in Queensland being the employment of liquor licensing officers to control "sly grogging" to dry communities (Queensland Government 2000). In the Northern Territory women have been running night patrols and sobering up shelters for over a decade (see Blagg's 2000 report for accounts of various programs).
- 9 Since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987-1991), there have been a number of criminal justice initiatives aimed at keeping Aboriginal men out of prison. Unfortunately, although the Commission discussed family violence within the report as a major reason for men being in prison, it made no recommendations about strategies for reducing or addressing family violence (Atkinson 1991).
- 10 See the annotated bibliography at the end of this Briefing Paper for a list of current reports.
- 11 Information about the *Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women* can be found at <http://www.agd.nsw.gov.au/cpd.nsf/pages/vaw2>
- 12 *Big Shame, Who's the Loser* and other ECAV material can be ordered through the ECAV website at: <http://www1.health.nsw.gov.au/ecav/ProdRes/index.asp>
- 13 The current *Violence Against Women, Australia Says No* campaign includes posters and information brochures specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. These can be found at www.australiasaysno.gov.au
- 14 We wish to respectfully acknowledge the advice we received from one non-Indigenous worker who urged us in future, to make face-to-face visits with Indigenous women in terms of preparing publications. Travelling to communities and meeting women face to face would "show more interest and respect to women living in remote communities" and is "essential when working with people where English is a second/third or fourth language." ACSSA will attempt to visit and meet with members of communities in the future, and to feed back wherever possible research findings and information that are of interest to Indigenous service providers and survivors.

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Bibliography of recent policy statements and reports related to family violence and sexual assault in Indigenous communities

The following annotated bibliography presents a brief synopsis of some of the key policy documents, research, and consultation reports related to family violence and sexual assault in Indigenous communities published over the past decade.

The bibliography is by no means a definitive list of all reports written about Indigenous family violence and sexual assault during this time. Rather, it is intended as a guide for people who wish to have more ready access to the various approaches and key issues identified across a range of recent literature.

We have not been able to access specific Indigenous family violence policies or major reports from South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory or New South Wales to include in this list. Links to many of the reports discussed can be found on the ACSSA website at www.aifs.gov.au/acssa. The reports are listed in order of recency.



Thorpe L., Solomon R. & Dimopoulos M. (2004), *From Shame to Pride: Access to Sexual Assault Services for Indigenous People*, Elizabeth Hoffman House, Melbourne.

This report details consultations with service providers about the responses of organisations to Indigenous people who experience sexual assault. The consultations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers sought to: identify the service needs of Indigenous victim/survivors of sexual assault; explore/develop/strengthen collaborative approaches to sexual assault between Indigenous organisations and CASAs; identify gaps and barriers that prevent Aboriginal people from reporting sexual assault; and to provide the opportunity for Aboriginal workers in the field to enhance their skills in responding to sexual assault.

The report includes a concise review of recent state and federal literature on sexual assault in Indigenous communities, and places the project in a historical and cultural context. The highly consultative and Indigenous-specific approach provided a sound foundation for the project and is usefully outlined in the report (pages 10 -11). Recommendations and outcomes from the project are provided. The paper also includes a report from the Indigenous-only roundtable held in October 2003.

This is one of the few reports that is specifically devoted to sexual assault and is a useful starting point for those unfamiliar with the area, providing a clear voice for many of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who participated in the project. It clearly describes ways in which the community can move ahead in addressing the issue of sexual assault. The report is easy to read and provides a brief review of current national literature; it is a good model for consultative research.



Sutherland, N. (2004), *Indigenous State-wide Forum Report: Service Options for Responding to Indigenous Sexual Assault, Family Violence and Prevention Legal Service (Victoria), Melbourne.*

This document was written by the Family Violence and Prevention Legal Service (Victoria) and is the report from the Indigenous-specific forum on sexual assault. The report: provides a background to the forum; discusses the issues facing victim/survivors of sexual assault and the urgent need for an Indigenous response to the issue; identifies service gaps; provides two models for responding to sexual assault; and provides a list of recommendations.

The Indigenous-only forum has been praised as groundbreaking for communities: it is the first time Indigenous people have come together in Victoria specifically to talk about sexual assault. The report also details some of the feedback provided by participants.



Orr, L. & Turner, C. (2004), *The Tasmania Regional Aboriginal Council Family Violence Action Plan, The Tasmania Regional Aboriginal Council, Tasmania.*

This report was commissioned by the Tasmanian Regional Aboriginal Council in response to the national ATSIC Family Violence policy directions. The report refers broadly to Family Violence and there are no specific references to the issue of sexual assault in Indigenous communities.

Six broad themes for action across Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services were drawn from a targeted consultation process and with consideration of the “ya pulinga karni” and Pathways reports. Themes include: Break the silence and heal; Promote education and employment; and Build partnerships and cooperation. Key actions and broad strategies are identified but as the report was being finalised on the eve of the dismantling of ATSIC, the implementation strategy is incomplete.

The development of Tasmanian Aboriginal Family Violence training and a specific Tasmanian Aboriginal Family Wellbeing course and are currently in process as a result of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Regional Council accepting the report.



Yarram, D. (2003), *Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force: Final Report, Department for Victorian Communities, Victoria.*

This paper is a result of consultations across Victoria with Indigenous communities and includes a detailed look at the issues of family

violence in Victoria. Within the report Victorian statistics on violence are provided, although no gender breakdown is given. There is a strong focus on the impact of violence on men, and no acknowledgement that women are more likely to be victim/survivors than men. The different types of abuse are listed and described in some detail, and a large number of recommendations are made on page 240.

The authors of the report state the impact that colonisation has had on Indigenous people and advocate a holistic approach to family healing, which recognises the importance of kinship. They also detail the failings of mainstream service approaches to sexual violence, and suggest the kinds of principles that should inform how governments and mainstream or non-Indigenous services should work with communities.

The authors recognise alcohol and drugs as “major triggers” to sexual assault (page 102) and take an intergenerational approach to the “cycle of violence” in Indigenous communities. They argue for a whole of community approach, with shared responsibility, and they articulate the needs of both victims and perpetrators, with the safety and security of victims being the number one priority (see page 17 for further key points). They are critical of white feminist approaches to family violence, which are seen to pressure women to leave violent men and their families. Instead, solutions are located in “a family healing approach which reunifies families” (page 113).

The report makes a number of recommendations specific to sexual assault (pages 102 and 117). These recommendations are to: establish an Indigenous Sexual Assault Task Force into extent and nature of sexual assault; establish positions for male and female Indigenous Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA) workers; provide cross-cultural training for CASAs; recommend to CASAs to seek feedback from community on Indigenous issues; provide immediate and practical help (with phone services not considered enough); evaluate effectiveness of current programs; establish an Indigenous specific rape crisis centre; establish an Indigenous specific 1800 helpline; establish men’s and women’s healing places; better allocate funds to regional areas; and demand better accountability from services that have Indigenous-specific funds.

In addition to these recommendations, on page 117, gaps in service responses to sexual assault are detailed and recommendations to rectify them listed. Useful reports from various government agencies about what they are doing are also provided.

The format of this report is difficult to follow at times, but the report does make strong statements about family violence, which are summarised on pages 6 and 11. These may well provide useful tools for workers involved in applications for funding or service development.



ATSIC (2003), *ATSIC Board of Commissioners Family Violence Policy Statement*, ATSIC.

and

ATSIC (2003), *Family violence Action Plan*, ATSIC.

These are the most recent ASTIC documents related to family violence. They are very brief and make no attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the issues. However, both documents acknowledge that family violence and sexual violence are not part of ATSI culture, and that most forms of family violence are criminal and “should be dealt with as such”. The documents do not address the issue of gender in terms of the incidence of family violence, but rather state that women, children and men have the same rights before the law, and their interests must be represented equally in public policy.



Gordon, S., Hallahan, K. & Henry, D. (2002), *Putting the Picture Together: Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities*, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia.

and

Gordon Implementation: Regional Update February 2004. This document outlines where the money is to be spent.

The Gordon Inquiry was prompted by the coronial inquest of a 15-year-old Nyoongar girl in the Swan Valley Nyoongar Community and was headed by Sue Gordon, an Indigenous Magistrate. The Gordon Inquiry conducted formal hearings as well as consulted widely. Submissions were sought from Aboriginal communities and more than 40 communities and towns were visited outside of the metropolitan area. The authors acknowledge that due to time restrictions, visits were brief and that some Aboriginal community members may not have spoken freely because of a number of factors, including a fear of retribution.

The Terms of Reference required the Inquiry, within its six-month timeframe, to: (a) examine the issues raised by the Coroner’s Inquiry into the death of Susan Taylor in relation to the way that Government agencies responded to issues of violence and sexual assault at the Swan Valley Nyoongar community; (b) examine how State Government agencies respond to evidence of family violence and child abuse that may be occurring in Aboriginal communities generally; and (c) make practical recommendations for addressing incidents of sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities including any legislative changes and administrative measures.

More specifically, the Inquiry was called to examine the activities of the State Government agencies in addressing complaints and the reporting of sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities, and to identify the barriers and capacity of government agencies to address the issue of family violence – in particular, child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities.

The Gordon Inquiry looked at the causes, prevalence and effects of violence and examined how each government department responded to family violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities. The focus of the Inquiry was on sexual abuse of children and young adolescents, and on government agencies' responses.

The Inquiry did not attempt to provide one correct definition of family violence or child abuse. It describes feminist analysis (of domestic violence) as an early and simplistic theory, in which "blame was focused on the more dominant positions of men in society" (page 27). The authors explicitly reject a gendered analysis of family violence, both in the Indigenous and mainstream context. The report uses a framework that explores a multiplicity of factors (precipitating, situational, underlying) that contribute to the violence and focuses in particular on "resource systems" in order to "assess the needs of men, women and young people in domestic violence (page 27)".

The report includes a long list of recommendations (page 410) and provides best practice models and a community-focused systematic response. Recommendations specific to sexual assault include: the expansion of sexual assault services in metropolitan, rural and remote areas (page 120); better data collection; and mandatory reporting of STDs in children under 13 years.

The focus on government agencies has meant that the continuing implementation of the recommendations is occurring at a State Government level. Due to the nature of the report and the way in which the Inquiry was prompted, there was little focus on the sexual abuse of adults. The only funding to address adult sexual abuse has been channelled towards the Sexual Assault Referral Centres, which until early 2004 did not employ any Aboriginal sexual assault workers.

This report is unique in providing a detailed description of how various government agencies responded to violence and it providing a detailed analysis of their impressions of what may provide the best way forward. The initial chapters are useful as an overview of the context of family violence and child sexual abuse, and Section 4 provides a comprehensive look at possible future directions that governments and the community can take. It is easy to read and highly instructive for policy makers and service providers.



Pugh, R. (2002), *ya pulingina kani – good to see you talk*, Office of Aboriginal Affairs, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Tasmania.

ya pulingina kani – good to see you talk is essentially a narrative of a consultation with Indigenous people accompanied by a set of recommendations. The authors note the absence of information that currently exists for and about men, and therefore focus much of the discussion on men's experiences. The overall philosophy seems to be about allowing people to tell their stories in recognising where the "causes" of violence originate and the importance of healing. The *ya pulingina kani* report is not specifically about sexual assault, but is useful as it demonstrates an appropriate methodology for consultation. What sets this report apart from other reports is its narrative, non-academic style.



Broken Hill & Menindee Rural Crisis Interventions Projects (2001), *Community Solutions to Aboriginal Family Violence: Final Report and Model of Best Practice 1999-2001*, NSW Department for Women, New South Wales.

This report provides an evaluation of a project involving the employment of family violence workers in two towns in the west of New South Wales. It identifies racism as an issue that needs addressing and talks about the importance of links made by the domestic violence workers with mainstream agencies. Most interestingly, the report describes models of best practice, which is uncommon due to the paucity of evaluation of programs. As the PADV does not provide recurrent funding, the project was not continued, although one of its findings was the extent to which important gains were frequently being lost due to the nature of short-term funding allocations being given to Indigenous programs and projects.

Although the report acknowledges the engagement of men as crucial to addressing family violence, the reference group in Broken Hill made a decision to restrict its membership to women only, recognising that Aboriginal women have been abused by a predominantly white male population and that this project was concerned with women's business. The report focused on family violence and not sexual assault specifically.



Memmott, P., Stacy, R., Chambers, C. & Keys, C. (2001), *Violence in Indigenous Communities*. Commonwealth Attorney General's Department, Canberra.

This widely quoted research report looks at violence in general in Indigenous communities. The report documents previous literature on Indigenous violence and profiles various programs. It also details strategies for combating violence and promotes community-driven programs. Included is a lengthy discussion of the causes of violence in

Indigenous communities, locating the violence within a historical and cultural context. Sexual assault is identified explicitly and discretely, rather than subsumed within the broad notion of “domestic” or “family” violence. This report provides a good basis for individuals seeking information about anti-violence programs across Australia and for those who wish to understand how Indigenous people came to be over-represented as both victim/survivors and perpetrators of violence.



The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence (2000), *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report*, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Queensland.

The Women's Task Force was comprised of 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who consulted widely across Queensland. The report looks at family violence, which is mainly positioned as violence against women, children and elders, as well as broader issues like street violence and “dysfunctional community syndrome”. It provides a comprehensive historical and sociological overview of the violence with numerous case studies. The authors recognise the impacts of invasion and colonisation and state that violence needs to be addressed within the historical, political, social and cultural environments in which it occurs.

This report provides a complex analysis of the philosophies surrounding the issue of family violence and service provision. First, it suggests that Indigenous problems have been defined in European terms for too long and that there is a need “to consider how race and gender intersects with age in a colonial context” (page 46). There is an emphasis on women and children as the primary victims of family violence and an acknowledgement that men are the primary perpetrators (page 7).

The report provides a qualified feminist approach stating that feminism alone cannot account for black women's experiences of violence and that there is a need for an Indigenous socio-political account as well as women's socio-political theory. The authors also discuss sociological and psychological theories and the effects of alcohol and drug abuse.

Recommendations number 132 and these are summarised on page 280. Only a small number of these are specific to sexual assault, but include: the establishment of multi-service delivery centres in all Communities to provide coordinated services for alcohol and drug addictions, family violence, sexual assault, grief counselling, advocacy for women, and child counselling; the establishment of support groups for men (pages 197 and 198) and the provision of support to establish National Sexual Assault Prevention Services; a focus on education and raising awareness among Indigenous professionals; and establishing specialist sexual assault services.

This report is the most comprehensive and most readable of all the major reports Australia-wide and is recommended reading for anyone who works in the area of Indigenous family violence and sexual assault.



Queensland Government (2000), *Queensland Government Responses to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence: The First Step*, Queensland Government, Queensland.

and

Queensland Government (2000), *Queensland Government Responses to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence: The Next Step*, Queensland Government, Queensland.

These two reports are produced by the Government of Queensland in response to the Women's Task Force Report. *The First Step* details what the Government was doing in response to the violence at the time of the handing down of the Women's Task Force Report. *The Next Step* details the initiatives that came out of the Women's Task Force Report, with a response to each of the 132 recommendations. It describes a number of programs in some detail. There are few recommendations specific to sexual assault. These reports are useful for those seeking an overview of what the Government's response to the Women's Task Force Report has been.



Blagg, H. (2000), *Crisis Intervention in Aboriginal Family Violence: Strategies and Models for Western Australia, Partnerships Against Domestic Violence*, Canberra.

This paper consists of a comprehensive literature review plus consultations with Aboriginal communities, women's groups and service providers. The paper provides a detailed look at family violence in Aboriginal communities and looks at new initiatives across Australia and internationally. It addresses issues around intervention, and in particular, develops guiding principles that should inform intervention strategies. The paper takes an Indigenous centred approach, and provides strong critiques of the responses that promote the "criminalisation of family violence".

The focus of the paper is on family violence, not sexual assault specifically, and is a good background paper, providing information on what is happening around the country and proposed methods of responding that are Indigenous specific. Although the focus is on crisis responses, the paper looks in some depth at healing as a necessary response to violence.



Blagg H. (2000), *Crisis Intervention in Aboriginal Family Violence: Strategies and Models for Western Australia, Partnerships Against Domestic Violence*, Canberra.

This report is a companion to the above report and details a number of model intervention strategies. Indigenous and regionally specific responses are documented although not specifically related to sexual assault.



Cummings, E. & Katona, M. (1995), *Aboriginal Family Violence: A Report to the Northern Territory Government*, Office of Women's Policy, Northern Territory Government, Darwin.

This report arose out of the recognition of the need for a specific Aboriginal family violence strategy in the Northern Territory. The authors travelled and consulted with numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, although they recognise that a shortness of time prevented a more comprehensive consultation. This report provides some background to the issue of family violence in the Northern Territory. It provides a community-based framework, with definitions and goals, and emphasises that violence is not part of traditional Aboriginal culture. Importantly, the report stresses that all members of communities are affected by family violence.

The authors situate alcohol misuse as a major contributing factor to the incidence of family violence. There is a significant discussion of why Aboriginal women do not wish to leave their families or communities as a solution to family violence, and that guidance from Elders is needed in order to change men's behaviour. The authors stress that solutions to family violence should emerge from communities in strategic partnership with Government agencies.

The strategy is focused on the particular issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas and there is recognition of women as the primary victims of family violence and men as principle offenders. There is no specific reference to sexual assault.

This report is useful in that it provides clear strategies that are action and outcome oriented. It is particularly useful for those working in remote communities as its work is based on consultation with people in remote areas of the Northern Territory and looks at issues particular to the region.



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