

For the first time in Australia, we have a National Framework for Sexual Assault Prevention!

In 2004, the Office for Women published a report prepared by consultants from Urbis Keys Young outlining a National Framework for Sexual Assault Prevention. This is an edited version of a presentation by **Clare Grealy** showcasing the key findings from the project.

I'd like to thank the Office for Women for inviting us to participate in this forum – to hear the speakers and showcase our work – but most of all for the opportunity, a year on from its finalisation, to reflect critically on the work we did to develop the National Framework for Sexual Assault Prevention (NFSAP).

I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues on this study. Kerry Reed-Gilbert is a Wirradjuri woman from New South Wales and has a long personal and professional commitment to addressing violence against Aboriginal Women. Ania Wilczynski has contributed to numerous studies in the area of violence against women. I began my career in human services 20 years ago at the Adelaide Rape Crisis Centre. Thus each of us brought a particular commitment to this important work.

In this presentation I'll be addressing what we set out to do, some reflections on our approach, and findings and the Framework.

Urbis Keys Young successfully tendered to develop the National Framework for Sexual Assault Prevention. The Framework was to “provide the basis for cross-sector responsibility for reducing and preventing sexual assault” and was to address sexual assault in Indigenous communities “with the aim of developing a collaborative and community-based approach”.

The objective was to: (1) provide the basis for cross sector responsibility for reducing and preventing sexual assault; (2) address sexual assault in Indigenous communities; and (3) provide a seamless platform with prevention strategies against child sexual assault.

The required tasks were to: (1) undertake an extensive literature review; (2) consult widely with stakeholders; (3) and develop the Framework, which would include a set of national principles, and recommendations or key priorities for future work in the area. To this end, we conducted a review of prevention, early intervention and responses to sexual assault in Australia and internationally. We undertook consultations with Australian Government agencies, state/territory agencies, and other relevant bodies. And we developed a cross-sectoral policy framework, including a set of national principles for sexual assault prevention and recommendations/key priorities for future work in the area.

The Framework

To start at the beginning, we took a step back and thought carefully about what a framework is, or should be, and what it should be able to offer. The notion of a “framework” includes that it be well constructed, systematic in its construction, and flexible for different applications.

By definition, a framework holds up something else. To do this it needs to be sturdy and well constructed. The idea of “framework” also implies some internal logic, something systematic about its construction, but in this instance it also needed to provide flexibility. The other important point at the outset was to anticipate the potential of the framework: how it might be used or applied, by whom, and what their stake might be in its development.

We saw its applications as many and varied. The Framework should:

- provide a basis for responsibility to be shared across multiple sectors of stakeholders;
- provide a mechanism that will promote the breadth of learning being generated everyday in every project, service, policy group, legislative review and so on;
- provide a way forward that would harness the enormous existing effort being put into the prevention of sexual assault across the country;
- support good practice across both policy and practice settings – making the links and the learning easier; and
- provide guidance and the impetus for the review of service delivery in ways that take into account the emerging evidence base.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders ranged across diverse professional disciplines, cultural groups, political and ideological perspectives and geographic locations.

The majority of people involved in the issue of sexual assault are passionate about their work, they often have strongly held opinions and values, and bring all of this to their work, whether they are service providers to victims, offenders, researchers, or policy makers. Our methodology needed to reach each group and bring people together, often for the first time.

Approach

The approach we developed included:

- forming a team comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members;
- conducting a wide ranging literature review leading to the collection of hundreds of documents from Australia and overseas;
- developing resources to support workshops and focus groups in the consultation phase;
- creating “entry” strategies in each location, including the identification and engagement with a key agency, person or group to assist in organising the consultation, to provide local legitimacy and integrity, and to encourage people to attend; and
- identifying the broadest range of stakeholders possible, conducting local discussion to check we had everyone, and making direct and repeated invitations to attend;

When the draft Framework was complete, three peers with expertise in the field were invited to review the document; this provided invaluable feedback. We also ensured that we understood the progress and scope of other activities funded under the National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault that might be relevant to the Framework, with the aim of ensuring that the Office for Women received a product that made sense in the overall context.

Some of the issues and complexities

A range of issues arose during the course of the project.

- It was important that we respected the fact that the sectors had strongly felt stakes in such a Framework.
- There were tensions and complexities in doing this work. The tensions were (and are) real, and our approach needed to predict the implications of these and work with those that arose along the way.
- Understanding prevention and the role of tertiary responses was an issue. There was a great strength of feeling brought to the development of the Framework by stakeholders and when resources are inadequate there is always a tension in terms of where investment goes – towards prevention or tertiary responses. We were also keen to explore where the appropriate balance between these two ends of the spectrum might lie.
- Another issue was the linking of adult sexual assault to child sexual assault responses. The project brief required us to link adult sexual assault prevention with child sexual assault systems – the fit between a national framework for adult sexual assault prevention and state based child sexual assault systems was certainly a challenge.
- Promoting interest in a national definition was an issue. A national definition was a focus in the brief, but stakeholders were less interested in this being an outcome.
- Reviewing the state of the existing evidence base which is in its infancy raised its own limitations. We thus included a focus in the literature review on program level evaluation that included unpublished papers resourced from services themselves, or examining “good practice” sites.
- A lack of clarity in some program design in terms of what types of violence the program targets was an issue. The question of “evaluability” often arose, with program design not always articulated, or described in so broad a way that legitimate links could not be made between the services provided and outcomes for people using these services.
- Finally, a challenge was that the consultation phase coincided with the high media attention and stakeholder awareness of the Office for Women’s postponed national campaign.

Reflections

Parallel processes using different approaches. We had already intended to use different formats for Indigenous and non-Indigenous consultations, using a single discussion paper, which would be inclusive of the full range of issues. However, as it was being prepared it became evident that a single paper would not be meaningful in the context of both mainstream and Indigenous discussions. The development of separate papers for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous consultations proved to be beneficial. The Indigenous paper stated clearly what we knew about sexual violence in Aboriginal communities and its impact on Aboriginal women, their children and their communities. The tailored paper, and the frank approach we took to naming the issues, was welcomed.

Reaching state/territory people with responsibility. A real challenge was reaching government people with responsibility for this area – indeed, not all states had people with responsibility for this area.

A primarily metropolitan focus. The only non-metropolitan areas in which consultations were conducted were Cairns, Alice Springs and Bendigo, and this was a limitation in some regards. However, those consulted included a number of stakeholders with responsibility for non-metropolitan regions, and some based in non-metropolitan areas who travelled to attend the consultations.

Challenged traditional/entrenched divides. An absolute strength was the challenge to traditional divides which people rose to without exception, often meeting for the first time with stakeholders who had traditionally sat at opposite ends of the table – for example, workers in offender-related programs having a dialogue with services that addressed the needs of victims.

Findings

General comments

When the fieldwork was completed, my colleagues and I spent three days downloading our notes, impressions and the richness of 23 workshops and focus groups across the country. What really struck us was the consistency of the issues and concerns, and importantly, consistency in the types of responses that emerged across the different groups in the community. The other key theme was the consistently high degree of commitment and will to work differently and more effectively, and the consistent reference to the need for leadership to make this occur.

Framework outline

Now to the Framework itself. The challenge was to bring together mountains of information, ideas and options into a format that could actively be used to move forward. Ultimately we structured the Framework around three themes, with corresponding sections in the document.

The first theme addresses the issue of evidenced-based prevention, including access to information pathways and how success in sexual assault prevention might be evaluated.

The second theme, points of intervention, addresses the focus of intervention, including the efficacy of and relationship between primary and secondary and tertiary strategies.

Finally, we looked at the ways in which prevention activity can be maximised, including the challenge of integrating effort across multiple sectors and disciplines. The impact of the language used, and definitional debates were also addressed.

Framework principles

In developing the principles we wanted to reflect the magnitude of the issue and the level of commitment and the leadership required to have an impact.

From the literature to the consultations it is absolutely evident that responsibility for the eradication of sexual assault rests with the whole Australian community.

Prevention must begin with addressing the cultural values and norms that support and tolerate sexual assault. This is a long-term undertaking requiring sustained leadership and effort. It also requires an evidence base anchored in the Australian context, which is disseminated across all the relevant spheres. Portfolios across all levels of government, partners outside of government and the whole community each must make a contribution.

Evidence-based prevention

To achieve evidence-based practice in any field, coherent information pathways are required. At present information sources are highly scattered. Front line services in particular lack the resources to invest in information management – and this has a double-edged consequence. Not only is practice disconnected from the emerging evidence base, but also the evidence base is not being expanded by front-line practitioners who are otherwise well placed to contribute.

In terms of developing indicators of success, there is no standardised national data collection in the sexual assault field, official statistics are well recognised as problematic, and self report surveys, while recognised as a valued methodology, raise questions of definition and comparability. In truth, the nature of the evidence required and how to get it, how to measure it, is not yet well enough understood.

Points of intervention

The obvious question is where to intervene in order to have the greatest effect. In practical terms, the answer inevitably links to the availability of resources.

Contemporary primary prevention campaigns seek to shift social norms by changing the meaning of behaviour. It is well recognised that primary prevention will not be effective in and of itself. But it is certainly valued as a springboard for well-targeted secondary efforts.

Secondary prevention takes into account what is known about risk factors and targets or “at risk” groups. In the sexual assault context this has raised concerns about the potential for victim blaming, or male stereotyping. Other questions that concern the effectiveness of programs or the adequacy of resourcing must also be raised. For example, key transition points in young people’s development are recognised as effective times to provide information and resources. But how much, when, and by whom?

These questions are only just beginning to be asked and *only just* beginning to be researched.

The place of tertiary responses in a preventive framework was the only link we found to child sexual abuse efforts. If prior assault is a risk factor for later assault, the response of child sexual abuse services is absolutely critical to prevention.

We also found that the links between stakeholders across these three areas of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention were consistently ad hoc. There is also some sensitivity about issues such as who should provide services, how links between services should work, and where the funding for the content of programs is coming from.

Maximising the impact

Integration of effort. It is abundantly clear that no single agency can lead prevention efforts alone, and because the responsibility lies across multiple agencies and portfolios there is a risk of a further scattering of effort. The biggest challenge identified by the project is sustaining integrated effort beyond short-term or one-off projects. Integration is hard and takes resources, but dissipated effort is a waste of resources.

Language and prevention initiatives. Given the key targets in sexual assault prevention are the norms and values that support a violence-tolerant culture in Australia, targeting these values requires the careful construction of campaigns which communicate well-crafted messages to each target group, including the broader community, violent and non-violent men and women, and young people across diverse cultural groups and settings. This challenge places the effective use of language in prevention efforts centre-stage.

- Prevention messages must use the vernacular of the target community to deliver messages and information.
- Sexual assault frequently occurs in the context of a range of other behaviours. The language used in prevention strategies must identify and name this continuum of behaviour.
- The key question when considering definitions of sexual assault is the purpose and utility of the definition. For example, can a single definition address the legislative, prevention and response contexts of sexual assault? What is lost through the variation in definitions across stakeholder groups, and what are the implications for prevention?
- There are significant research implications of the varying definitions of sexual assault used across disciplines, and the research methods preferred by the various disciplines. Implications range from what each discipline considers data, what is considered rigorous and/or reliable, and where to position the starting point of each inquiry.
- The defining of key terms may be a more relevant approach in the context of prevention than seeking to define “sexual assault” at a national level. Key terms may include date rape, acquaintance rape, rape in marriage, and other terms descriptive of the context in which sexual assault commonly occurs.

Proposed areas for future action

The Framework includes numerous ways forward, but there are a number that we draw particular attention to in the report, or that we believe should be given the highest priority. These include:

- Setting a national sexual assault research agenda
- Developing prevention plans
- Establishing the source of existing and new investment
- Providing investment into evidence-based programs
- Funding resource outcome-based evaluation
- Improving access to information pathways
- Ensuring that Indigenous voices are heard in key decision making forums.

Thanks for listening.

Claire Grealy is the senior consultant for the study team. The Showcasing Seminars took place in Brisbane in March 2005 and were hosted by the Australian Government’s Office for Women (Department of Family and Community Services) and the Queensland Office for Women.

Hard copies of the Urbis Keys Young Report, *National Framework for Sexual Assault Prevention*, can be requested from the Office for Women by phoning 1800 808 863. Online copies can be obtained via the following link: <http://ofw.facs.gov.au/padv/02/resources.html>