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Amplifying unheard voices: Systemic failures and strategic solutions in addressing violence against Indigenous women

Abstract: The crisis of violence against Indigenous women in Australia demands urgent, transformative action. Indigenous women continue to experience disproportionately high rates of violence. Recent data reveal they are up to thirty-three times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence–related assaults than non-Indigenous women. Between 1989 and 2023, 476 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were victims of homicide, reflecting victimisation rates up to seven times the national average. This chapter examines the systemic failures underpinning this crisis, including inadequate institutional training, inconsistent application of domestic violence guidelines, delayed responses, and pervasive scepticism towards Indigenous women's reports of violence. It highlights the lack of culturally safe services and the frequent misidentification of Indigenous women as perpetrators due to racial bias. We argue for a comprehensive, community-led approach grounded in cultural authority and self-determination. This includes sustained investment in Indigenous specialist services, enhanced antiracism training for service providers, and the establishment of Indigenous-led data collection and governance to inform policy. Centring Indigenous women's voices is essential to transforming responses to violence: believing their experiences, ensuring safe accommodation, and funding long-term, culturally responsive solutions. Only through genuine commitment can Australia move towards justice, healing, and safety for Indigenous women, families, and communities.

Introduction

Indigenous women worldwide face disproportionately high rates of violence, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in Australia are no exception. Recent research reveals that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are up to thirty-three times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence related assaults compared to non-Indigenous women (Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing (AIHW) 2024). Between June and early November 2024, twelve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were victims of homicide (Cripps and Longbottom 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are eight times more likely to be homicide victims than non-Indigenous women in Australia (Cripps 2024), and evidence from Western Australia shows that Aboriginal mothers are 17.5 times more likely to be homicide victims

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than non-Aboriginal mothers (Uibu 2016). This crisis is more pronounced in regional and remote areas of Australia (Longbottom and Mills 2025).

Statistics do not simply anonymise or obscure the experiences of Indigenous women; rather, the constant repetition of these statistics is a source of profound fatigue for Aboriginal women. 'Consultation fatigue' and emotional exhaustion arise because these numbers represent real lives marked by ongoing systemic violence and neglect that remain insufficiently addressed by policymakers. Simply put, the case has already been made and it should no longer need to be argued that responses to this violence are urgent and need to be community driven.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia have long called for urgent action to address the crisis of violence against Indigenous women in Australia (National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum (NFVPLS) 2017). The Australian government's own reviews and policies acknowledge that the violence is an emergency, with urgency comparable to national security and climate change (Australian Government Office for Women (AGOFW) 2024). The United Nations Special Rapporteur, who visited Australia in February 2017, highlighted the unacceptably high rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and identified the need for urgent action (United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) 2017). In spite of considerable acknowledgement of the crisis of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, the conditions necessary for implementing effective, culturally safe, and Indigenous-led solutions remain severely lacking.

The statistics, stories, and personal accounts of violence against Aboriginal women are profoundly disturbing. First Nations researchers and advocates have consistently provided detailed explanations, linking the ubiquity and severity of this violence to its deep roots in settler colonialism. As explored in this chapter, there is clear, virtually unanimous consensus among Aboriginal scholars, DFSV frontline workers, and activists on the solutions needed to address this crisis (Longbottom, McGlade and Cripps 2024).

Understanding the violence: Colonialism endures through systemic failures

Though traditional understandings of domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV) typically stress gender inequality as the key driver of violence (Australian Human Rights Council (AHRC) 2016), the first step in comprehending this (otherwise unthinkable) violence that many Aboriginal women and children endure is to reject the myth that colonisation is a completed historical event with the current violence Aboriginal women face merely its consequence (Watson 2016). We must accept that colonisation is to be understood as an ongoing and enduring process. Amongst other Aboriginal scholars, Aileen Moreton-Robinson has stressed that Australia is not postcolonial be-

cause the settler-colonial structure persists: colonisation is not a closed historical episode but a continuous and ongoing structure of power that shapes Indigenous lives, sovereignty, and rights (Moreton-Robinson 2003).

Since colonisation operates as an ongoing system of dispossession and social control that actively perpetuates structural inequalities for Indigenous peoples, it follows that a central aspect of the contemporary Australian state's role in executing colonial violence is its deliberate neglect of Aboriginal women. Even when institutions, such as coronial inquiries, police, and politicians, pledge to address the scourge of violence against women, we must remain cautious and critically vigilant, for the state's violence often disguises itself as a form of protection (Watson 2016).

Thus, the systemic failures against Aboriginal women and children should not be seen as isolated incidents but as an essential component of state violence, business as usual for a colonial state acting precisely as it was designed and intended to do. Violence against Aboriginal women in Australia is best understood as a complex issue emerging not from but *within* entrenched ongoing systems of colonial violence. These systems actively instrumentalise systemic racism, socioeconomic inequality, and inadequate institutional responses as integral tools and methods to maintain control and perpetuate harm.

Systemic and institutional failures, particularly within policing, have contributed to preventable deaths of Indigenous women in Australia. Kyllie Cripps's 2023 analysis of 151 coronial investigations over twenty years shows that Indigenous women experiencing intimate partner violence routinely sought assistance and engaged with various support services—including police—before their deaths (Cripps 2023). Firmly situating the victimisation of Indigenous women in the context of structural and institutional failures, Cripps summarises that most of these deaths were preventable and clarifies that police, as first responders, many times failed in their duty to protect the women. She clarifies:

> Women's deaths are rarely without warning and are generally preceded by increasing violent or abusive incidents indicating a heightened risk of future harm. It is because of these indicators that these types of deaths are considered some of the most preventable. However, prevention is only possible if the systems designed to protect women are capable of doing so and heed the warnings through practices and processes focused on addressing women's safety. (Cripps 2023: 294)

Barriers to reporting

Aboriginal women, especially those who experience DFSV, deserve culturally safe engagement across all sectors, but they often do not receive it, including from frontline workers in hospitals, the justice system, family violence support, and government services such as Centrelink (Cripps and Habibis 2019). Systemic barriers act as signifi-

cant obstacles to reporting DFSV; these include fear of child removal by authorities, homelessness, isolation from family and community, lack of culturally safe services, mistrust of mainstream and some Indigenous-run organisations, fear of reprisals or 'payback', and experiences of racism and discrimination (AIHW 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in regional and remote areas face heightened risks exacerbated by these barriers (AIHW 2019). The fear of further harm or loss when engaging with existing systems contributes heavily to underreporting and inadequate support outcomes.

A critical structural barrier to addressing DFSV in Aboriginal communities is the lack of adequate cultural competency training within the justice sector, especially among those working directly with Indigenous peoples. Prioritising comprehensive training programs that deepen cultural awareness and enhance understanding of the historical and social complexities of violence experienced by Indigenous communities is essential. Such training must extend beyond basic awareness to equip justice professionals with the skills needed for respectful and effective engagement. Furthermore, adopting a genuine partnership approach in the development, implementation, and evaluation of these programs is vital. Close collaboration with Aboriginal communities and Indigenous-led organisations ensures interventions are culturally safe, contextually relevant, and grounded in Indigenous peoples' lived experiences and expertise. This collaborative model fosters trust and accountability and leads to more effective, sustainable outcomes in responding to violence.

First Nations women often face police reluctance and institutional inaction when seeking help for DFSV (Cripps 2023). These practises are oftentimes underpinned by racist stereotypes, with police and legal systems often portraying Aboriginal women as dishonest or untrustworthy. For example, during Coroner Elisabeth Armitage's Inquiry into the deaths of four Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory, police records were found to contain annotations between officers expressing doubts about the legitimacy of victims' claims (Cripps and Longbottom 2024). As Armitage noted, such remarks undermine victims' credibility and adversely impact the urgency and effectiveness of police responses. Numerous well-founded fears arise from this distrust, including fear of child removal, misidentification as the primary aggressor with consequent criminalisation when seeking help, and backlash from the community, perpetrators, and their families (Langton et al. 2020). Pervasive distrust of, and institutional racism towards, Aboriginal women also contribute directly to the frequent misidentification of Indigenous women as perpetrators rather than victims. Research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are often wrongly labelled as aggressors due to systemic bias, including stereotypes that they are aggressive and dangerous, which is compounded by police scepticism and cultural misunderstandings (see Family Violence Reform Monitor (FVRIM) 2021). Djirra, for example, estimate that in family violence safety notices where their female client is listed as the respondent, there has been misidentification or some considerable degree of unfairness in 90 per cent of cases (FVRIM 2021). Further, Crime Statistics Agency data shows that

nearly 80 per cent of Aboriginal women who police identified as the respondent to a family violence incident in the past five years were also recoded as a victim during the same timeframe (FVRIM 2021). Such statistics reveal how the justice system systematically misapplies the 'respondent' label to Aboriginal women who are, in fact, primary victims. This misidentification is rooted in enduring colonial and gendered stereotypes, specifically, the view that Aboriginal women are aggressive or dangerous and that their experiences of violence are less credible or deserving of attention. This categorisation also results in Aboriginal women not neatly fitting the societal stereotype of 'ideal victims': one who is passive, innocent, and conforming. Their experiences and suffering are therefore minimised or dismissed and their help-seeking has led to greater policing and criminalisation (Watego et al. 2021).

The consequences of systemic failures within the justice system are profound for Aboriginal women. Cripps (2023) illustrates that persistent institutional inaction, disbelief, and misidentification often trap these women in cycles of escalating abuse. In the most tragic cases, this leaves them with no option but to use fatal force in self-defence—a response which, instead of being recognised as a result of social entrapment and prolonged victimisation, frequently leads to further criminalisation and lengthy imprisonment. Despite some judicial recognition of the extensive violence suffered by Aboriginal women, legal defences such as self-defence or provocation rarely succeed, and police and prosecutors are often inconsistent, sometimes opting to overcharge or pressure women into guilty pleas that fail to account for the complexity of their circumstances (Cripps 2023). Cripps (2023) further argues that, rather than confronting systemic failures to support Aboriginal women, courts and the broader justice system often reduce their narratives to harmful stereotypes: blaming individual pathology or moral failing instead of recognising the realities of social entrapment. Thus, there is clear evidence that institutional racism within the justice system drives the misidentification and criminalisation of First Nations women, perpetuating cycles of violence and preventable tragedy. Addressing these issues requires not only law reform but also comprehensive, intersectional training for justice professionals and a genuine commitment to Aboriginal-led solutions.

What are the solutions?

In a system of bodies, taxonomised from worthy of protection to unworthy—one designed to divest Indigenous women of their rights to self-determination, consent, and authority and to keeping them in a state of dependency, vulnerability, and neglect—any effective solution must honour and centre Aboriginal women's self-determination, authority, consent, and control. Put simply, decisions regarding 'what to do' about the violence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women endure must never, ever, be made without them. All remedies, solutions, and decisions can only be made by them, and they

have been proclaiming them for a very long time. The question is whether the DFSV and related sectors are willing to listen.

Proposals advocating culturally grounded, community-led approaches as solutions to the crisis of family violence for Indigenous women, are both widely supported and far from controversial. First Nations leaders, advocates, and government initiatives consistently emphasise that solutions must be designed and led by Indigenous communities themselves to be effective and respectful of cultural knowledge and self-determination. As Justice Armitage reflected at the conclusion of her coronial inquiry:

> I have made thirty-five recommendations today and I don't think any of them are radical. None of them are new. They all build on and are informed by the work that is already being done by our academic experts, the managers and frontline staff working every day in the domestic violence sector, [. . .] and by the family of those who have passed and community members with lived experience. (Armitage 2024: 243)

After her visit, the UN Special Rapporteur (UNHRC 2017) stressed the need for Aboriginal-led solutions, noting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women should lead and manage programs aimed at improving their legal and justice outcomes. These initiatives would amplify the voices of Aboriginal women by providing the necessary support and resources, including an adequate number of women's shelters as is urgently needed, that are operated by them and serve as central hubs for recovery and empowerment. But the response by government(s) to date to these and other calls have typically fallen short of meeting what communities have identified as required. For example, the NT government response to Justice Armitage's report was to say it was "overall" "uninspiring" and the report "failed so dismally to hit the mark" (Hislop 2025:para 4). Their response was to accept twenty-one recommendations as already being in progress not requiring further funding, accept in principle eleven recommendations and to not support three recommendations. The latter included the establishment of a Northern Territory DFSV peak body to represent the sector on a national level and ensuring frontline DFSV services are funded consistently with indexation increases. The latter is particularly important for maintaining the sustainability of not just services but a workforce able to keep up with demand (Hislop 2025).

Healing and intervention approaches for perpetrators

Aboriginal victim-survivors, researchers, and advocates emphasise the benefits of healing programs as holistic approaches to support reform and change among perpetrators. These programs assist men culturally and spiritually, focusing on addressing the root causes—rather than merely the symptoms—of family violence (Department of Social Services (DSS) 2023). A comprehensive research project led by Bronwyn Carl-

son with colleagues (2024) underscores the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing programs in responding to family violence. This research involved extensive engagement with First Nations victim-survivors and workers, highlighting that long-term funding is essential because healing is a prolonged process by nature. Carlson and colleagues' (2024) study highlights that responding to family violence is fundamentally anti-colonial work aimed at dismantling systems of violence introduced through colonization. Key findings emphasise the urgent need for sustainable, long-term funding for healing programs conceived and led by First Nations people. Successful programs share a common understanding of trauma within family and community contexts, empower First Nations women to actively participate in program design, delivery, and evaluation, and provide appropriate and effective alternatives to incarceration. Furthermore, the research recommends establishing auspicing relationships between mainstream organisations and community-controlled healing programs, ensuring programs are designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and developing professional qualifications and standards that recognise the value of lived expertise and community connections (Carlson et al. 2024).

What do Aboriginal women and children need and deserve?

Aboriginal researchers, activists, and frontline DFSV workers unanimously agree that long-term, culturally safe interventions are essential to support First Nations women experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, DFSV (Carlson et al. 2024; First Nations Advocates Against Family Violence (FNAAFV) 2024; NSW Government 2024). Indigenous-led approaches are holistic and inclusive, supporting women and men, victim-survivors and perpetrators alike (Monash University 2022). These culturally safe services acknowledge the systemic issues disproportionately impacting Indigenous women; they are trauma-informed and centre the self-determination of the women who engage with them. Typical programs include emergency, transitional, and support for long term housing, culturally appropriate counselling, and initiatives that foster relational safety and healing while consciously avoiding isolating families or punitive measures that result in criminalisation. These services are community-driven and Aboriginal-designed and led, ensuring cultural responsiveness and safety throughout their delivery (NSW Safe and Strong Program 2024). As Carlson and colleagues emphasised, long-term funding is vital because healing, by its very nature, is a prolonged process (Carlson et al. 2024).

The CEO of Djirra, Antoinette Braybrook, explained the importance of long-term investment in culturally safe early intervention and the critical work of Aboriginal community–controlled organisations that specialise in providing holistic, wrap-

around support to Aboriginal women at the highest risk of violence in the community.

Despite publicly stated government commitments to address DFSV in Aboriginal communities, funding remains inadequate, and resources are often poorly allocated. A study led by Marcia Langton highlighted this imbalance, concluding that a significant proportion of funding focused more on men's rehabilitation programs than on women's safety and support needs, resulting in a misalignment with victim-survivors' priorities (Langton et al. 2020). This misallocation limits the availability and effectiveness of culturally safe, Indigenous-led services crucial for supporting First Nations women experiencing violence.

Research highlights that inadequate housing options and systemic deficiencies repeatedly undermine women's ability to leave violent situations and seek help, thereby discouraging disclosure and reinforcing cycles of violence and silence (Langton et al. 2020). Australia is experiencing a significant housing crisis, and safe, long-term accommodation is a crucial component in securing safety for Aboriginal women. Extensive research indicates that insecure housing acts as a major barrier to reporting DFSV and that experiencing DFSV increases the likelihood of homelessness, while housing insecurity often forces victims to return to abusive relationships (Cripps and Habibis 2019). Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) reported that family violence was the most common reason Victorians sought help from homelessness services in 2016–17, accounting for 35 percent of cases (AHV 2019). Moreover, even when Aboriginal women secure temporary or emergency housing, restrictions such as prohibitions on receiving visitors make these options culturally inappropriate and insufficient for their needs (Langton et al. 2020). Aboriginal women experiencing family violence require not only safe housing but culturally appropriate and secure long-term housing combined with wrap-around support services that address their holistic safety and wellbeing.

Indigenous-led data collection and analysis is critical for crafting and implementing effective policies to reduce violence against Aboriginal women and children. A group of Aboriginal scholars in Australia, Maiam Nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective (MNWIDSC), explain that Indigenous Data Sovereignty entails Indigenous nations controlling their own data, which in turn supports 'nation rebuilding' and is foundationally necessary for sustainable self-determination and self-governance (MNWIDSC 2018). When it comes to reducing violence against Aboriginal women and children, data sovereignty ensures that Indigenous women are central—not just subjects but leaders shaping research and policy. Indigenous-led data processes are equipped to recognize and address systemic and often subtle barriers that external researchers may overlook or misunderstand.

For example, hospital admission data and records of intimate partner homicide involving Indigenous women have often been interpreted through non-Indigenous frameworks, which can misrepresent or downplay the true scale and nature of violence (Cripps 2023; Longbottom and Mills 2025). By applying Indigenous-led data anal-

ysis frameworks, these statistics are contextualised with cultural understanding, revealing patterns of systemic failure—such as persistent policing shortcomings or gaps in health service responses—that need targeted policy change (Cripps 2023; Longbottom and Mills 2025).

Embedding Indigenous leadership in all parts of data governance—collection, storage, analysis, and reporting—creates more authentic and actionable insights. These insights, in turn, support policies and interventions that are grounded in the experiences and priorities of those most affected, fostering greater trust and more sustainable progress. Additionally, respecting Indigenous Data Sovereignty upholds fundamental rights and strengthens community structures, which are also essential for both healing and future prevention efforts (Cripps 2023; Longbottom and Mills 2025).

Further it is essential that all service providers and law enforcement personnel undergo enhanced, intensive training to combat systemic racism. While national programs such as DV-alert exist (see Lifeline Australia 2025), it is incumbent upon these systems to make such training mandatory for all frontline workers responding to DFSV (Dowling 2024). Australian police officers urgently require training that challenges and dismantles harmful myths and stereotypes about Aboriginal women and men. It is critical that police confront and overcome racist assumptions about Aboriginal women. Dispelling these stereotypes will reduce perpetrator misidentification and counter damaging beliefs that Aboriginal women are troublesome, dishonest, or prone to making false allegations. At the core of these biases lies the cruel and false notion that Aboriginal women's bodies and lives are less valuable or important than those of others. Aboriginal women are mournable. Aboriginal women are credible. Aboriginal women are worth looking for. Aboriginal women must be heard. Aboriginal women should be believed. Aboriginal women are already leading the way, and it is time to follow.

Conclusion

The crisis of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia is neither new nor unknown. As this chapter has shown, Indigenous women have been speaking out for decades: naming the violence, identifying its colonial and systemic roots, and articulating the solutions required for safety, justice, and healing. Yet, their voices have too often been ignored, sidelined, or silenced by institutions that continue to fail them. The patterns are now tragically familiar: preventable deaths, misidentification of victims as aggressors, criminalisation instead of protection, and systemic racism that devalues Indigenous women's lives.

This chapter has traced the enduring colonial structures that enable such violence and highlighted the many intersecting failures across justice, health, housing, and ser-

vice sectors. It has underscored how Aboriginal women are routinely failed by systems meant to protect them and instead are retraumatised, disbelieved, or endangered. These systemic failures are not anomalies—they are the expected outcomes of a state structure that continues to operate through colonial logics of control, neglect, and dispossession.

Yet, amid these failures, Aboriginal women and communities continue to lead. They have long offered culturally grounded, community-led responses that uphold the principles of self-determination, relational safety, and collective healing. Whether through frontline services, healing programs, data sovereignty initiatives, or calls for systemic reform, Indigenous women are not passive victims. They are agents of change, demanding justice and forging pathways forward.

To amplify unheard voices, as this chapter's title urges, is not merely to 'listen' or consult; it is to shift power. It is to believe Indigenous women, to fund and implement the solutions they design, and to embed their leadership across all levels of policy, practice, and response. It is to reimagine systems of justice and safety not through colonial frameworks but through Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Real change will not come from more inquiries or performative acknowledgements; it will come from sustained political will, long-term investment in community-controlled organisations, and a deep reckoning with the legacies of colonial violence that still shape contemporary Australia. The challenge before us is not a lack of knowledge but a lack of courage. The solutions exist. The question is whether we will follow the lead of those who have always known the way

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