

Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project

Evaluation report

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And sometimes you don't realise that it has made an impact until you do something like this, a group is offered like this, and then you start bringing it up and talking about it and feeling comfortable amongst a group of women and seeing they are comfortable as well, so it breaks down that barrier of that shame and isolation. But the biggest impact that it has made for me is that I am now looking at what has happened through my life and how that underlying factor of domestic violence, even though I don't live in it, but I am controlled by it, by decisions that I make, by decisions that I don't make, things like that. So it has really opened my eyes there. This group has had a really big impact on me and how I think (Participant, Group 5)

Thank you

A special thank you to all the women who shared their experiences, opinions and humour throughout this evaluation. There is so much for us to learn!

Introduction

Violence against women is a worldwide problem, transcending cultural, geographic, religious, social and economic boundaries. ... A consensus is emerging that personal, economic, social and cultural factors combine to cause abuse

(Naved & Lars 2005: 289)

In 2008 Joan Harrison's Support Services for Women received funding under the National Community Crime Prevention Programme (NCCPP) in relation to the Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project. The overall aim of the project was 'to address family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Liverpool and Campbelltown areas' (Attorney General's Funding schedule).

The project identified two specific strategies to achieve this general aim:

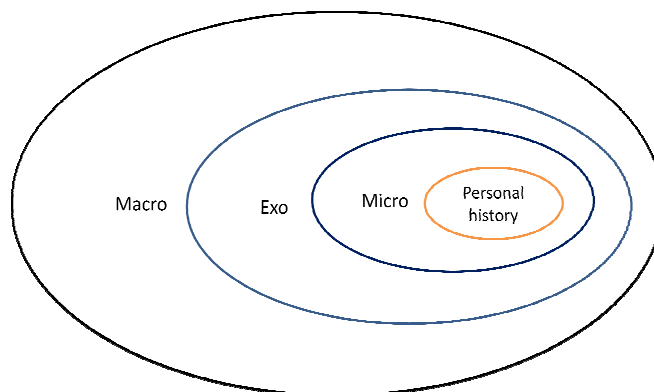
- to train local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to become trainer, mentors and advocates in their own communities,
- to establish an Aboriginal Women Against Violence Committee.

This evaluation will report on the agreed outcomes identified in the funding agreement as well as identifying broader lessons arising from the project in relation to addressing violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Joan Harrison's Support Services for Women commissioned Dr. Margot Rawsthorne, from the University of Sydney, to undertake this evaluation. Dr. Rawsthorne has significant practice and research experience in the field of violence against women, including the experiences of Aboriginal women.

Theoretical framework

This evaluation adopts Lori Heise's ecological framework (1998), conceptualising violence against women 'as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors' (1998: 263-264). Personal, economic, social and cultural factors combine within 'embedded levels of causality' (Heise 1998: 264). An ecological framework enables the individual(s), their context and broader socio-cultural factors to be considered. The ecological framework explains gender-based violence as arising from the 'interplay of personal, situational, and sociocultural factors' (Heise et al 2002: S7). The ecological framework is illustrated below comprising: individual personal histories; the immediate social context in which the abuse takes place (micro-system); the formal and informal institutions and social structures (exo-system); and finally the general cultural views and attitudes (macro-system). The framework provides a way on conceptualising the complex interplay of factors that contribute to violence against women but should not be viewed as static, linear or categorical. In thinking about the processes that shape women's experiences we need to be aware of the interdependencies of the layers or concentric circles. Individual behaviours are shaped by and shape social norms.

Framework for understanding violence (Heise, 1998)



Other important theoretical concepts underpinning the evaluation framework are social capital and social cohesion. Social capital is often referred to as the 'glue that holds society together'. Most theorists argue that social capital is located and generated within civil society. The Aboriginal Women Against Violence project is located within civil society, being a spontaneous engagement by individuals with social issues (Dixon 2003: 16). As Dixon (2003: 17) notes "Actors in civil society come together to apply pressure ... through lobbying, advocacy ... to build satisfying communities for themselves" (Dixon 2003: 17). Social capital arises from human relationships, people doing things together out of a sense of social obligation and reciprocity, social solidarity and community.

Research has identified different 'types' of social capital: bonding (dense, multi-functional ties and strong but localized trust); bridging (weak ties, thin, impersonal trust of strangers, bridges across structural holes); linking (relations to institutions such as government). The Aboriginal Women Against Violence project will seek to strength bonding capital among the steering committee and those who attend the training as well as enhance linking social capital between Aboriginal women and the local Domestic Violence Liaison Committee. Recent work on social disadvantage undertaken by Vinson, Rawsthorne & Cooper (2007) reveals the mediating affect of social cohesion. In those communities which exhibited high levels of social cohesion (in which there was a sense of trust, volunteering, participation in local events, ability to receive help from neighbours, feeling valued and feeling safe) the adverse affects of social disadvantage were minimized. This finding is important in the context of the social disadvantage of Aboriginal women in Liverpool.

Accordingly, the evaluation will also explore the following questions:

- In what ways has the Aboriginal Women Against Violence project impacted on the ecological frameworks four concentric circles?
- Which level or circle has the project been most successful in impacting and why?
- How has the Aboriginal Women Against Violence project strengthened bonding and linking social capital?
- In what ways has the Aboriginal Women Against Violence project build social cohesion to ameliorate the negative impacts of social disadvantage?

Methodology:

A white academic undertaking evaluation research with Aboriginal women needs to be very sensitive to historical tensions which shape ongoing relationships (Whyte and Krakouer, 2009: 12). This sensitivity requires methodology that 'are intended to give voice and prominence to communities previously marginalized in research practices' (Evans et al, 2009: 894). This sensitivity also creates the opportunity to focus attention on the 'whiteness' of the institutions which Aboriginal women face, particularly in relation to violence (Evans et al, 2009: 894). Aboriginal people in Australia are both over and under researched. They are over-researched as a 'problem' but under-researched in ways that seek to reflect their lived-experiences of being Aboriginal in a white society.

The study adopted a mixed methodology, aiming to collect robust evidence of the impact of the AWAV program (Whyte and Krakouer, 2009: 23). The initial evaluation design was informed by

previous evaluation of anti-violence programs with white participants. The assumptions underlying this approach (particularly literacy levels and written expression) were quickly challenged. Sensitivity to the research relationship demanded flexibility in responding to this challenge. The initial research design included the use of pre and post questionnaires with women participating in the training program. In Group 1 a four paged questionnaire was used to collect data. Feedback from the AWAV Project Worker was that participants found the questionnaire difficult and were embarrassed at the length of time it required to complete. Accordingly, with input from the AWAV Project Worker and Project Co-ordinator, focus groups were decided as being a better way of collecting information about the impact of the group. It was also agreed to provide the researcher with access to art work produced by participants as part of the group (with their express consent). This art work represented their understanding of domestic violence, how women can be helped and the sources of support or strengths in their lives. The use of images in qualitative research is a small but exciting area of research practice creating opportunities to uncover powerful meanings and understandings (Kearney and Hyle, 2004).

The information contained in this report is derived from:

- questionnaire data from group participants (Group 1 and 3)
- focus group discussions with group participants (Groups 2, 3 and 5)
- art work produced by group participants (Groups 2, 3 and 5)
- written evaluation of Juniperina group (Group 4)
- focus group discussions with the Steering Committee
- focus group discussions with Key Stakeholders
- interviews with project worker and key management staff at Joan Harrisons Support Services for Women
- documentary analysis, particularly in relation to Steering Committee meeting minutes and project reports.

Data from all interviews and forums were transcribed and entered into NVIVO qualitative software. Interview data from Steering Committee members and staff from JHSS were analysed separately. Inductive analysis techniques were used to identify and code themes. Networks of themes were developed around key research interests, particularly with regard knowledge and attitude towards violence against women, knowledge of strategies and social connections/cohesion.

The reliability of the evaluation data was strengthened through checking conclusions reached from one focus group with participants in subsequent focus groups; checking conclusions with the Project worker and other key people involved in the project; and reference to Aboriginal women who work and write in the field of preventing violence against women.

Project outcomes:

Objective 1:

Train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Liverpool and Campbelltown areas to become trainers, mentors and advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in their own communities.

Agreed Outcomes:

- 1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women trainers, mentors and advocates support and empower community members.**

The project was successful in supporting Aboriginal women to become mentors and advocates against violence. Focus group discussions, questionnaires and project staff reflections indicate that the training programs impacted on the individual, family and community level.

The adoption of a group work approach in the program was important to its overall success. The project brought Aboriginal women together to learn and support each other in welcoming environments. Learning in an informal setting was seen as very 'culturally appropriate' by mentor group participants and stakeholders. An Aboriginal participants in the stakeholders focus group noted that *'the most important thing is that it [support] is happening between our women'*. Friendships were forged or reinforced through the informal structure of the groups and the sharing of experiences, opinions and food. The Project Co-ordinated noted the program is a *"way of resourcing the community in a culturally appropriate way and it was a way of hopefully addressing some of the issues for that community... The program is now seen as a credible program and trusted by Aboriginal people in this area"*. The benefits of the group program were commented on by many participants, including this quote:

Sharing each other's experiences I think helps a lot of women understand. Because you don't know anybody out there that you feel like oh my god I'm the only one that's going through this until you get to know the groups, some of them. There are women going through exactly the same thing and you can talk about it, you can resolve your problems with each other and it's just good to socialise (Participant, Group 3)

The peer support element of the mentor group program was also highlighted in the stakeholders focus group, with one participant commenting:

Peer support is vital. Through doing workshops they're willing to take this on. I've observed if you educate women they will support each other, tell people it's not OK. It's great to talk about systems, like to pretend they work, but violence is still happening. If someone would say, 'I'm going to the Police' and her friends say 'we're coming with you' that would make such a big difference to women's experiences

During the evaluation five training programs were run and a total of 49 women and 7 young girls completed the mentor program:

- Group 1: Nov-Dec, 2008 – Miller group – 12 week program, completed by eight women although more participated in some elements of the program
- Group 2: July-Aug, 2009 – Bonnyrigg group – 9 week program (modified to fit better with school term), completed by nine women
- Group 3: Oct-Nov, 2009 – Campbelltown group – 9 week program, completed by twenty women
- Group 4: Jan, 2010 – Juniperina (Juvenile Justice Facility) – week long intensive program (modified to meet Juvenile Justice requirements) completed in partnership with Liverpool Women's Health Centre's Young Women's Project. This course was completed by seven young women
- Group 5: March-May, 2010 - Ashcroft Group – 9 week program, completed by twelve women

Evaluation data indicates a significant increase in participants' knowledge of the local service system. Prior to completing the program most participants in two of the three local groups had minimal knowledge of the local service system. In the first group only the Police were identified as being able to assist women in the event of domestic violence. In the third group (Campbelltown) knowledge of services was higher as many participants had previously completed other domestic violence programs. Participants from Campbelltown identified a range of agencies, including: women's health services; legal centre; court support; police; women's refuge; and DoCS (the Department of Community Services).

A key element of the training program was the participation of local services as 'guest presenters' to inform women of the support available to women experiencing violence. It was planned that Aboriginal workers from agencies would present the information, however due to the low number of

Aboriginal workers in key agencies this was not always possible. Guests included: women's health services; refugee workers; mental health workers; child protection workers; the Police; Department of Housing; community legal centres; and court support workers. This strategy was particularly important for Aboriginal women because they could 'put a face' to a service as well as 'suss them out'.

Wendy knows all the names. I know all their faces and that. Knowing what they do was really interesting 'cause now we know and that and they gave us cards. There was like heaps of them (Participant, Group 2)

One of the key outcomes of the training program was participant's increased confidence in accessing or supporting a friend to access support services.

It's easier when I know whose face, like if I know what they can help me with it is easier to call rather than ring up and find out they can't help me with what I need and then they pass me on to somebody else. (Participant, Group 2)

The lack of knowledge and awareness of support services evident among most participants prior to the group is at odds with the level of violence known to be experienced within Aboriginal communities (McKenzie & McNamara, 2008). There is a clear challenge facing mainstream services in supporting Aboriginal women, and this must begin with knowledge. An unintended outcome of having non-Aboriginal guest presenters was to bring these workers in contact with Aboriginal women. The JHSS Manager acknowledged this, noting that the AWAV project had increased cultural awareness among the Joan Harrison staff. She notes

I think it has increased our understanding of working ... with Aboriginal women. I think it's improved that, because I think some of the staff here probably haven't had a lot to do with Aboriginal women or the Aboriginal community before (Manager)

By bringing mainstream service providers into the group space the program shifted the traditional relationship between 'clients' and 'services'. A continual issue identified by the Project Worker was that many workers and services did not take into account different cultures and education levels. She notes that there is a big gap, often white people come in

talking at this big academic level and (they're) talking to Aboriginal people who may not have the same education and most times they don't... When you get someone who is Aboriginal speaking to them on their own level they feel more relaxed, they're more willing to participate (Project Worker).

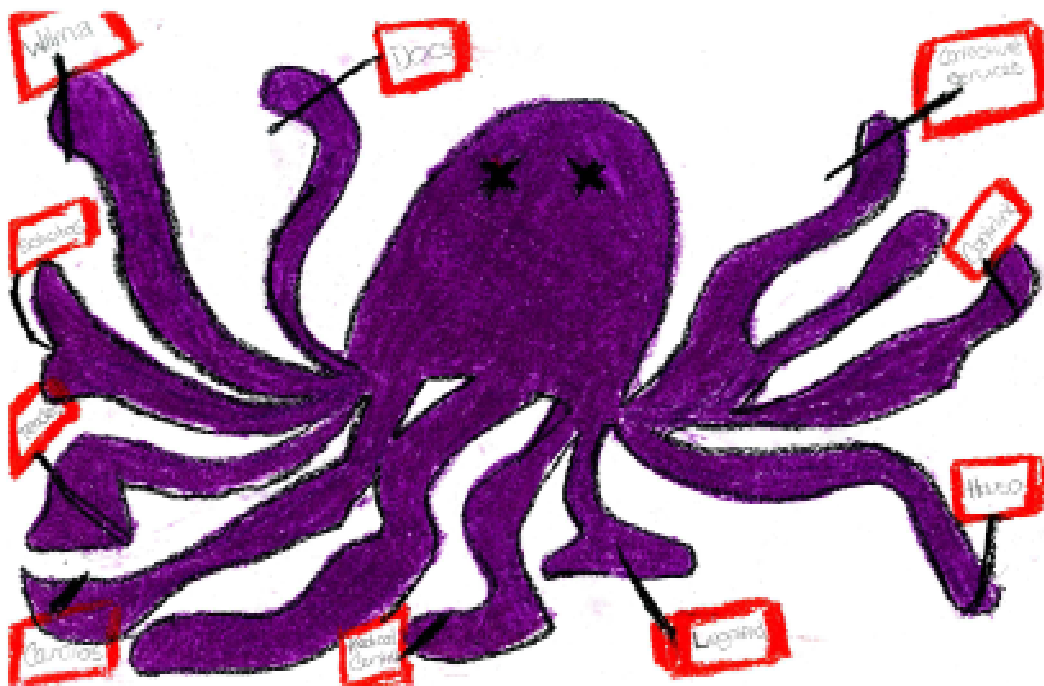
The Project Worker also noted that some white workers came to the group directing the Aboriginal women on what they needed to do without taking into account the barriers these women face in order to access services. Many women in focus groups reported a great reluctance to ask for help from white agencies. An unanticipated outcome of the strategy of bringing services providers to the group was the challenge issued by the Aboriginal participants to mainstream service providers: why should I trust you? What creates accessible mainstream services is complex but participants were united in their assessments of which guests were 'good women'. The group gave mainstream service providers the opportunity to build relationships with local Aboriginal women, which is vitally important if these services are going to be able to support Aboriginal women in relation to violence (Lumby & Farrelly, 2009; McKenzie & McNamara, 2008). Participants showed a clear preference to accessing services from an Aboriginal worker, pointing to the need for mainstream services to employ and support Aboriginal workers if they are hoping to improve their relevance to Aboriginal women (Lumby & Farrelly, 2009). The AWAV Project Worker expressed surprise that there are so few Aboriginal workers in the Liverpool region, given that there is a large Aboriginal population in the area. It can be questioned how services can be culturally aware if they are lacking an Aboriginal perspective. Having Aboriginal workers in services could help to overcome their deficiencies in dealing with domestic violence.

The lack of Aboriginal workers was also discussed by participants in the key stakeholder focus group. The Police, for example, noted that within the region there were three Aboriginal Liaison Officers, two located in Campbelltown and the other in Marrickville. It was reported that there was surprising levels of ignorance about the Aboriginal community in Liverpool among some Police. The generalist women's service (Liverpool Women's Resource Centre) noted the lack of an Aboriginal worker restricted their effectiveness as an easy access point for Aboriginal women. The co-ordinator noted that '*as a generalist service women come to groups and disclose violence. Not everyone will go to a DV group but they will go to a craft group. Having an Aboriginal worker would really help*'. Liverpool Women's Health Centre, by comparison, had employed an Aboriginal health worker for many years. This had enabled them to build strong relationships with Aboriginal women in the area, enabling the Centre to provide health services through the Miller Clinic, court support and other local initiatives. The specialist DV health service noted the inappropriateness of current health responses:

An Aboriginal worker would help make women feel comfortable. Flexibility needs to exist. For example, an Aboriginal woman should be able to say 'I want to meet here and know if I don't feel comfortable I can leave'. Not locking women into a room. In a back room with a white worker who doesn't understand.

It was evident from the stakeholder focus group that the AWAV project had challenged mainstream services to think more deeply about how to support Aboriginal women. The participants discussed the barriers created by forms and intake process and physical environments (including designating services non-smoking). They identified that Aboriginal women may feel alienated and suspicious if their first contact with agencies focuses on the completion of forms and the collection of client data. They advocated for more flexibility and 'woman-centred' responses to Aboriginal women in crisis among white agencies and institutions.

Image 2 below suggests that Aboriginal women can be ensnared by the service system, which includes DoCS, corrective services, legal aid, houso, centrelink, medical centres, teachers, counsellors, solicitors and non-government agencies (WILMA). It suggests a greater need for integration and collaboration between the different 'arms' of the support system.



All project interviewee's identified trust as a major issue for the Aboriginal community and particularly for the AWAV project. Due to a history of dispossession and trauma and thus a general feeling of distrust, it is very important for any service, person or project to build up a trusting relationship with Aboriginal people in order for any positive progression or changes to occur. Distrust can be a barrier to service use, as Mary says

they don't trust them...some of the services have no understanding of Aboriginal issues (Project worker)

Before working with an Aboriginal community mainstream services need to establish a trusting name. All project interviewees acknowledged that the process of building up trust and connections in the community is not easy and needs to be a gradual process. One interviewee noted that trust is

very important and takes a long time to build up in the Aboriginal community (Project co-ordinator)

In the case of AWAV, the Project Co-ordinator has worked with the Aboriginal community in Liverpool for over 40 years, and thus they are quite familiar with her and trust her, which has helped the project succeed. AWAV was also able to build on the established trust among Aboriginal women of the auspice (Joan Harrisons Support Services for Women Outreach program at Warwick Farm).

In contrast the original project worker, an Aboriginal woman, had not previously worked in the area. This meant that she had need to established trust or a name for herself within the community. Despite the Project Co-ordinator being a non-Indigenous woman, she was still able to develop trust in the Aboriginal community over time. This suggests that a worker does not have to be Aboriginal to develop trust; trust is developed through relationships, time and commitment. The current AWAV project worker is an Aboriginal worker and has also worked in the region for a long time and thus had community connections and had developed a sense of trust in the community, helping the project succeed further.

From the development of trust with the project the ripple effect or word of mouth has occurred. A key projects aim is to have mentors (program graduates) feeling comfortable referring a friend or a family member to a service to help them. The Project Co-ordinator notes

If you work with the Aboriginal community one of the biggest forms of communication within that community is word of mouth... This is about the trust factor. So word of mouth is often more trusted, so one member of the community will tell another and they, in turn, well tell another. And that will be more trusted than a total stranger coming in and telling them. So it is about supporting that as a structure that is used by them and how you can support that, and that is their way of communication.

Bronwyn Lumby and Terri Farrelly (2009) also highlight the importance of trust and cultural competence to enable Aboriginal women access mainstream services. A questionnaire completed by

Group 1 participants documented shocking levels of mistrust of mainstream services. When asked to rate whether institutions/services could be 'trusted' four of the five women indicated no institution of government (such as the courts; the police; DoCS; health or housing) could be trusted. These participants only expressed trust in non-government agencies such as refugees or neighbourhood centres. This finding has implications for policy and program responses to violence against Aboriginal women. The lack of 'trust' was unsurprising in the context of personal experiences of racism from mainstream services. One participant in Group 2 retold this story pointing to the barriers created by institutional policies (in this case, the inability of a refuge to respond to two sisters escaping violence)

I even went to a refuge with her [my older sister] when I was younger and that was in town. I couldn't stay there because it was a women and kids and it wasn't like a hostel where I could stay, I was a young one, so I couldn't stay there. It's daunting to go through that and then in the end they goes 'You can come but she can't come'. It was like 'what the ..?' It's my sister, you know? They gave me \$20 [for accommodation elsewhere] but she said don't worry and went back home. 'We'll go home'. (Participant, Group 2)

Many other women retold stories of offensive treatment, harassment and abuse at the hands of white institutions in the focus groups. Drawing on Karen McKenzie and Lorna McNamara's argument 'understanding trauma begins with rediscovering history' (2008, p. 48) but not only 'grand' history (such as colonisation, the legacy of the stolen generation and the dispossession of traditional lands) but also the personal history or lived experience of individual women.

Image 2 below illustrates the types of support that would help Aboriginal women re-build their lives after experiencing domestic violence. Livvi in her drawing has identified the importance of talking and listening, friends and supportive networks (women getting together and supporting each other). She has used the train track image to illustrate the journey towards a healthy, safe and happy home. Education, communication and support are all important to this journey. The image also carries a clear message of the importance of mentoring and supporting other women live free of domestic violence.

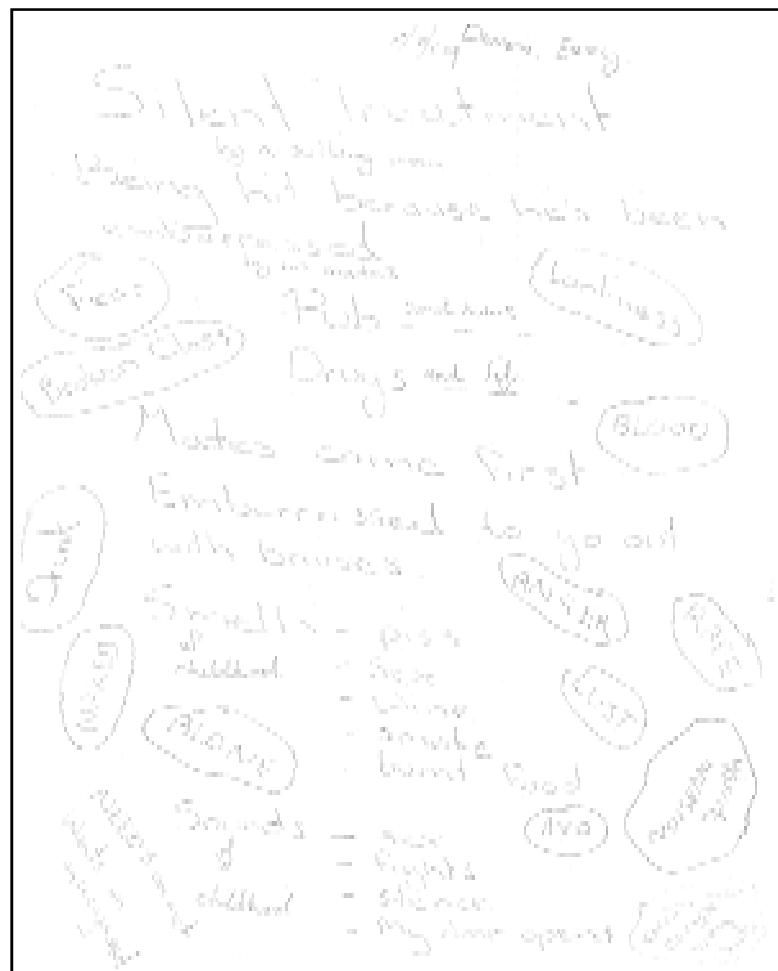
Worker). The Project Co-ordinator believes that this knowledge will change the usual outcome and help women to “recognise (domestic violence) and walk away from it rather than to remain in it”. The picture below highlights the ‘dream’ or desire of Aboriginal women to have happy, healthy, families and how domestic violence can shatter that dream. It clearly recognises that violence affects all members of the families, including children. It is also somewhat hopeful, suggesting that there is an alternative to families affected by domestic violence.



I look at my children and the decisions that they are making, and the underlying [exposure to] domestic violence that has not been addressed. My mother went through domestic violence. So it's breaking that cycle, which is what we all say we want to do but unless you become pro-active with it, it still remains (Participant, Group 5)

Participants in Group 3 had high levels of knowledge of the dynamic of domestic violence and its effects on women and children. This was particularly notable in their visual depictions of domestic violence. Most of these participants had personal experiences of violence and were drawing on these experiences to help other women. They exhibited a strong sense of themselves as advocates and the power that flows from knowledge.

The image below uses words to capture the stark reality of life lived with violence, including violence experienced as a child. It captures the very personal attack on the senses of violence (smell, sounds and sight). It captures the range of emotions including fear, loneliness, anger and lust. Jotted as if an after-thought the words 'circle complete with kids' acknowledges the impact of violence on children and the cycle of violence some Aboriginal women experience.



The participants in the mentor programs also identified the importance of understanding the dynamics of domestic violence in helping women change their situations. Knowledge of the dynamics of domestic violence challenges what is understood as 'normal'. One member of Group 2 commented:

And even those who are experiencing domestic violence because they're the ones that really, really need it. Like, come to this course, you might get a lot out of it. They might open their eyes a lot more to see, they might think it is okay and this is meant to happen in a relationship and if they do this course they'll realise 'Shit, this shouldn't be happening' so it would be good for them.

3. Increased understanding that domestic violence is illegal and unacceptable.

A key outcome of AWAV mentor program was to increase participants understanding that domestic violence is illegal and unacceptable. This outcome appears premised on the hope that increased understanding will result in less tolerance of violence. In some ways this premise under-estimates the complexity of ending domestic violence (Herman, 1992; Radford & Hester, 2006). Art work such as the one below indicate a high level of understanding and a rejection of violence against women. The focus group discussions with group participants also suggest a rejection of violence in women's lives. What appeared more valuable to the group participants were ideas about 'what can be done' rather than 'it is wrong'. The group participants were sensitive to the negative effect of violence on individuals (particularly children), families and the broader community. It is important that white support services do not under-estimate or patronise Aboriginal women, assuming that what is needed is simply 'white enlightenment'.

Participants in Program 1 and 3 were asked their agreement (or otherwise) to a series of commonly held myths that act to enable violence against women. Whilst in most cases participants rejected violence enabling explanations (such as 'it's alright for a guy to threaten his partner as long as he doesn't hit her; if he's earning the family money, it's alright for a guy to decide what his partner can and can't spend it on') there was more ambivalence in relation to some myths. This ambivalence related to the following beliefs: that 'abuse within a relationship is a private matter that should be handled between the partners or within the family'; that: 'most physical violence occurs in a relationship because a partner provoked it'; and, that: 'it's alright for a guy to restrict the contact between his partner and her friends and family if he thinks they have a bad influence on her'. The adverse impact of welfare services on the lives of Aboriginal people may inform a desire to deal with violence 'within the family'. Services need to build relationships with Aboriginal women that

challenge this privatisation of violence. The notion of male control (of finances and social contacts) reflected a strongly gendered (patriarchal) understanding of family life, with few participants influenced by feminist understandings of women's experiences.



Participants in the focus groups also discussed these commonly held beliefs. In relation to the notion that women 'provoke' violence one participant said:

It's nonsense. Just because somebody is saying something you don't like, it doesn't mean you have to hit them. You can walk away or you can say stuff back. You don't have to hit, there's a choice. Don't talk with your fists. I think just walk away and get yourself together and then when you're calm, then you talk. (Participant, Group 2)

4. Increased capacity to report and speak up about domestic violence.

The participants' capacity to 'report and speak up about domestic violence' is predicated on the ability to 'name' and reject domestic violence. If behaviour was not labelled and understood as violence, then women would not be able to 'report'. Additionally, without trust or awareness of services women are unlikely to 'speak up' about domestic violence or support their friends and family. It was noted by key stakeholders that *'it takes a lot of confidence to speak up'*. A very important outcome of the mentor program has been the increased confidence among participants and the increased support they are providing each other.

The young women, the young mothers, need to know it's not ok. The women from the group (Bonnyrigg) are continuing to support each other. They meet for coffee and that's continued on. Most are young mothers and have a long way to go. [After the group] they talk to their mums about it [dv]. The network is going on.

As indicated above, the program has enhanced participants' knowledge and attitudes in relation to domestic violence. Accordingly, most expressed more confidence in seeking support for themselves or for others in the event of violence.

Yeah like the parents don't like going to speak to them - the white people for instance, because they have a different attitude towards things, they're quick to judge you without even asking. I'd like to help people get through it and understand what that is. Only because I've been through the same sort of situation and I understand now, but I wish there was an Aboriginal worker that I could have talk to maybe that could have gotten me a lot further, do you know what I mean. But I've been working around the white society that have been so judgmental to me and have just been that quick to criticise me and I've still beat them, because I was persistent and I kept going. But I really think that's important, that's why I think it's a big issue for me, I'd like to go that way and try and help in that aspect. (Participant, Group 3)

Participants in the mentor focus groups were presented with a scenario of seeing an older woman surrounded by young people refusing to let her pass on the footpath and forcing her out on to a busy street. They were asked whether they would: definitely help her; probably help her; probably not help her but hope someone else does; and definitely not help her but hope someone else would. This question has been used as a way of measuring a sense of community responsibility. In this use it was intended as a proxy for macro level change (challenging cultural acceptance of violence) as well as individual level change (confidence to demand violence-free communities). The participants in

Group 2 had a long discussion of assessing whether intervening would be putting themselves at risk (from a knife for example), concluding:

I wouldn't like to see me and all these young ones around me and no one come and help me. I'd hate to think that no one would come over to help me. I think it's called karma. What you do, it comes back around and if you help somebody, someone will help you. (Participant, Group 2)

Objective 2

Establish a local Aboriginal Women Against Violence (AWAV) Committee to address specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and liaise with local Domestic Violence Liaison Committee.

Agreed outcomes:

- 1. Increased representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on committees that deal with family violence.**
- 2. Increased empowerment of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women through enhanced leadership capacity.**

The second objective of the AWAV project related to building capacity among Aboriginal women to become stronger advocates for themselves and their community. The strategy developed to facilitate this was the establishing of a 'reference committee' comprising interested Aboriginal women from or working in the community. The purpose of the 'reference committee' as identified in the initial Terms of Reference was:

To provide a culturally appropriate environment for Aboriginal women to raise awareness of the issues and affects of domestic and family violence in their communities, to advocate for appropriate service provision and promote and support relevant training opportunities to local Aboriginal women.

The committee objectives were:

1. To advocate for service provision, issues and challenges that Aboriginal Women experience in relation to domestic and family violence.
2. To raise awareness of the issues pertaining to Aboriginal women in relation to domestic and family violence.

3. To identify, support and promote educational needs of Aboriginal women as they relate to domestic and family violence.
4. To increase access and equity of service provision to Aboriginal women in relation to domestic and family violence
5. To provide an environment conducive to networking for Aboriginal women from agencies, services and community.
6. To provide an environment that is supportive of the needs of Aboriginal women working in or experiencing domestic and family violence.
7. To raise awareness of the services in both the public and private sector that assist women during crisis especially concerning domestic and family violence.
8. To empower Aboriginal women in options when dealing with domestic and family violence by providing adequate information about support, services and options, to make informed decisions.

The Committee initially was formally constituted, with monthly meetings, a chairperson and minutes taken. It met three times (July, August and September, 2008) in this formalised model. These meetings were supported by Aboriginal women from and working with the committee, with about 14 participants attending each meeting, a further 5-10 giving their apologies and a further 15 receiving minutes and information. The level of interest in the activities of the committee indicates a clear desire among Aboriginal women to raise the issue of domestic violence. At the first meeting a number of priorities were identified including:

Housing

- the importance of having a representative from various housing agencies on this committee including DOH, AHO and community housing
- Need to speak to senior management as the workers able to make decisions - possibility of getting the Area Director to attend
- The need for emergency housing and strategies that should be employed, the Lands council should also be involved in this
- Explore the houses that are marked for development in the interim

Hospitals

- What is their response to a woman who experiences DV
- Where do they go from there
- Need for family support workers and ALOs in hospitals

Police

- Attitude to women and particularly Aboriginal women
- Attitude of police women
- Responsibility of police eg. Proof of AVO
- Priority in responding to DV, first attend to the DV situation then address issues such as warrants later
- New commanders in Campbelltown and Liverpool
- Area Commander is obligated to consult with Aboriginal community as directed in the Aboriginal Strategic Direction document

DOCs

- Women worried about the DOCs notification – question whether this is why women don't come forward about DV
- Need for youth services for younger women
- Lack of support and services for children who witness and experience DV

Systems

- Lack of support systems in place for women who experience DV (women are expected to continue working as if nothing has happened- unrealistic expectation from workforce)
- Women need to be able to take time off to recover from DV without fear of repercussions from work place

DV & Mental Health

- Recognised as extreme
- No help for kids
- ICAMS has long waiting list
- No family support workers
- Limited staff
- New staff to be employed with the SSWAH team

Lack of sensitivity from all services of Aboriginal history

Attendance however fell off sharply with the October and November meetings effectively being cancelled. At this time there was considerable discontent with the formal model of the committee as well as health and other work priorities preventing attendance. The resignation of the Project Worker in December, 2008 and the gap before the next Project worker commenced drained the Committee of its momentum. The AWAV Project worker and Co-ordinator together with key

Aboriginal women within the community reviewed the formalised model of the committee in June, 2009. A decision was reached that rather than an ongoing formalised committee strategic 'working groups' would be formed to pursue issues of concern raised by Aboriginal women with the AWAV project. An example of this type of approach saw a delegation of AWAV staff and Aboriginal women leaders meet with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs about Department of Community Services practices in relation to child removal in the area. This delegation led to an extensive response from the responsible minister, including child removal figures and highlighted concerns about DoCS practices. One member felt the steering committees role was to 'speak' not to 'listen' which is historically what Aboriginal women have done.

I think that's where it fell a little bit, like for me, because it was they came almost preaching to us rather than the other way around. See initially the committee was to identify issues to get the people to come and listen to them. And I mean that linked into the police area strategic command, you know, their direction and it clearly states in that strategic document that the police are mandated to actually consult with Aboriginal committees or the community and that direction is in for the next five years. So my idea was to link into that, get the police, listen to what we've got to say, and we're not going to listen to what you've got to say, okay?

The participation of the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Graduation Ceremony for the second and third groups indicated the respect with which the Steering Committee and the AWAV Project are held. This Ceremony was a celebration of the achievements of the mentor group participants and was attended by approximately 40 people, including the local media. Graduates received a certificate and those who spoke acknowledged the significant impact participation in the group had upon them. Quite a few graduates had or were thinking about further education due to the positive experience in the mentor program.

The key stakeholder focus group identified a number of ways in which the AWAV project had impacted on the local service system. Members of the local Domestic Violence Liaison Committee, for example, said the existence of the project and the steering committee made them more sensitive to the support needs of Aboriginal women. The AWAV project made the DV Liaison committee and individual services 'think about how we can provide better services and increased our commitment to Aboriginal women'. For other stakeholders having access to the AWAV project's expertise was vital:

What's been really important for me is to have access to Mary as a worker. If I'm not sure what to do, how to be support a woman, I can contact Mary for advice. I can refer women to the mentor group. If AWAV wasn't here, who else would I ask?

Unanticipated outcomes

There were some unanticipated outcomes arising from the project which contributed to its overall success. Most importantly the project was able to form a very productive partnership with TAFE NSW which led to significant outcomes for the overall project and individual women. Through this partnership the mentor program was embedded within the Aboriginal Welfare Certificate and the First Aid Certificate. This meant that completion of the mentor program was credited towards the Aboriginal Welfare Certificate. This arrangement added credibility and worth to participating in the mentor program. It also meant that individual women were able to use participation in the mentor program as a pathway to further education. Many of the women who have completed the mentor program have gone on to complete further TAFE qualifications. This resulted in unanticipated education and potentially employment outcomes from the program. It is argued that programs such as the mentor program provided a very safe entry pathway for Aboriginal women into education, particularly those alienated or marginalised from formal education throughout their lives.

Yeah definitely I'd say the same. I'd like to go on and get a further education based around the kids if I can get time. But definitely this course has taught me a lot as well. Many of us have learnt a lot from it. And yeah basically just continue, instead of it going to waste I'd like to get another certificate or do one after this. (Participant, Group 3)

Anecdotal information indicates that increased levels of self confidence gained from participation in the group had also assisted three participants obtain employment in welfare related positions.

Impact on the four concentric circles or levels of the ecological framework

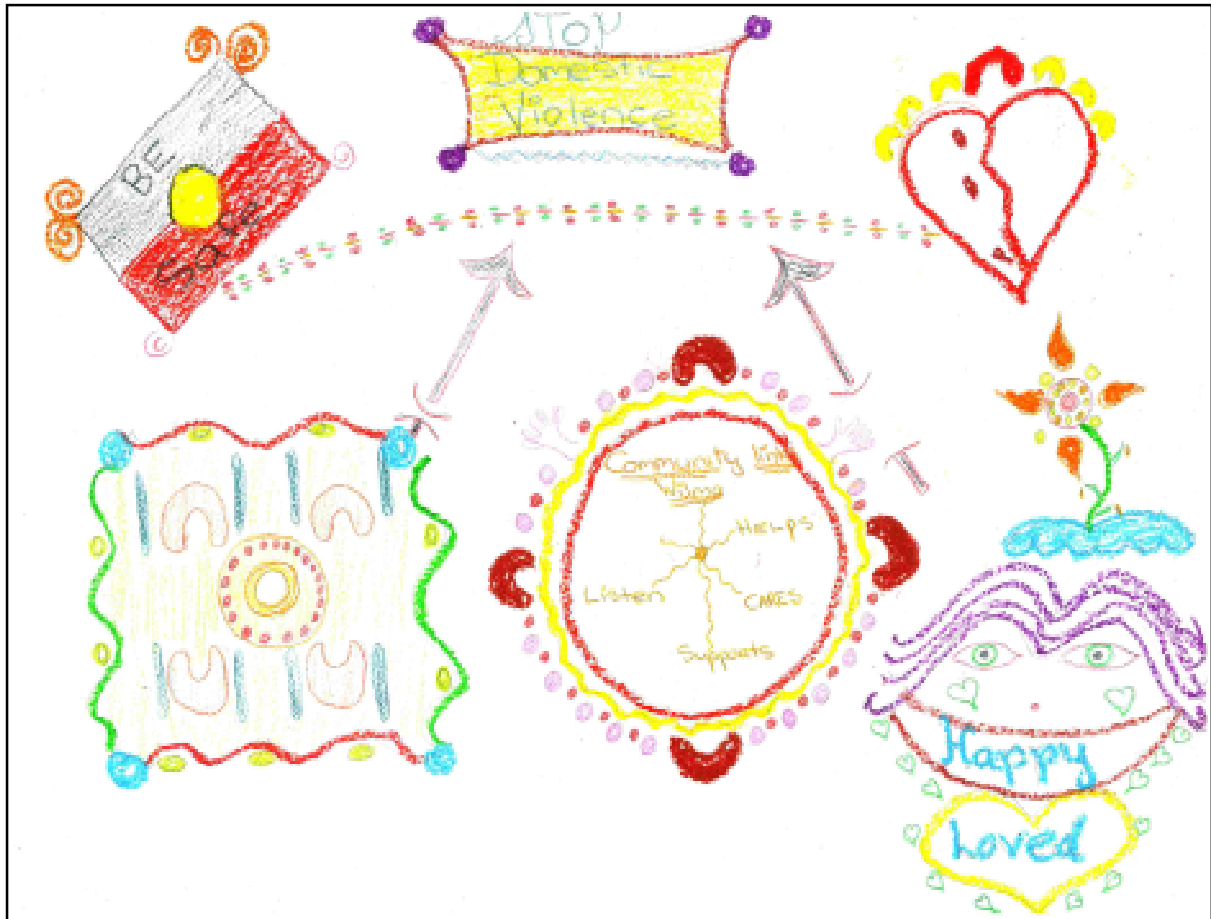
The Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project impacted on all four concentric circles or levels identified by Heise et al (1998; 2002). The table below attempts to illustrate simply the impacts of the Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project on the ecological frameworks four concentric circles. The composition of each group influenced the specific circle or level impacted. For example, Group 2 comprised mainly women who had not experienced domestic violence but felt strongly about Aboriginal women's rights. For this group there were personal (confidence), micro (willingness to act and assist) and exo (knowledge of domestic violence dynamics and support services) level impacts. For this group exo level impacts were most significant. Group 3 by comparison had an established group identity and relationship, arising from their personal histories of domestic violence. For this group the mentor program reinforced personal and micro level relationships, however, the greatest

impact was on their desire to be involved in institutional change or macro level change. Group 1 on the other hand did not have pre-existing relationships, making it very hard to establish a safe level of participation. For this group the program impacted at a personal level and to some extent micro level only. This indicates that the impact of the mentor program on the circles or levels of the ecological framework is strongly influenced by the way the groups are constituted and their pre-existing relationships.

The table below attempts to portray the multi-level impact of the project

Outcomes/changes	Personal	Micro	Exo	Macro
New friendships and supporting existing relationships	✓			
New knowledge about domestic violence	✓	✓		
Increased knowledge of service system	✓	✓	✓	
Greater confidence in accessing services	✓	✓	✓	
Ability to identify violence behaviour	✓	✓	✓	✓
Introducing white services to Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women's perspectives			✓	✓
Seeking accountability from white institutions (such as DoCS and Police)			✓	✓
Building networks that challenge violence against Aboriginal women			✓	✓

A further question asked at the beginning of this evaluation was how the project strengthened bonding and linking social capital. This question was premised on research that indicates strong social bonds have a protective effect against violence whilst linking social capital strengthens an individual's ability to access and trust institutions. The outcomes of the project were quite distinct in relation to bonding and linking social capital.



In most of the mentor groups individuals indicated pre-existing strong social bonds, through families and neighbourhoods. Only participants in Group 1 revealed any sense of isolation. All the other Aboriginal women, it appeared, had access to family or friendship networks that were protective. Strong bonds are not however always protective of individuals but at times can override individual protection for group protection. We cannot assume the strong bonds evident will always act to support women experiencing violence. In some circumstances these strong bonds deny violence in order to protect the overall group (the family or Aboriginal community, for example). A remaining challenge for people working with strongly bonded Aboriginal women is to ensure these bonds are used to reject rather than deny violence. In relation to the strengthening linking social capital, the AWAV project was very successful. The information about services and the introduction of workers to Aboriginal women was very important in beginning to build trust between the Aboriginal women and institutions. Institutions, however, have to show they are 'trustworthy'.

The final question posed by this evaluation was in relation to building social cohesion in order to ameliorate the negative impacts of social disadvantage. What was clear from the focus group discussions was that such a goal is well outside the scope of a single, time specific, project. The level

of day to day racism experienced by these Aboriginal women was shocking. In this way violence permeated their everyday lives. Racism creates a deep cleavage in any hope for social cohesion.

Conclusion

The Project provides a best practice example of working with Aboriginal women to prevent violence. It drew on thoughtful practice wisdom, working in a respectful and inclusive manner. The mentor program created a safe space for Aboriginal women to explore the painful reality of violence in their lives, their families and their communities. It broke down barriers to 'formal' education and mainstream support services. It highlighted, once again, Aboriginal women's rejection of violence and their determination of address violence in their communities. In many ways, the Project issued a challenge to mainstream service providers – how can we support Aboriginal women?

Recommendations

- That the learning and wisdom developed through the AWAV Project be disseminated to others working in this area
- That government support Aboriginal women's efforts to prevent violence in their communities through adequate, secure, funding support
- That the significant challenges facing Aboriginal communities be acknowledged and long-term commitments to support change be funded
- That funds be allocated to support the continuation of the important work commenced in the Liverpool and Campbelltown areas by the Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project
- That the peer mentor program, tailored to the local community, be expanded to other areas
- That program evaluation remain a priority, to enable the building of the evidence base concerning practice, policy and program responses to support Aboriginal women live free of violence

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