

FORUM#

FAMILY VIOLENCE IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: BREAKING THE SILENCE?

FOREWORD

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The problem of family violence in Indigenous communities is difficult to come to terms with. Rather than improving with time, the situation for many Indigenous communities across Australia has become more desperate. For too long, the silence of governments on the issue has reflected the general ignorance on the part of many Australians as to the extent of the problem. Others perceive it to be simply too hard to deal with. The 'silence' referred to in the title of this publication is not that of Indigenous women – it is of the wider Australian community. The authors who have contributed to this publication are among the groundswell of voices that are telling us that this approach can no longer be tolerated.

The purpose of *Forum*, a themed publication of the *University of New South Wales Law Journal*, is to promote a greater awareness of an important contemporary topic, and to generate debate. Such debate is, in the case of family violence in Indigenous communities, much needed. The focus of this *Forum* is on 'family', rather than 'domestic', violence in recognition of the complex intersection of issues in Indigenous communities that this problem is both a product and a part of. While Indigenous family violence shares some characteristics with domestic violence in the wider community, in many respects it is unique – the history of dispossession, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and racism has left its mark. The topic does not clearly lend itself to a detached, academic treatment, and many of the authors have accordingly adopted a polemical approach.

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The overwhelming message that emerges in this *Forum* is that Indigenous communities must play a pivotal role in developing and implementing culturally appropriate solutions. The authors vary in their perception of the role that current criminal justice approaches should play, raising questions of how involved non-Indigenous people and structures should be in this process. However, a recognition of this debate does not absolve governments and members of the wider Australian community from an obligation to address the injustices that have laid the foundations for the current problems. The necessary support must be provided to enable genuine self-determination to occur. But first, we need to listen.

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