

The challenge of Indigenous family violence

Indigenous leaders and experts met with Prime Minister Howard on 23 July 2003 to discuss the issue of family violence. More than half of the delegates were Indigenous women, most of whom viewed the summit as a significant demonstration of the Australian Government's commitment to working with Indigenous leaders to address family violence.

During the press conference that followed the meeting, the Prime Minister said that he had listened to the participants, and had been particularly struck by the voices of Indigenous women who repeatedly highlighted the "dimensions of the problem" well beyond the current statistics. He acknowledged that female leaders within Indigenous communities had been calling for action for some considerable time, and said that the meeting "brought home to me the great importance of enhancing the leadership role of women within Indigenous communities" (Press Conference 23 July 2003).

Recently, the Prime Minister announced a commitment of \$20 million as an initial "down payment" for addressing violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities. Sexual assault was specifically recognised in the decision to allocate \$400,000 to "increase awareness amongst young indigenous people on sexual assault" (Media Release, Prime Minister John Howard, 10 October 2003). The program will be developed under the auspice of the National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault.

It seems Indigenous women's fight to have violence against them recognised is drawing important results. Recently the Western Australian *Inquiry by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities*, known informally as the "Gordon Inquiry", urged governments, service providers, and members of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to look to strategies and approaches that respond to family violence in ways that are integrated, holistic, and designed in collaboration with Aboriginal communities.

Among the terms of reference for the Inquiry were calls to examine current research into the prevalence, causes and options for preventing Aboriginal family violence. Emphasis was also to be given to identifying the barriers in relation to disclosing and reporting family violence, and the capacity of government agencies to better address the associated issues. There was acknowledgement also of the extent to which child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities had reached critical levels and the need for urgent measures to attend to the systemic failure of current systems to provide an adequate response (Gordon, Hallahan and Henry 2002).

Jackie Huggins, Co-Chair of *Reconciliation Australia*, was one of the women who attended the summit in July. She described the event as a "highly significant symbolic act of reconciliation on the part of the Prime Minister towards Indigenous Australians" (*The Australian*, 30 July 2003).

A week later, Jackie Huggins presented a keynote speech at the International Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Conference held on the Gold Coast in Queensland. In it, she calls on Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike to maintain the momentum, to struggle against attitudes of complacency and defeatism – in effect, to act at this pivotal time in Australia, when political and community will must remain steadfastly committed to addressing violence against Indigenous women as part of a broader commitment to Reconciliation.

ACSSA *Aware* is pleased to publish the following edited extract from that keynote address by Jackie Huggins. ➤

Our chance to tackle Indigenous family violence

JACKIE HUGGINS, a member of the Bidjara and Birri Gubba people and Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia, says it's now or never if we're genuinely going to tackle Indigenous family violence.



Jackie Huggins, Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay respect to those who have gone before us. This conference is taking place at a pivotal time in Australia – when, for the first time, national attention is being paid to the horror of Indigenous family violence in this country.

For the first time, an Australian Prime Minister has held a summit in the national capital to listen to concerns and ideas on this issue from a group of Indigenous leaders. For the first time, we are reading editorials about it in our newspapers. For the first time, perhaps we now have a chance to do something solid, sensible, sensitive and coordinated to stop the violence that is killing our women and children, and destroying our communities.

This spark of national interest came after an address at the National Press Club in Canberra a couple of months ago by Professor Mick Dodson, a fellow director from *Reconciliation Australia*. In essence, Mick's strong speech incorporated three key messages about Indigenous family violence – the term preferred by Indigenous people:

- Violence has reached epidemic proportions in Indigenous communities, and is so entrenched that child victims become perpetrators themselves in a cycle that is destroying our people.
- This violence was *never* a part of Aboriginal culture and that any suggestion it was, or is, constitutes either a desperate excuse by perpetrators or else a shameful cop-out by those who continue to look on while this scourge is killing fellow Australians each and every day.
- Only with strong, committed leadership, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and across this vast nation, can we turn the situation around.

Mick's speech had a powerful impact. It was intriguing that the media and the Prime Minister responded as though these desperate calls had not been made before – as though courageous Indigenous women had not been raising the alarm for decades. But perhaps – and I hope it is true – we are more ready now to take this desperate problem seriously.

So why, despite these attempts to draw attention to Indigenous family violence over many years, have we seen things go backwards rather than forwards? For the general community, the answer to this question is quite elusive. It tempts people to fall back on dangerous stereotypes about Aboriginal people and the choices we make and don't make for ourselves.

The reality is that what has stayed the same over these years is the inability of government agencies and mainstream service providers to address our problems effectively. And when problems like these are chucked in the "too hard basket" over long periods of time and no one does anything about it, they get worse and worse until they reach the kind of crisis levels we now face in family violence.

Having attended last week's meeting with the Prime Minister, I would say this of the opportunity we now have to make a fresh start: it was clear in the meeting that despite the genuine concern about children shown by all parties, there is still a reluctance to accept that we cannot help women and children without appreciating the broader environmental context in which they live. ▶

We cannot stop a woman or child being beaten if we can't appreciate what makes communities like ours dysfunctional, and what helps them learn to be functional, *want* to be functional. While alcohol and drugs are major factors, they are not the only ones, and should not be looked at in isolation. And here I would also make the point that within the Australian context, within the domestic violence sector, there also needs to be more acceptance of the need for flexibility and insight in addressing Indigenous family violence.

The conference program this week is heavily focused on the criminal justice system and its role in addressing domestic violence. That's understandable, given the struggle many of you have waged over many years to have domestic violence taken seriously by our legislators, our courts and by police. But if you continue down this road without reflecting on the wishes of Indigenous women, without considering alternative policies to meet the needs of our communities, our issues, a word of caution: we will find ourselves very quickly on a collision course.

I am not so expert as many of you are in this field to be recommending particular models of restorative justice or community conferencing as alternatives, but I am sufficiently mindful of the concerns of my sisters to advise you to keep an open mind, and to accept, as the Prime Minister did last week, that one size doesn't fit all. And to accept that a white, feminist approach to domestic violence is not always right in every situation for every woman. This is where we have struggled so much in this sector and continue to do so. In a few cases, cooperative coalitions have been forged with white women.

I come here to this conference in my capacity as Co-Chair of *Reconciliation Australia*, the nation's peak body promoting reconciliation in a way that will deliver tangible outcomes for Indigenous people and make their lives better. I won't spend too much time here today talking to you about the incidence of Indigenous family violence because most of you know about it only too well. You've heard the statistics, some of you live and work with them every day.

You recognise that this, the saddest of all forms of violence, is a problem across the community, in every cultural, socio-economic and faith group in Australia and around the world. But the fact that the figures are so much worse for Indigenous women and children – 45 times greater in fact – and that a society like ours continues to tolerate it, is nothing short of a mind-boggling, national disgrace.

I've said it before and I say it again – if this devastation was happening to any other community, any group other than Indigenous people, it would be a source of public outrage. Whatever resources it took, whatever specifically targeted approaches, it would be stopped. But as our women and children continue to die, that kind of serious response is yet to materialise, although we are hopeful that the Prime Minister's intervention may signal a serious, fresh start.

Apart from this development, some important inroads have been made in recent times where the right information is at hand and decision-makers have been prepared to take it on board. Sue Gordon's ground-breaking report into Indigenous family violence in Western Australia last year went a long way to identifying the many aspects of the system that have been working against Indigenous people and, in effect, exacerbating the problem of family violence.

While the Western Australian State Government's response, I believe, still relies too heavily on repairing existing programs, its commitment of \$75 million represents a good start and, when we see it matched and extended by governments across the country, we might be in a better position to say that Australia is truly committed to tackling this problem.

It will take nothing short of great leadership to recognise this problem as being an above politics, genuine, no-strings-attached commitment and genuine, heartfelt concern for fellow Australians. I think it is important for me to point out here today that blaming the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission alone for the failure to deal with family violence is simplistic and unhelpful. They are a supplementary funder here.

It is government at all levels, particularly state governments and including government agencies (along with mainstream service providers, I might add) that have let us down and the right response, if and when it finally comes, needs to come in a coordinated way from every level.

Hence the call for a national, concerted effort.

And as I said earlier, this effort will need to be culturally sensitive because past failures should have made it blatantly clear that our women won't go to refuges that refuse their sons. We won't be part of

a separatist regime that vilifies men. And the statistics show that our women will almost always return to their men. We know that our men have been damaged too and have learned destructive behaviour, and the evidence again shows that Indigenous women want to live with them in well-functioning communities, keeping our families together.

This does not, however, condone men's violent behaviour. Quite clearly, they *must* wake up to themselves. In fact, the establishment of men's groups are great initiatives whereby men are owning their behaviours and attempting to do something about them.

Family violence is a tough issue to handle in any society, but it is harder when it presents in communities with poor local governance and is handled under complex inter-governmental arrangements. It is why *Reconciliation Australia* will continue to press for a coordinated national response to Indigenous family violence, through the Council of Australian Governments, and through our dealings with leaders at all levels of government, in everything we say and everything we do to promote reconciliation.

It may seem odd to you that I have linked the issue of Indigenous family violence to the process of national reconciliation. Certainly a lot of media commentators fail to understand the connection. Some have suggested that in accepting a pragmatic framework for action, Australians, including Indigenous leaders themselves, have left behind the ideals of reconciliation.

But the reality is that reconciliation is about many things, and its practical and symbolic aspects have and always will be essentially interwoven, as they were in last week's summit. At a political level, we have a tendency to overcomplicate the notion of reconciliation where, in reality, we may be closer than we realise to reaching the next milestone.

Although the violence summit agenda was framed around practical problems facing Indigenous communities, this fresh start in relations between the Government and Indigenous leaders could represent something much more. It is important that it be seen for what it was – a highly significant symbolic act of reconciliation on the part of the Prime Minister towards Indigenous Australians. And as I said last week, we'll be on his tail to make sure things happen.

To you who are working at the grassroots of domestic violence, I can only offer encouragement to also take on this issue in its broadest sense. As you consider your policy positions, your lobbying messages, your posters and brochures, think too of their implications for reconciliation between our peoples. I would also suggest to the organisers and delegates of conferences like this that the opportunity will be wasted if all you walk away with is a sense of frustration with this particularly difficult area of violence against women – if you cop-out because it's all just too hard.

For the Australian delegates here, I urge you to make this gathering action-driven, so that you might leave here with a strong message to deliver to politicians, to media, to government officials and to Indigenous people themselves in all the workplaces and areas of study and interest you represent. And that message must be absolutely clear and uncompromising in communicating to these people that Aboriginal women and those who care about their plight are not prepared to put up with this violence any more. And, as always, it must be owned by Indigenous people and spoken about on our terms. We must deliver the message in an empowering way for our community as a whole.

Ultimately, I remain confident that these barriers will be broken and that solid progress will be made, as it has been in other Indigenous communities around the world. If we continue to bolster our response on all the different fronts, through government, service providers, through Indigenous action and through brave public debate, the only way to travel will be in a forward direction.

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■ **Jackie Huggins** is a member of the Bidjara and Birri Gubba people and is the Co-Chair of *Reconciliation Australia*. This is an edited extract from her keynote speech at the International Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Conference, held in Broadbeach, Queensland, on 30 July 2003. We are very grateful to Jackie for allowing us to reproduce her paper in this edition of *ACSSA Aware*.