

A NATIONAL DISGRACE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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The people who could have made a difference have failed to intervene to stop innocent women and children being bashed, raped, mutilated and murdered and exposed to forms of violence that have been allowed to escalate to a level that is now a national disgrace.¹

After decades of ignoring violence in Indigenous communities, government agencies and community leaders are now beginning to examine the problem more rigorously. Evidently they are beginning to place the same value on the lives and security of Indigenous women and children as they do on those of the rest of the community.

The offensive – and racist – assumption that violence is culturally determined and should therefore be tolerated is being challenged. Violence cannot be explained or excused as being ‘the Aboriginal way’. While the fear that public scrutiny of the issue might reinforce existing negative stereotypes about Indigenous people has been realised to some extent, communities have decided that the only way to begin the process of reducing violence is to confront it directly. They argue that underpinning responses to violence should be a clear recognition that ‘violence in all its forms, whatever its locale and in any circumstances, is unacceptable. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must work together to help in its eradication’.²

This shift in sentiment has largely been driven by women speaking out and refusing to countenance the now devastating levels of abuse experienced in many communities. Reports suggest that no matter who initiates such violence, women are more likely to be injured or to suffer more severe injury than men.³ Women’s shelters, where they exist, are often full to overflowing at the end of the week when drinking binges occur.

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1 Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence (‘Women’s Task Force’), *The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report* (revised ed, 2000) x, Office for Women <http://www.qldwoman.qld.gov.au/publications/atsi_violence.doc> at 30 May 2002.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid xv.

In 1991, Maryanne Sam reported that:

Family violence is widespread in our communities. In fact, it is one of the major causes of family breakdown, along with drugs and alcohol. Our women are suffering serious injuries and are fleeing to refuges and shelters in order to get away from the violence. Our kids are running away from home, often turning to crime, drugs and alcohol, as well as other substance abuse. Our men are drinking more and more, turning to drugs and gambling as a way of coping with the loss of their families and the deterioration of their traditional roles.⁴

There is abundant evidence that, in many communities, the situation has deteriorated further since Sam made those observations.⁵ As writers such as Peter Sutton⁶ and Noel Pearson⁷ have reported, in many communities violence has spiralled out of control, reaching almost epidemic proportions.

As the findings of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence ('Women's Task Force') demonstrated, Indigenous women want the violence to stop and do not accept that it is an acceptable part of everyday life. However, openly dealing with the issue of family violence is made more difficult by the fact that many non-Indigenous people find the current level of violence in Indigenous communities 'difficult to comprehend'.⁸ I suspect that this includes policy makers and politicians who are still not showing the necessary sense of urgency in working to ameliorate such violence.

Solutions must be devised to deal urgently with violence wherever and whenever it occurs. The cycle of disadvantage, reinforced as it is with alcohol and substance abuse must be broken. Approaches to solving these problems need to encompass measures to help prevent future violence, as well as the rehabilitation of those damaged by violence and assistance for their families and communities. Different standards of response to violence should not be applied to Indigenous communities. Violence should not be accepted as normal or inevitable just because it occurs between Indigenous people.

To assess the causes and find solutions for family violence, Indigenous leaders have rightly insisted that we must first understand the sense of hopelessness that the dispossession and relocation of whole communities, along with the forced separation of family members, has generated among many Indigenous people. As the Women's Task Force has argued, 'the impact of history cannot be isolated in any discussion on its origins and the consequences of such violence in the lives of Indigenous peoples'.⁹ The wilful denial of the importance of such history by the current federal government, and the repeated refusal to acknowledge the impact of dispossession, cultural fragmentation and marginalisation, means that

4 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, *Through Black Eyes: A Handbook of Family Violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities* (1991) 1.

5 See, eg, Paul Memmott et al, *Violence in Indigenous Communities: Full Report* (2001) 51, National Crime Prevention Programme <<http://www.ncp.gov.au/ncp/Publications/PDF/violenceindigenous.pdf>> at 11 June 2002.

6 Peter Sutton, 'The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia since the 1970s' (2001) 11 *Anthropological Forum* 125.

7 Noel Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility* (2000).

8 Women's Task Force, above n 1, ix.

9 *Ibid.*

the solutions proposed under the rhetoric of 'practical reconciliation' are unlikely to solve the problem.

Failure to accurately analyse the causes and contributing factors of violence will mean that the solutions proffered will be, at best, partial. Strategies must be tailored to the experiences and circumstances of Indigenous communities. As the Women's Task Force clearly illustrated, there are factors present in Indigenous communities that are not present in non-Indigenous communities: dispossession of land and culture, the separation of children from parents over successive generations, and the failure of governments to enforce sanctions against violence, to name but a few.¹⁰ The contribution of associated social problems including high unemployment, poor mental health, poverty and low levels of educational attainment must be recognised in any strategy or program developed to combat violence.

Additionally, in addressing so-called 'domestic' violence, it is important to be aware that it is closely connected with child abuse. Surveys indicate that as many as 60 per cent of the children of abused mothers are also abused.¹¹ Children are often the 'silent' victims of family violence even when they are not themselves the primary victims. In many communities, children have no choice but to witness such violence and endure the resultant disruption and mental trauma. Poor attendance at school, reduced employment prospects, depression and despair make such children future players in the destructive cycle of abuse and violence. Attention to the special needs of children should feature prominently in violence reduction strategies.

Critical to the successful design and implementation of such solutions is a sustained commitment from governments. There is a desperate need for greater clarification of Commonwealth/State funding arrangements. Few programs delivered to Aboriginal communities in this area, or indeed in any others, have enjoyed the focused attention and commitment from governments necessary to deliver successful outcomes. For instance, after a modest but promising start to family violence prevention programs in the early nineties, the \$30 million which had funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission ('ATSIC')'s Family Violence Intervention Program was lost as a result of the massive cuts to ATSIC's budget in 1996–97.¹² Too often resources are short-lived or delivered as part of a narrowly conceived 'pilot' that rarely develops into a fully-fledged program. Bizarrely, given their experimental character, such 'pilots' are rarely evaluated, making it difficult to get any idea of whether they have actually been useful.

Given the severity and pervasiveness of violence in Indigenous communities, a high level of coordination between agencies and programs is also essential. Health, substance abuse, education, child protection and law enforcement agencies must all be involved. Sadly, this is rarely achieved. Duplication, poor coordination and a failure to think beyond departmental and jurisdictional

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Domestic Violence Resource Centre, *Domestic Violence and Child Protection* (2001) 3–4.

¹² Parliamentary Library Research Note, 28 March 2002 (copy on file with author).

boundaries characterise many of the programs delivered to Indigenous communities. Piecemeal funding decisions, complex accountability requirements and conflicting objectives all contribute to frequent failure and escalate the sense of hopelessness that is all too palpable in some communities. Conversely, successes are not disseminated for wider adoption and 'good practice' goes unrecognised and unrewarded.

Perhaps the most important prerequisite to produce sustained improvements in violence levels is the involvement of Indigenous people in decision-making at all levels. Self-determination, the target of criticism and disdain by the Howard Government and its allies, has not actually been tried in most Indigenous communities. Self-determination or self-rule means being able to effectively control institutions and make major decisions regarding resource allocation, and economic and development strategies, not just being left to manage a plethora of complex programs devised and imposed by outsiders. It is nowhere more important to engage Indigenous people in decision-making than in the effort to reduce violence. This depends on effective support for community development (so-called 'capacity building'), including the provision of funds for training Indigenous leaders and staff. Partnerships between government agencies and Indigenous communities need to be developed, committing all parties to specific actions and responsibilities with agreed and measurable outcomes and performance benchmarks.

There is hope that the tide has turned. Community leaders and most governments are more prepared than they have ever been to acknowledge and act on what Indigenous women have been telling them for many years. There should be no more reports gathering dust and feeding hopelessness. We must all roll up our sleeves and work in partnership to remove the scourge of violence from our Indigenous people and to ensure that the wider community does not continue to add, through prejudice or indifference, to the burden already carried by the abused.