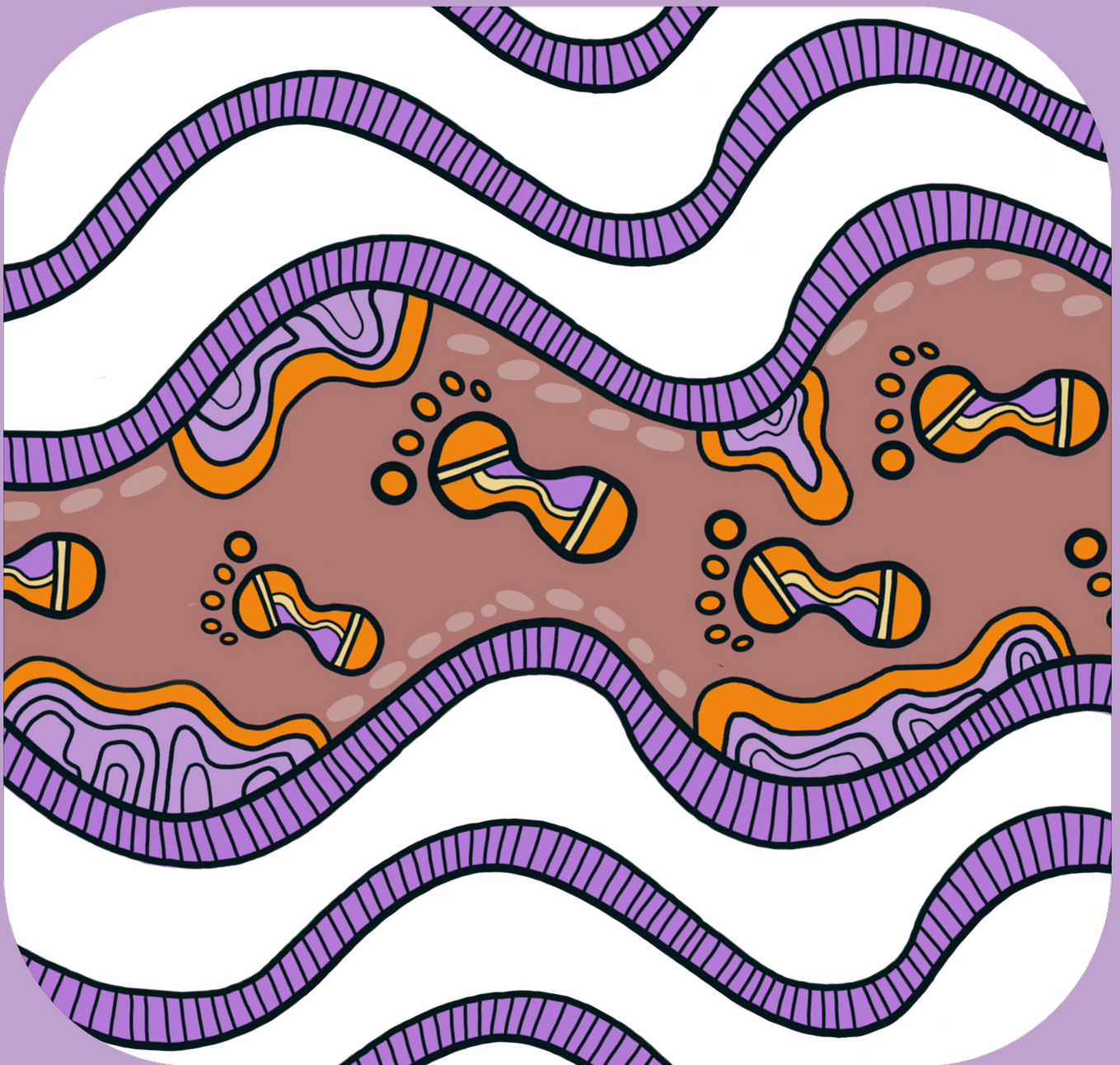


Centring Aboriginal Women's Voices

Djirra, Elizabeth Morgan House,
and Safe and Equal
Partnership Case Study
2026



Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we are fortunate to live and work on. We pay respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters, community and culture. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.



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Contributors: Katrina Harrison, Grace*, Kristy Nocker, Lesly Zambrano and Anna Wark

We acknowledge the generosity of Aboriginal women who contributed their experiences, ideas and vision. They are the ones who can determine if the process was culturally safe for them.

"I'm finding that a lot of organisations are now open to having advocates, and you can't get any better resource than that, can you?" - Aboriginal woman

The voices of Aboriginal women included in this resource were shared with their informed consent for the purposes of this work. These women retain ownership of their stories. Please do not use or repurpose their words for other purposes without consent.

*Pseudonym chosen to protect safety and privacy.

About the partners

Djirra is a specialist Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) with over 23 years' experience accompanying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and their children, on their individual journeys. Djirra celebrates women's strength and resilience, finding solutions through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women sharing their stories, journeys, and experiences. Djirra delivers holistic, culturally safe, specialist family violence legal services and case management, alongside cultural and wellbeing workshops and programs with state-wide reach.

Elizabeth Morgan House Aboriginal Women's Services is a place where the rights of Aboriginal women against gender and racially based violence have been upheld since 1976. Elizabeth Morgan House (EMH) is proudly an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation providing refuge accommodation, specialist family violence services, therapeutic support and work with our women in the justice system to uphold and defend their rights to live a life free from violence. EMH continue a matriarchal legacy by advocating for culturally safe, place-based, trauma informed, strength and rights-based approaches.

Safe and Equal is the peak body for Victorian organisations that specialise in family and gender-based violence across the continuum, including primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. They are an independent, non-government organisation that work with and for their members to prevent and respond to violence, building a better future for adults, children and young people experiencing, at risk of, or recovering from family and gender-based violence.



ELIZABETH MORGAN HOUSE
ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S SERVICE INC

SAFE + EQUAL

Illustrations by **Emma Bamblett**, Wemba Wemba, Gunditjmara, Ngadjonji and Taungurung.

Resource design by **Lacey Yeomans**, Monero Ngarigo.

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Background

Aboriginal women have cultural strength and resistance, possess creativity and joy, and are loving mothers, aunties, grandmothers and Elders. They are keepers of knowledge, change makers, advocates, and leaders.¹

In 2022 Djirra and Safe and Equal established a strategic partnership to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing family violence through ensuring access to culturally responsive and accessible services, when seeking support from non-Aboriginal family violence services.² Elizabeth Morgan House joined the partnership in 2024. Through a collaborative process, the partnership generated an Insights Report, Commitment for Action and Story of Change for non-Aboriginal family violence services.

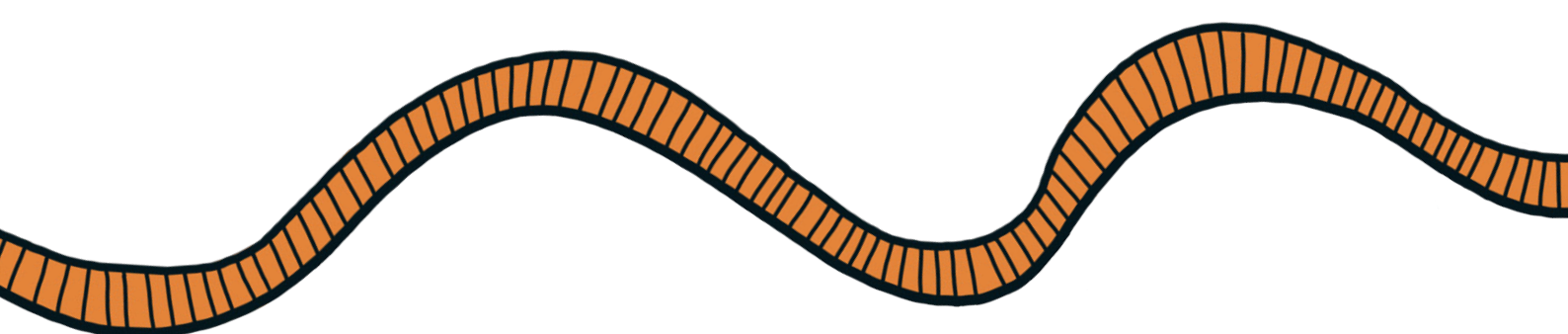
Each organisation knew from the start that it was crucial for this work to be informed by the voices of Aboriginal women who have accessed family violence services. A process was developed to engage Aboriginal women in a culturally responsive way, with the knowledge that they were the ones who could determine if the process was culturally safe.

About this resource

This resource is intended for non-Aboriginal family violence organisations seeking to genuinely centre Aboriginal women's voices in their work. It draws from a partnership between Djirra, Elizabeth Morgan House and Safe and Equal, and shares the practical steps taken to ensure Aboriginal women shaped the process from the start.

It draws from the perspectives of three Aboriginal women participating in this project, the Project Lead who worked closely with them, and a lessons learnt report capturing their experiences.³

Recognising that organisations and communities are unique, this resource is intended as an example, with the invitation to use as a reference and adapt what does not fit to your context.



¹ Safe and Equal (2024) Sector Commitment to Action. Available: <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/commitment-to-action/>

² Further information on the partnership project is available at <https://safeandequal.org.au/about/working-together-for-change/supporting-a-culturally-responsive-and-accountable-family-violence-sector/>

³ Zambrano, L, Portillo-Baskett, N., Huynh, P. (2025) Djirra and Safe and Equal Lived Experience Lessons Learned Report (Internal document)

How were Aboriginal women's voices centred in the initiative?

Djirra and Safe and Equal recognised the value and importance of centring Aboriginal women's voices in the initiative. Aboriginal survivor advocates were part of the governance of the initiative, and Aboriginal women who have received support from family violence services in Victoria were engaged through listening phase consultations. The steps taken to enable this are shared below.

Governance

A steering group provided guidance and leadership to the project across 2023-2024, setting the direction of the project and ensuring it reflected mutual benefit, upheld Aboriginal self-determination, and challenged colonial and extractive dynamics.

Co-facilitated by Djirra and Safe and Equal, the group included representation from three Aboriginal family violence services⁴, two Aboriginal survivor advocates and three non-Aboriginal family violence services.⁵

"We bonded as Aboriginal women. [Aboriginal co-facilitator] really led the process and the conversations, which was really great.... always addressing me as Aunt, that's a big respect thing. When you join the meeting you've got them smiling, it's already that warm feeling in the room before it starts."
- Aboriginal woman

"I think the process too to have older women, younger women too, and to listen to their experiences is kind of an eye opener too. I thought that was a really good idea." - Aboriginal woman

"I was really proud to be part of this group and as the group progressed, I felt prouder because it was such a positive group." - Aboriginal woman

⁴Djirra, Elizabeth Morgan House and Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service

⁵Good Samaritan Inn, FVREE and Centre Against Violence

The following steps were taken:

Created a participant brief and video explaining the purpose of the project, role of the steering group, possible risks and benefits, payment amount and method, complaints pathways and the positionality of the organisations and Project Lead.

Ensured the steering group had more Aboriginal voices than non-Aboriginal voices.

Held individual conversations with each steering group member to explore accessibility, communication and cultural safety needs and expectations, alongside worries and hopes for the work together. These conversations were referred to as cultures of collaboration from which our shared ways of working emerged.

Recognised the diversity of Aboriginal people and communities, the reciprocity of leaning from each other, and named that no one Aboriginal person or organisation represents all communities.

Ensured the space was co-facilitated by an Aboriginal woman and a non-Aboriginal woman. The Aboriginal facilitator was able to attend to cultural protocols, and the non-Aboriginal facilitator was able to attend to white fragility and resistance.

Fostered an open and honest space, in which non-Aboriginal people and organisations were encouraged to hear different perspectives, and resist seeking comfort.

Offered a debrief after each meeting and provided regular updates and different pathways for feedback.

Distributed the brief and video to survivor advocate groups.⁶

Offered a meeting to yarn about the project, get to know the Project Lead, ask questions and decide whether to be involved, or not.

Took care to centre Aboriginal voices and acknowledged there is no expectation for Aboriginal people to educate non-Aboriginal people.

Acknowledged that people participating in the capacity of their organisational role, may also bring personal experiences alongside professional experience.

Shared documents one week before each meeting. Offered a meeting or phone call to prepare for the meeting. This was an opportunity ask questions and test any ideas. Preparation time was paid.

Provided flexible payment options. Budgeted for equity to pay for travel time and accommodation for women living regionally to attend in-person workshops.

Worked with the steering group to design the process for listening consultations, data collection and analysis. Undertook sense-making with the steering group to collaboratively analyse data and unearth key messages and insights.

Honoured the generosity and efforts of the steering group and took care to close the work together well. Held a reflective group conversation about how we had worked together, where we had upheld our ways of working and where we hadn't.

⁶For example, Safe and Equal Expert Advisory Panel, Family Safety Victoria Victim Survivor Advisory Group, Berry Street's Y Change, University of Melbourne WEAVERS, Women with Disabilities Victoria Experts by Experience, Independent Collective of Survivors, YLab.

Listening

Aboriginal women who have received support from family violence services in Victoria were invited to share their views on how services can better support Aboriginal people's rights and cultural safety.

Recognising that research has been used as a colonial tool to erode agency, exploit, dehumanise and harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since invasion,⁷ the process of collecting evidence drew from the expertise of the steering group and Aboriginal participatory research methods.⁸ The approach was shaped and strengthened through relationships with the Aboriginal women participating in interviews.

"I felt my voice was heard and I felt they captured how I was feeling at each time, which is actually quite hard to do, right, to capture how someone's feeling. I can tell you how I feel but to capture it is another thing... that's really hard to do because sometimes words don't explain how someone feels."
- Aboriginal woman

"Some people think they're ready for this, but then when they actually open up about it, they find that they're not. So yes, it's good to have that process, because then those people that aren't ready can then figure out for themselves if they're not ready or if they are."
- Aboriginal woman



⁷ Dudgeon, P., Bray, A., Darlaston-Jones, D. & Walker, R. (2020). Aboriginal Participatory Action Research: An Indigenous Research Methodology Strengthening Decolonisation and Social and Emotional Wellbeing. Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

⁸ Dudgeon, P., Bray, A., Darlaston-Jones, D. & Walker, R. (2020). Aboriginal Participatory Action Research: An Indigenous Research Methodology Strengthening Decolonisation and Social and Emotional Wellbeing. Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

The following steps were taken:

Designed the consultation approach and questions with the steering group.

A flyer was designed by an Aboriginal designer. Feedback was provided by the steering group and senior Aboriginal staff at Djirra.

Distributed the brief, video and flyer through community groups and survivor advocate and lived experience networks.

Worked with each person to understand accessibility, cultural and physical safety and support needs, and payment arrangements. Provided the option to bring a support person.

Provided choice and control over where that yarn/interview took place – in-person, online or over the phone.

Followed a semi-structured interview guide, while allowing the conversation to go where it needed to go. Each interview was recorded and transcribed with informed consent

Shared back quotes for the chance to correct, clarify or remove information. Where women couldn't be contacted for this step, the quotes were not used as informed consent could not be gained.

Explained that once their words enter the public domain, and control over further sharing is limited. Included a note in the report stating that Aboriginal women retained the ownership of their stories and asking readers not to use or repurpose their words for other purposes without consent.

Created a participant brief and video explaining the purpose of the project, role of the steering group, possible risks and benefits, payment amount and method, privacy, complaints pathways and the positionality of the organisations and project lead.

Offered a time to meet, yarn about the project, get to know the project lead, ask questions and decide whether to be involved, or not.

Prioritised flexibility, allowing the Aboriginal woman to shape the process and intentionally moving away from transactional one-off relationships towards continuous consent and accountability.⁹

Explained the purpose of the data collection, and how their stories would be stored, protected and used. Let them know they had ownership over their stories and could withdraw consent at any time.

Provided follow-up support, such as debriefing or check-ins.

Took care to ensure that Aboriginal women understood how their words and experiences were being included and offered follow up meetings to talk through the insights and next steps the work generated.

Fostered opportunities for reciprocal benefits, ensuring the project did not only draw on the women's contributions, but also created meaningful opportunities for Aboriginal women to benefit.

Thanked each person for their involvement and provided a printed copy of the report, a project t-shirt and tote bag.

⁹ Lowitja Institute (2026) Strengthening outcomes through Aboriginal-led co-design: lessons learnt from co-design in practice: <https://apo.org.au/organisation/61518>

How was **cultural responsiveness** enacted and experienced?

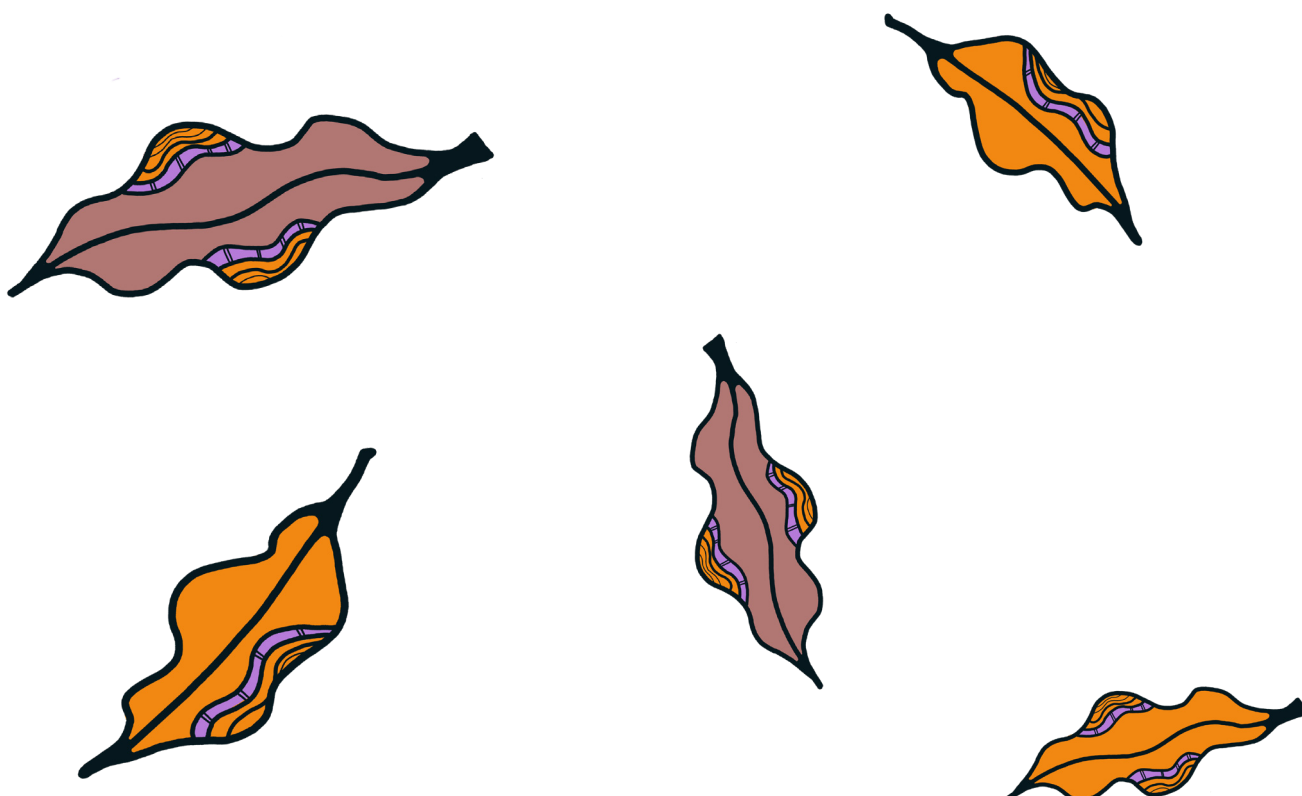
To understand if the process was experienced as culturally safe, we asked the Aboriginal women involved. To understand how cultural responsiveness was enacted, we asked the Project Lead. These are the lessons learned.

“I felt I was listened to. I felt I was heard. I felt that I was respected, and I felt that I was in a culturally safe place.”

- Aboriginal woman

Principles are a pathway to move from intention to practice

Grounding the approach in principles was essential to shaping and guiding the process. Frameworks such as the Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Implementation Framework¹⁰,¹¹ Indigenous Data Sovereignty and the Family Violence by Experience Framework¹³ guided how Aboriginal women's voices were centred.



¹⁰ Co-design and collaborate, Strength-based approach, Engage in deep listening, Commit to self-awareness and reflection, Rebalance of power, Be intersectional, Think in context and relationships, Be informed by women's Law and culture, Be visionary and sustainable, Take a healing-informed approach

¹¹ Australian Human Rights Commission 2021. Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future—Implementation Framework. https://wiyiyaniuthangani.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/ahrc_wyut_framework_2021_2-1.pdf

¹² Maïam nayri Wingara. (2018). Indigenous Data Sovereignty Communique Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit 20th June 2018, Canberra, ACT. Available here.

¹³ Recognise, Safety, Value, Transparency, Accountability, Support, Trust, Reciprocity, Inclusion, and Sustainability.

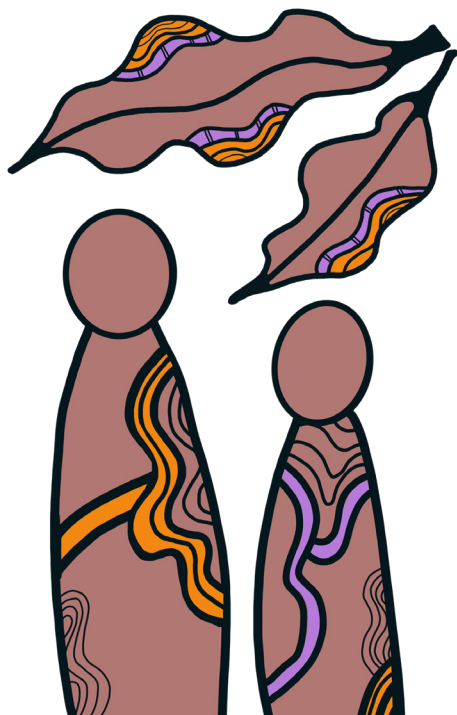
Accessibility and inclusivity were supported by enabling women to participate in ways that suited them, offering multiple communication methods, and maintaining communication before and after engagement. A healing informed approach ensured cultural and physical safety was co created. Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles ensured women controlled their information. Recognition was demonstrated through valuing Aboriginal women's expertise and providing flexible, fair remuneration for their time and contributions.

"Always letting us know through emails or phoning. That was great, that she'd phone just to see how things were going... I think the fact that we had her phone number too and we could contact her if we needed to ask anything." - Aboriginal woman

"I actually got to physically see what happened with my voice and my information. It was good to see the way it was being used...the fact that they want to use my quotes in the work. And participating in it actually gives you confidence, as a person, that you're valued as a person, and they genuinely value, what you bring to the table."
- Aboriginal woman

"Transparency, if you're going to interview someone, send the questions, give them the context... The reason why we're doing what we're doing, just so that they have an informed decision.... making sure that the participants are doing their own self-care, and checking in with them after the process, during the process, to see how they're going. Sometimes even after an interview, it can bring things up for people." - Aboriginal woman

"I work casual up here so I'm missing two days of work to travel down and get back again. That was tough for me. But they paid me for my travel time, which is really helpful."
- Aboriginal woman



Relationality is foundational in building trust

Everything starts by building trust and taking time to form connections. Trust grows through many interactions, not just one. Each meeting is a chance to understand what works for each woman and to shape a relationship of ongoing consent and accountability. It is important to move at the pace of trust and focus on the benefits for women, not just the initiative. Sometimes this means taking time, other times it requires quick action. Meeting women face to face in their own spaces strengthens connection, and strong feedback loops contributed to feeling respected.

“What you pay attention to will grow. So really paying attention to the relationships through this process...for the women to see how their information was used, that they could change or build on what they shared, and see that that’s going somewhere. I felt that over time and through the process, the relationship was deepened.” – Project Lead

“Checking in with me and having a yarn, even if it was only for 10 minutes, just to see how I’m going and where I’m at... she’s kept me updated with the process and where things are currently at. So, it’s building that relationship with people. That’s important.” – Aboriginal woman

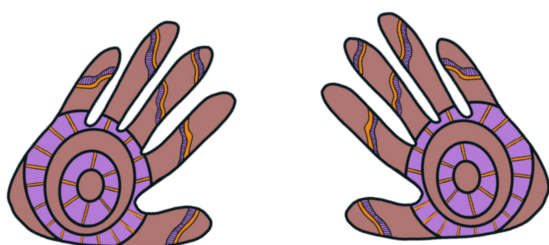
“As Aboriginal women we connect through yarning. Once one person starts and you find that it’s a roll-on effect too, you know, they’ve all got their different experiences which is good.” – Aboriginal woman

Emergent ways of working let Aboriginal ways of doing to flourish

Centring Aboriginal women’s voices means allowing them to lead. Rigid processes often force Aboriginal people to fit white ways of working, whereas flexibility and genuine listening and responding to what is heard are essential. The project staff were open to iterative, adaptive and responsive ways of working. Allowing Aboriginal women to shape the process, rather than fitting into preset structures, created space for more respectful and culturally safe practice.

“... the people that they had from other organisations, were open to learning. You know they wanted to learn and, and they were honest too and that’s really important... to be honest about, what you know, what you don’t know.” – Aboriginal woman

“One of the strengths has been that it’s been so emergent, it’s been flexible, We’ve, been able to take guidance and advice of [Aboriginal people] when it’s offered, not expecting to get all the information or direction on day one. Noticing when people are offering you guidance, even if it’s not particularly direct... but when I really listened to it I thought that’s something that I need to act on.” – Project Lead



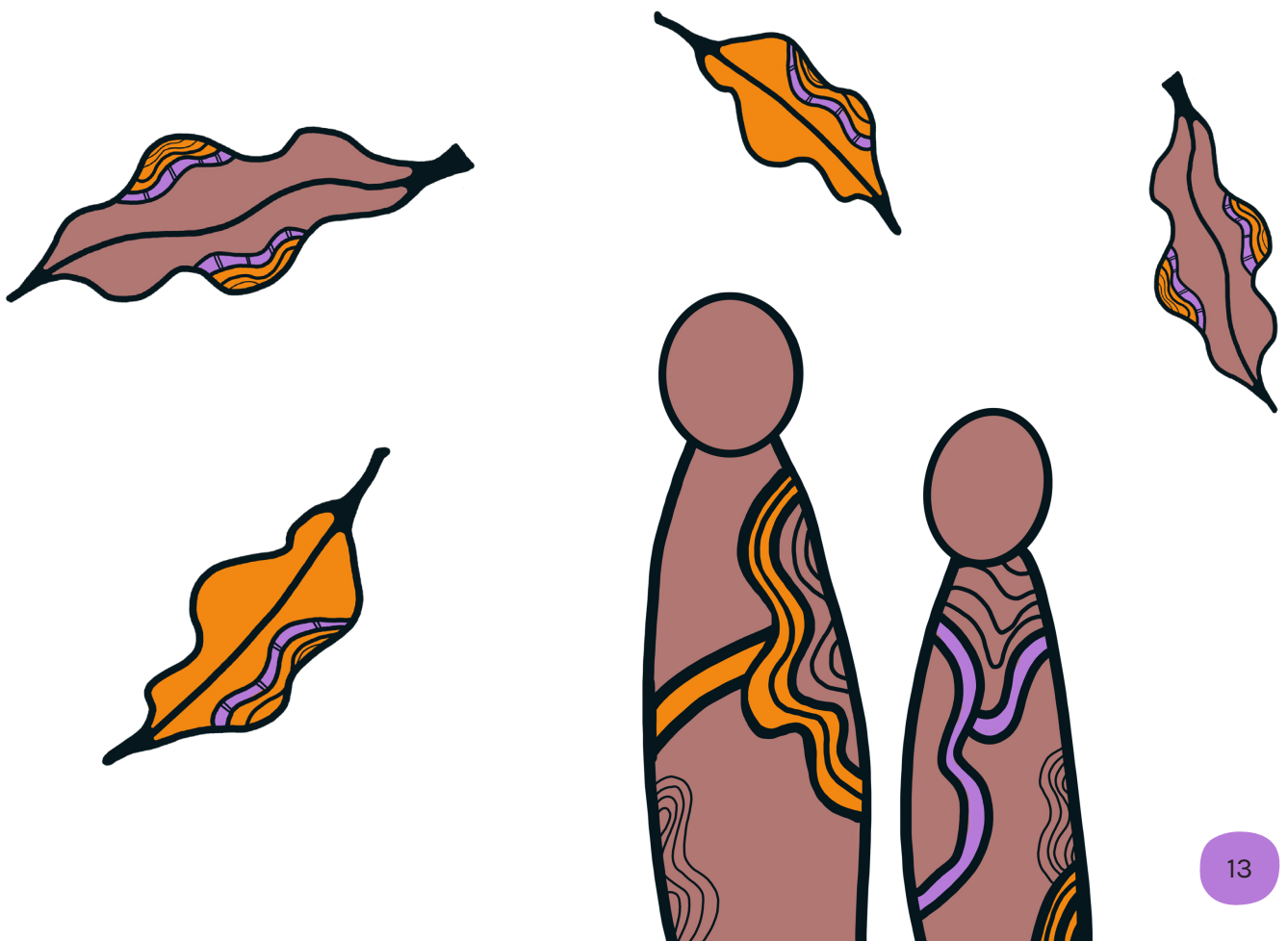
Disrupting Whiteness and upholding Aboriginal Self-determination is critical

Any efforts that involve Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people requires non-Aboriginal people to intentionally disrupt whiteness. In this project, some of the ways that non-Aboriginal people tried to attend to this were:

- Named social location to provide the opportunity for Aboriginal women to decide if, and how, they wanted to work with a non-Aboriginal person and organisations.
- Recognised the limits of their knowledge and understanding, and listened to the guidance by Aboriginal women.
- Centred and referenced the work of Aboriginal women, organisations, researchers, academics and authors.
- Being aware of whiteness, and how it might show up personally, in processes, and assumptions.
- Built in space for self-reflection, both before and after stepping into spaces and conversations.
- Gave relationships, interactions and conversations the time they need.

“I think for me the fact that it was an Aboriginal group that gives you a bit more, I don’t want to use the word power, but more safety in knowing that...so you’re feeling a little bit more confident probably than...the others that are in the room because you know it’s about what you know.”
- Aboriginal woman

“Being upfront that I’m working at Djirra that’s an ACCO but I’m a white woman. Where I grew up. What’s my ancestry. I shared that this is my first time working at an ACCO... being genuine and not trying to be anything that I’m not”. – Project Lead



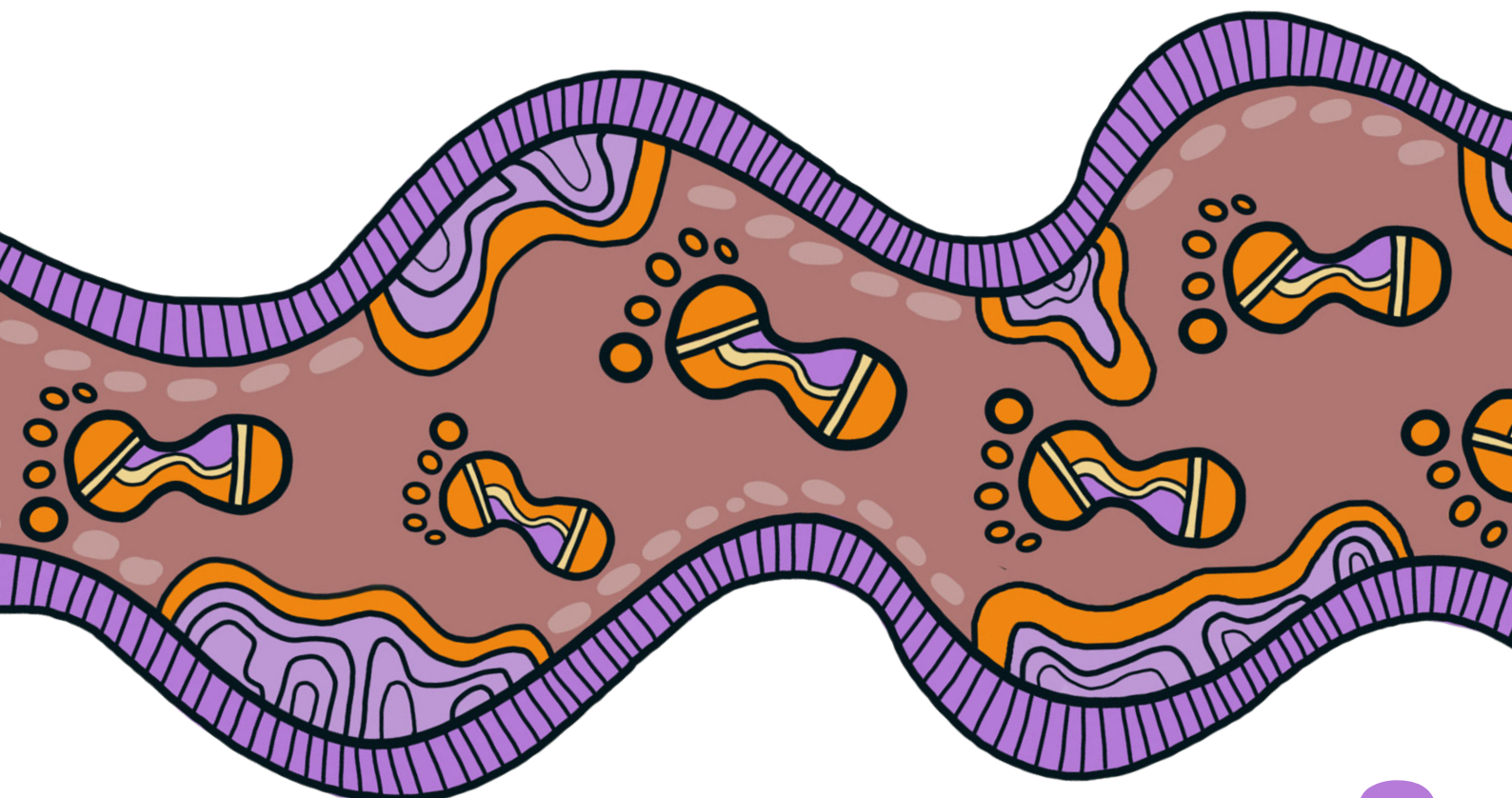
Valuing Aboriginal perspectives and welcoming feedback matters

There must be genuine openness to be guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Non-Aboriginal people must act with honesty, respect and a willingness to sit with discomfort. In this project, this was modelled by maintaining a reflective stance, seeking advice and acting on guidance and feedback. Causing harm is a common fear among non-Aboriginal people and organisations. Addressing this requires believing in the importance of centring Aboriginal voices and using that commitment to guide a more careful, considered approach.

“What worked well? Everyone was open and honest. Everyone brought something to the table, right down from youth to older people... I felt the richness of the discussions were amazing too.”
- Aboriginal woman

“If [Project Lead] wasn’t sure she’d be asking questions and I think that’s so important. She’s not Aboriginal so to be asking those questions and being curious is fantastic.”
- Aboriginal woman

“Sometimes it’s just a book on the shelf that no-one reads....I think that Djirra and Safe and Equal have a mutual agreement... that they are going to make places accountable and safer for Aboriginal women. I really do believe that.” - Aboriginal woman

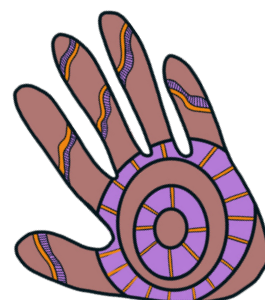
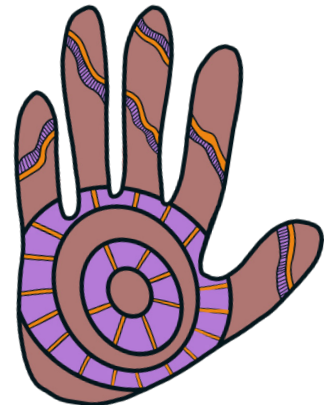
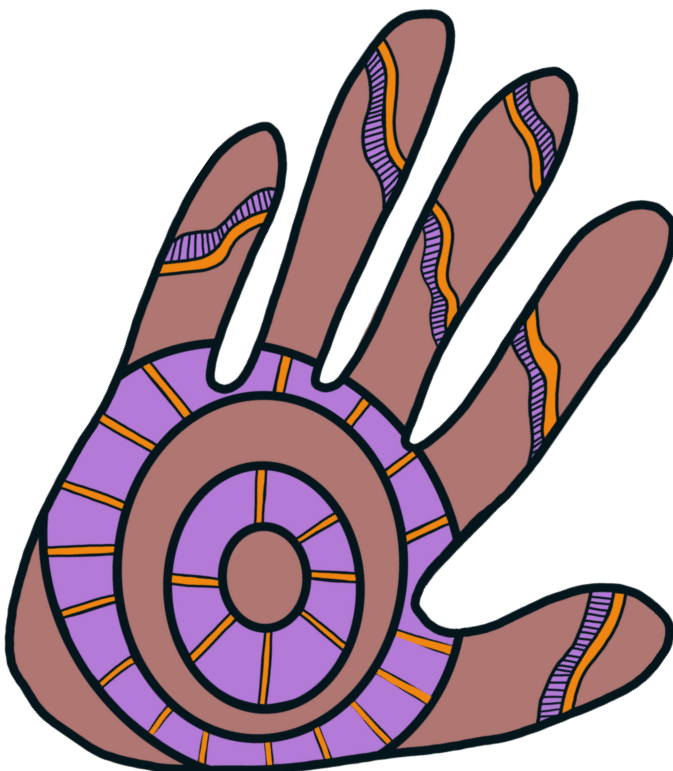
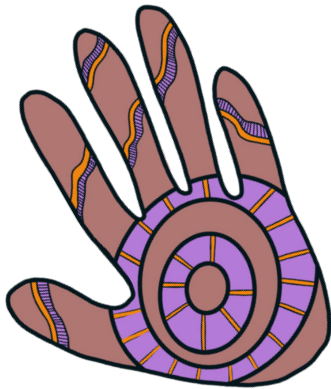


Centring Aboriginal women's voices enriches everyone

Centring the voices of Aboriginal women creates layered benefits. Their perspectives strengthened the project, resulting in an Insights Report, a Commitment to Action and a Story of Change shaped directly by their contributions. For non Aboriginal organisations, the process revealed service gaps and challenging the binary divide between “professionals” and “clients”. For Aboriginal women, the reciprocal approach fostered validation, respect and a sense of influence as they saw their input drive real change building confidence and skills.

“...even for us Aboriginal women, we learn from being part of those groups....there's still things that you learn because we don't know all about Aboriginal people. So, there's learning there for us too.”
- Aboriginal woman

“Having that respectful and caring relationship has helped me to be more confident in other things.. the process in itself has given me confidence in myself and confidence that we're going to get somewhere. It helps you in your everyday life to be a more confident person. And it changes your perspective. From hopelessness of feeling like nobody cares and nobody's listening, to being part of a project and seeing it through to the end, and then seeing its impact. There's something in that that's good for your soul, because it makes you feel like somebody's listening.” - Aboriginal woman



Final Words

Centring Aboriginal women's voices can lay the foundation for real transformation when supported by processes that are culturally responsive. Aboriginal women are driven to improve the service system that has been designed to fail them, to create better outcomes for their communities. However, for this to happen, there is a responsibility on non-Aboriginal people and organisations to earn trust and create culturally responsive spaces to centre Aboriginal women's voices.

"I've been through the system. I've had a terrible experience. Why should we have to go through that, as women, as mothers, as grandmothers? ... To be able to do something, and understand that the wheels do turn slowly, but if we all jump in there, we can make that wheel go a little bit faster. That somebody's got to step forward first, that's my approach, is one of us has to stand up and say something, and then others will follow from there."
- Aboriginal woman

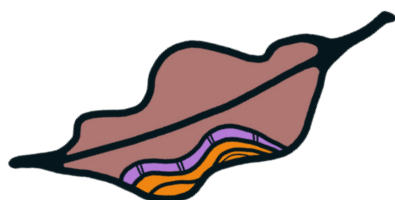
From Aboriginal women to Aboriginal women

A message from Aboriginal women to other Aboriginal women:

"Your voice is worth being heard and if you can make that change, make that change, because you're going to be well supported as an Aboriginal woman, 100%."
- Aboriginal woman

"...be honest about your experiences because all our experiences are different, so it's about being honest. And only sharing what you feel comfortable sharing is important as well." - Aboriginal woman

"Make sure that you're prepared to go through the process, because it is emotional, it is up and down, but also if you feel that you can do it, then step into the light and do it, because we all need to work together here." - Aboriginal woman



Key terms

Cultural Humility

A lifelong process of self-reflection and learning, grounded in a willingness to address power imbalances, privilege, and bias. It requires openness to feedback, recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge, and a commitment to respectful, accountable relationships.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

The right of Indigenous people to exercise ownership over Indigenous Data. Ownership of data can be expressed through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination, and reuse of Indigenous Data.¹⁵

Survivor advocate

A term to describe people with lived experience of family violence who are engaged in activities to influence policy development, service design, and contribute to broader systems reform, social change and community awareness.¹⁷ Contemporary dialogue assumes the concept has broad application across all parts of the community, which can stand at odds with the principles of Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination.

Cultural safety and responsiveness

To practice in collaboration with the person, with care and insight for their culture, while being mindful of one's own. A culturally safe environment is one where people feel safe and where there is no challenge or need for the denial of their identity.¹⁴

This resource uses the term cultural responsiveness in the context of non-Aboriginal people and services, recognising that cultural safety can only be self-determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Self-determination

The right of Aboriginal people to self-determination as “exercising true freedom, full and total control of our own safety, healing, connections to land and culture, communities, futures and lives”, which requires “a systemic shift from government and the non-Aboriginal service sector, that requires the transfer of power, control, decision making and resources to Aboriginal communities and their organisations”.¹⁶

Whiteness

A system of privilege and power that centres white cultural norms and values, often invisibly, in institutions, policies, and interpersonal interactions, reflecting structural privilege, unnamed cultural practices, and a dominant position from which non-white people are viewed.^{18,19}

¹⁴Williams, R. (1999). Cultural Safety – What does it mean for our work practice? Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 23(2), 213-214

¹⁵Maia nayri Wingara. (2018). Indigenous Data Sovereignty Communique Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit 20th June 2018, Canberra, ACT. Available here.

¹⁶Department of Health and Human Services (2018). Dhek Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028). Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

¹⁷Lamb K, Hegarty K, Amanda, Cina, Fiona, and the University of Melbourne WEAVERS lived experience group, Parker R. (2020) The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework: Domestic Violence Victoria. Melbourne, Australia. <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/family-violence-experts-by-experience-framework/>

¹⁸Moreton-Robinson, A. (2004). “Whiteness, epistemology and Indigenous representation”. In *Whitening Race*, Edited by: Moreton-Robinson, A. 75-88. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

¹⁹Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin' up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism*. University of Queensland Press. p172