

**The stories of our women:
Exploring the barriers to
Aboriginal women's help
seeking in the context of family
violence.**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Jenna Ashleigh Woods

Dedication

For all the women living in fear,
Covering their bruises and crying in silence.
For all the women scared of what tomorrow will bring,
With broken bones and broken hearts.
You deserve so much better.
Out of the worst struggles rise the strongest women.

Acknowledgements

My family – Jayden, Mum, Nicole and all the mob

What a journey this has been and, without you all, I would have given up a long time ago. Thank you for always being there, for loving me through my stressed out craziness, the late nights when I couldn't sleep and all those times when I was too exhausted to even function. You have made me who I am today, helped me to heal, to grow and to chase my dreams. Family is everything and this couldn't have happened without you mob. I am truly blessed to be able to call you my family. I love you.

My community – The women of Armadale and Kwinana

This project recounts your stories and without your involvement, there would have been no thesis to write. I would like to thank you all for giving your support and sharing your time and your stories with me. These weren't easy stories to tell, you shared your most vulnerable moments with me and I will be forever grateful for the trust you have shown me. I hope that this thesis does justice to your stories. Finally, I want to acknowledge the strength and resilience that you embody in rebuilding your lives after such immense pain. You are truly inspirational and your stories will stay with me forever.

My Kulbardi crew – The staff and students of the Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre

Who would have thought that we would be here today? I walked into the Kulbardi Centre as a 19-year-old high school dropout and feeling a little lost in life. Since that day, Kulbardi has been like my second home and the people there like my family. From helping me with undergraduate assignments to pushing me to grow in my personal life, shouting me lunches when I didn't have any, to looking after my son in your offices when he's sick and I still had to work. Thank you for always walking with me, Kulbardi has changed my life.

My supervisors – Dr. Ian Cook and Dr. Yvonne Haigh

We made it! When I came to you three years ago, I had no idea of what research actually entailed, nor any idea of what I wanted to explore in this project. From there, you have supported me through each step of the way and shown me how to become a part of this academic world. Thank you for your patience, a motivational chat when needed and your guidance. I have learnt so much from you both and I hope this thesis does you proud.

Abstract

Family violence in Aboriginal communities is an ongoing tragedy and a blight on Australian society and governments. Developing a clear understanding of the nature of family violence in Aboriginal communities and the barriers preventing Aboriginal women's help seeking is, therefore, of the utmost importance. In collaboration with target communities in Armadale and Kwinana, the following research question was devised: what barriers do Aboriginal women face when seeking help to address family violence? Community focus groups and individual interviews, guided by the Indigenous Research Methodology of 'Yarning', were held in the two focus sites. A total of 37 women participated in this process and three types of barriers to help seeking are identified from their stories. There are: i) barriers within our own communities; ii) structural barriers, and; iii) institutional racism. The barriers within our community were the normalisation of violence, problematic family intervention and a collective fear of child protection. Structural barriers were refuge accommodation inaccessibility, police negligence and harmful child protection intervention. Thirdly, direct and indirect experiences of institutional racism from members of two key institutions, the police force and child protection agency, were found to negatively influence the women's willingness to seek assistance and protection. The findings of this research provide a comprehensive account of Aboriginal women's experiences of help seeking in the context of family violence within the Perth metropolitan region.

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Introduction

BACKGROUND

Our families are central to our notion of ourselves: they are the primary influence in shaping who we are and what we will become. Within our family, we can find comfort, support and unconditional love. However, this is not the case for all. When the family is dysfunctional, it can have significant impacts on individual family members, their broader community networks, and society more generally. In the context of family violence, this can have devastating effect. It is well known that Aboriginal people experience such violence at exceedingly high rates; and, due to the closeness of kinship networks and collectivist nature of communities, this has profound implications for the population's overall wellbeing. While family violence is not isolated to Aboriginal communities, the sheer extent at which it is occurring among such families is particularly concerning.

Family violence is a sweeping social justice issue throughout the world, causing severe harm to millions of victims. The recognition of family violence as a public concern is a recent occurrence, arising out of the feminist movement's push for women's rights in the 1970s. Prior to the 1970s, violence within the family was constructed as a private dispute between spouses which did not require external intervention (Ramsay 2007). Over recent decades, however, family violence has been thrust into the public consciousness and is now recognised to be an urgent national concern. While initially recognised as violent acts perpetrated by an intimate partner onto members of his or her family, the definition of family violence has since evolved to include varying forms of abuse. In contemporary times, it can be understood not only in terms of acts of physical violence but more holistically as physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, social, spiritual, and economic abuse against a partner (Healey 2014, 2). As such, family violence can be understood as the repeated exertion of power by one partner in order to control the other through fear.

THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

There are many terms applied to define violence that occurs within the family. These include, but are not limited to, 'domestic violence', 'family violence' and 'intimate partner violence', while the word 'violence' is often used interchangeably with 'abuse'. Language is a

powerful tool through which we form our reality; and, as such, words must be chosen carefully. For the purpose of this project, the term family violence and family abuse will be applied. This is consistent with the broader literature in this field which contends that family violence is the more appropriate term amongst Aboriginal peoples, reflecting the collectivist nature of our communities and the intergenerational experience of such abuse (Cheers et al. 2006 52; Cox, Young and Bairnsfather-Scott 2009, 152; Gordon 2006, 21). While the form of abuse for examination in this project is that which takes place between partners, the term family violence acknowledges the interconnectedness of our communities which is highly relevant to the stories of our women.

A key power dynamic that must be taken into account when exploring Aboriginal family violence is that of Australia's colonial history and embedded racial hierarchy. In order to explore any contemporary social justice issues within our communities, the historical and political context must be examined first. Australia's colonial expansion occurred at the expense of the pre-existing Aboriginal populations and persecutory policies introduced in these times were intended to enforce the strict exclusion and isolation of Aboriginal peoples. The legacy of this lives on today, with Aboriginal peoples among the most disadvantaged population groups in the world across a range of areas including education, employment, housing, economic, justice and health (Australia. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2018). The racial power structure that was enforced in Australia and its socio-cultural aftermath are highly relevant to understanding the social environment which enables and perpetuates our community's high rate of family violence.

As family violence is considered to be one partner exerting power over another, it must also be viewed in the context of broader power relations, particularly gendered power relations. Gender and control are central features of family violence, with the vast majority of cases of family violence perpetrated by men against women. As such, it should be understood within the context of our long standing gendered social hierarchy, "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations" (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2014, 1). The deeply ingrained sexism and misogyny in modern society perpetuates ideals of male dominance and female submissiveness, resulting in a high tolerance of the disrespect and devaluing of women. Research demonstrates that there is a positive correlation between the acceptance of traditional gender roles and abuse (Fisher 2013; Golden, Perreira and Durrance 2013; Reyes et al. 2016). Family violence, therefore is gendered violence and a reflection of chronic social inequality.

The extent to which family violence is occurring in Australian homes is alarming. According to Government statistics, Australian women are physically or sexually victimised at a rate between 1 in 3 and 1 in 6 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018; Australia. Parliament of Australia 2011). Amongst the Aboriginal population, this rate is much higher. Research indicates that Aboriginal women are 45 times more likely to be victims of family violence than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, with 1 in 4 Aboriginal women experiencing some form of violence in the past 12 months alone (ANROWS 2017; Ombudsman Western Australia 2015, 107). They are also 5 times more likely to be victims of domestic homicide and 35 times more likely to be hospitalised for assault (ANROWS 2017). Compounding this problem further, Aboriginal women are less likely to report acts of family violence than non-Aboriginal women and, as such, the discrepancies in abuse rates are probably greater than these statistics suggest (Willis 2011).

The implications of such extensive family violence are far reaching and long lasting. Direct impacts of family violence include death, physical injury, ongoing physical and psychological illness, poor maternal outcomes, financial stress, unemployment and homelessness (Gorde, Helfrich and Finlayson 2004). Impacts on children who are exposed to abuse often replicate those that the mother experiences and, in addition, include behavioural issues, physical aggression, lower educational attainment and a higher likelihood of future substance abuse (Astbury et al. 2000). On a broader societal level, a Government enquiry found that family violence costs an estimated \$22 billion per year with an additional \$4 billion attributed specifically to vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal families, bringing the total costs up to \$26 billion per year (Australia. Department of Social Services 2016, 4, 8). The social impacts of family violence are profound and the economic costs substantial, making such abuse an important political, economic and social issue.

POSITIONING THE SELF

The way in which people perceive the world, interpret information and attribute meaning to it is heavily informed by their view of the world. This worldview is determined by one's personal and collective history, experiences and belief system. When one becomes a researcher, one does not abandon one's worldview; rather, it serves as a lens through which they see the topic of research. Positioning oneself in relation to the research project and its participants is central to a productive and transparent research process. Brown and Strega (2005, 110) note that positioning yourself in this way "brings ownership and responsibility to

the forefront. When researchers own who and/or what they represent, they also reveal what they do not represent.”

The topic of research for this project, Aboriginal family violence, is one that I know intimately. I am a Noongar woman from the South West of Western Australia and grew up in the Armadale region, one of the focus sites in this project. I fell pregnant with my now 10 year old son at the age of 16 and experienced severe physical and psychological abuse at the hands of his father. This abuse continued for many years. I faced frequent barriers when trying to seek assistance and protection from police officers who refused to take my reports of assaults and breaches of a Violence Restraining Order; I faced hostile meetings with child protection workers, who were alerted to my abuse by the police; I was unable to attain appropriate refuge accommodation, nor could I access the services that I needed to ensure the safety of my son and myself. This research project and its findings are derived from the stories of our women and I am actively aware that my story is innately entwined with theirs.

The women participating in this project are my people; I have grown up amongst many of them and some are my family. We are one people, united by a shared land, shared history, shared cultural background and, for many, shared family networks. This has been essential to my ability to engage with the community for participant recruitment and also has enhanced the depth of the data collected. Throughout this thesis, I will use the term ‘our’ when referring to Aboriginal women and Aboriginal community. My identity is tied up with that of the women and the communities involved and my use of ‘our’ throughout this thesis reflects that. Beyond the shared community connections between myself and the participating women, we also share the experience of being victimised by someone we love. Engaging in this research has required me to be constantly reflective and to critically examine my own assumptions throughout the process, which Bonner and Tolhurst (2013, 11) consider to be critical to the validity and rigour of insider research. I am extremely privileged to have been supported by the women of Armadale and Kwinana who have shared their stories, our stories, for the benefit of this project and our communities more generally.

SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE

In light of the profound impacts that family violence has on the individual, their wider kinship network and society more generally, understanding the barriers to addressing it is of the utmost importance. While there are various studies that investigate particular aspects of

family violence in Aboriginal communities, Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan's (2017) Queensland-based research is the only recent academic study that has focused on the barriers to service access faced by Aboriginal women. Due to historical and political differences between Queensland and Western Australia, along with the cultural heterogeneity of Aboriginal peoples, localised research is required to understand the plight of our women in this context. This project, while academic, is a community led examination of the barriers that Aboriginal women face when seeking help to address family violence in the Perth metropolitan area and is the first of its kind.

Little can be done to address family violence in our communities if our women do not seek and secure meaningful support. This project represents the experiences of Aboriginal women in the prescribed locations, the Armadale and Kwinana regions. While Aboriginal communities throughout Australia are struggling with high rates of family violence and are experiencing similar barriers to their help seeking, the findings from this project only apply directly to the Armadale and Kwinana communities. Considering the diversity of our communities nationwide, I do not propose that the findings of this project are readily generalisable to any communities other than those who were directly involved in this project. However, the findings of this research were consistent across the two locations which suggest that they may be relevant to the broader Aboriginal population.

The women who participated in this project shared their intimate experiences of family violence and the resulting data covers a broad range of areas relating to this topic. Due to the word limit applied to Research Masters theses, this thesis cannot explore the full breadth of the data generated with respect to those women's experiences and will only address data associated with the barriers to seeking and securing meaningful assistance. The barriers described by our women will be discussed in terms of three themes: barriers within our communities, structural barriers and institutional racism as a barrier. Each of these themes will be pursued through several sub-themes. I am truly grateful for the depth of the stories shared by our women and it will not be squandered, rather, the remaining data will be utilised in subsequent texts and academic articles to do justice to the profound and powerful stories of our women.

ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

This exploration of the barriers to help seeking identified by Aboriginal women who have experienced, and in some cases continue to experience, family violence, is comprised of six chapters. The first chapter, *Historical Policy Context*, outlines the socio-political background to this research project. Here, the stages from colonisation to the current day policy context will be examined with a focus on Western Australian State legislation and brief mentions of relevant Federal initiatives. Contemporary Australian society and its public institutions do not exist in a socio-political vacuum, rather, the ideological make-up of modern Australia's legal framework is derived from previous policy and practice. As such, in order to generate a sound understanding of the nature of family violence within our communities today and our strained relations with particular institutions, we must first establish how we, as a society, got here. Since colonisation, Aboriginal peoples have been persecuted and subjected to demeaning and oppressive policies that actively sought to fragment our communities and destroy our culture. The impacts of these policies continue to manifest today, with the nature and extent of family violence in our communities being one of these manifestations.

After exploring the socio-political context in which our contemporary communities exist, this thesis will next examine the relevant scholarly material in a *Literature Review*. This chapter will review academic literature in two fields, the first being the intergenerational transmission of trauma and violence. Here, I will explore the ongoing impacts of the inherently brutal colonial process as outlined in the previous chapter. The works included will demonstrate the link between colonial oppression and collective trauma through which violence has become normalised in our communities. The second literature examined in this chapter is that which relates to the evolution of institutional racism and its relevance in contemporary Australian society. This chapter builds on the last to further evaluate the nature of family violence in Aboriginal communities and the presence of continuing racism in public institutions. Both of these areas are highly relevant to the help seeking behaviours of our women and provide the context for these women's experiences.

The approach to research applied in this project will then be outlined in the *Methodology* chapter. The Indigenous research method of 'Yarning' will be explored here. This approach guides a community owned and led research process that enhances the cultural integrity of the work to be undertaken. The three key cultural principles of research, being respect, relationships and reciprocity, derived from community practice and refined into

research principles through this project, are also explained. These principles reflect the shared cultural practices of the researcher and participant base and are applied to ensure that the project follows appropriate protocols and meets community needs. The guiding question is then discussed, being, *what barriers do Aboriginal women face when seeking help to address family violence?* The scope of this project has evolved significantly since its inception due to community feedback and this journey to the current research question will be detailed. Finally, the research process will be outlined, including the planning, data collection and data analysis phases. This chapter will provide a comprehensive account of the research approach, purpose and process.

The final three chapters recount the stories of our women. The findings of this research are analysed in terms of three separate types of barriers as identified by our women: barriers within our own communities, structural barriers and barriers created by institutions. The chapters deal with each type of barrier in turn to represent the difficult path that our women must walk in order to attain meaningful assistance to address family violence. The chapter on barriers within our communities explores the impediments that are generated within the families and extended networks of the women in this study. These are the first of a multitude of hurdles that our women face that oftentimes prevent them from seeking assistance. Those who do persevere through community barriers and actively seek help from the family violence service sector are then often subjected to structural barriers which hinder their attempts to attain safety. These structural barriers apply to all women experiencing family violence and, as such, are not isolated to Aboriginal women but are still relevant for them. These structural impediments to seeking help are further reinforced by the prevailing racism within the institutional framework of statutory responders. Institutional racism, therefore, acts as an additional layer of barriers that our women face when seeking assistance for family violence; this will be discussed in the final chapter.

The chapter on barriers within our own communities will explain the three key aspects of community behaviour that were identified by our women as hindering their help seeking. The normalisation of violence within our communities, to the extent that family violence is considered a routine and unremarkable occurrence, was a consistent theme across data collection. Our women attribute this normalisation to the inherent violence of colonisation and resulting breakdown of traditional family structures. Problematic family intervention is the second key area of concern for our women. Many discussed their experiences of their family's direct opposition to their help seeking, or their family's enabling and encouraging of their

abusive partner's behaviour. A long standing deep-seated fear of child removal, stemming from the collective experience of the Stolen Generation, was identified as a further contributing factor for our women's unwillingness to seek assistance as they are acutely aware that they risk having their children removed if their abuse is exposed. The concerns identified here lead to a collective pressure to not report instances of family violence. The barriers outlined here do not indicate that our community is responsible for the suffering of our women, rather, they reflect the role of historical forces in perpetuating further harm to our women today.

The chapter on structural barriers explores issues within the family violence service sector that prevent victims from attaining safety and justice. There were three areas of concern identified by our women in this regard. The inaccessibility of refuge accommodation, due to a critical shortage of available crisis beds in safe locations and gendered age restrictions for children fleeing violence, was identified as a substantial obstacle thwarting women's help seeking. Furthermore, police negligence was highlighted as a pressing matter. On the one hand, our women contend that the police do not approach family violence with the seriousness it requires and that this exposes them to further harm. Their methods were characterised by our women as hostile and indifferent toward victims and tolerant toward offenders. Child welfare authorities, on the other hand, were heavy-handed in their response to family violence, threatening women with child removal and, in some cases, actually removing children from their mother's care as a direct result of her victimisation. These barriers apply to all family violence victims, not only Aboriginal women. Due to the high rate at which our women are being abused and their high rate of ensuing interaction with the system, these concerns are highly relevant to them and have a greater effect on Aboriginal women than they do on non-Aboriginal women.

Institutional racism is the final theme identified by our women as restricting their ability to secure assistance in relation to family violence. The police force and child protection services were the key institutions discussed by our women as operating with racial bias and impeding their help seeking. These statutory responders have tense relationships with Aboriginal communities as a result of their role in enforcing historic persecutory policies against our people. It was consistently argued by our women that the police force have maintained their racist practices and continue to devalue the lives of Aboriginal women. They believe that this heavily informs their approach to Aboriginal family violence cases and exposes our women to further abuse solely due to their Aboriginality. According to our women, child welfare services also operate on racially discriminatory assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority, resulting in a

lower likelihood of support provision and a higher likelihood of child removal. This final layer of barriers prevents our women from securing meaningful assistance in response to their abuse.

CONCLUSION

Family violence is a pressing social justice issue disproportionately affecting Aboriginal women and children with devastating consequences. Considering the profound and far reaching effects of family violence, the sheer rate at which it occurs in our communities is cause for alarm. This chapter has provided an overview of the research project undertaken, the findings provide a comprehensive account of the barriers to help seeking that Aboriginal women face in the context of family violence. Their stories are the centrepiece of this project and I am truly grateful to the women of Armadale and Kwinana for sharing their experiences, their vulnerabilities and their strengths with me. In doing so, we have established groundbreaking research which provides a unique contribution to the academic literature on our own terms and with respect and love for our community.

Historical Policy Context

INTRODUCTION

To govern society in an ordered manner, states must establish a system of rules that set out the way that its people conduct themselves. In the modern world, this is done through the development and implementation of public policy. Public policy can be understood as “a political agreement on a course of action (or inaction) designed to resolve or mitigate problems on the political agenda” (Fischer 1995, 2). Policy is not developed in a socio-political vacuum; rather, it is a political tool used to reinforce the social normalcies of the time and set behavioural standards by which the population must abide. In doing this, policy plays a fundamental role in framing the structure and nature of society.

Since the colonisation of Western Australian (WA) in 1829, the State has implemented a range of public policies to assert excessive control over Aboriginal peoples resulting in devastating impacts. While there have been many advances made since this time, understanding the nature of the State’s oppressive policies provide the background for examining the contemporary social circumstances that Aboriginal communities must navigate today. As discussed below, the ongoing colonial narrative surrounding Aboriginal peoples has resulted in their ultimate dehumanisation and enabled State-sponsored oppression spanning multiple generations (Smith 1999, 39). It is argued here that there have been five distinct stages in Aboriginal policy from colonisation to the present day.

These five stages will be elaborated below with attention paid to the formal political environment, the dominant ideology, the key policies relating to Aboriginal peoples and their practical impacts on communities. The policy stages are: i) Early Colonialism; ii) Protectionism; iii) Assimilation; iv) Self-Determination; and v) Post Self-Determination. While these policy stages will be discussed independently of each other in a chronological manner, it is acknowledged that there are similarities between some stages and the line between one ending and another beginning is sometimes blurred. The discussion here on the practical implications of such policies will give particular attention to Noongar country, being the greater South West region of WA, in line with the project focus. There is not scope within this chapter to analyse every individual policy that has impacted Aboriginal communities and, as such, only

policies that have had the most significant impact on our community's overall wellbeing and ongoing social issues, including family violence, have been selected.

EARLY COLONIALISM 1829 – 1900

The arrival of British fleets to WA shores signalled the establishment of a new social hierarchy, one grounded in patriarchy and racial superiority. In spite of early reports by both Captain Stirling and Mayor Lockyer that the land was inhabited by “numerous and fierce” Aboriginal peoples, Captain Fremantle’s declaration that WA was unoccupied in 1829 provided the platform on which WA was brought under British legal jurisdiction (Whitney 1997, 19). As with all legal systems, the creation of laws enables the establishment and enforcement of pre-existing social powers. In 1829, the then-Governor Stirling proclaimed the “Laws of the United Kingdom...do therein immediately prevail” and while this extended to the legal protection of the Aboriginal populations from acts of “fraudulent, cruel or felonious manner” (in Russell 1980, 334-335), the primary focus was the legal protection of colony property and inhabitants (Hunter 2004). As more Aboriginal lands were seized for colonial expansion, interactions between Aboriginal peoples and colonists became more regular and tense and legal interventions became more punitive.

This social structure implemented through British colonisation was legitimised by the social interpretation of Darwin’s theory of evolution, the favoured justification for colonial imperialism and the subjugation of Indigenous peoples throughout the world. This theory reinforced colonial notions of racial superiority on the basis that the evolutionary process had stalled in Aboriginal populations and, as such, they were more like animals than humans of European heritage (Francis 1996). The Social-Darwinian belief held that Aboriginal peoples, due to their supposed genetic inferiority, were destined to extinction and, therefore, the role of colonists was to simply ease their suffering during this process. To do this, European colonists were to live separately from the local Aboriginal peoples so as to ‘smooth the pillow of a dying race’ and enable future European prosperity (Haebich 2001, 18).

During the initial colonial period, the legal status of Aboriginal peoples and the regulations governing them were somewhat ad hoc. To consolidate these disjointed legal prescriptions, the *1886 Aborigines Protection Act* was introduced. This *Act* was the primary overarching piece of State policy concerning Aboriginal communities and provided the legal framework for their social and political persecution. Paternalism, being government restriction of a group’s freedom for their own interest, was institutionally implemented and the

overzealous intervention into Aboriginal families became more systematic. A key component of the *Act* was the establishment of the Aborigines Protection Board, led by the Chief Protector of Aborigines (CPA), to which it ascribed significant power to intervene in the lives of Aboriginal families. Under their authority was the allocation of funds to Aboriginal welfare, management of reserves and the direct distribution of rations and medical supplies to communities (State Law Publisher 2017a). To oversee the practical undertaking of these assignments, there was a proliferation of Protectors of Aborigines and although their role was intended to be humanitarian in nature, they often acted as instruments of surveillance, agents of social control and increased punitive intervention.

The imposition of colonial populations and their system of governance was a brutal process for Aboriginal communities. In a very short period of time, the communities went from a relatively peaceful and equitable existence to being fundamentally excluded from the new rigid social structure established on their homelands. Aboriginal peoples were politically persecuted and found themselves being routinely violated without proper physical protection or legal prosecution of the offenders (Van den Berg 2002, 72). The practical implications of this were disastrous to the collective wellbeing of Aboriginal communities. Massacres, slavery, the rape of women and the mass incarceration of men were generally accepted as routine occurrences and, although it was policy for Aboriginal peoples to be protected from colonial exploitation, this did not occur.

There were four major massacres that took place in Noongar Country during this period, including the infamous Pinjarra Massacre, which saw many men, women and children murdered as retribution for past frontier disputes (Ferrell 2003). Rape was commonplace during the establishment of the early colonies (Behrendt 2000, 353). This often occurred through physical force but also through forced prostitution by women who, through removal from homelands and social exclusion, had no other means to provide for their families. Slavery was widespread under the guise of servitude, whereby Aboriginal peoples were forced into involuntary service for little to no payment (Paisley 2017, 2). Furthermore, as Aboriginal men were considered a threat to colonial rule, they were targeted under Common Law. This resulted in unfair judicial processes and the mass incarceration of Aboriginal men for seemingly trivial incidents such as common theft, assault or “absconding” from forced servitude (Whitley 2015, 126-127).

The aforementioned social regulations brought about by the colonial establishment in Western Australia had stark implications for Aboriginal communities. The *1886 Aborigines Protection Act* worked to actively fragment Aboriginal social structures. Families and communities were torn apart through State sponsored extra-judiciary killings. The rape of Aboriginal women disrupted traditional cultural protocols and furthered miscegenation, while forced servitude and the mass incarceration of Aboriginal men disintegrated pre-colonial equity and unity among Aboriginal people. The fragmentation of family and the broader community was not an unintended by-product of colonialism; rather, it was a targeted approach to force compliance from the Aboriginal population and enable further colonial expansion.

PROTECTIONISM – 1901 – 1930s

The turn of the nineteenth century brought about a change in the political landscape for the Aboriginal peoples of WA. Australia's Federation in 1901, in which all States ceded from British rule and gained independence, further institutionalised the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from mainstream Australian society. The *Constitution of Australia*, the founding document outlining the laws through which the new country would be governed, instituted the formal exclusion of Aboriginal people from census counting, voting and pensions. It also paved the way for the White Australia Policy, formally known as the *Restricted Immigration Act 1901*, and, while this did not directly impact Aboriginal communities, it solidified the national identity as white.

The principle ideology of this period was one of white nationalism, as captured in the White Australia policy. Grounded in the previously discussed Social Darwinism, the essence of the White Australia policy was to reinforce European dominance both in population make up and in cultural power so as to establish Australia as a white nation. To undertake this task, pro-white regulations were implemented in immigration policy on a national level and Aboriginal policy on a State level with the intention of restricting non-white population growth. In explaining his vision for a white Australia, inaugural Prime Minister (PM) Barton noted it "cannot be long before the immigration of persons and races not wanted in Australia will be regulated by one equitable law" (in Barton 2011, 18). The construction of Australia's national identity was a concerted effort to promote white nationalism and institutionally embed notions of white supremacy.

During this time, the Parliament of WA introduced the *1905 Aborigines Protection Act*. This piece of legislation known simply as the *1905 Act*, built on the paternalistic foundations

of the *1886 Act* to legislate additional State intervention into Aboriginal lives. It clarified the definition of Aboriginal to mean ‘full blooded’ Aboriginal people of all ages, ‘half castes’ under the age of 16 and ‘half castes’ over the age of 16 who habitually live or associate with Aboriginal people, so as to simplify its enforcement (State Law Publisher 2017b, 2). The term ‘half caste’ refers to individuals with one Aboriginal parent and one non-Aboriginal parent, considered a half-blood Aboriginal. The *1905 Act* established a system of control which allowed the State to determine access to social services, education, employment, marriage, property ownership, freedom of movement and association, and other legal decisions for all those under guardianship (Delmege 2005, 1). The dramatic increase in the authority of the Department was not supported by a commensurate increase in funding, generating a reliance on unpaid honorary protectors. Many of these roles were assumed by police officers whose dual role to both protect and prosecute Aboriginal peoples promoted a punitive approach in the implementation of policy (Biskup 1973, 9).

The 1905 Act has been perhaps the most significant and intrusive piece of WA Aboriginal policy ever to be implemented. Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men could not travel in company and any marriage involving an Aboriginal person required prior approval from the CPA (State Law Publisher 2017b, 11). While Aboriginal people could seek employment, the industry, period and location of employment required State approval (State Law Publisher 2017b, 6 – 8). Furthermore, the CPA could “take possession of, retain, sell, or dispose of” the property of Aboriginal peoples at any time (State Law Publisher 2017b, 8). Movements of Aboriginal people were severely restricted with reserve lands and native camps essentially becoming internment facilities while standardised exclusion zones were applied to limit Aboriginal presence in towns (State Law Publisher 2017b, 10 – 11). The CPA also had the power to order the removal of entire Aboriginal families and communities from towns to native settlements, often outside of their traditional homelands. Aboriginal peoples violating the *Act* could be arrested without a warrant and prosecution routinely took place before two justices of the peace, greatly increasing the probability of imprisonment.

This *Act* appointed the CPA as the legal guardian of all ‘full blood’ and ‘half-caste’ children until the age of 16, becoming the centrepiece for the systematic removal of Aboriginal children (State Law Publisher 2017b, 3). In his justification of this, CPA Neville argued “it is infinitely better to take a child from its mother, and put it in an institution, where it will be looked after” (Neville 2004, 341). This established and underscored the position that Aboriginal families were incapable of providing proper care for their children, although the

concept of ‘proper care’ was heavily influenced by Western ideals. Jacobs (2009, 45) examined this ethnocentric bias in her analysis of Aboriginal child removal, noting that “Indigeneity itself became inextricably associated with neglect.” Aboriginal families, due solely to their Aboriginality, were regarded as inferior and their children were either removed en masse to missions where traditional cultural practices were prohibited or were adopted into non-Aboriginal families without legitimate parental consent (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, 6-7).

The passage of the *1905 Act* had devastating impacts on Aboriginal communities. The removal of children from families and families from homelands was particularly concentrated in Noongar country, due to this region being the centre for white development in the State. By 1920, 25 per cent of the Noongar population had been forced to leave their homelands and relocate to reserves and between 1 in 3 and 1 in 10 children were forcibly removed from their families (Delmege 2005, 5; Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, 31). According to the *Bringing Them Home Report* (BTHR), WA was at the higher end of this range and every family interviewed for the report had been directly impacted by forced removal (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, 31). The provisions of the *1905 Act* also reinforced the over-policing of Aboriginal peoples and removed their autonomy to make decisions in almost all areas of their lives. Involuntary, unpaid and underpaid employment continued to be an issue during this time.

The *1905 Act* was a targeted, conscious effort by the State to dismantle Aboriginal culture, identity and community structure. As stated above, every Noongar family interviewed for the BTHR had experienced the removal of their children. Now known as The Stolen Generation, multiple generations of Aboriginal communities were institutionalised in missions away from their families and homelands whilst being prohibited from practicing culture. As a result, many became disassociated from their traditional practices and protocols, severely impacting their future generations’ ability to maintain culture. Furthermore, sexual abuse was rife in these institutions, around 10 per cent for both male and female children (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, 141). Families were separated and often never reunited. The collective trauma generated through the *1905 Act* in terms of mass child removal and overall disempowerment, cannot be understated in terms of its nature or severity.

ASSIMILATION – 1930s - 1960s

The 1930s ushered in a new direction in the administration of Aboriginal affairs. Referred to as the Era of Assimilation, this period was marked by a push towards the Westernisation of Aboriginal peoples and their ultimate absorption into white Australian society. Assimilation was retrospectively defined in a joint statement by State and Commonwealth Aboriginal Affairs ministers in 1963 as “all Aborigines and part-Aborigines... accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians” (Australia. Department of Territories, 1963). Although assimilation seemingly encouraged the acceptance of Aboriginal peoples, the ideological foundation of this approach reinforced the superiority of Western culture and, in doing so, further demonised Aboriginal culture and peoples. As race-based legislation lost favour following the Holocaust and World War II, cultural homogeneity became the preferred ideology (Moran 2005, 169). During this period, the idea of Aboriginal absorption shifted from a purely biological approach to include notions of cultural and social absorption. This saw a shift in the construction of political and social power from one based on white dominance to one based on Australian values (Moran 2005, 169).

This new approach of assimilation through cultural and social absorption continued to bestow power on white society. In effect, white cultural principles were maintained and the expectation was that Aboriginal people must adhere to Western values and customs in order to gain acceptance. To implement this, the *1944 Native (Citizenship Rights) Act* introduced provisions under which Aboriginal peoples could apply for citizenship and supposedly gain the same legal rights as Australian citizens (State Law Publisher 2017c). Exemption certificates were the pinnacle of cultural and social assimilation ideals, the basic premise being that bearers must adopt a white lifestyle in order to attain a certificate which exempted them from the State’s oppressive Aboriginal policy. Successful applicants had to provide written references from two white Australians, be fluent in English, have dissolved all association with Aboriginal peoples other than their children for a minimum period of two years and renounced their traditional cultural practices in favour of “the manner and habits of civilised life” (State Law Publisher 2017c, 2). Even when such provisions had been met, the exemption could be revoked at any time if it was deemed the holder had failed to comply with any conditions (State Law Publisher 2017c, 3-4).

Further strengthening the biological absorption objectives of WA’s *1905 Act*, the *1936 Aborigines Act Amendment Act* was passed. This policy revised the definition of Aboriginality

to include all ‘full bloods’ and ‘half castes’ and ‘quadroons’ who habitually associated with Aboriginal populations (State Law Publisher 2017d, 2). ‘Quadroon’ refers to individuals with one Aboriginal grandparent and three non-Aboriginal grandparents, considered by the State to be of one quarter Aboriginal blood. This legislation also introduced a broader definition of children to come under State guardianship to all children with part-Aboriginal heritage, enabling a dramatic increase in child removal so as to cleanse such children of their Aboriginality and imbue them with the Australian way of life (State Law Publisher 2017d, 9; Funston and Herring 2016, 52). This revised definition of Aboriginality brought about a significant increase in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families to institutions.

In practice, these policies not only segregated Aboriginal communities from mainstream society but also from each other. The purpose of redefining Aboriginality under the *1936 Act* was to divide Aboriginal populations into two distinct classes. ‘Full blooded’ Aboriginal children were of lesser concern to the State as it was still expected that they were destined for extinction. The increasing population of ‘half-castes’ and ‘quadroons’, however, presented an urgent crisis. ‘Half castes’ were to be segregated from white society and Aboriginal communities and provided labour training to enable their eventual absorption into mainstream society, not as whites but as Aboriginals with useful economic skills (Tomlinson 2008, 225). ‘Quadroons’ on the other hand, were to be entirely segregated from the Aboriginal community and “should not be treated as natives at all”, the intention being their complete absorption into white society (Tomlinson 2008, 225-226). Further reinforcing this internal segregation, the exemption certificate scheme encouraged Aboriginal peoples to renounce their culture, family and community.

The Assimilation Era further fragmented Aboriginal families and communities while promoting whiteness, both in colour and culture, as the goal for all. While past policy isolated communities more generally, the 1936 and 1944 legislation segregated Aboriginal peoples from each other. They also actively divided the community based on biological make up, with the fair skinned ‘quadroons’ portrayed as superior to their ‘half caste’ and ‘full blood’ counterparts. The division was also implemented on cultural and social grounds, with those holding an exemption certificate considered superior to those whom did not hold such certificate. The mass removal of children continued throughout this era and had devastating impacts on families, cultural continuity and identity. These two key State policies of this time were active attempts by the State to entirely suppress Aboriginality and restrict solidarity among Aboriginal people.

SELF-DETERMINATION – 1960s – 1990s

With civil rights and social justice movements gaining momentum on an international scale, the 1960s were a time of rapid social change. In the Australian context, injustice against Aboriginal people found its way into the mainstream consciousness and increasing numbers of white Australians called for the institutional implementation of Aboriginal self-determination. A significant event in this period was the resounding ‘Yes’ vote in the 1967 Referendum to recognise Aboriginal people in the Australian census, essentially acknowledging them as human beings, and bringing Aboriginal policy under Federal control. Self-determination in relation to Indigenous peoples can be understood as the collective right to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and political development” (United Nations 2007). This power shift, from Government domination to Aboriginal empowerment, was grounded in the notion of equality in recognition of difference, accepting Aboriginal peoples as a distinct social group who could participate in mainstream society while maintaining their own culture and social structure. This movement was further reinforced by the newly established Pan-Australian Aboriginal consciousness which enabled a more targeted, coordinated approach to Aboriginal political action. This can be understood as the development of a shared identity and solidarity amongst Aboriginal peoples on a national scale, rather than the region-based networks of past generations.

This period saw a fundamental change in the mainstream perception of Aboriginal peoples. As opposed to being seen as inferior, incapable beings, they were now considered capable not only of participating in mainstream society, but making major decisions about their collective future. In 1975, Prime Minister Whitlam returned the land deeds of the traditional lands back to the Gurindji people, signalling the introduction of land rights under *The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* that saw over 40 per cent of Northern Territory lands returned to traditional owners (Australia. Federal Register of Legislation 2019; Neate 1998, 7). Furthermore, the Aboriginal Loans program, the first federal Aboriginal Affairs Department and the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee were established and the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* was passed (Australia. Federal Register of Legislation 2016). During the self-determination period, numerous community-controlled organisations were established to address community identified concerns in areas such as health, law, education and social justice. While these organisations worked to serve the needs of the people, they also possessed the structural power to amplify the direct expression of Aboriginal interests. During

this period, there was a general sense of optimism for the direction of Aboriginal affairs, both with Aboriginal communities themselves and in mainstream society.

Further advances in self-determination were made in the latter years of this period including the passage of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* and *Native Title Act 1993* (Australia. Federal Register of Legislation nd; Australia. Federal Register of Legislation 2017). The push for direct representation of Aboriginal peoples culminated in the establishment of ATSIC, the only community elected national body to advocate on behalf of the Aboriginal population. The organisation's primary actions were to promote Aboriginal interests through Government advisory, regional, national and international advocacy and program delivery (Bradfield 2006). Further to this, Prime Minister Keating reinforced the rulings of the Mabo case which overturned the legal basis of terra nullius, by instituting native title policy. While land rights were confined to the legal ownership of lands in the Northern Territory, native title was implemented nationally. Upon approval of a native title claim, the State acknowledged traditional Aboriginal ownership of these lands and provided concessions to the local peoples for the loss of such ownership rather than the legal return of the lands (Behrendt 2013).

While the intentions of the aforementioned policy were positive and designed to promote equality, there were some unintended consequences for Aboriginal communities. The dissolution of the *1905 Act* in 1963 saw improvements for Aboriginal autonomy; however, the closure of reserves resulted in a second wave of forced relocations of Aboriginal peoples from their homes. Furthermore, due to the introduction of equal pay arrangements for pastoral workers in 1968, many Aboriginal workers were dismissed without notice and their families forced off pastoral lands, which were often their traditional lands. While difficult, reserve life promoted a closeness and interconnectedness among the people and their seemingly positive move into town and city homes resulted in the fragmentation of Aboriginal families and communities. The 1963 dissolution also supposedly brought an end to the mass removal of children on the sole basis of their Aboriginality; however, these removals continued arbitrarily under child welfare policy until the closure of most missions in the 1970s.

This period saw both positive and negative impacts on Aboriginal populations. Aboriginal peoples achieved equal legal status to their non-Aboriginal counterparts; and, further to this, Government acknowledged the need for special concessions which allowed the socio-political advancement of communities (Chesterman 2005). These concessions, such as

the funding of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, were made on the basis that Aboriginal peoples had long been denied basic human rights and now required additional support to enable their collective growth and full participation in mainstream society (Chesterman 2005). It can be argued, however, that self-determination set Aboriginal communities up to fail. Considering previous policies that denied such peoples access to even basic level education, Aboriginal led organisations required, but were rarely provided with, thorough capacity building to ensure they were managed in accordance with Government standards. Failure to do so led many to being accused of mismanagement. This, essentially, shifted the responsibility to overcome generations of oppression to those in the oppressed group, being Aboriginal peoples, rather than the oppressors, being the State.

POST SELF-DETERMINATION – LATE 1990s – CURRENT

The 1996 election of a Howard-led Government signalled the official end of the self-determination movement and a radical change in the political status of Aboriginal peoples. Howard was an outspoken critic of the Aboriginal rights movement, rejecting “any notion of Indigenous separateness” (Gunstone 2008, 2). The Howard Government introduced a new policy platform, termed ‘practical reconciliation’, which was aimed at addressing practical concerns such as disadvantage and dysfunction through economic participation (McGuinness 2000, 239). This position held that current day Aboriginal issues are not directly linked to past injustices, therefore, addressing such injustice is merely symbolic. As such, the ongoing legacy of colonial oppression was ignored and the link between intergenerational trauma and current day issues was discounted.

While the discourse of this approach focuses on eliminating the collective disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal communities, its focus on social uniformity and mainstreaming of policy means that it is marked by assimilationist undertones (Dodson 2006). During this period, Howard reinvigorated assimilation ideals under the banner of national unity. He argued that a united Australia required an “overriding and unifying commitment to Australian institutions” (Howard 2000, 90). This meant that Aboriginal peoples must prioritise the Australian way of life over their traditional identities, community structures and cultures. During this period, the primary goal shifted from social justice, whereby additional support was provided to the disadvantaged so that all could achieve equal outcomes, to equality, whereby all peoples are to be treated identically (Robbins 2007, 318). Although white nationalism is not as explicit during

this period as in the Assimilation Era, all peoples were expected to homogenise and become part of one Australian nation.

During this period, several highly political moves to restrict Aboriginal rights were enacted. Howard's 10 Point Plan weakened the *Native Title Act*, essentially rendering it ineffectual due to higher evidence requirements and restricted Traditional Owner rights. The peak body for Aboriginal community affairs, ATSIC, was abolished, citing irreparable governance issues as the cause. Whilst these concerns were not entirely unfounded, the decision to completely dissolve the organisation was a drastic move. Following this, Howard revoked the *Racial Discrimination Act* in the Northern Territory to introduce the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) (Hunyor 2009). The army was dispatched to enforce the NTER's severe restrictions on personal autonomy including alcohol bans, mandatory health checks and Government quarantining of Aboriginal people's welfare payments (Hunyor 2009). It was later proven that this policy was knowingly implemented in the basis of distorted and, in some cases, falsified claims of abuse and dysfunction.

Following Howard's electoral loss later that year, it was hoped that there may be some improvement in the Aboriginal policy trend. Incoming PM Rudd provided an official apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, the first formal Government apology for the racially motivated mass removal of Aboriginal children (Hastie 2012, 118). Mitigating this gesture of solidarity, however, was Rudd's continued support of the NTER. Subsequent PM Gillard further reinforced the attack on Aboriginal families, being quoted as saying that Aboriginal parents require a "change in behaviour... to take care of your children... to respect good social norms" (Lane 2011). Successive governments since this have continued such paternalistic approaches which have undermined self-determination and demonised Aboriginal peoples.

In line with the interventionist approach of this policy period, Aboriginal communities have seen a significant increase in governmental control and interference in their family lives. In WA, Aboriginal child removals have risen dramatically, increasing fivefold in particular age groups between 1990 and 2008 (Bilson, Cant, Harries and Thorpe 2015, 783 – 784). There have been far-reaching impacts stemming from the NTER, particularly in terms of the State-enforced alcohol bans and quarantining of finances which has been extended to prescribed regions across the country (Mendes 2018). During this time, there has also been a significant increase in the number of incarcerated Aboriginal peoples, with WA having the highest rate per capita nationally (Young and Solonec 2011, 15). The focus on the economic development

of communities was and continues to be linked with reduced funding for Aboriginal social welfare and program delivery to disadvantaged communities. The dismantling of Aboriginal self-determination policy and practice has had significant consequences for communities throughout the State and more widely.

The policy changes of this time have further disempowered Aboriginal families and communities, attributing blame for the impacts of intergenerational oppression on the people themselves. Although equality as a policy approach seems ideal, this overlooks the structural barriers caused by the historic persecution of Aboriginal peoples. In the Self-Determination Era, it was acknowledged that Aboriginal peoples required additional support to enable them to overcome almost 200 years of State oppression and participate fully in mainstream society. Many of these provisions, however, have now been removed. Aboriginal peoples are in a state of limbo, having access to formal equality while collectively experiencing the lowest levels of educational attainment of any Australian social group and high rates of dysfunction including drug and alcohol addiction, family violence, long term unemployment, child removal, mental and physical health problems. In effect, many of the opportunities available to the wider population are unattainable for a large number of Aboriginal peoples.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of Western Australia's colonies was an inherently brutal and violent process. While the colonists initially sought to protect local Aboriginal peoples, such legal protections were rather ad hoc and as the colony expanded, the interactions between its people and the Aboriginal populations became more regular and tense. As a result, relations declined and persecutory policies were enforced. The hostile segregationist approach, intended to exclude and isolate Aboriginal peoples from each other and from white society, institutionalised racial power and fragmented Aboriginal communities with devastating effect. The mass removal of Aboriginal children that resulted from this approach sought to actively destroy the culture and social structures of Aboriginal populations.

The policy advancements made in the Self-Determination Era, which facilitated Aboriginal ownership of Aboriginal affairs, while momentous, were short lived and the return to assimilationist ideology under Howard has reinvigorated the interventionist approach to Aboriginal communities. As a direct result of the persecutory colonial process and ongoing oppressive State policy, Aboriginal peoples are experiencing severe collective trauma. The link between such trauma and the contemporary concern of family violence in our communities will

be explored in the next chapter, as too will the institutionally embedded racism that continues to cause harm to our communities today.

Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

Family violence in Aboriginal communities is a complex and highly contentious issue. The experiences of the Aboriginal women included in this thesis are not isolated events; the victimisation of Aboriginal women and children is occurring at extreme levels throughout the country. The contemporary lives of our people are moulded by our shared history, which has normalised violence in our communities, and by the institutional framework, which regulates the nature of our participation in society. In order to understand the experiences of our women that are explored later in this thesis, these concepts must first be understood. This literature review builds on the previous chapter and brings together two separate fields of scholarly work: Colonisation, Trauma and Violence, and Institutional Racism.

The first field explores the historical and structural forces that contribute to the high rate of family violence in our contemporary communities. The assertion in the literature in this field is that such violence is not a part of our cultures; rather, the violence is an outcome of the brutality of colonisation which caused intergenerational trauma and violence within Aboriginal communities. Oppressive past policy has been outlined in the previous chapter and this section will demonstrate how such policy has caused macro-level dysfunction which, in turn, contributes to the high levels of family violence. However, in arguing this, I wish to make clear that while the literature demonstrates the importance of the socio-political and historical environment as a contextual backdrop through which Aboriginal family violence is understood, this backdrop does not justify acts of family violence, nor does it remove responsibility from the perpetrators who hurt their families.

The second field of literature explored concerns the racial bias within institutional practice. As was illustrated in the previous chapter, early relationships between the State and Aboriginal communities were grounded in racial persecution and excessive intervention. Although there have been sustained attempts to improve the State's approach in Aboriginal affairs and enhance the collective wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples, relations between the two remain tense and poor life outcomes persist. Many of the scholars whose works are included below argue that that statutory institutions remain racially prejudiced. This is consistent with the literature on Aboriginal community relations with the State, much of which asserts that the

State is perceived by such communities to be a tool of oppression and a direct extension of past oppressive regimes. This is a key concern for Aboriginal family violence victims who, at some point, must engage with these statutory institutions in order to attain protection and meaningful support.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE

Violence is prevalent in Aboriginal families and communities; it has been wrongly argued that Aboriginal culture is inherently violent. This argument has been put forward frequently by cultural theorists who attribute Aboriginal peoples' propensity for violence to their traditional cultural grounding (Jarrett 2013; Nowra 2007; Snowball and Weatherburn 2008, 217-218). These authors mistakenly believe that traditional Aboriginal culture was ruthless and extreme acts of violence and abuse were common place. Following this, Aboriginal peoples' apparent readiness to resort to physical violence for seemingly minor acts of wrongdoing has been framed as a form of cultural expression. Following this line of simple logic then, high rates of violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities can be considered as a continuance of culture (Price in Hudson 2013, 41-42). This inaccurate proposition has facilitated significant harm to our women when it leads to a form of 'cultural respect' that prevents intervention to address family violence in Aboriginal communities and silences victims through fear that seeking intervention or support will demonise their own cultures.

The notion that Aboriginal cultures and, in turn, Aboriginal people, are intrinsically abusive has been widely discounted. Put simply, "violence against women and children was never acceptable or part of traditional Aboriginal society" (Cummings 1993, 15). This is a position widely held among scholars in this field who argue that cultural justifications for violence are simplistic and dangerous (Atkinson 2007; Behrendt and Watson 2008; Gordon 2006; McGlade 2003; Wenitong, Milroy, Brown and Mokak 2006). This unfounded justification occurs under many circumstances and has dire consequences for Aboriginal women and children. The most dangerous of these perhaps is its use by Aboriginal perpetrators and their white lawyers to minimise family violence offences to avoid punishment (Behrendt 2006; Howe 2009). In using the cultural justification defence, they simultaneously devalidate the suffering of Aboriginal women, solidify male dominance within Aboriginal communities and halt external inquiry into such violence on the basis of 'cultural respect'. While cultural respect is central to any discussion of family violence in Aboriginal communities, the falsifying of cultural values by perpetrators must be refuted.

The literature makes it clear that the extreme nature and extent of violence in Aboriginal families and communities is best understood in relation to the effects of colonisation. Family violence is not a traditional cultural practice. Rather, according to the literature, it is directly related to the attempted genocide of Aboriginal populations. This is not to suggest that historical oppression is the sole cause of contemporary family violence. It simply acknowledges the significance of this history in establishing a social environment wherein violence can exist on this scale. As outlined in the previous chapter, the Australian colonial project was a targeted approach aimed at fragmenting and destroying Aboriginal families and communities. This intentionally brutal process was devised to elicit maximum physical, psychological, social and cultural devastation and was bound to have long standing effects (Cox, Young and Bairnsfather-Scott 2009, 151 – 152). The resulting layers of trauma have had far reaching consequences, with Aboriginal people now experiencing poorer life outcomes than their non-Aboriginal counterparts in almost all areas of life and a general loss of hope for future improvement (Cox, Young and Bairnsfather-Scott 2009, 152).

The ongoing harm resulting from oppressive policy is thoroughly examined in the literature. Intergenerational trauma was first explored in the 1970s to draw attention to the widespread distress and strained family dynamics experienced by second generation Holocaust survivors who had never personally experienced Nazi persecution but were suffering none the less (Fromm 2012, 3). It is held that children of survivors unconsciously identify with their parents' suffering and replicate their parents' deep-seated feelings of "loss and humiliation, guilt and aggression" (Kogan 2012, 6). The trauma associated with oppression not only harms those who were directly oppressed, but also transmits to members of subsequent generations, wreaking havoc on their collective psyche and future life outcomes (Bombay, Matheson and Anisman 2009; Gagne 1998; Menzies 2010; Walters, Mohammed, Evans-Campbell and Beltran 2011).

The literature in this field makes it clear that the legacy of colonisation and resulting intergenerational trauma continues to haunt colonised populations today. This has been explored most comprehensively in relation to Canada's First Nations peoples. While there are a multitude of ways in which the colonial process has brutalised Indigenous populations, a key focus of the intergenerational trauma literature is the role of Indian Residential Schools and, more recently, the child welfare institution. Abuse and neglect were widespread within this system which also prohibited cultural expression and attempted to erase Indigenous identities (Bombay, Matheson and Anisman 2009, 322). The collective harm caused by this widespread abuse was further reinforced by the communities' inability to transmit traditional "family

values, parenting knowledge and community behaviour” due to the mass removal of children from their communities (Menziés 2008). As a result, many Canadian First Nations people are now in a perpetual state of trauma, suffering and loss (Gagne 1998; Nelson and Wilson 2017; Wilk, Maltby and Cook 2017).

The Australian Aboriginal experience of intergenerational trauma is strikingly similar to the Canadian experience, although less researched. The direct assault on Australia’s Aboriginal peoples through colonial persecution, as outlined in the preceding chapter, instilled a deeply ingrained collective sense of trauma within Aboriginal communities (Atkinson 2002; Atkinson 2008; Krieg 2009; O’Donoghue 1993). As a result of the intergenerational transmission of this collective suffering, colonialism continues to dominate the social, cultural, economic and political fabric of Aboriginal communities today. Collective trauma, or as Halloran (2004, 6) refers to it, cultural trauma, is a direct cause of anxiety related psychologies which have, in turn, led to the disturbingly high rates of contemporary social dysfunction. The aspect of dysfunction for consideration here is the way in which such intergenerational transmission of trauma manifests itself in intra-community violence, particularly family violence.

Children raised in communities marked by deep seated unresolved pain come to adopt and incorporate such pain into their own existence (O’Loughlin 2009, 34). If this pain is not properly addressed, it can manifest in a variety of destructive behaviours in adulthood, perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational trauma (O’Loughlin 2009). This is evident in widespread social dysfunction, of which violence is a principle example. This pattern was identified by Ratnavale (in Krieg 2009, 29) in his development of key traits which characterise traumatised communities. Of the 11 traits, four are concerned with violence and abuse. These are “self-directed violence-suicide”, “violence against women”, “intergenerational conflict” and “role diffusion, including sexual abuse” (in Krieg 2009, 29). Consequently, it can be argued that the widespread intracommunity and family violence experienced by Aboriginal communities today is directly related to the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

The perpetuation of such violence is so extensive that it has become normalised within many families and communities. Intergenerational trauma has become intergenerational abuse and family violence is now considered “inevitable and something to be tolerated” in many communities (Prentice, Blair and O’Mullan 2017, 245). That a general acceptance of violence, as a routine occurrence, has developed amongst many members of Aboriginal communities is supported by the literature (Atkinson 1990; Frost 2014; Gordon 2006, 21; Lloyd 2014; Senior, Helmer and Chenhall 2017). Early exposure to violence and abuse, common due to the extent

to which family violence is occurring in our communities, plays a central role in the normalisation of violence (Wilson, Jones, Butler, Simpson, Giles, Baldry, Levy and Sullivan 2017, 42). Furthermore, for some women, violence is not only expected but desired, fusing love and abuse into a dangerous understanding of relationships (Atkinson 1990). Violence within contemporary Aboriginal communities has been explored in various studies, as detailed below, and provides vital background information on the nature and extent of this problem.

For example, the collective experience of Aboriginal family violence has been explored by Cheers et al. (2006) in the context of Ceduna, South Australia. Undertaken in partnership with the local Aboriginal corporation, the project involved 25 individual interviewees and an undisclosed number of focus groups. The participants framed family violence as a holistic matter entwined with other social issues, such as substance abuse, gambling, poverty and unemployment (Cheers et al. 2006, 55). Collective grief relating to a loss of pride, culture and self-respect was identified as a contributing factor in all of these concerns. The authors argued that violence disintegrates families and, with family being the core foundation of community, leads to the breakdown of entire community structures (Cheers et al. 2006, 56). They argued that weakened communities are less able to respond effectively to violence and support victims which leads to the perpetuation of violence (Cheers et al. 2006, 56). The community-based approach adapted in this project, combined with a primarily Aboriginal research team, enabled a deeper conceptual understanding of family violence, however, with data collection undertaken in 2006, this study is rather outdated but remains relevant.

Another more recent study investigated violence within the intimate relationships of young Aboriginal people in Northern Australia. Senior, Helmer and Chenhall (2017) conducted qualitative interviews and workshops with 88 young Aboriginal people in 5 locations. They found that in communities lacking positive opportunities, relationships are considered as a status symbol and that, therefore, maintenance of those relationships, in spite of abuse, was paramount (Senior, Helmer and Chenhall 2017, 208-209). Participants were able to identify gendered power imbalances in their communities but they felt unable to “resist such norms” in their own relationships (Senior, Helmer and Chenhall 2017, 209). Many also reported that sexual violence in the context of relationships was tolerable, particularly if they shared children with their abuser (Senior, Helmer and Chenhall 2017, 210). Rather than the participants addressing the abuse, reinforcing male dominance and maintaining intimate relationships were key priorities (Senior, Helmer and Chenhall 2017, 211). This study provides a detailed account of young Aboriginal peoples’ conceptualisation of family violence in their formative stages of

adulthood, assisting in an understanding of relationship standards among their broader communities.

A more recent study was conducted with respect to the role of violence in the lives of incarcerated Aboriginal women in Western Australia. Using data from a larger project, Wilson et al. (2017) drew on individual interviews from 54 women who self-identified as having engaged in violence. Most participants had experienced severe childhood trauma, early exposure to extreme violence and early initiation into substance abuse (Wilson et al. 2017, 4-5). The authors of this study noted that the use of violence is not only condoned within these women's families but was also encouraged as a legitimate method of conflict resolution with one participant stating she had been raised "to be a fighter" (Wilson et al. 2017, 5). Histories of victimisation were common and influenced women's acceptance of violence within intimate relationships and their own use of violence (Wilson et al. 2017, 6-7). The women identified a veil of silence around abuse, noting a reluctance amongst community and service providers to intervene. They also reported that they had actively concealed their abuse due to fear of having their children removed and the perceived procedural unfairness in the criminal justice system (Wilson et al. 2017, 8-9). While this study provides a useful illustration of the experience of violence among Aboriginal women in the Western Australian context, the restricted sample, consisting only of prisoners who have committed acts of violence, limits the findings applicability to the wider Perth Aboriginal population.

Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan (2017) shed further light on Aboriginal women's experience of family violence in a recent Queensland study that investigated the barriers to service access. Five individual interviews and 62 survey responses were used to explore perceptions of family violence, the conduct of mainstream family violence services, and means to develop strategies for improving service accessibility. The authors found that social taboo and shame were key barriers to the disclosure of sexual and family violence and impacted participant's ability to seek intervention or support (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 244). Further to the harm caused by the violence itself, they found that the stigma of having been abused caused further harm to the participants (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 244). In essence, the victim is revictimised through their fear of ostracisation from their community and the consequent self-enforced silence concerning the abuse and the sense of isolation this brings. Furthermore, the normalisation of violence is identified by participants as a key deterrent for seeking intervention (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 245). As a participant of this study states, "sexual and family violence... has almost become the norm" (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 245). While the use of surveys to explore such a complex concern may have

limited the depth to which respondents detailed their experiences, the findings are consistent with the literature outlined above.

Violence in Aboriginal families is occurring at unacceptable levels and has become deeply ingrained in contemporary Aboriginal communities. The aforementioned studies provide a detailed account of Aboriginal women's experience of violence and have assisted in the development of this research project. Cheers et al. (2006), for example, conducted a community led project in the South Australian context, using a similar approach to the one that was applied in this Research Masters study. Senior, Helmer and Chenhall (2017) illustrate the conceptualisation of violence within young people's formative intimate partner relationships and, in doing so, provide a backdrop to how understandings of family violence develop. Wilson et al. (2017) explore Aboriginal women's use of, and victimisation through violence that provides a useful commentary on the Perth Aboriginal community's experiences. Finally, Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan (2017) have conducted research into the barriers that obstruct Aboriginal women's help seeking in the Queensland context which is highly relevant to this study. My project will build on the findings of these studies by exploring the barriers to help seeking that Aboriginal women face in the context of family violence in the Perth metropolitan region.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

While the concept of race, or biologically distinct species of human beings, has been scientifically discounted, racism persists (Graves, 2015). Schaeffer (1990, 16) contends that racism is grounded in "a doctrine of racial supremacy, that one race is superior." Racism, then, can be understood as a set of beliefs about racial hierarchy that produce discriminatory attitudes amongst the dominant society that manifest in harmful acts against or neglects of the interests of minorities (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 466). There is a general scholarly consensus that race and racism have played a fundamental role in the establishment and maintenance of social structures (Banerjee and Singer 2007; Hall 1996; Reilly, Kaufman and Bodino 2003). While it is now widely accepted that race does not exist on a biological level, the social construct of race has been used to categorise people and organise society for hundreds of years and, as such, is an invaluable frame for understanding contemporary social circumstances (Miles and Torres 2003, 97-98).

There are two key ways in which racism can be enacted: explicitly and implicitly. Explicit racism, also known as 'old racism', relies on notions of racial superiority and "open opposition to racial equality" (Augoustinos, Tuffin and Rapley 1999, 352). In this form of

racism, race is considered a primary determinant of one's character, physical and mental capacity, and is a legitimate means through which segregationist and oppressive policy is applied. Alternatively, implicit racism, or 'new racism', is a more socially acceptable form, maintaining the "resentment" and "ambivalence" of the earlier form but on different terms (Augoustinos, Tuffin and Rapley 1999, 352). The focus of this form of racism is on individual responsibility which results in a discounting of the role of historic oppression in contemporary disadvantage and a blaming of the oppressed people themselves for their disadvantaged position in society (Augoustinos, Tuffin and Rapley 1999, 352). In this way, collective disadvantage is conceived as a failure of the individual, due to one's personal ineptitude, lack of responsibility, immorality, flawed character, inferior intelligence and deviant value systems.

Public institutions are both informed by and reinforce the mainstream populations' beliefs. Institutions are the framework through which society is governed and they set the standard for "interactions among social actors, encompassing both formal and informal conventions, norms and practices" (Ostrom 1999, 38). However, while they exert influence in shaping public opinion and action, institutions also respond to the public. Institutions are "malleable and amendable" to the beliefs and values of the people (Shaw 2013, 480). As such, institutional frameworks reflect the people and the people reflect their institutions. This is problematic, however, in that the dominant social group has the capacity to determine public institutional values through their dominance over social and political power. Consequently, in a majority white nation like Australia, the institutions reflect the values and beliefs of the members of the dominant white population. This feedback loop between a dominant white majority and their hostile institutions enables the maintenance of perpetual racism.

Institutional racism results when discriminatory principles and procedures are applied in the organisation of the State. The origins of the term 'institutional racism' can be found in the United States' civil rights movement. In their book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) coined the term to account for the biased bureaucratic principles and processes that produce inequitable outcomes for peoples of colour. This is further elaborated by Better (2008, 11) as the "patterns, procedures, practices and policies" prescribed by institutions that "penalise, disadvantage and exploit" non-whites. This refers not only to explicit racism, as expressed openly in oppressive policy, but also the implicit racism of institutional processes that perpetuate inequality and reinforce the power imbalance that reproduces white dominance. The institutional framework of the State plays a fundamental role in organising society and, therefore, ingrained racism within these systems has far reaching implications for the overall wellbeing and social status of members of Aboriginal communities.

Explicit racism characterised the establishment of the Australian nation and its early institutions openly endorsed a racial hierarchy organised around white superiority. As outlined in the previous chapter, colonial authorities dehumanised and persecuted Aboriginal people on the assumption that they were less evolved than whites and should be treated as such. Overt racism in the public policy of the colonial era is easily identifiable. For example, State sponsored massacres, widespread slavery, rape, segregation of Aboriginal people and the mass removal of Aboriginal children were not only condoned, but much of this was legislated through successive *Aborigines Acts*. It was during this time that the foundations of Australia's modern legal, political, social and economic institutions were laid. Overt racism was fundamental in the nation building process with the goal being the creation of a homogenous white Australia (Elder, Ellis and Pratt 2004, 208). This was enforced by institutional structures through their regulatory power which ingrained racism in Australian society.

The 1967 Referendum was followed by a sustained effort to dismantle the explicit racism that characterised the early institutional framework of Australia. This Referendum saw Aboriginal affairs shift from state to federal jurisdiction and allowed for a nationwide approach towards formal equality as Aboriginal peoples were recognised as a part of Australia's human population in the national census for the first time. The oppressive State-based *Aborigines Protection Acts* of 1886 and 1905 were invalidated and the overbearing control over Aboriginal lives diminished. Simultaneously, progressive policy was enacted on a national level to support Aboriginal self-determination and instil legal protections from racial discrimination. However, eliminating racism is a far more nuanced process than this. Rather than the overhaul eradicating the ingrained racism within Australia's institutional structures, the Government simply changed the way that racism is manifested, shifting from explicit racism based on unconditional racial inferiority to the more subtle implicit racism grounded in a discourse of individual responsibility.

While the 'language' of racism operating within the structures that maintain Australian society has transformed, the ideals remain the same and continue to be expressed in Australia's systems of governance. While explicit racial provisions have been removed, these institutions were founded upon values of racial supremacy and whiteness, neither of which can be easily dissolved. In spite of the implementation of formal equality, the Australian Government itself has acknowledged that its institutions operate through white worldviews, values and social norms (Australia. Parliament of Australia 1993, 3). These have an exclusionary effect on Aboriginal peoples and communities because of their minority positioning, preventing basic service access and, as a result, denying Aboriginal peoples' right to equal participation in

Australian society (Fuller, Howard and Cummings 2004, 561-562). An implicit form of racism has been identified in State institutions across the board, from health to justice and from education to economic development (Augoustinos, Tuffin and Every 2005; Barter and Eggington 2017; Henry, Houston and Mooney 2004; Humpage 2016).

In light of the continuing racism in State institutional practice, it is not surprising that relations between Aboriginal communities and the State remain strained. The result is a collective mistrust of statutory institutions amongst Aboriginal people, particularly in relation to those focused on punitive interventions (Atkinson 2001; Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris 2012; Nancarrow 2006; Wilson et al. 2017). Atkinson (2001, 14) explains that this lack of faith in the State, with its openly hostile approach towards Aboriginal peoples deterring them from engaging with State institutions. In addition, other scholars have argued that perceptions of past injustice committed by the State and continuing racial bias are key causes of community members' unwillingness to work with the State (Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris 2012, 87-90). The existence of institutional racism in the Australian context has been explored in various academic studies, particularly in relation to Aboriginal health. The key institutions of concern for this project, however, are the ones actively involved in the institutional response to family violence.

Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris (2012) explore the experiences of Aboriginal families in their dealings with child protection services. Using a sample of 45 parents and kinship carers, participants were asked to detail their treatment by welfare authorities, what support was helpful, and what improvements to support systems could be made (Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris 2012, 86). Participants identified their negative perceptions of child protection authorities as a key concern. Contemporary child protection institutions were perceived as an extension of the previous child welfare institutions that systematically removed Aboriginal children on the basis of race during the Stolen Generation era (Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris 2012, 87-88). The continuity between mass child removals in this era and the current rate of child removals was a cause of deep anger amongst participants who identified ongoing procedural injustices due to discrimination, lack of respect for families and stigmatisation (Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris 2012, 88-90). One participant stated that although the language of the authorities has changed "the attitudes are the same" (Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris 2012, 88). The findings of this research project strongly link Aboriginal people's views of the child protection institutions with the historic oppression of their communities and highlights the continued racism ingrained in child welfare practice.

Institutional racism was further elaborated in Nancarrow's (2006) comparative study on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women's perceptions of family violence and subsequent statutory responses. The study collected data from 10 Aboriginal and 10 non-Aboriginal women and the authors found that, while stopping the violence was a key concern for both groups, each had conflicting beliefs about appropriate intervention approaches (Nancarrow 2006, 96). Aboriginal women prioritised community cohesion and education while their non-Aboriginal counterparts prioritised men's accountability (Nancarrow 2006, 96). Their legacy of oppression was highlighted by Aboriginal participants who provided a strong critique of the criminal justice system, considering it to be a tool of the State that facilitates structural and actual violence against members of their communities. Institutional racism was inferred by Aboriginal participants in that police brutality, the mass incarceration of Aboriginal men, and the fragmentation of families and communities, were seen as real consequences of institutional involvement (Nancarrow 2006, 98). This project presents powerful findings, reinforced further by the author's ability to contrast them with the views of non-Aboriginal women. The small sample size, however, may mean the findings may not be representative of the broader lived experience of members of either group.

Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan (2017) have also provided a valuable account of institutional racism derived from Aboriginal women's experiences of service responses to their victimisation. The participants in this study identified the Euro-centric approach of service providers, grounded in white ways of working, as a key barrier to their ability to access family violence services (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 245). The participants evidenced a strong sense of mistrust towards mainstream service providers and their white service staff, who often instigated inappropriate interventions based on cultural misunderstandings (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 246). Grounded in, and operating on, white worldviews and values, mainstream service providers are actively, but perhaps unintentionally, incorporating racial bias into their practice. In doing so, Aboriginal victims of sexual and family violence feel unable to seek and receive support from the relevant services.

The nature and operation of the justice system was also identified as a deterrent to seeking help to address such violence by the participants of this study. The authors contend that the women's perception of racial bias within the system informs their unwillingness to report sexual and family violence and, further, to seek service support in its aftermath. Participants noted that they felt a "lack of confidence or trust in the system, and a strongly held belief that reporting [violence] would not lead to a desired outcome" (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 247). Beliefs about the justice system were paradoxical with participants

believing that the police were unwilling to pursue family violence offenders while also recognising the mass incarceration of Aboriginal peoples (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullan 2017, 247). There was a collective sense that the justice system is failing Aboriginal communities on two fronts. There was a lack of faith that Aboriginal women and children would be protected from acts of sexual and family violence and scepticism that offenders would be punished. However, there was also a deep mistrust of the system due to the high rates at which Aboriginal men are imprisoned. As discussed in the previous section, the findings of this study would have greater effect had the authors undertaken more personal data collection as opposed to relying primarily on survey data.

Institutional racism is ingrained throughout Australian society and is a key concern when exploring tensions between Aboriginal communities and the State. All of the above studies discussed found a deeply held mistrust of the intentions and practices of those involved in institutional interventions into their communities. The studies by Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris (2012) and Nancarrow (2006) both highlighted the legacy of colonial oppression on current day relations and found that Aboriginal peoples perceived contemporary institutions as a continuation of past institutions which persecuted their communities. Prentice, Blair and O'Mullen (2017) explored this further in relation to the justice system with the participants in their study who characterised the system as indifferent with respect to protecting Aboriginal women and children but overzealous in incarcerating Aboriginal men. The accounts outlined here are fundamental to understanding the interactions between Aboriginal family violence victims and the State.

CONCLUSION

It is widely accepted that the nature and extent of family violence in Aboriginal communities is alarming. While there is debate around the causes of this, the studies discussed in this chapter have strongly argued that our culture is not one of those causes. Intergenerational trauma has been identified among Aboriginal communities and violence is better understood as a manifestation of this trauma. The literature certainly supports this, noting that family violence must be understood in the context of broader social issues which plague Aboriginal communities and that a process of normalisation has ingrained an acceptance of violence as a routine occurrence in the Aboriginal consciousness. Another key concern identified in the literature is the perpetual silence around family violence and the need for Aboriginal communities to address this 'private' issue collectively.

Race was a leading factor in the organisation of the State throughout Australia's colonial history. The literature demonstrates that, although the language of race has changed from that of the explicitly expressed old racism, it remains ingrained in our institutional structures in the form of implicit new racism. Operating from white values and worldviews, the system is designed in a way that excludes and harms Aboriginal peoples. Studies conducted in the Australian context have found the perception of institutional racism to be strong among Aboriginal populations, who believe that the State perpetually oppresses their communities. The legacy of colonial persecution and the perception of continuing racial bias in institutional practices were highlighted by these studies as central to the ongoing hostile relationships between Aboriginal communities and the State.

These two fields of literature, alongside the historical context earlier outlined, are key to understanding the barriers that Aboriginal women face when seeking help to address family violence in contemporary times. Our communities continue to be in a state of collective trauma which not only causes violence to occur at such a high rate but also prevents women from seeking and attaining meaningful assistance in their time of need. The deeply held perception of institutional racism further impedes this by inducing a strong sense of fear amongst the people with respect to institutional interventions. I will draw these two separate research areas together and seek to understand them in relation to the Aboriginal women's help seeking in the context of family violence in this study. While doing so parallels aspects of the Prentice, Blair and O'Mullen (2017) study, my study differs from theirs in that it focuses on the localised historical, social and cultural circumstances specific to the Perth communities with whose members I interacted.

Methodology

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the manner in which my project was undertaken. Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrated that Aboriginal family violence occurs in a unique socio-political context that is informed by a variety of factors that are specific to Aboriginal communities. In turn, the barriers to help seeking for Aboriginal women are also unique and examining such barriers required an approach that is specifically tailored to the community of focus. This research project applied a community-led approach, guided by cultural practices in all stages to explore the ways in which Aboriginal women's help seeking attempts are impeded. Applying a community-led approach not only ensured that the data collected in this project was of the highest quality, both in its depth and breadth, but also enhanced the cultural safety and integrity of the research process.

This chapter details my research design, which was informed by Aboriginal practices. In order to undertake such sensitive research, the Indigenous research methodology of 'Yarning' and three key culturally-based research principles of respect, relationships and reciprocity have guided the research design and practice. Yarning was utilised as the fundamental methodological approach to data collection due to its grounding in Aboriginal cultural customs. Applying its key principles ensured that the work undertaken in this project aligned with the local community protocols. This was integral to the overall success of this research, which sought to explore a very sensitive issue and, as such, relied on a strong connection between myself and my community to gather detailed data. In collaboration with my community, the following question was devised: *What barriers do Aboriginal women face when seeking help to address family violence?*

In the second part of this chapter, the practical undertaking of this research, from its initiation to completion, is outlined. This is discussed in three stages. The first stage was planning. During this phase the focus was on relationship building, stakeholder management and developing the project design to meet community needs. The second stage was data collection in which the two focus groups and multiple individual interviews were held. The final stage was concerned with data analysis which entailed transcription, thematic analysis

and write up. This chapter outlines the uniquely Aboriginal approach applied to this Aboriginal-centred research project.

METHODOLOGY

Yarning is central to the emerging Indigenous Research Methods discourse, a movement within the academic sphere that is grounded in Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 4) argues that academic research is routinely undertaken through a Western lens, transposing colonial conceptions of human nature and society onto its Aboriginal subjects. In light of this, Indigenous research methods, such as Yarning, have been developed to explore the experiences of Aboriginal subjects through culturally embedded practices. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010, 47) contend that the success of Aboriginal research depends on the “quality of relationship between the researcher and participant, the language being used and the conceptual baggage brought to the interview process.” This makes clear that undertaking such research in a culturally competent manner is of critical importance.

The application of Yarning as a research methodology privileges traditional cultural practices grounded in tens of thousands of years of pre- and post-colonial protocols. The dominant mode of communication throughout these periods was oral, requiring all the parties involved in a conversation to practice deep listening, resulting in effective dialogue (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). Yarning as a qualitative research approach utilises four types of yarn; namely, the social yarn, the research topic yarn, the collaborative yarn and the therapeutic yarn (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). The success of the social yarn is fundamental to the rest of the data collection process as it lays the foundation for the relationship between researcher and participant. It generally involves exploring family networks and connection to country and is a means of ‘placing’ the researcher and building trust (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010, 43). Next, the yarn moves to the research topic, introduced in an open manner that allows participants to “take that topic and respond as they see fit” (Fletcher, Fredericks, Adams, Finlay, Andy, Briggs and Hall 2011, 93). The collaborative yarn occurs when ideas are developed in equal partnership between the researcher and the participant and therapeutic yarning is required if a participant becomes distressed (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010, 40 – 41).

Yarning was the central approach of this research project, informing both the design and the practical undertaking. The strength of this approach was derived from power-sharing between researcher and participant which allows the participants to guide the yarns in a way not available through other research methods. This was integral to ensuring that my research was undertaken as openly and with as little prejudice as possible. For, as a member of the participating communities I had pre-existing experience and beliefs on this topic. By aligning

this project with the yarning approach and allowing the community to provide project direction, the risk of researcher bias, due to my pre-existing beliefs, was reduced. Ongoing engagement with the communities throughout the research process was fundamental to the overall design. This was also critical to enhancing participant recruitment, cultural integrity and ensuring that the project addressed community concerns. The community took active ownership of this project from its inception and even revised the research question, as will be explained later in this chapter.

The practical application of the yarning approach in the research interactions was highly successful. Applying the social yarn in all interactions was fundamental to the success of this project, particularly with relation to stakeholder relationships and data collection. By discussing family connections and connection to country, the community stakeholders and I positioned each other within a shared system of cultural and familial networks in a short period of time. This positioning process is a standard social protocol in our communities and applying it to the research process evidenced my cultural understanding to those with whom I interacted. The efficacy of this was demonstrated in the sheer volume and depth of the data collected. Using yarning as the key theoretical approach for this project ensured compliance with our community's cultural protocols and, as a result, garnered extensive community support for the project.

CULTURAL RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

Undertaking research in Aboriginal communities is a unique activity which requires adherence not only to university protocols but also to the cultural practices of the communities it engages. As I undertook this research project with my own community, I was in the privileged position of being intimately aware of such practices and was mindful of their application in the research design. While the ethics approval process requires researchers to incorporate ethical measures into their projects, I found three principles to be particularly important for my project. These were respect, relationships and reciprocity. These principles ensured that this research was undertaken in a socially responsible manner that gained community approval and produced beneficial outcomes for my participants and the wider community.

Respect

Respect was the key principle for this Aboriginal research project from which the other two principles were derived. For the purpose of this project, respect should not be understood as involving specific actions; rather, respect should be understood as a holistic way of being that underlies all individual and collective conduct. Castellano (2004, 104) refers to this

concept in relation to Canadian Aboriginal peoples as being a “mutual dialogue” between all living beings in all aspects of life, characterised by obligation and reciprocity. Australian Aboriginal family and community structures, governance and cultural protocols are grounded in a similar conceptualisation (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003, 207). For our communities, respect can be understood as the lens through which we see and understand the world around us. Without an understanding of the importance of this mode of conduct and what it looks like in practical terms, researchers will struggle to develop meaningful relationships and gain acceptance from members of the community participating in the research project.

Respect was of the utmost importance throughout the research process, from the formation of the research question to the thesis write up. As is noted below, the research question and aims were altered significantly due to feedback from the community. Given that community members were considered collaborators in this project, as opposed to subjects, their guidance was influential in shaping its direction. Before beginning data collection, a relationship phase was initiated wherein I met with community leaders, Elders and executive staff in key Aboriginal organisations. This phase focused solely on engaging with community members to ensure that they felt comfortable with and supported this research. Again, concerns raised here, such as the need for Aboriginal-only support staff during focus groups and the need for childcare facilities, were integrated into the project design. The data collection phase required a multitude of specific acts to ensure that participants felt respected; while in data analysis and write up, I have been actively aware of the community’s desire to not demonise our men and to accurately represent their stories while maintaining their confidentiality.

Showing respect was fundamental to the women’s open and honest participation in the focus groups and interviews. This was done in a number of ways. First, as is customary in the community, all women of higher status than myself, in age and in community standing, were referred to as ‘Aunty’ and those my age or younger, referred to as ‘sis’. Doing so demonstrated my understanding of community structure, my position within it and my closeness with these women who I consider as family. Furthermore, all women were paid for their time in the form of Coles-Myer vouchers, acknowledging that their time, knowledge and experiences were important. As the researcher, I offered all women a tea or coffee upon arrival, which I made for them myself, showing that I do not think that I am above them. For each of the focus groups, I also paid an Elder to provide a Welcome to Country and a senior community woman to co-facilitate. This again demonstrated to the community that I understood and respect the cultural protocols of our people. Further, I stated in these workshops that I am an Aboriginal woman

before I am a researcher, reinforcing our interconnectedness and mutual respect which endures long after project completion.

Relationships

Relationships are central to human life and to research with Aboriginal peoples, the formation and maintenance of relationships are key to the success for the project. Traditionally, due to the nature of pre-determined and hierarchical roles allotted to each in academic research projects of this type, there is an inherent power imbalance in the researcher-participant relationship (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach 2009, 280). The researcher is understood as the expert and the participants as subjects to the researcher's expertise. This has historically been the nature of research in Aboriginal communities, with harmful impacts (Henderson, Simmons, Bourke and Muir 2002, 482; Martin 2008, 25). In this project, I have been actively aware of this imbalance and attempted to achieve what Raheim, Magnussen, Sekse, Lunde, Jacobsen and Blystad. (2016, 4) refer to as "symmetrical" relationships. This type of research relationship acknowledges that the researcher has "superior knowledge" in the field of research while participants have superiority in their practical understanding of the research topic (Raheim et al. 2016, 4).

The establishment and maintenance of meaningful relationships is a time-consuming task. The tension between the time constraints associated with Research Masters projects and the expectations of community members for researchers to fully commit to the relationship building process is identified by Kingsley, Phillips, Townsend and Henderson-Wilson (2010, 8). They found that time constraints impeded their ability to meaningfully engage with and assist the community (Kingsley, Phillips, Townsend and Henderson-Wilson 2010). My position as a member of the communities involved in this project and the application of the Yarning approach enabled this time-consuming process to be significantly expedited. While I had pre-existing personal or familial relationships with the majority of stakeholders, the maintenance of these relationships required a significant time commitment.

A strong emphasis was placed on community relationships in this project. Three months were set aside primarily to focus on regular meetings with key stakeholders, such as community leaders, Elders and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. Initial contact was made either in person by approaching those I already knew or by being introduced through mutual connections to those I did not know, and follow up meetings were scheduled. The nature of these meetings was somewhat informal. They generally involved me bringing coffee and cake to the location of the stakeholder's choice, such as their home, workplace, or a public

venue, and engaging in social conversations. My research intentions were one matter raised during these meetings and I sought feedback in relation to my research direction and approach. This informal approach to community engagement was highly successful in establishing community awareness and support for the project, as was shown in the high participation rate in the data collection stage.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a core value in Aboriginal communities and is an important principle to be incorporated into culturally safe research projects. The mutual obligation and shared responsibility of community members to care for one another is a central tenet in Aboriginal cultures (Peterson 2013). While this collectivist approach was established in pre-colonial times to ensure the continuity of cultures and families, it has continued on as a key feature of contemporary Aboriginal communities. In relation to Aboriginal research, reciprocity is explained by Toombs (2016, 9) as implying “inclusion and an equitable benefit of value” to Aboriginal communities. Fitzpatrick, MacDonald, Martiniuk, D’Antoine, Oscar, Carter, Lawford and Elliot (2017, 11) concur, stating that research must meet the needs of the community whose members participate in a project by exploring a topic of concern to the people while also providing them with direct benefits.

Considering this, it is necessary to ensure that research exploring aspects of Aboriginal community life is not undertaken solely for the sake of producing academic papers. Rather, it must have tangible and meaningful outcomes for the people it engages. These outcomes cannot be pre-determined by the research team before they enter a community but must be identified and prioritised by the community members themselves. This can be challenging to researchers working in this space, as it requires a significant amount of flexibility. Furthermore, there may be a considerable workload associated with meeting the goals of the community in order to deliver the benefits that they desire. As such, it is necessary to be transparent and honest in all stages about what the researcher can and cannot achieve, as over-promising and under-delivering will damage relationships between the members of the community and the researchers.

Several desired benefits were identified by community stakeholders during the initial relationships phase of this project. For example, early in our discussions, community members observed that many of our women experiencing family violence were not aware of the support services available to them. As a result, it was decided that a resource directory identifying local family violence services would be helpful. In response to this, I developed a localised family

violence resource directory which, alongside a general Aboriginal services directory, was issued to all participants in focus groups and interviewees, some of whom took multiple copies to disseminate to family members. In addition, the two Aboriginal services who hosted community workshops requested and received additional copies of the family violence directory to circulate amongst the general community. Reciprocity has been integral to this research process in ensuring that the research does not just meet my needs with respect to achieving my academic degree but also meets the needs of the community.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This research project was designed to address three critical objectives. The first objective was to provide a platform through which Aboriginal women can express themselves, discuss their experiences with family violence and identify their struggles. This was achieved throughout the process of my research project, whereby participants shared their experiences and determined the nature and extent of the discussions in both focus groups and interviews. The second objective was to reinforce community cohesion, which was achieved through the supportive environment established in community workshops and the strength-based approach to facilitation. The third objective was to raise awareness amongst the community as to the resources available to them. As was previously explained, all participants were provided with two resource directories, one being a general Aboriginal social services directory developed by not-for-profit organisation RUAH and the other was a localised family violence directory developed by myself specifically for this project.

The research question and hypothesis that guide this project transformed significantly since its inception. The original guiding question devised for the project was: *How does the mandatory reporting of family violence incidents by the police to child protection services influence Aboriginal mothers' help seeking?* In my initial relationship building stage, I met with many members of the community and Aboriginal organisations who expressed concern that this question was too narrow and would not capture the full experiences of our women who are unable to access family violence support. Upon reflection, I accepted this and refined my question to gather information on barriers to help seeking more generally as opposed to focusing solely on the effect of mandatory reporting.

As a result of the community feedback, the following research question was devised: *What barriers do Aboriginal women face when seeking help to address family violence?* As a member of the focus communities and having myself experienced family violence, I had a pre-existing knowledge of this topic which informed my initial position. My hypothesis was that Aboriginal women experience many barriers to seeking and securing support throughout their

family violence experience, primarily due to failures within the statutory system and family support services. It was my initial belief, informed through my personal experiences and observations of other members of my community, that such barriers impede the provision of meaningful support and physical protection to Aboriginal women.

ETHICS

Ethical practice was a key concern of this project. This was because I required institutional approval to undertake field research and also had a responsibility to the members of my community to ensure that I did them no harm. With this in mind, the following National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) documents were used to guide the planning and practice of this project:

1. *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* (NHMRC 2018)
2. *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007)* (NHMRC 2016)
3. *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (2003)* (NHMRC 2015)

Ethics approval was sought through Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee and considered at its May 2017 meeting. The application consisted of the standard ethics application, with a focus on risk management and participant wellbeing, due to the deep trauma associated with the research topic, and an extended statement addressing Section 4.7 of the *National Statement* regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research. The prospect of applying to the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee was also considered due to the focus of this project; however, that Committee's approval was not sought. This second layer of ethics approval would have involved a significant delay while awaiting approval and is not a requirement for non-health-based projects. It was decided by the researcher, supervisors and community stakeholders that this step was unnecessary. The ethics application to the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee for this project, number 2017/100, received outright approval.

BACKGROUND AND METHOD

This Research Masters project was undertaken through Murdoch University's School of Business and Governance in collaboration with the University's Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre. Both departments provided financial backing for this project and a significant amount of in-kind donations were provided both by the community organisations involved and by community leaders. The study was undertaken over a two-and-a-half-year period, from July 2016 to December 2018, in the Perth metropolitan regions of Kwinana and Armadale. Data

collection took place over a six-month period that began in August 2017. A total of 37 Aboriginal women participated in data collection for this research project. The Kwinana sample consisted of 13 participants, ranging in age from 25 years to 80 years, with a mean age of the members of this group at 53.3 years. The Armadale focus group was much larger with 25 participants, ranging in age from 21 years to 66 years, and the mean age for this group was 42.4 years. Of the individuals interviewed, four of the five participants had partaken in the community focus groups with one further interview participant, aged 27 and living in the Kwinana region, self-referred to this project. Overall, the mean age of interviewees was 46.6 years.

Planning stage

The planning phase of this research took place from July 2016 to June 2017. The key focus over this period was meaningful engagement with the community and enhancing the research design to ensure the cultural integrity of the project and cultural safety during data collection. Throughout this time, the project evolved significantly. To ensure that this project both met the needs of community and the requirements of a Research Master's degree, I relied heavily on the guidance of community leaders and my academic supervisors during this period. To this end, I met with numerous community leaders, Elders and members of the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations working in this space to discuss my proposed research topic and data collection ideas. Effective collaboration in this phase was crucial to the overall success of this research project. Although the building and maintenance of meaningful relationships with members of the communities involved did require timeframes be extended, the guidance provided, and support gained were invaluable.

The key issues identified from the feedback of community stakeholders were: cultural safety, inclusivity, addressing community needs and mitigating harm to participants and boarder community. In response to cultural safety concerns, it was suggested that all supporting staff throughout the project be Aboriginal. This was done. Elders were also invited to participate, and each focus group began with a Welcome to Country. These focus groups were co-facilitated by a senior woman from each community and another senior woman was available to provide emotional support if participants became distressed. In relation to inclusivity, invitations to participate in focus groups were made public with no limit on participant numbers. As noted above, the research question was also broadened to address community needs and better reflect our women's experiences. All participants were also provided with two support service resource directories. Finally, to mitigate harm to our broader

community and to prevent the demonization of our men, this project focused solely on the experiences of our women, not the characteristics of perpetrators.

The use of two data collection methods, community focus groups and individual interviews, was determined to be the most effective way to collect the stories of our women. The use of focus groups in this project provided a rich and meaningful collection of our women's stories, enabling a large number of women to participate in sharing their experiences while the dialogue between women generated discussions on topics which may not have otherwise been considered. However, this setting did not allow the women participating to provide in depth accounts of their experiences due to the number of women sharing within a limited timeframe; there were also confidentiality concerns and uneasiness in discussing traumatic events publicly. To address these issues individual interviews were also offered to all focus group participants.

Data collection stage

The data collection phase of this project took place between July and December 2017. As explained above, there were two methods applied in the data collection process: community focus groups, referred to as workshops, and individual interviews. The first workshop was conducted in the Kwinana region in partnership with a local Aboriginal community-controlled organisation, Moorditj Koort Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre. I built upon my pre-existing relationship with the management of this organisation during the planning stage and they offered significant in-kind support including the use of their facility and provided support staff to undertake logistical tasks, such as participant recruitment, transport and the collection of lunch. The second workshop took place in Armadale at an Aboriginal community centre called the Champion Centre. Each workshop and interview was recorded in full for later transcription.

Confidentiality was a key concern for the participants in these focus groups and all efforts were made to ensure that it was a safe space for all of the women involved. To accommodate these concerns, both focus groups and interviews were conducted in a closed designated room within each community centre. Privacy expectations were made clear before beginning the research yarn; namely, that the stories of our women, as shared with each other during the focus group, were not to be repeated outside of that space. Furthermore, all participants were assigned numbers which were laid on the table in front of them. Each time a participant spoke, my volunteer note-taker recorded this number, along with the time, in order to track a participant's full story without interrupting the flow of yarns by requiring them to

state their names before speaking or diminishing their confidentiality by video recording sessions. All participants also chose an alias which is used later in this thesis.

Both workshops were co-facilitated by a senior Aboriginal woman in the local community and began with an informal morning tea and social yarn. The formal research workshop was opened with a Welcome to Country by a local Elder followed by the introduction of all participants and research support staff. Support staff were volunteers from the Murdoch University Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre who assisted with serving refreshments, welcoming participants, notetaking, child care and administration. Following this, an information letter concerning the research project and a consent form were explained in non-academic language to ensure participants understood to what they were consenting. The co-facilitator and I then initiated the research yarn, beginning with an outline of the research process to date and topics of focus for group discussion. Rather than asking specific questions and therefore leading the conversations, a simple topic guide allowed the members of the focus group to lead yarns in the manner that they saw fit. The topics were as follows: constructions of Aboriginal mothers and families, family violence, and service responses.

Participants were able to determine the extent to which they shared their stories; and, on the few occasions that discussions became side-tracked, we allowed the women to finish their story before redirecting the yarn. Following the discussion of these topics, one final topic, community proposed solutions, was introduced. This instigated the collaborative yarning stage. During this discussion, participants acknowledged the strengths that exist in our communities and suggested practical ways in which we can support our people to address family violence. Due to the conditions of a Masters Research thesis, the information gathered on this subject will not be explored in this paper, however, will be utilised for further research papers following the completion of this thesis. There were also times when therapeutic yarning was applied, wherein a participant shared a very personal and traumatic experience. Although therapeutic yarns usually take place between the researcher and participant, due to the nature of a community workshop, these yarns were primarily between participants who, without prompting, responded to these stories as a collective support network.

Interviews were conducted using a similar approach. A social yarn over coffee initiated the interview which was followed by an explanation of the important project information and discussing the consent forms in layperson's terms. Following this, the participant was asked to discuss their story in relation to family violence and probing questions were posed when necessary to clarify information. In one interview, the participant requested the audio recording device to be turned off while she discussed a particularly traumatic event; and, after exploring

this on her own terms, she requested that it then be turned back on. The yarning approach to data collection, both in workshops and interviews, was found to be highly effective in gathering relevant and meaningful data in a way that respected the experiences of our women.

Data analysis stage

The data analysis and write up of this project took place over a one-year period from January 2018. Throughout the data collection process, our women shared comprehensive accounts of their family violence experience and, as a result, there was a substantial volume of data for analysis. This began with the transcription process, which, after discussion with my academic supervisors and community members, it was determined that I would be best placed to undertake this task personally. The possibility of procuring a third party to complete transcriptions of focus groups and interviews was explored, however, due to the benefits of maintaining closeness with the data, in addition to the possibility of third party misinterpretation of Noongar slang, this was decided against. Although transcription was a time-consuming process, it enabled me to re-familiarise myself with the data which assisted with my analysis.

After the transcriptions were completed, I returned the individual stories of our women to them for their evaluation. This was done in order to ensure that the women were comfortable with what was included and that the transcription process was accurate. Returning of transcripts was not possible for all participants, as some did not provide a means for future contact at the data collection stage. Participants were notified that they could provide an email address or a street address through which their written stories would be returned. As it was acknowledged that this was a sensitive topic and that not all of the women involved had separated from their abusive partners, it was suggested that, if they felt unsafe receiving such communication by email or at their home, they may provide a safe address of a family member or their work address. While many did this, there were a number of women whom did not and, as such, not all transcripts were returned to the women for their final approval.

After the approval process, content analysis of the data was undertaken. As a result of having recently listened to the interviews and focus groups again in the process of transcription, I had a formative understanding of the issues identified through our women's stories. During the first cycle of coding, I drew out key patterns within the stories and began to develop general categories into which I could arrange the women's stories. This was the first step of analysis, whereby categories were derived from initial coding of raw data (Saldana 2009, 12-13). To ensure that all of these key categories were identified, I repeated this process for a second time onto a new document and later collated both documents. I decided against employing NVivo

software to analyse the raw data, as the stories of our women are often expressed in Noongar English, a creole form of English which incorporates Noongar words and concepts. As such, its interpretation requires a general knowledge of Noongar English and, therefore, community insiders, such as myself, are best placed to draw out relevant quotes. Three overarching themes were generated through this process. Saldana (2009, 13) explains themes as “describing more subtle and tacit processes” which require a deeper level of analytic reflection than general categories, which are explicit.

One of the primary goals of this project was to provide a platform through which our women could tell their stories and this was fundamental to the development of themes. In order to maintain this participant focus throughout the writing up phase, I decided that the discussion of each theme should begin with the recounting of several stories that reflected it before the discussion moved to the theme in depth. The purpose of this was not only to share their experiences as evidence for findings but to personalise the experience and ensure that our women maintain their power through their stories, which can be difficult when only applying short quotes within the discussion. In undertaking academic research, it could be very easy to become removed from the topic as the women were made anonymous and their stories were compartmentalised under different themes. However, the participant-focused method of write up in this project aimed to place our women’s stories front and centre of this thesis, treating them with the respect that they deserve.

CONCLUSION

The methodology that was applied to the design and practical application of this project was heavily informed by the communities with whom it engaged. The members of our communities exist within a unique social, political, historical and cultural context which highly influences the ways in which they experience family violence and their subsequent help seeking attempts. The approach required to explore these experiences must be appropriate for the women who are participating. The use of the Indigenous research method of Yarning, and application of the culturally-based research principles, which were derived from local community protocols, were central to ensuring the integrity of this research. Further, transforming the research question to address the needs as identified by the community also supported this process.

The intensive community involvement in the development of this project brought about widespread support that was evident in the data collection phase. This was built on throughout the analysis and write up period to reinforce the power of our women’s stories. That was the

purpose of this Research Masters project: to explore the stories of our women, empower them through a strengths-based facilitation approach, and provide a platform for them to share their experiences. Family violence is a major concern in our communities and the large number of women who volunteered to participate in this project demonstrates that they want change. The remainder of this thesis will centre on their voices. These are the stories of our women.

Barriers Within Our Communities

INTRODUCTION

In understanding how deeply entrenched family violence is within our families we must explore the barriers to help seeking that manifest within our own communities. While institutional and structural impediments are critical to Aboriginal women's experiences of family violence and can prevent them from securing effective assistance, there is another level of barriers that are rarely discussed. While the following chapters examine the institutional and structural barriers to *securing* help, this chapter will explore the barriers which prevent our women from *seeking* help. As a community, we must look within to consider how we are contributing to the struggles of our women. This chapter does not attempt to excuse family violence by developing justifications for such acts, nor does it endeavour to demonise our communities by contending that we are the problem. Rather, this chapter seeks to provide a clear understanding of the views and practices through which we may unintentionally enable the victimisation of our women.

As has been explored in previous chapters, the socio-political landscape of our contemporary communities is shaped by our shared experience of colonisation and persecution. The historic oppression of our communities plays a significant role in our collective consciousness and continues to inform the views, values and experiences of our people today. To do justice to the stories shared by our women in the workshops and interviews is to be truthful about their experiences, and a key component of this is to reflect on the ways that our own communities perceive and respond to family violence. We must first understand the ways in which we, as a people, unconsciously hinder or prevent our women from seeking support, before we can truly explore the full experiences of our women.

There are three key barriers to help seeking within our communities which were identified by participants of this project. These are: i) Normalisation of Violence; ii) Problematic Family Intervention, and; iii) Fear of Child Removal. The normalisation of violence and the cyclical nature of abuse within our families was a significant barrier to seeking

help as identified by many participants. Where violence is considered an acceptable form of family behaviour, there will be little inclination towards help seeking. There were also concerns around family involvement in abusive relationships, not only in enabling violence against women, but also being complicit in it. This was discussed both in relation to the women's families and the families of their abusive partners. The deeply held fear of child removal, commonly associated with Stolen Generation practices of State removal of Aboriginal children, was also discussed in detail. The real fear felt by mothers that the child protection institution would remove their children should their victimisation be exposed, also acts as a considerable barrier to help seeking. The child protection institution, Department for Child Protection and Family Services, is often referred to by participants as DCP throughout.

NORMALISATION OF VIOLENCE

The normalisation of family violence was repeatedly discussed by our women, particularly in the community focus groups, wherein victimisation was explored as a shared experience. When violence is witnessed and experienced on a regular basis in a person's formative years, it becomes ingrained in the minds of the child as a normal dimension of family life (Wilson et al. 2017, 42). The women contend that their early exposure to family violence, and the reinforcement of strict gender roles, facilitated a high tolerance towards abuse which informed their future relationship expectations. It is in this way that family violence has been transmitted intergenerationally, with many noting that such abuse was modelled to them by their parents or carers and that they then went on to model violent family behaviour to their own children. The cyclical nature of normalised violence within our families contributes to the continuing endemic rates of family abuse within our communities.

The Stories of Our Women

“A lot of our people that were Stolen Generation, they wasn't around their families to see how to be strong and how to be a family because they experienced abuse when they were in care so when they become parents and got married, all they can do is relate to how they were treated in care and so it just carried on from there. Then their children experienced the same so it's just like a ripple effect so it just continues and continues until, I don't know... So kids seeing their parents having that domestic violence, those kids will continue to do that and I've see that since I've been young.”

- Linda, 46 years

“My kids went through domestic violence, I did, and now my kids, my oldest sons still suffer because they’re scarred from seeing their mother being hit and they still remember that. But why was he like that in the first place because did he go through the domestic violence? Was he a victim? That’s what I’m saying, it doesn’t just happen. And I still remember my dad, I mean he worked, he was a lovely old man, I had to forgive my father because my mother said well I’ve forgiven him for what he’s done to me. He put a gun to her head and I took the bullets out before it happened. I mean I been scarred for life, like you said, and it hurts. Now my boys are living that same cycle.”

- Eagles, 52 years

“I don't know, maybe my daughter seen me getting bashed so that was the type of bloke she was looking for, someone violent, you know? And that was probably a historical thing happening there cause when I was young, I seen my mother get bashed by my father, he’d go running around on her, come back, accuse her of this bloke and that bloke, even Elvis Presley, and he’d flog her... We’d go to refuges all the time and that had an impact on us, you know? I looked up to my dad... I didn’t want them to split up, I wanted this perfect little family ...When I got older, I was looking for someone like my father, a violent man I suppose, and low and behold, I got one... Because you lived with getting bashed all your life so you think that bashing is normal, you know? It’s not, it’s not. My life centred around violence, it was all about violence, and my kids seen a lot of that and they’re paying for it today because they’ve got mental health problems and addictions because of their early trauma of the violence that they’ve seen... My kids seen a lot of that so yeah, I’ve got a lot of guilt because I’ve got a lot to answer for their, um, for how they are today.”

- Cheeky, 48 years

Discussion

The normalisation of violence and its intergenerational transmission are highlighted in the stories of Linda, Eagles and Cheeky. While Linda speaks directly to abuse from carers in the institutional care setting under past Aboriginal child removal policy, Eagles and Cheeky both discuss the roles that their parents had in modelling family violence in their homes. Each of these stories cover abuse spanning three generations. First, violence occurring between or by their parents or carers which they came to accept as normal behaviour. Following this, each of the women discussed reproduction of this behaviour in their own adult relationships or, as in Linda’s story, the adult relationships of those raised in institutional care. Finally, they all

discuss how this pattern is repeated in the relationships of the next generation. For Eagles and Cheeky, their own children are now struggling with the trauma of this abuse through further violence and dysfunctional habits. The desensitisation to, and normalisation of, violence in the formative years were identified in all three stories as a key contributor to dysfunction within the next generations of the family.

The normalisation of violence is not restricted to the family unit. Rather, the extent to which such abuse is occurring has normalised family violence in our communities more generally. There was a general consensus among the women that all community members are impacted by family violence and that it is generally considered to be a commonplace experience. Participants openly shared this. For instance, participants stated that *“I think everybody’s been through domestic violence...”* and *“Domestic violence approaches and affects every one of us...”* (Calgaret, 50 years, and Walley, 52 years). This widespread occurrence of family violence in our communities is supported by the Wilson et al. (2017, 5) study undertaken with Aboriginal women in Western Australia, which found that 75 per cent of their total participant pool had been directly victimised. Due to the exceedingly high rates at which such abuse is occurring, family violence can be considered a collective experience that impacts all community members.

Of particular interest in these stories is the differences in transmission between the women’s female and male children. Both Eagles and Cheeky discuss the long-term harm that their children have experienced as a result of the abuse. Eagles notes that her sons *“...still suffer...”* and are *“...scarred...”* by the abuse, while Cheeky speaks of her children’s *“...early trauma of the violence that they’ve seen...”*. On the one hand, Cheeky discusses this in relation to her daughter’s pursuit of violent men. She also provides her similar childhood experience of family violence as a possible cause of her own attraction to abusive men, suggesting that abused daughters seek out abusive partners and replicate the dysfunctional relationship dynamics that they witnessed in their childhood. This replication is also discussed by Eagles in relation to her sons, whom she contends are *“...living that same cycle...”* suggesting that they too are reproducing their abusive childhoods, from victims as children to perpetrator as adults. She attributes their use of violence to the deeply entrenched hurt caused by their own victimisation.

The differential gendered responses to family violence in the adult relationships of children who were exposed to abuse, as was identified by these participants, is supported by the academic evidence. In their broad review of the literature on impacts of family violence

exposure for children, Holt, Buckley and Whelan (2008) found children from abusive homes are at high risk of future family dysfunction and further abuse. Such children were found to have difficulty in forming and maintaining healthy relationships with gender being a key indicator of the manner of difficulty experienced. Further, exposure to childhood family violence is the strongest indicator of future violent perpetration on the part of men and future victimisation for women (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks and Semel 2002). Another study included in this review found such exposure to be the single best predictor of future male-perpetrated family violence and also a significant predictor of male and female victimisation (Wekerle and Wolfe 1999).

While gendered violence was considered by many of the women to be a routine occurrence, the normalisation of rigid gender roles is also a general issue of concern. Male dominated family and community structures were argued to be causing a significant gendered power imbalance, marked by dominant men and submissive women. Both Eagles and Cheeky allude to this in their stories above and other participants discussed this in more detail. Tina, aged 69 years, asserts that *“I thought it was normal for blackfellas to be very male dominant, the men were the boss...”* Further to this, another participant, Jessica, aged 26, commented that *“...they got this right where they owned us and we had to do what we was told to do.”* These quotes, shared by both younger and older participants, demonstrate an ongoing power disparity within our families which allocates men to a superior position over women. It is in this context that family violence is able to occur at such endemic rates.

Women who exist in communities defined by rigid gender based power structures are at a much higher risk of being abused. This is particularly so among socially excluded groups where a loss of social status, due to poverty and restructuring of community hierarchy, results in a reconstitution of masculinity (Anderson 1997, 667). Due to their disempowerment throughout the colonial process, the traditional role of men as protectors and providers for the family has diminished and, in turn, so too has their masculine identity. In the context of a “crisis of masculine identity”, violence against women becomes a social norm to enforce honour, respect and control, returning the vulnerable man to his dominant position within the community (Jewkes 2002, 1412). Powerless men seek to feel powerful through the use of violence. On this basis family violence can be considered not only as an expression of control and dominance but also as an expression of powerlessness and vulnerability (Jewkes 2002, 1412).

Australia's history of colonisation and continuing injustice towards Aboriginal peoples establishes the ideal breeding ground for this process. Participants were aware of this pattern, discussing colonisation, the breakdown of traditional structures and family violence as interrelated issues. One participant noted *"Our men have, you know, since colonisation, they've been disempowered and the only way they feel powerful is when they can belt their women"* (Martha, 70 years). Another commented that *"The 1905 Act destroyed every single Aboriginal person in WA and it hurt the whole structure of the way that Aboriginal people live and do things..."* (Nicole, 35 years). As such, the perpetual disenfranchisement of Aboriginal men and the corresponding violence and reinforcement of strict gender roles within communities are contributing factors to our high rate of domestic abuse and its normalisation within our families.

The normalisation of such behaviour acts as a barrier to help seeking for women from these communities. When acts of violence are viewed as an inevitable part of daily life, it is unlikely that victims will seek external support to deal with it. In other words, in communities where family violence is seen as normal, rather than as a problem, there is no need to seek intervention to address it. Prentice, Blair and O'Mullen (2017) found this to be a significant factor in women's unwillingness to report family violence in their Queensland study with Aboriginal women. The community identified family violence as an intergenerational cycle which is so deeply entrenched that it is considered ordinary. Family violence, a participant in their research stated, was something women "have to put up with" and, therefore, it is "not seen as serious enough to report and be dealt with" (Prentice, Blair and O'Mullen 2017, 245). Due to this perception of abuse as a minor infraction, many women do not see a need to seek assistance. This interpretation is further supported by Gracia and Herrero (2007, 738), who contend that a climate of social acceptability towards violence against women not only emboldens abusive men but also hinders women from reporting their abuse to authorities.

It is important to note that, while participants discussed the general collective tolerance towards family violence in their communities, many are now strongly resistant to it. This, however, is a recent realisation for most. Many participants acknowledged their acceptance of violence throughout their childhood and adult relationships, but stated that they no longer accept or condone such behaviour. This was illustrated in a quote by Dory, 46 years, *"I got to the point where I said I've had enough, he was standing blue drunk with two knives and I said, 'do it, I'd rather be dead than live another day with you'."* Dory recounted her history of successive abusive relationships from her teenage years until this experience, after which she became an active advocate for women's and children's right to live free from abuse. Thus many

victims of family violence, who once considered it to be normal behaviour, are now challenging the collective normalisation of abuse.

PROBLEMATIC FAMILY INTERVENTION

Considering the collectivist nature of Aboriginal communities and the intimacy of our family structures, it is to be expected that family involvement is high across all areas of life, including relationships. The women of our community described two opposing ways in which this occurs in relation to violent relationships. The first was characterised as helpful, whereby family members would intervene to halt or prevent further acts of violence, and the second as problematic, whereby family members encourage such acts and enable further abuse. Heise (1998, 281-282) contends that this as a direct result of community normalisation of violence, positing that some communities consider violence against women as a method of punishment, similar to the corporal punishment of children. As with physical chastisement of children, physical violence against women is acceptable to a certain degree (Heise 1998, 281-282). In these communities, abuse against an intimate partner is condoned and even encouraged in some families, so long as it takes place within particular socially determined boundaries. This section will focus on problematic methods of family intervention into such violence as a way in which our community presents as a barrier to our women's help seeking behaviours.

The Stories of Our Women

"I didn't used to report it, I used to keep it quiet and just let it go until it started getting a bit too much... You love your children and you love your partner as well... When I was pregnant and I was still living with my partner's family, my partner used to abuse me physically and emotionally and at times, he'd hit me. I was always to blame as to why I'd get hit. Ended up with a few black eyes and hit with a few different things at different times and I didn't report it. I used to keep it quiet because there was other people in his family saying like, if anything happens to my son, if he gets charged then I'm making you piss [hurt] and blah, blah, blah, and what not, just all different stuff I'd get threatened with, so I just used to let it go, let it build up...DCP was always involved, only because when I used to take off [leave him], I used to get welfare checks called in by his family and they used to say I was a drug user and all different things, just so I would stay with him, even though he was hitting me."

- Jessica, 26 years

"I just about lived here all my life as a married woman and a mother...In 67, they [the Government] said you can walk into a pub now and you can have a drink... And one drink goes

to another then when they come home, the argument starts 'cause there's no money left and, need rent, need food, and that's when the argument starts, the violence. Married men, used to listen to their brothers, 'come on, she's not the boss, have a drink! Got a smoke? Might as well get a couple packets of smokes too'... One thing led to another and we separated... I promised myself, never ever again will I get married so I been single from then 'til now. I will never ever get married again with the trauma I went through. It's not just the two of you, it's the whole family ganging up on you and that's what my experience of married life is. I had to stick it out with seven kids, trying to get them through school, trying to get them an education and have decent clothes, you know, and you have all their family telling them, you know, 'she's not the boss'. That was my experience, 'she's not the boss'. So yeah, from that day on, I thought never again, so I been single all my life mostly, half of my life anyway..."

- Mary, 80 years

Discussion

The experiences of young mum Jessica and community Elder Mary span generations, suggesting the current concern of problematic family involvement is an ongoing issue within our communities. Both women here discuss family involvement going beyond ignoring or excusing the violence perpetrated on them, to the family being complicit in their abuse. For Jessica, members of her partner's family threatened her with further acts violence should she seek police intervention. She recounts his family threatening "...if anything happens to my son, if he gets charged then I'm making you piss [hurt] ... just all different stuff I'd get threatened with." They also intervened on another level, making false accusations to welfare authorities with the intent of forcing her return to her partner. Mary faced threats and acts of violence from her husband's family, characterising her abusive marriage as "...the whole family ganging up on you." She also explicitly stated that they encouraged the abuse, using the term "*she's not the boss*" repeatedly in reference to her husband's violence, suggesting this is likely the direct expression that was used by his family.

The complicit involvement of the abusive partner's family in women's victimisation is not an isolated experience. Participant Cheeky, aged 48, stated that, following her long-term abusive relationship and her partner's violent death at the hands of police officers, she continued to be blamed by his family. She recounted "...when he died, I had a big fight with his family because they all blamed me for it. I didn't even go to his funeral." The problematic approach of families who actively encourage intimate partner abuse is also highlighted by Frost (2014). In his paper on Central Australian Aboriginal communities, Frost (2014, 93) outlines

cases of extreme violence in which the perpetrator's family often triggered his abuse of his partner. His family perceived her to be "stuck up" and openly accused her of infidelity in order to shame him, after which he would often return home and commit acts of violence against her (Frost 2014, 93).

The above stories illustrate problematic involvement in relation to members of the abusive partner's family. However, many other participants also recounted their own family's role in enabling their abuse. Many of the women claimed that when they did disclose their victimisation to their families, the primary method of intervention was to encourage their return to their abusive homes. Community Elder Gedda, aged 73, noted "*Our families said that we made our bed and we've got to lay in it when we married, when we got our husbands.*" This was echoed in similar words by Dory, aged 48, "*Family had told me 'go home, you made your bed, now lay in it'*". In discussing the story of her close friend, who was eventually murdered by her abusive partner, Dory further explained that her friend's family had responded negatively to her status as an abused woman, "*...the family had been so judgemental all the way.*" She maintained that this reinforced the woman's isolation, which enabled the escalation of abuse and eventually culminated in her murder.

The manner in which family intervenes in violent relationships can have a significant impact on the victim's future help seeking. Research demonstrates that abused women's help seeking is often met with a general unwillingness on the part of their families to intervene, or encouragement to return to their violent partners (Fanslow and Robinson 2010; Taket, O'Doherty, Valpied and Hegarty 2014). When women's initial help seeking is thwarted by their own family, they may perceive help seeking to be futile which, in turn, deters future attempts (Lempert 1997, 296-297). Furthermore, active family involvement in abuse, as highlighted by the women in this project, is supported in the findings of the Clark, Silverman, Shahrouri, Everson-Rose and Groce (2010) research. They found that the family members of violent husbands, primarily the victim's mother-in-law or father-in-law, often committed further acts of violence against them (Clark et al. 2010, 417). Almost half of their participant pool, 46 per cent, identified harmful family interference in their abusive relationships (Clark et al. 2010, 418). Problematic family intervention in abusive relationships can act as a significant deterrent to help seeking.

In all of the women's accounts included in this section, the families of both perpetrators and of victims intervened in a way that enabled the women's further abuse, often attributing the blame for such acts to the victims themselves. While some participants were able to articulate their resistance to this victim blaming approach, it is deeply entrenched within our

communities, even within some victims themselves. Jessica, who remains with her abusive partner, is a powerful example of this. She notes in her story above that she was blamed for her own victimisation and could identify that the abuse was wrong, stating in relation to her children “*they don’t need to see that kind of stuff, I don’t want that for them.*” However, when asked if she had advice for other women in a similar situation during an individual interview, she put the responsibility for preventing violence on the victims. She commented, “*...it’s hard to ignore them because they make you say and do things to make them more angry, maybe just, like in my shoes, I didn’t talk back to him. I just let him go off on his own...*” The dominant belief that victims are to blame for the abuse perpetrated against them provides the basis from which problematic family intervention transpires.

Victim blaming has been identified as an influencing factor for unhelpful family and community involvement. Flood and Pease (2009, 127) relate this to the normalisation process, arguing that people with violence-condoning attitudes are more likely to assign blame to the victim and, therefore, respond to them with less empathy and support than those who do not hold such attitudes. This is supported by Gracia (2014) who argues that victim blaming attitudes coincide with a lack of empathy for the abused, absolving the perpetrators of wrongdoing and third parties of the responsibility to meaningfully intervene. The above stories reflect this, wherein families attribute blame to the women and intervene in a problematic manner, either by returning the victim to her abusive home or committing further acts of violence against her. This can be understood as a practical barrier within our families and communities that prevent our women from seeking assistance to address their abuse.

COLLECTIVE FEAR OF CHILD REMOVAL

A deep-seated fear of child removal was identified by our women as a key internal cause of their unwillingness to seek assistance in the context of family violence. This collective fear among the members of the communities involved in this project is so profound that many women discussed their experiences of hiding their own victimisation and even running away to avoid contact with police and child welfare authorities. The fear of State intervention in this area is well founded. Almost all families on Noongar country, where this project took place, were found by the *Bringing Them Home Report* to have been directly impacted by the mass child removal practiced under Stolen Generation policy (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, 31). In addition to this, State-based information sharing agreements, in which women seeking police intervention for family violence incidents are reported to child protection authorities, are cause for further resistance (Western Australia. Department of

Communities 2017). Fear of child removal is a significant barrier to Aboriginal women's help seeking in the context of abusive relationships.

The Stories of Our Women

"It's one of the most heart breaking things you'll ever witness seeing a child removed from their mother... There's a lot of stuff that's going down that isn't talked about and a lot of stuff that isn't talked about is because sometimes we as community and as women in our families, we don't talk about it, because we fear the risk of our children being taken away so a lot of people are hiding it."

- Sheree, 48 years

"I was 16 when I first went through domestic violence. I didn't used to report it, I used to keep it quiet and just let it go until it started getting a bit too much then I thought the police would help me out not knowing the outcome that whatever happens, the police automatically go straight to DCP [child welfare] and then DCP gets involved and starts coming saying if it doesn't stop, we're going to take the kids. DCP used to really come at me a lot. There was times where I would duck them [hide] and go to other people's houses just to get them off my back. I used to hide from DCP because I didn't want to face them on my own, a few times I did face them on my own. They just threatened to take my kids away but I never really got my support from them."

- Jessica, 26 years

"... I gave birth and he came down, he stayed with me for about three months and he flogged me when my baby was three months old and actually knocked me clean out. I didn't put the police on him, I was frightened. I remember my Nanna saying, 'don't get the police involved because they might call welfare and your baby be taken off of you.' So that was it... Then when I grew older, every time I saw my sister, she was always busted up and I said to her 'you need to call the police' and she said 'well if I do that, the welfare will come in.' She wasn't reporting domestic violence but the neighbours were. Welfare was called and she was too frightened to open the door to them, actually packed some clothes up and took off for a while... She end up losing her kids from being homeless and through domestic violence and then she just spiralled downhill from there... she lost her kids for about 18 months, nearly 2 years."

- Linda, 46 years

Discussion

The stories above highlight a community awareness of the relationship between police and child protection authorities, causing anxiety among women who are experiencing family violence. While two of the older participants, Sheree and Linda, noted that women are already aware of this relationship, or are made aware prior to help seeking, young mother Jessica stated that she was not. Sheree and Linda both state that this awareness prevents them from pursuing external support as *“we fear the risk of our children being taken away”*. Alternatively, Jessica, who did seek police intervention, commented *“I thought the police would help me out, not knowing the outcome that whatever happens, the police automatically go straight to DCP [welfare]”*. It is implied here that had she known of the information sharing between police and child welfare, she would not have requested police assistance.

The deep collective anxiety in relation to child protection involvement has induced a veil of secrecy in our communities surrounding family violence. As Sheree commented above, *“There’s a lot of stuff that’s going down that isn’t talked about... a lot of people are hiding it”*. The resulting active concealment of abuse was a repeated theme throughout data collection with many women noting secrecy as a response encouraged by their families. Young mother Rose, 26, recounted *“Mum said you know, don’t tell anyone, don’t call the police, don’t get them involved, because the welfare will get involved...”* This fear of having their victimisation exposed was strong among the women involved in this project, as was the belief that child protection would remove their children on the sole basis of their status as abused women. The silencing of our women through fear of child removal is of key concern as such silencing prevents women from attaining much needed support.

The fear of the child welfare agency’s involvement following family violence disclosure is common for all abused women, however, such fear in the Aboriginal community is rooted in our unique experience. In Linda’s story, she notes it was her nanna who advised her not to seek police involvement. Linda’s nanna, as with many of the Elders who participated in this project, were members of the Stolen Generation. Sixteen women who participated in this project were aged over 50 and, with data collection taking place on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, it should be noted that these sixteen were born under oppressive State-based Aboriginal policy. As such, systematic child removal on the basis of race is a lived experience for many of the women involved and also for a large section of our general community. This is clearly expressed in the comments of Tina, aged 69 years, who contends

“...they’re saying they’re not doing what they done in the olden days [Stolen Generation], but they still do it.” Further to this, Nicole, 35, reflects, “I remember my grandmother’s stories and I remember my mother’s stories... I’m experiencing the same story.” While these policies have since been repealed, the distress of mothers and children who were subjected to them remains an ever-present part of our collective consciousness. Considering this, fears of child removal, as outlined by the three stories above, are well founded.

There is ample academic evidence which demonstrates the deeply ingrained collective fear of child removal among Aboriginal families. In Douglas and Walsh’s (2010, 500) research with domestic violence practitioners, participants noted a high rate of anxiety among Aboriginal clients in regards to child protection intervention, which they related to the historic mass child removal. The strong relationship between colonial separation of Aboriginal families and this deep collective fear is further supported in studies by Humphreys (2008, 233) and Ivec, Braithwaite and Harris (2012, 87-88). Additionally, a child protection agency’s involvement was identified as a key concern in relation to family violence among Western Australian Aboriginal communities by Wilson et al. (2017, 8). Considering this, the fear of welfare intervention, highlighted in the stories Sheree, Linda and Jessica, can be understood in relation to historic Aboriginal child removal policy and as a collective experience across Aboriginal communities.

The extent of this fear can be found in the women’s extreme responses to the prospect of the child protection agency’s involvement, which goes beyond secrecy to actively hiding from the authorities. This was a theme in both Linda and Jessica’s stories, the former whose sister “...actually packed some clothes up and took off for a while...” and the latter saying she “...would duck them [hide] and go to other people’s houses...”. This was echoed by other participants such as Gedda, 73 years, who commented that her granddaughter was currently in hiding with her young child, “DCP [welfare] been looking for her and when they get her, they’re going to take the baby”. Another participant, Walley, referred to the helplessness that this situation causes, stating “they’re in this horrible predicament that they can’t get themselves out.” This mirrors the sentiments of Stolen Generation Era mothers, who “lived with the fear of their children being abducted by welfare workers and police, often having to hide their children” (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997). The fear of child removal results in the revictimisation of Aboriginal women who feel the need to leave their homes not only to

protect their children from their violent partner but also to protect them from removal by welfare authorities.

The extreme collective fear of child protection authorities within our communities is a key barrier obstructing Aboriginal women from seeking help in the context of family violence. Past government practices heavily inform the contemporary experience of the members of our communities and the intergenerational transmission of these experiences is evident throughout our women's stories. The fear is real, derived from the lived experiences of our people and is now deeply entrenched in our collective consciousness. In relation to family violence, this internal anxiety has become so overwhelming for many mothers that they are going to extreme lengths to not only conceal their abuse but also to physically hide from authorities. In doing so, they feel as though they are protecting their children from the State. Unfortunately, it also results in such women being unable to seek support from the statutory system to protect themselves and their children from the primary threat, the acts of violence themselves. As such, family violence victims are being punished by the very system that is supposed to keep them and their children safe.

CONCLUSION

Family violence is a deeply ingrained issue within our communities. The endemic rates at which it is occurring has been identified by our women as they commented that we are all impacted by family violence. It has been argued that the perpetual cycle of abuse that is transmitted intergenerationally can be traced back to the trauma of our colonial oppression and ongoing disenfranchisement of our communities. Intergenerational trauma has become intergenerational violence and is now occurring at such high rates that it has become acceptable relationship behaviour in the eyes of many in our community. As a result of this, those who perceive violence to be a normal aspect of family life will not identify it as a problem and, therefore, will not seek help.

This normalisation process has established an environment of social acceptability towards intimate partner abuse which enables the problematic intervention of families. While participants noted that family could be an enabler for seeking assistance, many noted that after disclosing their victimisation to their family, they were encouraged to return to their homes to face further abuse. Furthermore, the family of their abusive partner often provoked such violence or, as recounted by several participants, perpetrated additional violence against them. The problematic ways in which we as a community respond to family violence victims is influential in their attitudes to help seeking. The hindering of women's initial help seeking

attempts often result in them feeling that future attempts will be unsuccessful and, therefore, resigns them to ongoing victimisation.

The collective deep seated fear of child removal in our communities also deters women from seeking assistance to address family violence. The systematic removal of Aboriginal children on the basis of race is a lived experience for many in our communities and its legacy is very real. Our women fear child welfare authorities and believe that exposing their status as abused women will result in the removal of their children from their care. The extent of this fear was highlighted in the women's stories of being discouraged from help seeking, hiding their abuse and physically hiding from statutory authorities. These stories demonstrate that our women feel that they not only need to protect themselves and their children from their partner's abuse but also from State intervention.

Our communities exist in a complex socio-political context which informs the way that we understand, experience and respond to family violence. The women who participated in this project love their families and communities, as do I. We do not wish to demonise the perpetrators of violence; they are our partners, our fathers, our uncles, our brothers, our cousins and our sons. Instead, we wish to provide a clear understanding of the current plight of our women who are being harmed and the obstacles that prevent us from seeking the assistance we so desperately need. In doing so, we have reflected on the experiences of our women, highlighting the underlying views and practices of our own families and communities which enable the ongoing victimisation of our women.

Structural Barriers

INTRODUCTION

For women experiencing family violence, the institutional response to their victimisation is fundamental to their inability to secure meaningful support and protection. Family violence has only recently gained recognition as a public policy concern; therefore, the structural response to it is still developing. Statutory institutions are often the first responders in cases of family violence and the way in which they approach victims can strongly influence future help-seeking attempts. Many of the women whose stories are included in this section speak of their attempts to seek institutional support or requests for assistance from family violence service providers and speak of being turned away or blamed for their own abuse. This, they argue, worked to further disempower them.

The unhelpful responses that will be discussed here are understood as structural barriers. The two government institutions discussed in this section, the police and child protection authorities, will also be discussed in the following chapter that covers institutional racism. The women discussed these statutory bodies' responses to their abuse as fundamentally flawed and they did so in two ways. First, they sometimes identified this as a general antipathy from those in the departments towards women experiencing family violence; and, second, they spoke about a deeper level of institutional contempt grounded in racism. This chapter explores the problematic approach of both the police and child welfare in relation to family violence and this chapter also discusses the additional layer of hostility stemming from a culture of institutional racism. This differs from the general fear of the child protection department as discussed in the preceding chapter in that this chapter examines actual cases of harmful intervention.

There are three key forms of structural barriers identified by our women. These are: i) crisis accommodation inaccessibility; ii) police negligence, and; iii) harmful child protection intervention. Our women argued that family violence refuge accommodation was consistently unavailable for two reasons: there being a lack of beds in safe locations and the refuge's age restrictions on male children. The police were repeatedly said to be ambivalent towards family violence victims, which often put victims at high risk of future harm. Delayed police responses, minimising the severity of family violence offences and a lack of appropriate follow through

were identified as key issues in this context. Finally, harmful child protection intervention will be explored in relation to the punitive victim-blaming approach of those in the welfare authorities which, the women argued, penalised mothers for their own victimisation.

REFUGE ACCOMMODATION INACCESSIBILITY

The inaccessibility of refuge accommodation for family violence victims was a repeated theme throughout data collection. Refuges not only provide an immediate safe haven for family violence victims but also therapeutic intervention, advocacy and ongoing support which enables women to establish their newfound independence. Access to crisis accommodation is a “critical factor in women’s decisions about whether or not to leave a violent relationship”, particularly so for women with children (Macdonald 2007, 22). The discussion in this section primarily focuses on the women’s experiences with crisis accommodation, many of whom argue that refuges either did not have the capacity to house them and their children in a safe location or that refuges imposed age restrictions on male children, essentially excluding mothers with older sons. Many of our women report being repeatedly turned away from crisis accommodation when attempting to flee family violence and then returning to their violent homes for lack of a safe alternative.

The Stories of Our Women

*“I couldn’t get into the refuges in Perth, I got told no room. In *country town*, yeah there was always a spot. Any time I’d ring up there, I got a spot, but it wasn’t a spot where I wanted to be because I had to put my sons in school, I had to walk them to school, I had to walk in that same area [that he was in], I couldn’t get out. They wanted to transfer me all the way to Broome. I said no, that’s too far. Yeah, I was trying to get out of *country town* to a refuge up here [Perth] because this is where I wanted to be, I would have had support from my family as well as this is where I grew up, had friends. They was always full up here. They offered me nothing else, they just told me no and that’s it. So I just had to go back to him again. I had no choice to go back to it.”*

- Jessica, 26 years

“... Going through DV [family violence] and wanting to escape all the time, I’d go to these places [refuge accommodation] to seek refuge and a lot of these places won’t take you if you’ve got sons that are at a certain age. These are children too, they might be ten, but they suffer. You know? And they scared kids but you can’t go to these places because they’re boys

and they're looked at as if they're adults or something. So where's that help? If you've got to run to a refuge, if you've got these kids, I have four sons, so a lot of these places wouldn't take me because of that fact. I had to go back every time to the same thing every time. Cause you've got places that are refuges, that call themselves refuges, and they don't help us black women who've got sons like that. [They say] 'You can leave your kids elsewhere.' No, I wouldn't do that, I wasn't going to separate my kids cause my babies needed to be with me... You know there's still more women like that today that's got sons, they need somewhere where they can feel safe, where they can go and they can take their kids, their sons, they can take their sons, and not be rejected because they boys and they're at a certain age."

- Ariana, 45 years

Discussion

Both Jessica and Ariana recounted seeking help from and being denied access to family violence services. While the women had different reasons for being turned away, Jessica due to limited capacity and Ariana due to her sons, they experienced similar outcomes. After she was told that she must stay in a refuge in the small country town that she lived in with her abuser and his family, rather than being placed in the relative safety of Perth, Jessica commented that she *"...had to go back to him again. I had no choice to go back to it."* Similarly, when Ariana was repeatedly denied refuge placements due to her unwillingness to surrender custody of her male children, she felt defeated, *"I had to go back every time to the same thing every time."* When our women build the courage to attempt to leave their abusive partners they are routinely being denied access to safe accommodation, forcing them to return and enabling further violence against them.

Our women argued that crisis accommodation for family violence victims is consistently unavailable to them due to two reasons. The first is a lack of beds in safe locations. This is reflected in the story of Jessica who was unable to secure a placement in Perth and was expected to either live in a refuge within close proximity to her abuser, or relocate to Broome, which was over 2000km away from her support network. Another participant commented that she was also turned away when seeking refuge in Perth, *"...they said limited resources, they didn't have what was needed..."*. In recounting her attempts to seek placements for her clients, a frustrated Dory argued, *"You think we can get them into a safe house? You think we can get these mob into a refuge?... They were saying 'no, we can't help you, no, we can't support you', they say 'no, no, no, no'."* This is further echoed by another women who depicted a friends

similar experience, “...*she was running away from her man bashing her... and all these different refuge hostels she was ringing up was all filled up with people, she had nowhere to go.*” A lack of available crisis accommodation is being widely faced by women fleeing family violence and is forcing them to remain in abusive homes.

The inaccessibility of refuge accommodation in the Perth area is a well-known concern. According to a 2017 report tabled in the Parliament of Western Australia, there were 2627 denied requests by family violence victims for emergency accommodation in the Perth metropolitan area as a result of insufficient capacity during 2015-16 (Western Australia. Parliament of Western Australia 2017a, 3). Furthermore, for the 2016-17 period, there were extremely limited or no vacancies in Perth refuges on any given night (Western Australia. Parliament of Western Australia 2017a, 3). The experiences of our women being denied access to safe accommodation can be viewed within the broader context of a family violence system which routinely fails Perth women. In spite of this, the State claims it is making substantial investment to “break the cycle” and “offering better support and protection” for women and children (Western Australia. Department of the Premier and Cabinet 2017). From the consistent unavailability of crisis accommodation and the sheer volume of women being turned away when seeking such support, it is evident that the family violence sector remains chronically underfunded.

The second key cause of crisis accommodation inaccessibility is illustrated by Ariana’s story of being turned away due to her unwillingness to leave her sons behind. This is a common experience among our women who wish to flee their abusive homes but are unwilling to leave their sons behind to face such abuse alone. In detailing the story of seeking assistance for a close friend, one participant comments, “...*My friend had her older son with her and because he was a certain age, over 12 or something, he couldn’t stay at the refuge with her... she didn’t want to leave her kids around everywhere...*”. Further to this, another women noted that her friend was exposed to further danger because she would not give up custody of her son, “...*the refuges said the boy couldn’t go because he was like 12 years old at the time... So that stops a lot of mums, mums won’t leave their kids no matter what.*” While refuge accommodation is intended to provide a safe space for supporting women and their children who are escaping abuse, age limitation policies for male children are preventing access for many vulnerable families.

The denial of crisis accommodation to mothers who retain custody of their sons is the subject of a number of scholarly works. Policies that result in mothers with older sons being denied refuge are primarily derived from theories on the intergenerational transmission of violence which inevitably constructs the sons of abusive fathers as potential abusers themselves (Hester, Pearson, Harwin and Abrahams 2007, 72). While this theory is well established within the scholarly literature, as evidenced in the preceding chapter, its application in the crisis accommodation setting to exclude male children is problematic. Baker (2009) argues that this creates further harm by isolating boys from their families through the denial of safe accommodation with their mothers, by exposing them to further abuse from their fathers and by labelling them as potential abusers. An additional study by the same author found that the separation of older sons from their mothers and younger siblings due to refuge age exclusions had longstanding consequences, often resulting in resentment and animosity among the sons “left behind” (Baker 2005, 295).

When seeking assistance and a safe haven to enable their escape from family violence, many of our women are finding their attempts blocked due to problems in the crisis accommodation sector. Morley (2001) argues that access to safe housing is highly influential on a woman’s decision to leave an abusive relationship. Attaining a placement in appropriate refuge accommodation for our women and their children is difficult in the current context of limited crisis beds within the Perth region and, those who do successfully gain access, are faced with another obstacle. Due to the age restrictions placed on male children of women fleeing family violence, such mothers are faced with a profound dilemma. They must flee with their babies and daughters to safety, while leaving their sons to face the abuse alone, or remain together in the abusive home. The stories of our women demonstrate that they will not leave their sons behind. The concerns regarding refuge availability and age restrictions were reflected in the stories above whereby our women felt as though they had no option other than to remain with their abuser.

POLICE NEGLIGENCE

The women of our communities told stories of serious police negligence in relation to their family violence experiences. When seeking assistance during violent episodes, they often faced lengthy wait times for police attendance, a resistance to take meaningful action, and an inadequate response to offenders. They attributed this to a culture of ambivalence within the police force towards family violence victims and, as the first responders to such incidents, this

acts as a significant barrier to victims seeking help. A damning Parliamentary report supports this point, finding that police routinely “did not attend the scene or were slow to arrive”, “appeared unsupportive” and were “confused about correct procedure or unwilling to take action” (Western Australia. Legislative Assembly 2015, 52). Furthermore, officers were cited as making “insensitive comments, claiming it was not a policing matter or actively dissuading victims from making a statement” (Western Australia. Legislative Assembly 2015, 52). This report reflects the culture of apathy towards family violence within the police force which is adversely impacting our women in their time of need.

The Stories of Our Women

“...I went through DV [family violence], back then the police didn’t protect me. I went through the violence restraining orders and all the rest of it because I really thought that that fella was going to kill me and the police didn’t do much to support. One of the things that he done was, he fought the police in my parents’ house for the [police officer’s] gun. The police took him away, took him downtown and then just released him...”

- Dory, 46 years

“When you call them [police], they don’t come ‘til hours later or the next day and I’d say ‘I called you last night!’... When I got the [violence restraining] order, he kept breaking it and it wasn’t taken seriously. I was forever going in to the police station asking ‘have you found him yet?’ They were looking for him but not as hard as they would be if he’d stolen a car, you know? Breaking into my house in the middle of the night and stuff like that, they didn’t really care. I kept charging him but they ended up just letting him go anyway but then when they were looking for him for other things, they wanted to arrest him straight away. Because he was on the run, the police had to look for him because he was doing other stuff around the suburb. So they didn’t take domestic violence, they didn’t care about it that much... It made me angry, like they don’t take domestic violence seriously, not until someone dies anyways.”

- Rose, 26 years

“When I got bashed, I rang the police to come up there. An Aboriginal Liaison Police Officer came up there with another, the Sergeant or one of the Constables and said ‘What’s the problem?’ and he [her partner] said ‘No problem here’, so I said ‘He just bashed me and I want him out of my house!’ I remember them saying ‘Is that really what you want? Do you really want him to go?’ And I said ‘Yeah, fuck yeah, I want him out.’ And they said ‘Oh come

on... you know you're going to let him back in the house tomorrow'. They weren't even serious about what was going on, you know?"

- Cheeky, 48 years

Discussion

The stories of Dory, Rose and Cheeky highlight a strong sense of indifference within the police force towards victims of family violence. All three women recount having sought help from the police in order to address their abuse and two of them obtained legally binding violence restraining orders at the time. All of these women shared that their help seeking efforts were hindered by the officers' poor responses, which they believed were due to a lack of urgency directed towards addressing family violence in general. Dory contends that after a serious incident involving a firearm, the police *"took him downtown and then just released him..."*, while Rose stated *"they we're looking for him but not as hard as they would be if he'd stolen a car..."*. This indifferent approach towards family violence is further reinforced in the experience of Cheeky who requested police assistance to remove her partner after a violent incident, only to have them dissuade her from ousting him. There was a general consensus among our women that police responses towards family violence cases was purposefully negligent.

The women's initial interaction with police, being their attendance to the scene following a family violence incident, was often greatly delayed. Oftentimes, police did not attend the scene until hours or days later. This is reflected in this story of Rose and supported by a community Elder who noted that *"When you call the police here in Kwinana, you got to wait three hours before they come... They'll wait a while then come out and see if you still need their assistance..."*. This was further echoed in the comments of Zena, aged 40, *"When you do make the phone call for the police to come out, [they need to come] straight away and not come out when the perpetrator is already gone."* So delayed is the police response to family violence incidents that the situation has often subsided and the offender has already left, rendering their eventual attendance ineffectual. The stories of Rose and Jemma suggest this is intentional as family violence isn't *"taken seriously"* within the police force.

Delayed police response times in attending the scene of family violence incidents is a crucial issue. Calls to Western Australian police are triaged into numbered categories of urgency, with priority one referring to a life threatening situation and priority two requiring immediate police response for a serious offence in progress (Western Australia. Western

Australian Police 2017, 131). While the most recent Annual Report combines priorities one and two and targets a response time of 12 minutes, their Customer Service Charter sets the target at 9 minutes for priority 1 and 25 minutes for priority 2 (Western Australia. Western Australian Police 2017, 131; Western Australia. Western Australian Police, n.d). During this reporting period, one in five calls for priority 1 and 2 assistance were not attended to within the times targeted (Western Australia. Western Australian Police 2017, 131). The same report also acknowledges that it is “reasonable to assume that responding to priority 1 or 2 in marginal metropolitan areas may experience delays” (Western Australia. Western Australian Police 2017, 132). As such, family violence victims living in disadvantaged outer suburbs, such as the ones included in this research project, are likely to receive much longer police response times than that which are specified as acceptable and safe by the police force themselves.

When police finally did attend the scene, many of our women argue that they were unsupportive and were uninterested in the safety of victims. This is outlined in the three above stories and was a common theme across many of the other women’s stories. For example, Tania, aged 30, recounted her experience of being turned away from the police, “...*They say they can’t help... It’s really, really, sad because no one does care. Police shut the doors on you.*” In reference to a friend’s case, another woman stated “...*She went to the police, she asked for help... They didn’t take it seriously... The police failed her over and over and over and over again.*” That woman was later murdered in front of her children by her estranged abusive husband. As the first responders to such incidents, police officers are often the initial point of contact that abused women have with the statutory system and their contemptuous approach to these incidents can be extremely harmful.

The view that the police, as an institution, do not hold family violence incidents as a high concern is well supported in the academic literature. Research identifies a minimisation of the significance of family violence and the problematic use of officer discretion to refuse further investigation or charge the offender to be common in Australian abuse victims’ interactions with the police force (Douglas 2012; McPhedren, Gover and Mazerolle 2017; Meyer 2011). In their Australian study involving 162 police officers, Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon (2018) found that officers made a distinction between “real victims”, those who have been seriously assaulted through no fault of their own, and “imposters, liars and timewasters” who were exaggerating their abuse or did not follow through with criminal justice procedures (Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018, 105). Both types were treated with scepticism (Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018, 105). The participating officers described family

violence as “frustrating”, “annoying” and the authors note that they often struggled to hide their cynicism towards victims (Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018, 108 – 109).

Some women’s experience went further than a lack of police compassion towards them as victims to the police treating victims as the problem. In some cases, women requested police attendance and, rather than ensuring the safety of the victim and her children, they removed her and left her children in the care of their abusive father. Linda explains that after being abused, some women are “*so worked up and angry and that when the police arrives... they remove the victim.*” Hazel, aged 62, witnessed this when assisting her neighbour to seek help, “*...even though he was the perpetrator, the police came to the door and said to her ‘he seems pretty happy with the kids there so we’re leaving him there’.*” One of the participating young mothers had a similar experience, “*... I ended up getting hit, clothes ripped off... I rang the police... Police came over and I didn’t even get my son, my partner who abused me ended up keeping him... I was left with nothing, not even my kids. I felt hurt, sore, went home crying.*” These experiences are backed up by Goodman-Delahunty and Corbo Crehan’s (2015, 1014) research which found that the police applied similar pressure to abused women to surrender their children to their abusers. In these stories, not only were the police unhelpful but their intervention was actually harmful and placed the children at further risk.

Considering the police force’s central role in providing victims access to protection and justice, their attitudes towards family violence and its victims are a significant barrier to help seeking. In the statutory system, they are the only institution able to help our women; however, many of our women, and Australian women more generally, are being denied this due to a culture of apathy within the police force and their resulting negligence towards victims of abuse. Research shows that women who experience “indifferent and unsupportive” interactions with police officers after requesting their intervention felt discouraged from seeking police assistance in future (Meyer 2011, 279). This is further supported by Robinson and Strohshine (2005) who contend that victim dissatisfaction with police responses has significant consequences for future help seeking.

Our women lack faith in the police force to protect them from the very real danger within their homes, which results in a lack of hope for a future without violence. When they do seek help, they are often stonewalled by police officers and their cases are not adequately pursued. As a result, many of our women cannot see a way to end their abuse which feeds a self-fulfilling prophecy. She cannot see a way out and, therefore, she does not seek one. This

is quite aptly summed up in Dory's closing comments, *"I think that if the women could actually believe that the police could get these men out of their lives and keep them away, the women would leave much sooner."* The negligent approach of police officers, as outlined by our women and supported by the evidence, has real life implications for victims of abuse and, as such, the police force themselves are contributing to our women's ongoing victimisation.

PUNITIVE CHILD PROTECTION INTERVENTION

Malevolent intervention by child protection authorities in relation to family violence was also identified by our women as a key barrier which obstructed their efforts to address family violence. The women argued that child welfare authorities communicated poorly with abused women and were punitive in their approach, characterising abused women as bad mothers due to their victimisation. This approach can be understood as grounded in the ideological foundations of the child protection institution which includes 'exposure to family violence' within its definition of child abuse (Western Australia. Department for Child Protection and Family Services n.d). If witnessing violence is considered child abuse then the mother may be perceived as engaging in such abuse when her children witness the violence perpetrated against her. In their influential Australian study of child protection practice in family violence cases, Douglas and Walsh (2010, 493) argue that mothers are perceived as primarily responsible for the care of children and, therefore, are often blamed for not protecting them. They argue that this often results in female victims receiving a higher level of scrutiny than the male perpetrators (Douglas and Walsh 2010, 493).

The Stories of Our Women

"DCP always look as though you're bad mother, you're a bad mother just because of the fact that your partner is doing that [being abusive] so it automatically makes them think you're a bad mother, that you can't look after your children, you can't protect your children. They'd always come in and question all different things like 'if this keeps going, we're going to take your kids off of you' ... I don't think it's fair on us women going through it... It was like they'd only come to me like, 'we're going to take your kids from you because your partner is doing this to you' but yet they didn't help... They would really put me down as being a bad mum... They was really overpowering me in a big way saying that I'm going to take your kids... They just threatened to take my kids away but I never really got my support from them, nah I don't recall, no, no, not even programs, not even a women's group to talk about it, nah, they

only just about the children. Like it was my problem, like I'm the bad person, because they made it like I was being a bad mother to my children even though I was being abused."

- Jessica, 26 years

"One of my nieces, she was bashed while she was heavily pregnant and she went into labour all busted up and DCP was in the corridor waiting to grab the baby. Now only cause someone intervened, they said 'you need to go get this baby otherwise DCP are going to take it', the only way we got to keep the baby in the family is that I became primary carer for 12 months. Now what I was more angry about was DCP had already made that decision... they automatically was going to give the baby over a soon as it was born but because we intervened at that time... we were fighting to keep this baby. It became a very very traumatic experience for the whole family. Number one for the mother, because they didn't offer any help, they knew she was pregnant and they knew when she was having her baby... but what they didn't do was, they didn't give her a choice. You either get yourself together and get yourself ready to be a mum or we're going to take baby, but they waited 'til she was going to give birth. So she was assuming that she was going to become a mum but instead, welfare was waiting to take that away from her without giving her any choices. DCP are bullies, they are an authoritative [sic] figure and they have the power..."

- Walley, 52 years

Discussion

Both women recount their traumatic experiences with child welfare services throughout the abuse which caused further distress. Jessica and Walley both contend that child protection authorities were willing to remove the children from their families on the basis of the mother's victimisation, but offered little support to address the original problem, being the abuse. Threats to remove children, and in Walley's experience actual attempts to remove them, without the provision of adequate support were identified as key issues by both women and the broader group. Jessica comments *"they'd only come to me like, 'we're going to take your kids from you because your partner is doing this to you' but yet they didn't help"*, while Walley notes that *"they didn't offer any help, they knew she was pregnant and they knew when she was having her baby..."*. This punitive approach towards mothers experiencing abuse is attributed, by Jessica, to a victim blaming mentality within the department. She noted that they associate

being a victim with being “...a bad mother, that you can’t look after your children, you can’t protect your children.”

Many of our women talked about their experiences of having child welfare authorities place responsibility on them for their own abuse and, additionally, treat its continuation as evidence of the women’s poor parenting. The perception of mother blaming was strong amongst the participants, with one noting, “*They punish us for our partners...*”. Similarly, in the above story, Jessica notes that welfare authorities treated her “*like I’m the bad person, because they made it like I was being a bad mother to my children even though I was being abused.*” This view is further supported by the young mother, Natalie, who commented that many of her peers have had their children removed solely due to their victimisation: “*I know a few young girls who’ve lost their kids and they’re the best mothers going, just for the sake of domestic violence.*” The approach of child protection authorities towards mothers experiencing abuse was generally characterised as insensitive and punitive, with a participating family support practitioner stating that “*...it was just an uphill battle to get them [DCP] to have any kind of compassion and understanding.*”

Mother blaming is a common theme in the scholarly literature on family violence. In their study examining the dynamics between mothers and child protection authorities, Douglas and Walsh (2010) found that welfare workers construct mothers as primarily responsible for their children’s care and, therefore, primarily responsible for failing to protect their children from exposure to violence. They argue that this is reflected in their responses to family violence cases, wherein the mother’s “unprotective” behaviours are emphasised while the father’s abusive behaviour is ignored, preventing the provision of meaningful support to the family (Douglas and Walsh 2010, 493). Similarly, Mandel (2010) argues that child protection practices are guided by a double standard with respect to parenting, mothers having a high level of perceived responsibility and fathers having a low level. This indicates that mothers experience a higher level of accountability for their victimisation than the fathers who are abusing them (Mandel 2010). This is further evidenced by another study which found that in family violence related child protection cases mothers were referred to parenting programs at a high frequency while very few referrals for fathers occurred (Allagia, Gadalla, Shlonsky, Jenney and Dacuik 2015, 91).

Further to their perception of victim blaming, our women argued that welfare workers intentionally disempowered them and, in some cases, bullied them. Jessica explicitly argued

this above, stating, “*They was really overpowering me in a big way saying that I’m going to take your kids...*”. This abused of power between mothers and child welfare authorities was highlighted by many of our women throughout the data collection process. Further to her quote above, Walley discussed her perceptions of welfare practices: “*DCP are bullies, they are an authoritative [sic] figure and they have the power... they come in with a force to a young mum or a family that has no rights and they know that and they use that.*” Similarly, Sheree comments that many of the abused women that she works with feel “*...very spoken down to and they really feel that imbalance of power... sometimes they feel a hopelessness, I have mums say to me ‘do people ever get their kids back? Like I just feel that this is a big wall in front of me that I’m never going to get over’.*” The punitive approach of welfare authorities, grounded in their victim blaming beliefs, is not only further disempowering abused women but also harming their children through their revictimisation by the system.

This approach can be understood in terms of the department’s mandate, being the protection of children. The disempowerment of mothers through actions undertaken to benefit the child, is not of concern. The resulting bullying behaviours of child protection staff can be understood as a practical expression of this and is not an isolated experience. Davies and Krane (2006, 415) argue that victimised mothers are often treated in an “antagonistic or even volatile” manner by their case managers. Further to this, women participating in Johnson and Sullivan’s (2008, 246) research recounted being “callously” and “disrespectfully” treated by child protection practitioners. Following this, it can be argued that child protection workers are further victimising mothers through their domineering approach, knowingly disempowering mothers in what they perceive to be the best interests of the child. While authorities may see these mothers as failing their children, it is important to remember that they too are victims in need of support.

Our women identified a reluctance on the part of welfare authorities to provide meaningful support for family violence. Both of the above women discuss this, with Jessica contending, “*They just threatened to take my kids away but I never really got my support from them...*”, and Walley stating “*...they didn’t offer any help...*”. This position was also strongly reinforced by the other women involved in this project, such as Cheeky, who notes that there was no support offered to her daughter before her granddaughter was removed: “*...there was no consultation with DCP, they was just there at the hospital ready to take baby off my daughter.*” Likewise, Zena was met with resistance when seeking help from welfare to address family violence: “*When I was asking and begging for help... Why wasn’t there help for me?*”

In response to concerns, community Elder, Martha, argues that a family inclusive approach which prioritises healing the family, as opposed to the current child-centred practice which routinely results in removal, is needed. She argues “...*they’re taking these babies... they shouldn’t be doing that, they should be taking the mum with the baby and putting them in services where they can be looked after.*”

This lack of family support and willingness to remove children from their families in cases of domestic abuse are a well-known problems. Douglas and Walsh (2010, 492) contend that welfare authorities often perceive both parents in violent relationships to be “problematic” and the mother’s protective behaviours are often overlooked. This situates mothers as co-abusers which relieves the department of a responsibility to support her. Further research with abused mothers found that welfare services provided “little to no direct or concrete help” and “little ongoing support”; rather, they were forced into short term generic workshops that did not address their underlying issues (Hughes, Chau and Poff 2011, 1087). Even when seemingly helpful action is undertaken by authorities, it can be used as evidence of the mother’s poor parenting. Hester (2010, 518) recounts the story of a woman who was provided with a duress alarm, however, her triggering of the alarm was later used as justification to remove her children due to her inability to keep them safe.

The intervention practices of child protection services are characterised by our women as malicious and unsupportive. The practical implications of this are significant for abused mothers who are already vulnerable and disempowered as a result of their victimisation. Rather than focusing their limited energy on strategies to address the abuse, their suffering is exacerbated by threats to remove their children and they are instead forced to focus on meeting the demands of child protection authorities. In discussing the case of a vulnerable family member who was overwhelmed by child protection involvement, a senior community woman stated that “*She was exhausted, she’d been abused and she needed someone to come in and fight for her.*” In this experience, the fight was no longer about protecting her from her abuser but to protect her and her children from welfare intervention. As such, the help seeking of our women to address family violence is being derailed through insensitive and damaging welfare practices that further fragment families rather than support them. The ongoing trauma caused by such practices are summed up in the words of a prominent community Elder: “...*its mental abuse, its emotional abuse what’s happening to our kids when they’re removed from their parents, you can never ever heal that pain...*”.

CONCLUSION

The structural barriers that victims face when seeking help to address family violence are numerous and this chapter has briefly explored the three central themes as identified by our women. Crisis accommodation capacity in the Perth Metropolitan area, where the two communities included in this project are located, is limited. The high rate of women being turned away due to unavailable crisis accommodation is concerning and gendered age restrictions present a secondary barrier for women fleeing their abusive homes. Rather than providing the safe haven that these women so desperately need to rebuild their lives, refuges, due to the chronic underfunding in the family violence sector, are turning vulnerable women and their children away. As a result of this, many of our women argued that they were forced to return to their violent partners.

Police negligence was also a key issue identified by our women as a major barrier to their ability to access meaningful support in the context of family violence. When seeking police assistance with respect to family violence incidents, our women are experiencing lengthy police response times. These are often so delayed that by the time that police arrive, the crisis has subsided and the offender has left the scene, rendering their eventual attendance ineffective. Further, our women characterise the general demeanour of officers as unsupportive with many recounting experiences in which the attending officers appeared uninterested in their safety and attempts were made to dissuade them from reporting the incident. The claims made by our women are supported by the Government's own reports which speak to an institutional ambivalence in regards to family violence cases.

The final structural barrier to securing assistance to address family violence, as identified by our women, was the punitive intervention strategies of child protection authorities. Our women voiced a strong resentment towards welfare authorities, a result of their general hostility with regards to family violence cases. Perceived by authorities as primarily responsible for their children, our women repeatedly discussed feeling blamed for their children's exposure to their abuse, with threats and actions to remove children being common. In their interactions with child protection workers, the women recounted the strong power imbalance that left them at the mercy of protection workers' demands, which some characterised as bullying. In addition to this punitive approach by authorities, there was little meaningful support offered to mothers.

For Aboriginal women experiencing family violence, and for Australian women more generally, these structural barriers are not only hindering their access to vital support services but also causing them and their children further harm. Help seeking is a momentous step forward for abused women who, generally, have endured violence over a prolonged period before gathering the courage and determination to reach out for support. Help seeking therefore can be understood as a turning point. Above, we have explored our women's experiences of seeking assistance and being either turned away or blamed for their own victimisation by the very institutions that are supposed to help them. As many of them note, this structural response to their abuse caused them to lose hope and return to the abusive situations that they were trying to escape. If such responses are improved our vulnerable women and their children may be supported to address family violence and live free from abuse. Until then, not only will the statistics continue to indicate failed service sectors but our women and children will continue to suffer.

Institutional Racism as a Barrier

INTRODUCTION

As has been discussed in earlier chapters, Australia has a long history of racism, one plagued by overt institutional persecution and the dehumanisation of Aboriginal peoples. Throughout this chapter, our women will assert that this continues today through the practical operations of key State institutions. The statutory organisations focussed on here are the police force and child protection agencies, both of whom play major roles in the State's response to family violence and the protection of women and children. Police and child welfare practices, which are underpinned by racial biases, present a significant barrier to our women securing meaningful assistance to address family violence. Ongoing strained relations between these departments and our communities have been evidenced in previous chapters and this chapter will examine our women's perceptions with respect to the cause of these tensions.

Under previous policies, Aboriginal peoples have been criminalised and dehumanised. State institutions, such as the early police force and child welfare system, played a critical role in this and were responsible for the application of oppressive policy. Our contemporary institutions do not exist in isolation from these historical injustices; rather, they are the foundation from which the institutions have evolved. Racial bias is inherent in the ideological framework of these institutions and, as our women will affirm below, it is actively maintained in their current day to day operations. While many of our women implied experiences of racism in their negative interactions with State departments, the evidence included here will draw exclusively from those women who explicitly identified racism in their stories. The statutory response to family violence in general is problematic; however, ingrained institutional racism presents a further layer of hostility towards our women who are seeking support and protection.

State racism is discussed here in terms of two institutions that were identified by our women to be problematic. There are: i) Police; and, ii) Child Protection. It will be argued that the police consistently demonstrate indifference towards the Aboriginal women who seek assistance from them during their time of most need. Our women assert that, due to their

Aboriginality, they are dehumanised by the policing institution and that the low value placed on Aboriginal lives is reflected in the way that police officers respond to their requests for protection. Furthermore, our women hold that child protection services continue to operate from a Western paradigm which reproduces ideas of Aboriginal inferiority. This, they contend, results in Aboriginal methods of collective parenting being dismissed as fundamentally deficient and the unnecessary removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

POLICE

Our women strongly identified a culture of racism within the police force as a key barrier to securing meaningful intervention. The police force, being the colonial tool of oppression and the primary enforcer of historic persecutory policy, was founded on racialized practices and our women contend that this approach continues today. The manner in which police understand and respond to Aboriginal peoples has long been a matter of concern. The 1992 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found rampant racism within the policing sector on a national level and, among many other findings, that this heavily informed a complacent attitude towards crimes with Aboriginal victims (Austlii 1998). While some States were responsive to the Inquiry's findings, WA in particular was actively resistant to the accusations of institutional racism and the implementation of recommendations (Harvey 2012, 34). The ongoing denial of racial bias within the police force is inconsistent with the experiences of members of our communities. Our women argue that institutional racism continues to heavily influence the nature of police responses to Aboriginal family violence victims and to our people more generally.

The Stories of Our Women

“Black lives matter, you know, black lives matter. And the reason I say this, from several times ringing up monarch [police], they take forever and a day. I could have been dead, other people in same circumstances, black women, they could have been dead. I rang them up constantly, constantly, that night I nearly lost my life, I snuck my phone and I rung up, he found the phone and smashed it. I mean, the calls and the calls, they came out to my place... because it had deadlocks on it, they couldn't get in or out, but I mean they saw how distressed I was and... he's Mr Cool, Calm and Collected, like nothing's going on, but here I am, they could see me shaking, they could have at least broke the door down or something, you know, but it's just a black woman.”

- Ariana, 45 years

“... She went to the police, she asked for help, she found notes and notes and notes with machetes and photos, the bedroom was like a shrine... She went up to the police station and she said ‘he’s stalking me, he’s just been released from jail’... She wanted the police to go back to the house so they could see it with her, they said ‘no, you go get it and you bring it back to us’. So she went to the house and she picked up all this stuff and... she had this machete and monarch [police] was playing around with it and they didn’t take it seriously... Our women are going to the police, they are saying ‘I need help, can you help me?’, and they’re just being left, it’s like ‘your life doesn’t matter, off you go, sort it out for yourself’. Sometimes I feel as if the blacker your skin is, the more hard done by you are. If she was a white woman... the police would have treated it differently for sure. I think they would have done what they could do to help get her into a safe place for the night but with us, they just left us out the front of the police station standing around for nearly three hours not knowing where to go or what to do and offered no protection at all. [Police don’t help] because the women are Aboriginal women... They treat their dogs better than they treat us Aboriginal women who go in there for help. They wouldn’t allow their dog to be chased down by somebody with a knife and killed yet they allow it for our Aboriginal women, they turn their back and treat us as if we’re invisible. There’s no value for the life of an Aboriginal woman... They’ve got this attitude where it doesn’t matter, it’s just another black woman. They seem to have more value on cars and materialistic things than they do on an Aboriginal woman. More value on a dog than they do on Aboriginal women... they don’t think much of us.”

- Dory, 46 years

Discussion

Both women explicitly identify institutional racism in their experiences with the police force. They contend that the racial bias of police officer’s results in their lives being valued less than that of non-Aboriginal women and, subsequently, they are provided with a lower level of support and protection. Ariana asserts that, to the police, she was “...just a black woman” and, in response to this experience, she adamantly declared “black lives matter.” Ariana strongly associates police officers’ indifference towards her abuse with racism, which she argues is the reason that they did not adequately intervene. Dory supports Ariana’s position that black lives do not matter in the eyes of our police, arguing that they hold “...more value on a dog than they do on Aboriginal women.” She also believes that race is the primary reason why Aboriginal women do not receive proper assistance. The women contend that, due to their

Aboriginality, less value is placed on their lives and that this correlates with the level of importance attributed to their cases.

The parallel drawn here by Ariana between the plight of Aboriginal Australians and black Americans through her use of the term “*black lives matter*” is particularly interesting. This statement refers to the American social justice movement Black Lives Matter, which was formed in response to police brutality and killings of unarmed black people (Agozino 2018). Beginning as a Twitter hash tag #BlackLivesMatter and evolving into large scale political action, this movement seeks “accountability for racist violence and an immediate end to the murder of black people at the hands of the state” (Rickford 2016, 36). Supporters believe that racial bias underlies police action, whether consciously or unconsciously, and this results in inequitable policing and, often, the unnecessary use of force against people of colour. By using this term, Ariana is likening police hostility towards Aboriginal peoples in Australia to that of an international black experience.

Both women above argue that racism within the police force has very real implications for the Aboriginal women who seek help from them. Both consider this a matter of life and death, whereby police were exposing them to the risk of being murdered. As Ariana recounts, “*I could have been dead*”, and in Dory’s story, she discusses the repeated help seeking behaviours of her friend who was later murdered by her abusive partner while he was on parole for other crimes against her. This case was later subject to a coronial enquiry which found gross police negligence as a key contributor to her death (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). Dory states that the police inaction in this case was a direct result of the dehumanisation of the victim due to her Aboriginality: “*There’s no value for the life of an Aboriginal woman...*”. This case is particularly relevant to this study as the victim was a part of the Armadale community and many of the women participating in the Armadale focus group engaged with the same local police station that was found to have failed this Aboriginal woman.

Perceptions of racism within the police force developed and were reinforced in three ways: first, through direct negative experiences of racism as outlined above; second, through comparisons between police responses to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal victims; and third, via insider knowledge of police culture. As a collective, our women believe that the police force is failing Aboriginal women. This was reflected strongly in the women’s overall perceptions of police, with one participant noting “... *they treat us as if we’re nothing...*” and another stating “...*they just usually do nothing for us, you know?*” This is particularly

problematic, as Walley observes “...*police are worst because police are always the first one on the scene.*” In being the first responders to violent incidents and the primary institution responsible for protecting victims, the existence of racism within the police force and police officers resulting antipathy towards Aboriginal family violence victims has very serious implications for our women’s safety.

Our women said that they had witnessed serious discrepancies in the way that police respond to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal victims of abuse. As Cheeky comments, “*They take it more serious when a wadjella [white] woman gets bashed but when it’s Noongar womans [sic], they think it’s the norm...*”. She supports this claim by describing her own experience with police wherein they refused to take her report and dissuaded her from evicting her abusive partner. Another participant recounts witnessing this incongruence in responses; “...*two experiences with white girls in my family, something happens, monarch [police] there just like that... all because she’s a white woman. Black women, nothing happens, they don’t come...*”. There was a general consensus among the women involved in this project that Aboriginal victims are treated differently to non-Aboriginal victims and, whilst they collectively expressed their despair at this, they also found innovative ways to counteract it. When discussing differential responses, an Elder stated that, when calling for police assistance, “...*say blackfellas are coming here, I’m a white woman, blackfellas are coming here to smash my house up... They [police] turn straight up!*”

Our women hold that racism is an ingrained feature of police culture and this perception is even supported by some police officers themselves. In relation to her son who worked as a police officer for six years, a community Elder comments, “*My son was a senior constable... he used to see them discriminate [against] these Aboriginal kids... he put up with that for six years until he could not take any more... he said it’s all corrupt and it’s all for certain [white] people...*”. This insider knowledge of the ingrained racism in the police institution caused her son to resign from the force after assaulting another officer who had physically attacked an Aboriginal child. Further, the Western Australian Police Commissioner has publicly acknowledged racism within their ranks. Recently, Commissioner Chris Dawson formally apologised to Aboriginal communities for a “history of racism” and the ongoing “unconscious bias” within the institution and its officers (Knowles 2018). He also stated that “we [police] want to treat Aboriginal people as all people should be treated”, implying that currently they are not being treated as such (Knowles 2018). This is a critical statement from

the officer in charge of the State's police institution, which supports our women's perceptions of racial discrimination and validates their experiences.

The broader academic literature also supports our women's contention that racial discrimination is a central feature of Australian policing. For instance, in Hopkin's (2007, 32 - 33) research examining the experiences of police interactions with people of colour in Melbourne, community members recounted experiences of racial profiling, over-policing, derogatory racial language and police brutality, which led to loss of faith in police integrity and a fear of police violence. Similar issues were identified in a Northern Territory study, with Aboriginal police officers describing explicit racism, both towards them and towards community members, as "entrenched in the NT police force" (Cefai 2015, 22). Maxwell (2018), drawing on the case of Mulrunji who died on Palm Island after being assaulted by police officers, further argues that institutional racism is present in all levels of the legal system. As such, Aboriginal communities are not able to access justice through criminal justice processes.

This culture of racism is particularly harmful when it comes to police responses to Aboriginal victims. This is important as Aboriginal women are much more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to be victims of abuse. McGlade (2010), a prominent Aboriginal academic in the family violence space, notes that police are often unwilling to pursue cases in which Aboriginal women and children are the victims. In relation to sexual violence, she states that "of the reported cases, police will lay charges in the minority of instances and very few will go on to conviction... Aboriginal victims do not receive equal treatment" (McGlade 2010, 8). This is reinforced by Mellor's (2003) study in which Aboriginal participants discussed extreme examples of police harassment, threats and physical assault. They also noted that, when presenting as victims of crime, police often ridiculed and blamed them (Mellor 2003, 477). These scholarly works reflect our women's position that racism within the police force results in their open hostility towards Aboriginal family violence victims.

Further to the police neglect of cases involving Aboriginal victims, there have been some high profile examples of the actual criminalisation of family violence victims. This can be understood as a result of "stereotyping that does not recognise Aboriginal people as a victim" (Cox, Young and Bairnsfather-Scott 2009). Barter and Eggington (2017) argue that institutional racism is rampant in the Western Australian police force and Aboriginal victims are often incarcerated. They cite the death of Ms Dhu, an Aboriginal family violence victim who was imprisoned for unpaid fines and died from injuries inflicted by her abusive partner

whilst in custody, as epitomising “the problem of institutional racism in Australia” (Barter and Eggington 2017, 9). The 2016 coronial inquiry into her death found that unconscious racial assumptions had shaped police and medical responses to Ms Dhu’s fatal injuries and, therefore, contributed to her death (Western Australia. Coroners Court of Western Australia 2018, 161). In addition to this, another Aboriginal woman was recently arrested and imprisoned for outstanding fines after she requested police assistance during a family violence incident (Wahlquist 2017). Our women contend the incarceration of Aboriginal victims is common, with one noting “...if you’re a black woman with a white man and if that white man been belting you and you’ve retaliated... they’ll take you away because you’re the black one...”. The culture of racism experienced by our women extends beyond negligent police responses to the actual punishment of victims.

As identified by our women, racism within our police force is a key issue which prevents their access to safety and justice. The underlying racial bias of police officers informs their perception of Aboriginal women who present to them as victims. As outlined above, our women believe that their lives are not afforded the same value as that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts and that this has very serious implications for the manner in which police proceed in their cases. This assertion is not only supported by the individual stories of our women in this project, but also by academic evidence, public legal cases, and by the police officers themselves. As our women are actively aware of the prejudice against them, they often feel resentment towards the police and this impacts their willingness to seek statutory support in the context of abuse.

The racially discriminatory practices of the police force in their approach towards Aboriginal victims is harming the most vulnerable in our communities. According to Cox, Young and Bairnsfather-Scott (2009), the criminal justice system is “often not seen as providing protection and, as a result, is not accessed.” When our women assume that police officers will not help them, either through the provision of support or the pursuit of offenders, they are unlikely to engage with the criminal justice system. This, as our women have argued above, is the reality for Aboriginal women. Although many have sought police protection, it was consistently argued that, due to their race, such protection was not provided and, in many cases, they were treated with indifference or outright hostility. As such, the institutional racism present in the WA police force is a substantial barrier to Aboriginal women’s help seeking.

CHILD PROTECTION

Our women have consistently argued that racism is rife amongst members of the child protection institution. They believe that racial assumptions underpin these members construction of normal families, with Western values and structures guiding welfare workers understandings of parenting standards. Funston and Herring (2016, 54) argue that those involved in child protection services operate from a Western paradigm in which Euro-centric ideas of the nuclear family and associated child rearing practices are applied as the benchmark. In contrast, Aboriginal collectivist methods of parenting and, in turn, Aboriginal parents, are broadly considered to be inferior. This is noted throughout data collection by our women, who contend that child welfare perceives them and the women in the community to be bad parents due to their Aboriginality. They also relate contemporary child protection practices with racist Stolen Generation welfare policy, which openly targeted Aboriginal families due to their supposed inferiority and inability to parent their children.

The Stories of Our Women

“...I believe child protection agencies don’t treat us fairly. It’s like they think that we’re worthless as parents, being Noongar people, that we don’t protect our children. That’s the sense that I got from them, that we cannot protect our children. It’s like, you know, they’re saying they’re not doing what they done in the olden days but they still do it.”

- Tina, 69 years

“You’re right because we went into bat for some other families. There’s one family, they gave the baby to its Italian family but this baby has always been with the Aboriginal family before that and then the baby we was fighting for was half Scottish so they gave it, the Scottish grandmother was almost ready to be handed this baby straight away so it’s almost like Stolen Generation. If your baby has got two races, one Aboriginal and a different one, then they’ll look at the Aboriginal one as the lesser one for taking care of the baby... It was their way of saying ‘you’re unfit to be a mother, your race is unfit to be a mother’. They’ve got more respect for them than they’ve got for us... They’ve got no respect for us, none whatsoever.”

- Walley, 52 years

“I went through domestic violence and DCP was going to take my children... I am Aboriginal and dark skin so they look at that and think that I can’t take care of my children but because my mother was white... They thought ‘oh, she [her mother] will look after the kids’

and I had to use that to keep my children... When I went with my mum, she'd talk for me and they'd listen. She pretty much protected me and the children, not from domestic violence but from DCP taking my kids away... I seen the difference in the way that they spoke [to her] compared to how they spoke to me, I seen the difference in that they actually let me keep my kids as long as I was with my mum and I seen it as a racial thing because they thought I couldn't look after my children... It's the same way they acted without my mum, that I could not do it, I could not look after them, I could not protect them... Every time, because it happened three times, I would have to turn to my mother to speak on my behalf for them to listen... they wouldn't listen to me because of my skin colour, because I'm Aboriginal. So I don't think they look at us the same that they do for white people. I do think DCP treat people differently when you're black fellas. They think that we're not good mothers... they would have given me better support if I was white..."

- Jessica 26 years

Discussion

Throughout these women's stories, it is evident that they believe child welfare practices are grounded in racial assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority. While Tina discusses child protection constructions of Aboriginal communities more generally, both Walley and Jessica provide a critical comparison between the way that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families are treated by members of the department. All three women hold strong negative sentiments towards child protection services and believe that racial discrimination is a routine occurrence. This is staunchly articulated in these short excerpts from their quotes: "...they think that we're worthless as parents, being Noongar people..."; "It was their way of saying... 'your race is unfit to be a mother'"; and "I am Aboriginal and dark skin so they... think that I can't take care of my children." The stories of our women here explicitly reveal that racial discrimination is rampant within child welfare services.

This is strongly reinforced by the broader participant base who believe that the child protection department associate Aboriginality with deficiency and that this weakness-based approach informs their work with Aboriginal families. Many of our women, particularly our Elders, are staunchly vocal on this matter. As one Elders comments, "we're still dirty people to them", while another notes that the welfare system is "...prejudiced against Aboriginal families." Likewise, another participant discusses the antagonistic approach of welfare workers who intervene in Aboriginal families, "They come there with their attitude... they know nothing about our culture and they come to judge us... 'You people don't have any rights' and they

enforce that because they treat us as if we're nothing.” As is evident in our women’s testimony here, they perceive racial bias to be highly influential in the manner in which welfare workers understand and respond to Aboriginal mothers.

The relationship between workers in child welfare services and our communities has long been strained. Being the institution primarily responsible for enforced child removals during the Stolen Generation era, the modern-day department continues to be perceived as a colonial tool through which Aboriginal families are torn apart. This is evident in both Tina and Walley’s quotes above with both women arguing that the institution has maintained its racially discriminatory practices. In reference to child removal based solely on race, the former argues that *“they’re saying they’re not doing what they done in the olden days but they still do it”*, while the latter contends *“...it's almost like Stolen Generation... It was their way of saying... ‘your race is unfit to be a mother’.*” Supporting this, Nicole notes that *“we’re still branded as the older generation.”* The contemporary institution for child protection is perceived by our community to be an extension of historic oppression which continues to unjustly target Aboriginal mothers and families.

The connection between colonial persecution and contemporary welfare practice has been subject to various academic investigations. Ivec, Braithewaite and Harris (2012) undertook research with 45 Aboriginal parents and carers who were involved with the child protection systems in three Australian States. They found a deep-seated collective resentment towards welfare authorities for past persecutory actions, with similarities between the Elders and younger parents’ experiences generating *“a sense of continuity”* between the Stolen Generation and contemporary practice (Ivec, Braithewaite and Harris 2012, 88). Further to this, Watson (2011) argues that contemporary policy reproduces significant power imbalances that are reminiscent of the colonial regime. Douglas and Walsh (2013) have also undertaken research in this area, exploring the perceptions of lawyers representing Aboriginal families in child protection cases. Participants reported that some of their clients are the fourth or fifth generation of children removed from their families, dating back to Stolen Generation removals, and this family history of removal was itself a factor in their clients being *“targeted for surveillance and intervention by child protection authorities”* (Douglas and Walsh 2013, 63). Our women’s perception therefore that child protection is replicating Stolen Generation practices is warranted.

A key concern of our women is that welfare practices are grounded in Western ideals of family and parenting and, in turn, that Aboriginal family values are considered inferior. In light of this, it can be argued that child protection interventions fundamentally disadvantage

Aboriginal parents based on their racial background. Our women contend that child protection processes are often discriminatory, with Walley characterising them as “...*not Aboriginal culturally appropriate... meaning it’s actually prejudiced against Aboriginal families.*” Aboriginal child rearing practices are grounded in a collectivist approach whereby the entire family is responsible for the care of children. Rose argues that child protection workers “...*just don’t understand the whole family thing with black fellas.*” Due to this difference between Aboriginal and Western models of parenting, our women feel that they are being unfairly constructed as problematic. As Nicole claims, “...*they look at us as Aboriginal people and then they’ve got the mainstream people, but we’re always looked at as being, um, negative... Aboriginal people are the problem.*” Our women believe that the child welfare paradigm regards Aboriginality and Aboriginal child rearing customs as deficient.

The child protection system in Australia is well known for operating from a Western paradigm and imposing Western values of family and parenting, despite attempts by the institution to reform their cultural frameworks. Nietz (2017, 2) argues that such structural reforms are not sufficient to improve organisational practice and address current issues between Aboriginal communities and government institutions. This is explored by Funston and Herring (2016, 54), whose participants believe that Aboriginal worldviews and parenting practices are “discounted or erased by the dominant white Western nuclear family model”, resulting in our practices being perceived as inferior. The higher rates of Aboriginal child removals may be partly due to “culturally biased institutional processes and organizational practices” in which the dominant cultural values are applied to assess family dysfunction (Sawrikar and Katz 2014, 41). This is not to say that family violence is a cultural value of Aboriginal communities, rather, the positive attributes of Aboriginal families may be overlooked while the assessments of dysfunction may be over-emphasised due to ingrained ideas concerning Aboriginal cultural and racial inferiority.

Our women’s claim that the child protection system is implicitly biased against Aboriginal parents is particularly concerning when it influences institutional intervention approaches. The practical implications of institutionalised racism within the welfare department were discussed in two ways. First, participants reported that Aboriginal families receive lower rates of family support. They argued that they did not receive proper support to address the issue of concern, being family violence, and, consequently, they were more likely to have their children removed. This lack of support was highlighted by Cheeky, who considers it a racial issue, stating that “*I would have been treated so differently [if I was white].*” Similarly, Jessica contends that welfare workers were less willing to support her due to her

Aboriginality: *“They just threatened to take my kids away but I never really got my support from them... [I] would have given me better support if I was white.”* Our women contend that abused women were already exhausted and needed extensive support in order to make positive changes. This was discussed by a participant who noted that her family member was highly vulnerable: *“...she totally wasn't in her right mind in a sense of able to take on DCP, she was exhausted, she'd been abused.”* Considering this, the provision of meaningful support to mothers is essential in enabling family healing and preventing child removal. However, our women have vigorously argued that they cannot access such support due to racial discrimination on the part of child protection workers.

The second practical implication of institutional racism, as identified by our women, is that Aboriginal families are unjustly targeted for child removal. This is reflected strongly in TJ's statement that, *“...if it's a non-Aboriginal family then it's not good to get involved in the first place whereas if it's an Aboriginal family, they jump in straight away and it's like, well, same circumstances”*. She argues that those involved in welfare services are less likely to intervene and remove children from non-Aboriginal families than they are from Aboriginal families; a position shared by the other women. For instance, Tina explains this in relation to her grandson and his partner who were under investigation by welfare but, whilst attempting to resolve their issues, had their children removed. She comments that *“they told the parents to take them [kids] into the office so that they could have another meeting but as soon as they got the kids there, the police all came and they grabbed the children and they took them so the parents were just left devastated, they didn't really know what to do.”* Pilger (2014) found similar experiences of overzealous child removal among members of Aboriginal families who recounted that their first experience with welfare workers were when they arrived to remove their children.

The restricted provision of support for our struggling families and overzealous child removal has been argued consistently by our women to be a result of ingrained racism within the welfare system. A longitudinal study of South Australian child protection cases found that *“greater reliance appears to be placed on tertiary interventions rather than primary intervention strategies”* in cases involving Aboriginal families (DeFabbro, Hirte, Rogers and Wilson 2010, 1423-1424). Thus, in comparison to non-Aboriginal families, the institution is more likely to remove children from Aboriginal families and less likely to implement support mechanisms to address their underlying issues. As Tilbury (2009, 62) argues, it is not the Government intervention into Aboriginal families that is problematic; rather, it is the *“nature of the intervention”*, being removal rather than family support, that is cause for concern. The women

participating in this project maintained that abused women need help, however, the racially discriminatory approach of child protection practices caused further harm to our women.

Racial discrimination on the part of child protection workers is a critical impediment to our women's help seeking efforts in the context of family violence. Our women have consistently recounted poor service provision by child welfare services that is characterised by hostile interactions, an unwillingness to provide family support, and a propensity to remove children from Aboriginal families without due process. Throughout this research, it is evident that these issues are common knowledge amongst the members of our communities. Our women are actively aware of the racially biased practices of those in child protection services and this, as discussed earlier, promotes fear among our women which can prevent their help seeking. However, in light of the stories of our women, it seems that even those who do seek help are unlikely to secure appropriate family support from the child protection institution. Rather, it appears that they are more likely to be revictimised through welfare intervention than supported to overcome their abuse.

CONCLUSION

Racism was enshrined in the institutional framework of Australia from its colonial inception and our women have argued here that the colonial legacy continues to underlie institutional responses to their struggles. Although much time has now passed since Aboriginal peoples attained formal equality, their right to informal equality before the police force and child protection system has still to be realised. Throughout this chapter, our women have shared their interactions with the systems in their attempts to secure support to address family violence in which they were consistently faced with indifference or outright hostility. Our women's experiences highlight a deeply embedded and problematic racial bias within these institutions which is preventing their access, as victims of abuse, to essential family support and justice.

Our women have vigorously argued that racial discrimination is highly influential in police responses to their experiences of family violence. Being the primary institution responsible for keeping victims of abuse safe and pursuing perpetrators of abuse, racism within the police has significant impacts on our community's most vulnerable. They discussed this as a matter of life and death, maintaining that the lives of Aboriginal women are not afforded the same value as that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts and that crimes against our women are not considered to be serious offences. Many of the women also witnessed a serious incongruence between the manner in which police respond to abuse against them and abuse against non-Aboriginal women. Of even more concern is the criminalisation of Aboriginal

victims of abuse. It was argued, through the stories of our women and supporting evidence, that Aboriginal women are, at times, incarcerated after having called the police for assistance during a family violence episode. Racism within the police force is highly problematic and is a key concern for family violence victims who are routinely being neglected and persecuted through the criminal justice system.

The underlying presence of institutional racism within the child protection system is further compounding this issue. Our women consider welfare services to be an extension of the colonial regime which stole Aboriginal children from their families and fractured our communities. Although our children are no longer formally removed on the basis of their Aboriginality, our women believe that assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority continue to guide child protection responses to our families. The experiences discussed throughout this section explore the hostile approach of workers and their Euro-centric practices as further demonising Aboriginal peoples and cultures. This, they argue, informs child protection workers' decision making in relation to appropriate interventions, often resulting in a lower likelihood of family support provision and a higher likelihood of child removal.

Racism is a key concern for our communities and its manifestation in the institutions responsible for responding to family violence is a transgression against us all. Family violence is an urgent concern requiring efficient and effective responses by statutory responders to what is a matter of life and death for many victims. All Australian women have the right to live free from fear and abuse. However, the very institutions entrusted to protect our women and their children are failing at all levels. Not only are their pleas for help being ignored by the police officers who hold the power to halt the abuse; but, they are often then targeted by child welfare authorities and revictimised through the removal of their children. The claims of our women on this matter are widely supported by the literature. Institutional racism has long existed within the framework of Australian society and it continues to undermine the statutory response to the abuse of our women today. The racism that our women are being subjected to by these institutions can, and has been, lethal.

Conclusion

RESTATEMENT OF RESEARCH PURPOSE

This thesis set out to explore the nature and extent of barriers that impede Aboriginal women seeking and securing meaningful assistance in the context of family violence. From the outset of this project, I was aware that my story is intimately entwined with the women who would come to participate in my project. We share a collective history, identity, blood lines and, for all the women involved, an experience of being victimised by someone we love. Family violence is central concern to all our women, occurring at significantly higher rates in our homes in comparison to our non-Aboriginal counterparts (Ombudsman Western Australia 2015, 107). Considering this, it is evident that our women require much higher levels of support to address family violence than members of the mainstream population. The ways in which the family violence response sector interacts with our communities and, indeed, the ways in which we as a community interact with each other are of paramount importance in this context.

The barriers that impede our women's help seeking attempts, in the context of family abuse, are numerous. In order to address these barriers, and assist our women and their children in attaining safety, we must first understand them. This project has employed a broad scope in the process of identifying the forces which restrict our women's ability and willingness to seek out support. Rather than focusing the investigation to a particular issue, the community women involved guided conversations in which they highlighted the three key issues which affect them: i) barriers within our own communities; ii) structural barriers, and; iii) institutional racism as a barrier. Through the stories of our women that were recounted in the previous chapters, this thesis has provided a detailed account of the issues that must be overcome in order to enable Aboriginal women's help seeking attempts.

THEMATIC SUMMARY

Public policy plays a fundamental role in the establishment and maintenance of social standards and, in the case of Aboriginal policy, it has been used as a tool of oppression. During the expansion of the colony, in which it became clear that peaceful co-existence between settlers and Aboriginal populations was not the settler's goal, control and management of the latter by the former became a highly important and politicised concern. For over a century following colonisation, Aboriginal populations experienced extreme intervention into every

aspect of their lives, and the systematic removal of their children, fragmenting the pre-colonial social unity of the people. Assimilatory practices furthered this fragmentation, not only segregating communities from white society but from each other. The dramatic shift from this to self-determination reaped many benefits and enabled community control over community affairs for the first time but these advances were dismantled in the following decades. Aboriginal peoples now find themselves in a hostile political environment, one described by Dodson (2006) as assimilationist in nature.

This history is not only important in understanding the contemporary social circumstances of our people but also our strained relations with the State. The Literature Review delved further into this, bringing together two separate fields of research, the first being the intergenerational transmission of trauma and violence. The collective trauma experienced by Aboriginal communities as a direct result of historic racial persecution continues to impact our families today. As was demonstrated, such intense collective trauma can and has become ingrained in the group's shared identity and consciousness. In this way, it is passed down through family lines and manifests as intergenerational dysfunction, a key indicator of this being widespread intracommunity violence. The second field of literature, institutional racism, demonstrated the progression of racial bias, from explicit 'old racism' to the implicit 'new racism'. Although the language has changed, the outcomes of such racism remain the same and various studies have demonstrated that members of Aboriginal communities strongly perceive contemporary State institutions to be racially discriminatory.

In light of the socio-political context of contemporary Aboriginal family violence, the research design of this project was fundamental to engaging the community and ensuring that no harm was done through this project. In developing a community-led approach, the Indigenous Research Methodology of Yarning was selected to guide research practice. Furthermore, the cultural integrity of the research process and practices were strengthened by all work being undertaken in accordance with the Aboriginal research principles of Respect, Relationships and Reciprocity. As a result of this community-led culturally informed approach, the planning stage, which relied on strong relationship building, and participant recruitment for the data collection stage, were highly successful. The number of participants far exceeded expectations, as did the depth in which they shared their stories. In attempting to analyse such a rich set of data, it became evident that not all the issues identified by our women could be included in this thesis. The remaining data will be utilised in subsequent academic writings to respectfully share the stories of our women.

The first type of barrier as identified by our women were barriers within our own community. Our women's position that there are community responses that are unhelpful was primarily argued in relation to intergenerational trauma, with the dysfunction which now exists is seen as a manifestation of the harm perpetrated against our people over the past centuries. There were three key sub-themes which emerged in this context: i) the normalisation of violence; ii) problematic family intervention, and; iii) a collective fear of child protection. Violence occurs so regularly in our families that it is often considered normal, although many participants noted that they now openly challenge this sense of normalcy. Due to the seemingly broad acceptance of violence, family members or members of their partner's family often intervened in their abuse in an unhelpful manner, enabling and sometimes encouraging or even committing further acts of abuse. Compounding this is the deeply ingrained collective fear of child protection, informed by the racially-charged mass removal of Aboriginal children which still occurred only 50 years ago. Our women and their support networks are actively aware of the risk of child removal due to family violence and, consequently, often hide their abuse.

Several structural barriers which prevent the securing of meaningful assistance were also revealed in the stories of our women. These barriers apply to all women who experience family violence, not only Aboriginal women. Due to the high rates at which our women are victimised, however, these structural failures are highly relevant to our help seeking. The key barriers here include: i) refuge accommodation inaccessibility; ii) police negligence, and; iii) punitive child protection intervention. The women argued that, due to a critical shortage in refuge capacity, they were routinely unable to access safe accommodation. Some also contended that they were entirely excluded from such accommodation due to restrictions on the age of male children allowed to reside in a refuge and their unwillingness to relinquish care of their sons. The police were characterised as negligent, in that they often responded slowly to family violence incidents, hostile towards victims and lenient towards perpetrators. This institutional hostility was also demonstrated by child protection service workers, who the women asserted were hostile towards family violence victims, providing minimal support to the women while being eager to remove their children. The family violence response system was perceived by our women to be unhelpful and often punitive which prevented them from securing support to keep them and their children safe.

The final barrier highlighted by our women was that of institutional racism. Racism, they argued, was deeply ingrained in the processes and practices of two key institutions: i) the police force, and; ii) child protection services. These institutions have a poor record of

engagement with Aboriginal communities as a result of their historic role as enforcers of oppressive policy, which saw the mass incarceration of our men and mass removal of our children. Our women argued that the ideological framework through which these measures were developed and their enforcing institutions were created continues to guide their operations today. In their approach to Aboriginal family violence, it was asserted that members of the police force do not value the lives of our women, resulting in them being provided with a lower level of support and protection to that provided to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Child protection services have also maintained their racial bias and assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority, operating from a Western paradigm that informs their perception of good and bad parenting. This, our women argue, predisposes Aboriginal families to having their children removed due to their culturally-derived child rearing practices. Our women are at a fundamental disadvantage in attempting to secure meaningful support from the statutory system that continues to devalue and demonise Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

ISSUES UNDERLYING THE FINDINGS

There are several central issues that underlie many of the findings of this research. While there are three separate types of barriers identified by our women, these possess similar features. One of the underlying themes which came through consistently in the stories of our women was the strong link between colonial subjugation and their contemporary concerns, including internal community issues and the inadequate systemic responses to them. This was argued most strongly in relation to all sub-findings in the chapters devoted to discussed barriers within our own communities and institutional racism. Colonisation and the ensuing persecution of Aboriginal communities was argued to have caused significant and ongoing harm to our collective wellbeing. This is supported by the literature that relates contemporary dysfunction to historic racialised policy (Cox, Young and Bairnsfather-Scott 2009; Halloran 2004; Nancarrow 2006). Further, many of the women participating considered the institutions from which they must seek help to be an extension of the colonial system and part of a process to further disenfranchise them. The system of domination brought about by colonisation was routinely discussed, not only in terms of past suffering, but as a source of continued pain and disempowerment.

As a result of the perception that contemporary State institutions are simply an extension of past colonial institutions, our communities' relationship with the State remains poor. This underlying theme was evident throughout the stories of our women as they consistently articulated negative feelings towards State institutions, particularly those with an

interventionist mandate. These feelings were reinforced in most of the women's accounts by their personal experiences of hostile interactions with members of such institutions in which they identified a lack of empathy and a strong inclination towards racial bias on the behalf of the workers with whom they dealt. As such, our communities do not have faith that the institutional system will treat them in a fair and just manner; therefore, they are often unwilling to engage with it. Furthermore, due to these issues, even when they do seek to engage, they are routinely denied access to support. In relation to family violence, the inability to successfully engage with statutory responders places our women at a much higher risk of serious harm and ongoing abuse and, as such, the poor relationship between our communities and the State is facilitating actual harm to our women.

The final underlying issue identified in the stories of our women is that the family violence response system, both governmental and non-governmental services, are fundamentally failing victims of abuse. Throughout their stories, our women told of repeated attempts to seek assistance from family violence responders, primarily from police officers, child protection case managers and social service workers, in spite of their previous experiences of being denied access to support. This demonstrates a strong desire on behalf of these women to address the abuse in their homes and attain safety for them and their children. Their persistence, in spite of the numerous barriers and repeated denial of support, while laudable, should not be necessary. Our women should not have to persist in such a manner to receive proper protection and support from the family violence sector, nor should any women. The findings of this research identify deep-seated issues in the system's response to family violence that are denying victims of abuse access to much needed services.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

This process has been a long journey for me as a researcher; and, through reflective practices, I have learned much along the way. Here, I will reflect on the strengths and limitations of the research practice and process and identify what I would do differently next time. Such reflective processes facilitate self-awareness and growth in researchers, as recognising the strengths and limitations of their practice allows for future improvement in the research practice.

Strengths

A key strength of this research project is its Aboriginal ownership. Research can act as a liberating force by creating a space for Aboriginal people to articulate their stories on their own terms. Aboriginal communities are one of the most over-researched social groups in

Australia (Fredericks 2008, 24). In spite of this, we continue to be confined to the role of research “objects” as opposed to producers of research (Fredericks 2008, 24). This project has actively sought to go against this trend and return control of the discussion of Aboriginal family violence to the Aboriginal community. Members of the communities involved were instrumental in the project design and led the data collection phase. This, coupled with an Aboriginal-only research team consisting of myself and volunteers who assisted in the project, ensured that this research was done by Aboriginal people, with Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people. As a community, we have shared our experiences on our own terms with love and respect for our people.

The richness of the data collected in this project, due both to the high number of women participating and the depth to which they shared their stories, is another key strength. The ability to gather such rich data was heavily reliant on my own Aboriginality and community connections, as well as the involvement of well-respected community leaders. As a result of these factors, a safe and supportive environment was created in data collection sessions, ensuring that the women felt comfortable in recounting their experiences in great detail. The strong sense of community ownership of this project also assisted in generating a much higher than expected number of participants. As was discussed in the findings section, many of our women fear having their abuse exposed for a variety of reasons and this, unfortunately, often leads to a veil of silence on this matter. This project was able to overcome the concerns regarding exposure and gather the stories of our women in their most raw and profound form.

Limitations

The high number of women who participated in the two community focus groups also presents as a limitation of this research project. Due to the large numbers who attended for both two-hour focus groups, the degree to which all the participants could share their stories was limited. While the co-facilitator, a respected senior community woman, and I did what we could to ensure that all women had the opportunity to share their experiences, this was not always possible and some women did not speak beyond introducing themselves to the group. This was particularly so in the Armadale workshop at which the number of participants, 25 in total, far exceeded my expectation of 10-15 women. As a result, there was insufficient time during the two-hours allotted to this focus group for all the participating women to share their experiences to the degree that they may have wished.

A further limitation of this research project is its complete reliance on the perceptions of the women involved to identify barriers. The findings were derived from the stories of our women and relied solely on the participant's perceptions of the community and institutional responses to their abuse. That the findings of this research were not corroborated by official statistics increases its susceptibility to bias on behalf of the participants. However, this is not necessarily a flaw in the research design. There already exist a multitude of Aboriginal family violence reports produced by the Government and mainstream service providers. These reports examine the issue from their position, using their interpretation of the statistics that they collect and which are likely informed by their own biases. As such, this thesis offers a counter narrative, grounded in Aboriginal community perceptions and understandings. Although this may provide a seemingly biased perception of the current concerns around family violence, the barriers that they identified, whether accurately portrayed or not, are real to them and strongly influence their help seeking efforts.

What I would have done differently

In light of the above strengths and limitations of this research, there is one significant change that I could have implemented. Rather than running one community focus group in each of the prescribed locations, I could have undertaken a series of focus groups in different locations. This would have allowed me to maintain the overall high participant numbers while bringing down the focus group sizes, providing the women in attendance with additional time to share their experiences. The key factors in deciding to undertake only one focus group in the locations were the expected participant numbers and financial restrictions. RSVPs to the focus groups were requested on promotional materials. However, none were received which made the size of the group difficult to gauge beforehand. Furthermore, financial restrictions were a significant issue throughout this project and I personally invested a significant amount of money for data collection workshops. In future, I will seek external funding to ensure that a limited budget does not impede effective data collection.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Family violence is a key concern in the current political discourse, both at a state and national level. Given that Aboriginal women experience such violence at much higher rates than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, their experiences with the family violence service sector are fundamental to the Western Australian Government's intentions to "break the culture of violence in our families and communities" (Western Australia. Parliament of Western Australia 2017b). This research is the first of its kind to be undertaken with the Perth

metropolitan Aboriginal communities. The findings provide fresh insight into the lived experiences of women and children who are being victimised. The implications of this research are far reaching, identifying a strong sense of distrust towards statutory institutions and limited capacity of the current crisis accommodation system.

Two public institutions in particular were identified by our women as operating in a way that prevents them from seeking help. These institutions, the Department for Child Protection and Family Services and the Western Australian Police Force, have pre-existing tense relationships with our communities and were harshly criticised for their racialised practices. While the collective perception of operational bias was strong amongst participants, it is in contradiction to the departments' own protocols regarding involvement with Aboriginal communities. The rhetoric used by these institutions in their formal strategies and guiding philosophies are in stark contrast to the practical experiences of our women. The language in these documents reflects ideas of collaboration, community autonomy and positive relationships; however, the experiences of our women directly contradict this.

According to the vision statement of the Department for Child Protection and Family Services *Aboriginal Services and Practice Framework 2016-2018*, the agency seeks to “improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities who come into contact with the child protection system” (Western Australia. Department for Child Protection and Family Services 2016, 8). This is purportedly supported by their foundational elements of “cultural respect”, “consultation, collaboration and leadership”, “self-determination and autonomy” and “holistic and strengths based” (Western Australia. Department for Child Protection and Family Services 2016, 8-9). Furthermore, the practice requirements set out under the Department's Child Placement Principle is for Aboriginal children to, where possible, be placed with a carer based on the following priorities: i) a member of the family; ii) a member of the immediate Aboriginal community, and; iii) an Aboriginal carer more generally (Western Australia. Department of Child Protection and Family Services 2018). Unfortunately, as has been demonstrated by the findings of this study, the good intentions incorporated into the Department's formal policy are often ignored on the practical level in interactions between our women and departmental staff. While these policies appear progressive and positive, they are ineffectual if they are not applied by leadership and case workers.

Securing the formal policy documents of the Western Australian Police Force which pertain to the engagement of Aboriginal peoples and communities has been difficult. They do

not have a publicly available current strategy, nor did they respond to requests for their most recent framework. However, they have recently established an Aboriginal and Community Diversity Unit within the institution and do have a publicly available *Strategic Policy on Police and Aboriginal People* which they state has been developed around four key themes: “rights”, “respect”, “relationships” and “responsibility” (Western Australia. Western Australian Police n.d, 3). While these themes appear positive, this document has no date and appears outdated due to the most recent evidence in it being from 2005. The absence of any current publicly available documents in relation to Aboriginal communities is concerning and such concern is further reinforced by the Western Australian Police Commissioner’s recent statement that he wants his institution to “treat Aboriginal people as all people should be treated”; arguably inferring they currently are not (Knowles 2018).

Due to the strained relations between our communities and the statutory institutions that have been outlined in the findings of this research, it is suggested that community led initiatives in this space are needed. As an alternative to institutional intervention by State Departments, community-controlled organisations within this space have scope to deliver a more effective and efficient response to the family violence issue plaguing our communities. A community-controlled organisation can be understood as established by, situated within, governed through and grounded in the culture of, the community that it services (Davis 2013). Community organisations allow the community to take control of our own issues and develop appropriate solutions to them. According to prominent Aboriginal academic Pearson (2013), contemporary dysfunction within our communities cannot be addressed in any meaningful or sustainable manner without community leadership. Family violence is a routine occurrence in our communities and it is our community leaders, whose wellbeing and prosperity are innately entwined with ours, who are best positioned to facilitate change. As such, community initiatives should be facilitated to address the endemic family violence in our communities.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The ongoing epidemic of family violence in our communities is a pressing national concern. Addressing the barriers that face Aboriginal women in their help seeking attempts are paramount to ensuring that our women and children are able to live free from abuse. However, there is a significant gap in the literature in relation to Aboriginal family violence and the barriers to help seeking. While the findings of this study begin to address this gap, further research is needed in order to develop a clearer understanding on this issue. Future research in this area should be undertaken, particularly in relation to community strengths and how these

may be built on to establish new approaches for addressing family violence. Furthermore, the ingrained racism within our public institutions, as was explored briefly in this thesis, highlights a need for further research which explores contemporary experiences of racism in the Australian institutional context.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This thesis has explored the stories of our women and their struggles in raw and brutal honesty. Imprinted on the pages is their pain, their tears and their heartbreak. The findings of this research explored the barriers to our women's help seeking in the context of family violence. These barriers facing our women are complex and multilayered. While some of the findings are applicable to all women seeking help to address their abuse, particularly those in the *Structural Barriers* chapter, most are unique to the Perth Aboriginal community. I have undertaken this project out of love and respect for my community in the hope that it may lead to better outcomes and a better future for our women. The women involved in this study shared some of their most intimate and vulnerable moments, which they also did out of love and respect for their families and communities.

Many of the experiences shared by our women are confronting and they have been recited as candidly as possible to demonstrate the severity of the abuse that is happening in our homes and our communities. These women are our women, they are our mothers, our sisters, our neighbours and our friends. They have shared their stories in the hope that the same stories will not be told by their daughters, their nieces and their grandchildren. It is their and my hope that this research may provide a platform through which change can occur. The stories of our women identify ways in which they are being prevented from seeking help and addressing their abuse. As a result, this thesis provides evidence from which strategies to overcome such barriers may be developed. Doing so must be done collaboratively with the full participation of our communities. Nothing about us without us.

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