

“Very few Aboriginal families ... are not struggling with the debilitating effects of trauma, despair and damage resulting from their experiences with violence”

Dodson, M. (2003). *Violence Dysfunction Aboriginality*.
Paper presented at the National Press Club, Canberra, June 11, 2003.

Koorie Women Mean Business acknowledges the Victorian Government initiative of a Royal Commission into Family Violence.

In noting the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission, we believe the issues relating to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are extremely limited and lost as they are ‘lumped’ in with many other categories.

Therefore, we believe that there needs to be a particular paragraph devoted to better understanding the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Indigenous kinship, state based violence (institutional/policies/consultations) and complications within our communities, the fears of women who report, as well as the attitudes of the police, Aboriginal community controlled organisations and welfare groups to women reporting. There needs to be attention paid to the particular needs of the children who are caught up in family violence and the need to keep them safe. We believe that there has to be a strong separation of recommendations for children, women and men.

Koorie Women Mean Business (KWMB) was formed in 1990 by a group of Aboriginal women who saw the need and opportunity to empower Aboriginal women to develop a sustainable livelihood and wellbeing.

KWMB works in partnership, and collaborative arrangements with local women, their communities and supporting stakeholders to address their 'business' issues in ways they feel are right for them. The KWMB community is dispersed across the State, and while women living in regional, city and metropolitan environments share similar issues and goals, it is acknowledged they differ in priority and or/ severity.

Introduction

Today I speak to you about a subject that has at various points over the past decade but particularly in the last year as a “national emergency”, “Australia’s Tsunami”, and as a “national disgrace”. I speak of Indigenous experiences of violence.

Dodson, M. (2003).
Ibid. Canberra, June 11, 2003.

Since the release in 1999 of *The Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report* all states and territories throughout Australia have undertaken similar research and produced their own respective reports. Indigenous violence had evolved into a national concern that it was National Press Address in 2003 delivered by Mick Dodson.

There are nine reports on Indigenous Family violence and sexual assault they specifically define the problem in relationship to how the local (Indigenous) people understand it, detail the extent of the problem, the causes, the interventions that are working and are not working, and have made significant recommendations for change applicable to both Federal and State governments.

An analysis of the recommendations of these reports demonstrates that several recurring themes are evident. These include, in particular, recognition of community diversity and needs, the need to facilitate community choices in responses to problems, and the dire need for coordinated and meaningful partnerships between Indigenous communities, governments and service providers so that appropriate support can be provided to those affected by violence.

In addition, the reports call upon state and federal governments to recognise that violence continues to affect people in the long-term, and support will often be needed by victims of violence at various intervals throughout their life course. As such, the reports of the past decade have consistently advocated a long-term government approach to funding.

Practical recommendations have included strengthening the capacity of the existing workforce through accredited specialised training and the employment of Indigenous workers, particularly counselors. Where Indigenous workers are unavailable, all of the reports have recommended mandatory cultural awareness training for all non-Indigenous workers.

Another recurring recommendation has been to urgently expand the number of safe houses available to women and children escaping violence. Where safe houses already exist, the reports have noted that many of their facilities need to be urgently upgraded, and staffing times extended. The availability of medium term housing for women and children as they make the transition from crisis care to 'normal' living has also been stressed as a priority. Along with a recommendation has been for government to regularly review the outcomes of its service delivery, and to fund external evaluations of its programs and services. The latter is particularly important as, if the information were publicly available, it could act as a catalogue of what approaches and programs work and do not work – a resource that communities have been requesting for some time.

Royal Commission Response to Q 17, 19, 20 and Part 35, 36 & 37.

KWMB would like to focus on a research project we have been engaged with Building and Supporting Community Led Partnerships Initiatives Responding to Family Violence in Indigenous Communities in Victoria led by Dr Kyllie Cripps.

The project aimed to:

- Document and critically analyse Indigenous and mainstream services and programs (interventions) and models of practice in responding to family violence in Victoria.
- Define the meanings and processes associated with 'partnerships' from an Indigenous and non Indigenous perspective.
- Identify, systematically document and critically analyse existing partnerships between Indigenous and mainstream organisations and their implications for service delivery.
- Identify opportunities for further partnerships, in light of legislative changes, between Indigenous and mainstream organisations; and
- Identify how Indigenous and mainstream organisations working in this field can come together to sustain both their models of practice should they be different over the longer term.

The research involved interviews, and focus groups which took place in four research sites. These sites included:

The Southern Metropolitan Melbourne Region chosen as it has consistently had the highest incidence of adult female victim reports of family violence in the state over the past decade and the region has few Indigenous services and is therefore reliant on mainstream services to deliver to the Indigenous population.

The Hume region was chosen given the consistent and long standing investment over several years by federal and state governments to Indigenous development in a regional setting, with one of the highest Indigenous populations outside of Metropolitan Melbourne. It is a site where there has been intensive Commonwealth and state resources invested in the past decade largely as a consequence of Shepparton being one of eight communities included in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) trial to provide more flexible programs and services based on priorities agreed with communities.

The East Gippsland region was chosen given that it was the first site to successfully establish an Indigenous Healing and Time Out Service consistent with the recommendations of the Taskforce. It also has the second highest rate of child protection notifications in the state.

The Fourth site included in the study was the Victorian disability sector given that little information was available about the experience of Indigenous family violence victims who had disabilities and their engagement in the intersectoral space occupied by the disability, family violence and Indigenous service sectors. We were interested in how the three sectors worked together in partnership for the benefit of Indigenous victims and their families with disabilities.

In 2012 a community report was launched, Resistance and Renewal Report: Building and Supporting Community Led Partnerships Initiatives Responding to Family Violence in Indigenous Communities in Victoria. It is a landmark community document which provided a community platform on FV that was inclusive of the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability and it captured the voices of our community on FV issues posts the taskforce consultations, the views of Aboriginal and community workers. We submit the report recommendations in response to the questions posed (17, 18 & 19).

Recommendations

1. Ongoing incentives (financial and resources) to build and support local and regional Indigenous family violence groups to continue their community engagement work started as part of the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force Report in 2003.
2. Transparent accountability mechanisms to be defined and incorporated into funding agreements that measure the strength and productivity of Indigenous family partnerships at local, regional and state levels. For example, cultural safety measures.
3. Improvements in data collection and reporting with the specific attention focussed on the recording of the Aboriginality of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of violence eg children; as well the disability of the disability status of Aboriginal clients utilising the family violence sector.
4. Improvements in distributing available data making it publicly accessible and in a format that is useful for communities to utilise in developing a knowledge base around issues relating to violence in their communities.
5. Investment in work force development in multiple areas is required; this would involve a skills assessment, recognition of prior learning, and advice on career pathways. Areas identified for training include:
 - i. Men who are working at the front line
 - ii. Women who are working at the front line
 - iii. Those working with people with disabilities
 - iv. Those working with same sex couples
 - v. Those working with families engaged with child protection
 - vi. Sexual assault
6. Development of a local, regional and statewide recruitment and employment strategy to build and support the sector.
7. Special attention to the significant disadvantage experienced by victims of violence who also have disabilities is urgently needed. The allocation of funding to support interpreter services and aids to enable access to services to facilitate client's choices in crisis situations is critical.
8. Partnerships are the 'gold standard' in the delivery of services in the family violence sector but they come at a cost both in time, resources and program dollars to complete work plans, they should be funded accordingly.

We have listened and read of a number of proposals to assist men and women coming forward to report FV. KWMB have concerns post RC what occurs in relation to the environmental impacts of some of the non-negotiable areas. We would like to mention the complexities involved in reporting violence from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander clients perspective.

- Mandatory reporting within medical profession would have decrease of interaction by Indigenous clients. We believe that weight should also be given to the possibility that clients would not disclose their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Heritage. The Commonwealth and State definition of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander defines three criteria's which are reliant on self disclosure:
- Police reporting violence has had reputational impacts resulting in a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community reporting or coming forward to report FV:
- Increased attention to preventative programs should be specifically directed to Indigenous communities:
- An interalia process where men are required to take responsibility for the impact of their behaviour :
- Mainstream services and issues of access to services based on a funding formula.

Existing partnerships and the pressures of making them work: It was reported that developing and maintaining partnerships was very demanding, time consuming and not always what organisation's would be doing if they were not mandated to do so by their funding bodies.

Whilst we believe that a holistic approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander client's issue based needs are the way forward. our research found that one of the primary reasons given for choosing to not use an Indigenous service was explained in the context of the interconnectedness of our families and communities confidentiality cannot be assured when using Indigenous services and this can compromise the safety of victims.

In closing we would like to reiterate the need for a particular paragraph devoted to better understanding the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients/communities, such as Indigenous kinship, state based violence (institutional/policies/consultations) and complications within our communities, the fears of women who report, as well as the attitudes of the police, Aboriginal community controlled organisations and welfare groups to women reporting.