Experts and Influencers: the need for Indigenous-led responses to violence against women.

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Abstract:

This paper argues that mainstream interventions – or those developed for Western women – are often inappropriate to address violence against women in Indigenous contexts. Mainstream interventions often seek to solve the problem of violence against women by developing programs which place the onus on the woman to leave the abusive relationship and seek safety. These often take the form of shelters, refuges, or counselling. However, such interventions are largely inappropriate in many Indigenous contexts where relationships are considered permanent and the removal of a woman could mean she is off country or could sever her support networks. Alternatively, amid national calls for tougher penalties for abusive partners, interventions occur through the judicial system in the form of incarceration. However, recidivism rates highlight the ineffectiveness of a solely penal approach. Moreover, the nature of violence is different in Indigenous contexts where there are often multiple victims and multiple perpetrators. Hence the approach to resolving abuse by Indigenous-led interventions is often more holistic and directed at healing and restoration, rather than punitive measures. There is a wealth of practice-based knowledge within Indigenous Australia – Indigenous people, and particularly Indigenous women, are the experts and influencers in their communities. Decades of activism by various Indigenous people and organisations highlights the need for deep listening in order to move past the mainstream model to one that meets the needs of Indigenous communities. This paper draws upon a case study of one Indigenous-led program, as well as semi-structured interviews, to present some of this practice-based knowledge and to make the case for Indigenous-led interventions to prevent violence against women.

Introduction

Globally, violence against Indigenous women is disproportionately frequent and severe (Manjoo, 2012). In Australia, three of every five Indigenous women have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate male partner (Our Watch, 2018).

Indigenous women are also hospitalised due to family violence at 32 times the rate of non-Indigenous women, and at three times the rate of Indigenous males (Our Watch, 2018; Day, Francisco, & Jones, 2013). In the Northern Territory, Indigenous women are hospitalised from assault at 69 times the rate of non-Indigenous women (Havnen, 2012). Intimate partner violence (IPV) is 10.9% of the burden of disease for Indigenous women between the ages of 18 and 44 – this is the highest health risk factor for Indigenous women, more than alcohol, smoking, or obesity (Our Watch, 2018). Indigenous women are almost 11 times more likely to be killed due to assault than non-Indigenous women (Our Watch, 2018). Whilst both women and men are at risk of experiencing high levels of violence, the perpetrators of this violence are usually men and the victims of this violence are mostly women and children (Cuneen, 2002, p. 243). These stark figures have invariably resulted in violence against Indigenous women being characterised in various reports as a 'tsunami', an 'avalanche', an 'epidemic', and a 'national emergency' (Brown, 2014; Cripps & Davis, 2012; Day, Francisco, & Jones, 2013; Skelton, 2011).

It must be acknowledged that the violence against Indigenous women takes place within a matrix of historical, social and other risk factors. Violence against Indigenous women, and all forms of family violence, must be located within "the historical context of colonization, oppression, dispossession, disempowerment, poverty, and cultural, social and geographic dislocation as these affect individuals, families and entire communities" (Cheers, et al., 2006, p. 52). The Steering Committee for the review of Government Services (2005 cited in Lawrence, 2006 p. 29) notes "many Indigenous families and communities live under severe social strain due to a range of socioeconomic factors. Alcohol and substance misuse, and overcrowded living conditions are just some of the factors which can lead to child abuse and violence." (Lawrence, 2006, p. 29). Globally, Indigenous women exist in a context in which racism, sexism and other prejudices intersect to make them vulnerable to violence, marginalise them when seeking justice, and present additional barriers when seeking help (The Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples , 2014, p. 10; Manjoo, 2012, p. 15). However, whilst the problem of violence against women (VAW) is well-known, the solutions are not.

Increasingly, research is being directed at solutions and prevention of violence against women, but the literature-base is still growing. Owing to the lack of formal evaluations, little is known about 'what works' to prevent violence against Indigenous women. This research aims to shift the focus from the problem to the solution by asking 'what works to prevent

violence against Indigenous women?'. The research makes use of three case studies of Indigenous-led programs designed to prevent violence against women to harness practice-based and place-based knowledge to facilitate the development of principles of good practice.

At this stage, two periods of fieldwork have been conducted with two different Indigenous-led programs in the Northern Territory: one in Alice Springs Town Camps, and the other based in Katherine with outreach to surrounding remote communities – these two programs will be referred to as 'partner-programs'. A third case study and follow-up periods of fieldwork with each partner-program will be conducted in the new year. The research makes use of ethnographic methods, interviews, focus groups, and an internal document review to answer the central research question: 'what is good practice in Indigenous-led programs to prevent violence against women?' Program staff are the primary research participants, and external stakeholders and program beneficiaries also contribute to the research. A total of 66 participants have contributed to research so far: this is comprised of 16 staff-participants (SP), 27 stakeholder-participants (ES), and 23 program-participants (PP). The breakdown of participants by gender and Indigeneity can be seen in **Figure 1**. Whilst two periods of fieldwork have been completed, this paper will mostly focus on information gleaned from the case study in Alice Springs, as the initial reporting cycle for the Katherine-based case study has not yet been completed. However, some interviews from Katherine-based external stakeholders will also be drawn upon for insights into what is needed to prevent violence against women in the Territory.
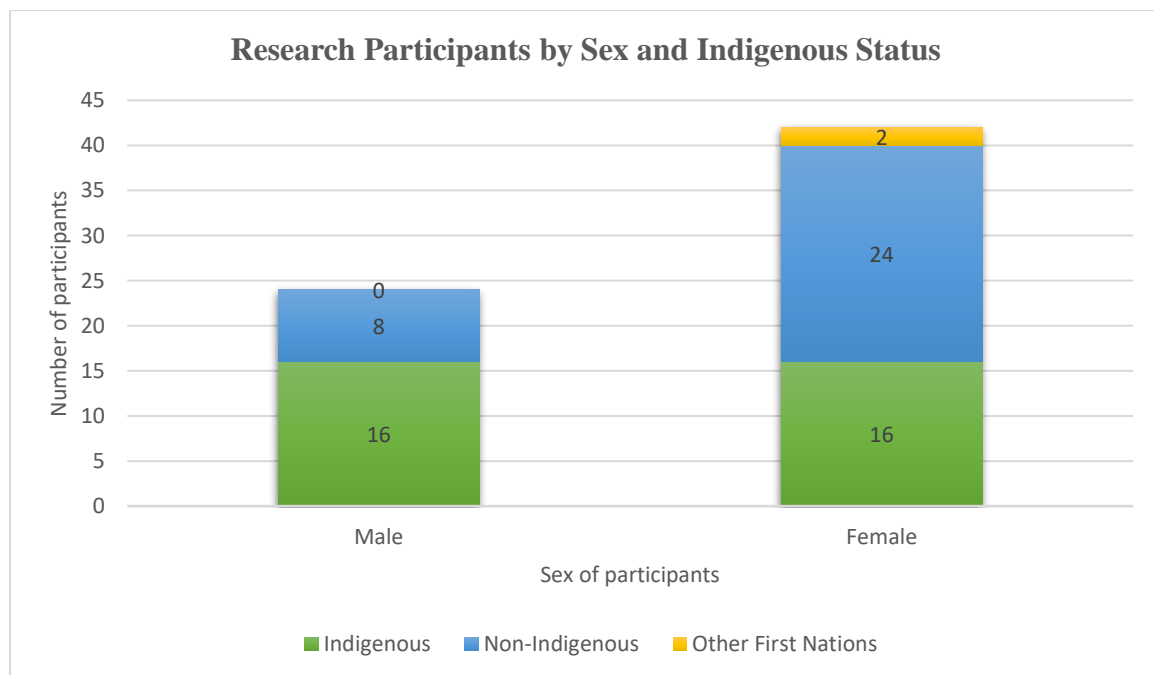

Figure 1 Chart Research Participants by Sex and Indigenity

The impact of the partner-programs is assessed using a Stages of Change model (adapted from Prochaska, 2013) to measure community attitudes towards violence, triangulated with assessment using Humphrey et al's (2000)'Good Practice Indicators'. In this period of fieldwork, participants were asked to assess community attitudes towards violence using the stages of change. As shown in **Figure 2** and **Table 1**, the language and definitions has been adapted in partnership with program-partners to make it more accessible to participants and so that it could be applied to community change, rather than an individual process.
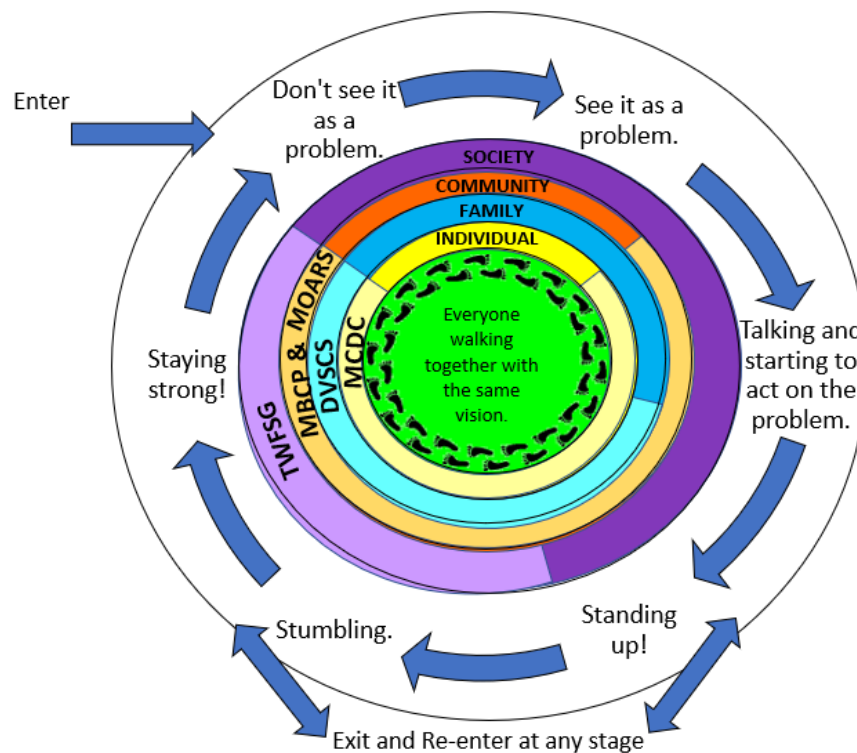

Figure 2 Stages of Change model adapted to TFVPP

Table 1 Adapted definitions of the different cycles of change

Community Stages of Change to prevent domestic and family violence.

Stage of Change	Definition.
'Don't see it as a problem.' Precontemplation	The community/people does/do not recognise violence against women and/or domestic, family, & sexual violence (VAW/DFSV) as a problem in their community and aren't interested in change. "There's no violence" "That's the way it is" "She put him in jail" The community is unaware that DFSV is a problem and that it produces negative consequences for the community.
'See it as a problem.' Contemplation	The community/people recognise/s VAW/DFSV as a problem in their community and they are becoming aware of the reasons/benefits to/of change or not changing. "it makes us sad and hurts our families and community" The community may still be unsure about making changes.

'Talking and starting to act on the problem.' Determination	The community accepts that VAW/DFSV is a problem, decides to change, and makes a plan. "Living free from violence means our families can be happy" The community is making small steps towards change and they believe ending DFSV/VAW will lead to a better life for their community.
'Standing up!' Action	The community is actively engaged/participating in making changes to end DFSV/VAW in their community. "coming together to defeat violence" "finding ways to stand together" Change has been made and the community intends to keep moving forward.
'Stumbling.' Relapse	The community experiences a setback and DFSV/VAW once again becomes a problem. The community recycles through the stages of change or re-enters at another point.
'Staying strong!' Maintenance	DFSV/VAW is no longer a problem/widespread in the community, the change is being sustained, and the community is taking steps to prevent relapse to earlier stages. "supporting the community to keep violence away" "Town Camps Free from Family Violence"

The Humphrey's indicators (2000) were developed in a very different context (Scotland) in the early 2000s and are mostly focused on victim/perpetrator interventions rather than prevention, but they may still be salient if adapted to Australian Indigenous contexts. These indicators include: the use of definitions of domestic violence; the use of monitoring processes and screening; good practice guidelines and policies; safety measures and safety-oriented practice; training; evaluation; multi-agency integration and coordination; and specific working with women and children (Humphreys, 2000). The research uses these indicators to review internal documentation as part of the case study. These two frameworks help to identify good practice and impact of each partner-program.

In the next phase of fieldwork, the research aims to use the stages of change to see whether the partner-programs have made any progress in changing community attitudes to violence. In the final stages of the research, the three programs will work collaboratively together to identify principles of good practice and develop specific indicators for these principles – for which the Humphrey's indicators will provide a model. What is becoming increasingly evident as the research continues, is the need for Indigenous-led programs to be supported and championed as Indigenous people are the experts and influencers in their communities.

Why are mainstream interventions inappropriate for Indigenous contexts?

Mainstream – or Western – responses to violence against women place the responsibility to end violence on the victim. Mainstream responses are predicated on women leaving the abusive relationship and seeking help. Such responses usually take the form of refuges, shelters, and counselling services, and therefore often take place in the context of a crisis or

once violence has already occurred (Cripps & Davis, 2012). Whilst these protective crisis responses remain necessary, they do not work to prevent violence. Victim-based responses can only ever be one part of the picture. Moreover, mainstream approaches to perpetrators of VAW occur through the judicial system in the form of domestic violence orders (DVOs) and/or incarceration. Perpetrators may or may not be mandated to attend a men's behaviour change program or rehabilitation as part of their release conditions, but this is not always the case. In sum, from a Western perspective, the onus is placed on the woman to leave the abusive relationship, apply for a DVO, and/or make a statement to the Police, who may bring charges against the perpetrator.

> *"There is still too much emphasis on women leaving. Sometimes women just want someone to say to their partner that it [DFSV] is wrong. Sometimes, that's all they want." [ES6]*

> *"Onus always placed on women. Everything generally left up to the women. I haven't seen many applications [for DVOs] from men. The emphasis always pushed back to women to deal with it." [ES9]*

This approach usually only captures the severest forms of violence, and is flawed for several reasons, the primary one being that a woman is most at risk of being murdered by her partner when she has just left the relationship or is about to leave (Kasperkevic, 2014). It is also flawed because victims are not attacking themselves – it stands to reason that efforts to prevent further violence should be directed at perpetrators, and that violence is best addressed with a holistic model wherein there is a place for both victims and perpetrators in the response. This, in addition to several other barriers, means that Western responses to VAW are often ineffective in Indigenous contexts (Day, Jones, Nakata, & McDermott, 2012; Dobbs & Eruera, 2014; Cripps & Davis, 2012; Cheers, et al., 2006).

In many Indigenous contexts, the idea that a woman should flee a violent relationship is inappropriate and unrealistic. For many Indigenous people, relationships are considered permanent and ending a relationship can carry many cultural and social consequences (Brown, 2014; Cunneen, 2008). The remoteness of many Indigenous communities means that should a woman want to leave a relationship, this could mean she has to travel hundreds of kilometres off-country to seek safety. Such a distance means that she leaves all of her support systems behind – her language, her culture, her mob, and her country. A number of participants responded to the idea of women leaving with *"where are they going to go?" [ES21]*. If a woman chooses to leave her relationship, but remain in her community, presuming that she can get the housing arrangements, Indigenous communities are extremely small places - she may be living across the road from her abuser and will certainly see him at

the one community shop: *"there's only one shop and one takeaway. Clinic. Police. That's it."* [ES15]

In this situation, should the woman wish to get help – who would she call? Many Indigenous communities have no police and if they have a shelter, funding restrictions mean they are often unstaffed. Moreover, many Indigenous communities have no phone coverage, and many Indigenous women have no access to a phone or to credit to make the phone call – many of the mainstream helpline services are therefore of no help to many Indigenous women. If a woman is able to access a service, many of them cost, and a woman may not be able to afford the service. At this point, I'd like to caveat this section by saying that some Indigenous women do make use of shelters and these are a valuable and life-saving service, but these women have already overcome many barriers to access that service – often to return, if they can, when the next violent incident occurs. In addition, Indigenous women can also face the barriers of poverty, racism, and lateral violence.

> *"We've got women from community who have been sexually assaulted and now they're living in the long grass. If they go back to community they're exposed to payback."* [ES15].
>
> *"What would it take [to prevent violence]? Eliminate poverty and break down gender stereotypes"* [SP9]
>
> *"The severity is high. You'd have to hope it's at the highest end of severity... [DFV] is also shaped by financial hardship here."* [ES8]

Mainstream interventions occurring through the judicial system are also largely ineffective. In the Northern Territory, the prison population is 92% male, and 8% female, 84% Indigenous, and most offenders derive from Alice Springs (19%) (Criminal Justice Research and Statistics Unit, 2017). 'Acts intended to cause injury' is the single greatest offence type of offenders in custody (47%), followed by 'sexual assault and related offences' (11%) (Criminal Justice Research and Statistics Unit, 2017). In the same time period, 58.6% of assaults were related to domestic violence (Department of Attorney-General and Justice , 2018). These figures also only represent those crimes which have been reported and the offenders been sentenced – and we know that VAW in all its forms is underreported. These figures will only make up the most severe of cases. The rate of recidivism in the Northern Territory in 2016 was 58.3 – the highest rate in Australia – and this rate also only includes those who return to prison in the same jurisdiction within two years of release (Criminal Justice Research and Statistics Unit, 2017). The rate of recidivism clearly illustrates that a purely penal approach cannot solve VAW – this is reinforced by participants who say that jail is no deterrent.

> *"We're expecting a huge spike in violence around this time of year – because they usually get around 3 months jail time. So they're in jail for the wet season, with a roof over their head, guaranteed three meals a day. Jail is not a bad option."* [ES17].

> *"Men are coming out of jail, hurting their partner the same day, and they go straight back to jail to finish their sentence"* [SP5].

Although, non-custodial sentences, like community-based orders could present a viable alternative if adapted to fit the context.

> *"Community corrections in the N.T. is different to elsewhere – we travel constantly – others expect offenders to come in to meetings. High risk offenders have a minimum of fortnightly meetings. We're in the perpetrator's environment. We go to them. We meet them where they are at."* [ES2].

The use of DVOs is also reported as being ineffective – participants report this is largely because perpetrators do not understand the conditions.

> *"DVO is written in really complex terms. They forget the conditions…There's no case management for parties going forward – they need someone to help them remember and understand…They need someone to talk through their conditions with real-life situations."* [ES7]

Participants also reported the high incidences of men and women continuing to live with each other despite full non-contact DVOs *"It's helpful for prosecutions. It's definitely not a deterrent."* [ES24]. Some participants also reflected that often women went to live on their husband's community with his family – so they are isolated and bringing a DVO can open a woman up to risk. Several participants linked DVOs to the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in incarceration. "*Are we contributing to mass incarceration through the full non-contact DVO because a third breach is automatic jail time."* [ES3]. Some participants said the only value of DVOs was for prosecutions but it may be *"setting people up to fail"* [ES24]. There can also be consequences for victims who report violence in the form of payback. *"There is the risk of retaliation if they come forward and pressure to drop charges"* [ES1]. Evidently, mainstream responses have their place, but they cannot make up the bulk of the response to violence against Indigenous women.

What is needed to prevent violence against Indigenous women?

Interview participants were asked "what would it take to prevent violence against Indigenous women here?" and their answers illustrate three consistent themes: different measures of safety; holistic approaches; and education. The first theme illustrates how the extreme levels of violence in the Northern Territory call for different yardsticks when it comes to safety.

"I used to think that measuring DV by physical violence was unacceptable, but here I've had to learn to accept that getting someone to stop using physical violence is a measure of success. Because the violence is so extreme and so high and so severe, the ruler is different." [SP3].

"Elsewhere [DFV] is behind closed doors but in our town you see it walking down the street. It's different types of violence. The ruler is 'he didn't hit me' but 'he won't let me leave the house' – the focus is only on the physical violence." [ES3]

The high incidents of couples choosing to stay together, despite full non-contact DVOs, means we need programs that help women be safe if they choose to remain in their relationship.

"We need interventions directed at trying to keep people as safe as possible who want to stay together [in a relationship after DFV]. We're not in a place where people leave." [ES5]

"[It's] important to work with women at their own pace. A lot of women want to stay with their partners. It needs to be allowed for women to say 'this behaviour is not okay but I still want to be in the relationship.'" [ES3]

This requires constant risk assessment and different ideas of safety. One of the ways participants suggested ongoing risk assessment can be done is through the use of holistic models – programs which simultaneously engage with victims, perpetrators, and their children. By working with victims and perpetrators (within the same program but with a different point of contact) this allows for constant risk assessment because the voices of victims and children are centred, whereas programs that only work with perpetrators have no way of knowing whether the partner is at risk: *"if he's not giving us anything, we have no idea what's going on" [SP]*. This type of holistic program can work with perpetrators to promote alternative behaviours, whilst safety planning with victims and their children, as well as providing them with therapeutic support.

The final theme, and the largest, was education. Interview and focus group participants highlighted the importance of education, particularly of young ones, in their responses.

"We need to focus on the youth downwards to make them changes. The generation nowadays is lost." [ES16].

"Harness family connections and ties and talk about how families can support each other. Makes these young ones realise their wife is a partner." [ES1]

"Elders talking to the young ones… Older people to teach you and talk about the things what's happening around so the future can be better and stronger" [PP6]

"They see it. They live it. They experience it themselves. They're grandmothers. They want to put some ideas in their young women's heads" [SP7]

Participants believed young people should be taught about healthy relationships and consent in ways that was accessible. Several participants also felt it was important that women and men learn together.

> "Men and women working together – this seemingly goes against all concepts around FV intervention – but in remote communities it's what works best." [ES2]

> "Dual learning… A lot of women don't understand what men are learning in these programs – for example men are taught the concept of 'walk away' that the women don't understand – it exacerbates the conflict because women don't know... We ask men to change their behaviour then put them back in the exact same situation". [ES3].

> "There's not enough education to talk to men and woman about jealousing" [ES20].

Participants also said that where possible, messages should be broken down so they're understandable and the use of language and culture should be promoted to create safe learning about coping tools. Further education was also needed to help people to understand DVO conditions; and teach peaceful conflict resolution. Finally, participants reflected that service should not just be town-based, that there should be local programs in place: *"It's town-based. No support out at community"* [ES10].

The fact that these themes were so common amongst 66 participants, shows that these solutions are known at the grassroots. Indigenous people have been calling for these changes for decades (Lawrence, 2006), yet the response is still overwhelmingly driven by mainstream approaches. The Northern Territory context demonstrates that interventions must be localised and context-specific – and this can only be achieved by deeply listening to Indigenous people because they are the experts and influencers on their communities.

Indigenous people are the experts when it comes to addressing violence against women in their communities. Indigenous women, in particular, need to be listened to as this is their lived reality *"Aboriginal people are not listened to – they need not just to be listened to, but to be heard. There's a difference." [ES16].* Indigenous women have insights an outsider could not possibly know – for example, stakeholders often report the various objects (planks of wood, screwdrivers, star pickets etc.) on the roofs of houses out at community, but it was Indigenous women who explained to the partner-program that women and children throw the objects up there so that they cannot be used as weapons in a violent incident. This one example shows how Indigenous women and children are cognisant of violence on their communities and are acting to make their own safety. When Indigenous people are not listened to, this can render interventions ineffective. For example, during the Northern Territory Emergency Response, otherwise known as the intervention, several shelters and

men's 'cooling off' sheds were constructed using shipping containers in remote communities without prior consultation with local Indigenous people - Indigenous women later reported poor uptake because the refuges were "more like detention centres" (Yu, Gray, & Duncan, 2008, p. 33). Clearly there is need for deep listening to Indigenous people about the barriers women face and their local knowledge must inform program concepts and design.

Indigenous people, particularly Elders, must also be at the centre of program implementation and delivery – because they are the influencers on their communities. Multiple participants also reported that who delivered the program was of the utmost importance.

> "It's the right worker too: appropriate, culturally competent staff. Aboriginal but Aboriginal from here" [ES23].

> "There needs to be championing by some really respected people – strong voices from community – to speak up against DFV. They are key. At the moment there are a lot of external voices who don't speak for community and who are not respected." [ES5]

> "[Need] two male and two female elders to champion the cause. To be the 'go to' people when the program finishes to show people how people should be different in the same situation. Need community ownership. Up-skill Aboriginal people to own, develop, and grow the program." [ES2]

> "It has to come from community. So, not provided from a whitefella... Strategies can be passed on but it must come from a community level." [ES20]

Indigenous women, in particular, have the ability to shape the future as they become the ones to educate the next generation. In a focus group, several program-participants created artwork which they explained showed a future with women teaching young ones about violence (**See Figure 3** and **4**)

Figure 4 Photo of painting which shows the women teaching the children about domestic violence under the tree of knowledge

Figure 3 Photo of painting which shows the women talking to the children about domestic violence.

Indigenous community leaders also have the ability to influence community attitudes towards violence which is key in creating and sustaining change: *"Stop condoning violent behaviour on community." [ES20]*. Through training local Indigenous people, the sphere of influence spreads which can act as a safety measure when violence occurs. For example, one partner-program trains women on Alice Springs town camps about the different types of violence and how to safely intervene and report violence. Program-participants believed that having a woman who had completed the training living on the Town Camp improved safety. This is possibly because this acted as a measure of accountability, the woman could also be a point-of-call, and give visibility to the problem. Indigenous people, and particularly women, are the experts and influencers on their communities – if Australia is serious about addressing violence against Indigenous women, then their inclusion in developing solutions to the problems that affect them is a basic minimum. To really address violence against Indigenous women, there is a need for Indigenous-led responses.

Indigenous-led means that Indigenous people's voices, particularly Indigenous women's, are centred. Indigenous people are instrumental to the conception, design, implementation, and delivery of the program. Indigenous-led responses move beyond mainstream models because they draw upon local Indigenous knowledge, make use of community leaders and their influence, and the program is driven by Indigenous people. As a model, the concept of service provision is therefore replaced with community development – capacity building and community ownership are key. As Indigenous-led responses attempt to address the structural disadvantages and underlying causes which result in a disproportionate rate of violence against women in their communities, they can often incorporate elements of restorative justice, recovery, and trauma-informed therapeutic care. These responses are often holistic – perhaps using a family-based approach – and operate in culturally appropriate and culturally safe ways which are cognisant of the need to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes of Indigenous people. Participants reflected on the need for Indigenous-led responses to VAW.

> *"You need to put it fairly and squarely at the feet of Aboriginal people." [ES17]*
> *"It's dangerous for a non-Indigenous model to be put in." [ES11]*
> *"My position is that change needs to come from within" [ES4]*.

One example of this model is the Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program (TFVPP) in Alice Springs. This program is community-led and is governed by the Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group (Women's Group) which comprises thirteen

women from ten Alice Springs Town Camps. The Women's Group informs the work of the Marra'ka Mbarintja Men's Behaviour Change Program and the Domestic Violence Specialist Children's Service. These three programs reflect a holistic model as victims, children, and perpetrators are all included by the program. The program is also preventative and solution-focused through capacity-building: the Women's Group conducts training with Indigenous women to help them to recognise and respond to the different types of violence. The program also organises events and develops culturally appropriate resources to create visibility and challenge the underlying causes of VAW, such as rigid gender stereotypes. The program, and particularly the Women's Group, draws upon community strengths in their work, for example by using kinship, language, and art to engage with Town Campers. The Women's Group also acts as influencers outside of their community by advocating to government and decision-makers on behalf of Town Camp women about long-term solutions to VAW. As well as exemplifying an Indigenous-led response to VAW, TFVPP also meets the vast majority of Humphrey's (2000) 'Good Practice Indicators' and was identified by several stakeholders as helping to move their community through the stages of change.

Whilst these external frameworks help to identify and guide good practice, programs must ultimately be accountable to community – and this is reflected in the number of Indigenous people now accessing TFVPP and remaining engaged in the program over long periods, despite the barriers they face.

Conclusion

Mainstream responses, although vital for many women, cannot offer the only solutions to violence against Indigenous women. All Indigenous contexts and communities are different, with their own strengths and needs, consequently there is a need for localised responses to VAW. Therefore, three principles emerge for programs responding to violence against Indigenous women: deep listening; drawing on the asset of influencers; and community-leadership. Indigenous-led models are already in place within Australia, and have practised-based knowledge which can inform program design in other contexts. What is needed is deep listening by Government, decision-makers, and funding bodies in order to move past the mainstream model to one that meets the needs of Indigenous communities.

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