



**SAFE + EQUAL**

Standing strong  
against family  
violence

# Insights Report

***Supporting a culturally responsive and accountable  
specialist family violence sector***

**2024**



## **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.

We acknowledge the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who share their stories and experiences to enable Djirra to contribute to important work such as this.



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## **About Djirra**

Djirra is a specialist Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) with over 22 years' experience accompanying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and their children, on their individual journeys. We find solutions through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women sharing their stories, journeys, and experiences. Djirra celebrates women's strength and resilience. We are committed to a future without family violence.

Djirra delivers holistic, culturally safe, specialist family violence support, legal services and case management, alongside cultural and wellbeing workshops and programs. Our services have state-wide reach, touching every part of Victoria to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Self-determination is the foundation of everything we do. Djirra amplifies the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. We advocate for system-wide change to improve access to justice, eliminate systemic violence, and strengthen women's resilience.

We are an active member of First Nations Advocates Against Family Violence (FNAAFV) (formerly known as the National Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services Forum) the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are experiencing or at risk of family violence.

## **About Safe and Equal**

At Safe and Equal, we work towards a world where everyone is safe, respected and thriving, living free from family and gender-based violence. We are 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. We are an independent, non-government organisation.

Our work prioritises the safety of all people experiencing, recovering from or at risk of family and gender-based violence. While we know that most family violence is perpetrated by men against women and children, we recognise that family violence impacts people across a diversity of gender identities, social and cultural contexts, and within various intimate, family and other relationships. We apply an intersectional feminist lens in our work to address the gendered drivers of violence, and how these overlap and intersect with additional forms of violence, oppression and inequality.

As a peak, we work with and for our 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.

## **With thanks**

We'd like to acknowledge the generosity in which Aboriginal women who have accessed family violence services in Victoria contributed their knowings, grounded in their lived experiences, their ideas and hopes for change.

“I've experienced both sides of it, working with black services and working with white services. There's so much that needs to be changed. It's people making all these plans and what they think is best, but until you speak to a woman going through it, you don't know what's needed.” – Aboriginal woman

**Please note:** The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have accessed family violence services included in this report were shared for the purposes of this work. These Aboriginal women retain ownership of their stories. Please do not use or repurpose their words for other purposes without consent.

We are grateful to the strong voices of Aboriginal family violence services and leaders that offered their time and expertise to deepen our understandings of the practices and relationships across the regions.

We'd like to recognise the project collaborators. In particular, the steering group for their guidance, fire and deep commitment to keeping us accountable to centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's strengths, knowledge and leadership to improve family violence service provision. Membership of the group evolved as people changed roles and joined or left organisations.

- Skye Gooch, Djirra – co-Chair
- Louise Simms, Safe and Equal – co-Chair
- Gabby Johnston, Elizabeth Morgan House
- Sarah Joyce, Jida McCartney, Tehyali Malone, Amanda Tully, and Latoya Baker, Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service
- Sharyn, Victim Survivor Advisory Council, Family Safety Victoria
- Katrina Harrison, Victim Survivor Advisory Council, Family Safety Victoria
- Nardine Keriakous, Good Samaritan Inn
- Caterina Wooden, FVREE
- Rebecca Jones and Taylar Anderson, Centre Against Violence

We recognise the openness and critical reflections of Safe and Equal's non-Aboriginal family violence member services. Your genuine engagement and willingness to step into discomfort throughout the development of this work is significant. Thank you to the many colleagues across Djirra and Safe and Equal who have contributed support, critical feedback and rich conversations that have strengthened this work.

## About the authors

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Anna is a White woman, the descendant of English, Irish and Scottish settler/colonisers. Anna was born on Muwinina country in southern Lutruwita/Tasmania. Now living on the unceded Wurundjeri and Bunurong Country, Anna works at Djirra supporting work in partnership with Safe and Equal to strengthen the cultural responsiveness of non-Aboriginal family violence services.

### Skye Gooch

Skye is a proud Aboriginal woman, born and raised on Wurundjeri Country. Her grandmother's line is from Cunnamulla in Queensland. Skye is an active member of her community in Melbourne's west. Skye is a Social Worker who practices from an Indigenous feminist framework and leads Djirra's specialist family violence program as the manager of the Individual Support Service.

### Louise Simms

Louise is a pakeha (White) woman, born in Aotearoa to parents who were both born overseas. She has lived and worked on Wurundjeri Country for more than 15 years. As Executive Director of Policy, Communications and Engagement at Safe and Equal, Louise has led cross-sector approaches to policy analysis, strategic advocacy and campaigns, partnering with lived experience, and stakeholder and member engagement.



## Executive Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right to access culturally responsive, inclusive, and equitable family violence support, no matter what kind of service they go to.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's resilience and leadership has long shaped solutions that address family violence against their communities. Community controlled services and initiatives are fundamental – they provide culturally safe, healing-informed care that responds holistically to the needs of individuals and families.

In some cases, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also engage with non-Aboriginal family violence services. The *Dhelk Dja Partnership Agreement*<sup>1</sup> recognises that non-Aboriginal services have a role in providing equitable access to culturally responsive services. This is essential to ensure that Aboriginal people can exercise their right to access culturally safe and appropriate service options from any part of the service system.

There are many essential frameworks that outline responsibilities and requirements for providing culturally safe and responsive services to Aboriginal people, which apply to specialist family violence services. However, alignment to these frameworks is usually self-assessed and, in the absence of strong accountability mechanisms, these responsibilities are not upheld consistently. Upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's rights and confronting the racism and Whiteness that remains embedded, invisibly and strategically, within the service system

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year*

requires sustained effort. Without meaningful, ongoing action, Aboriginal women and children will continue to experience devastating consequences:

“The odds are all stacked against us. We're a Black family. We're going through family violence. You want to get out ...get the help. But the first thing we worry about is our babies. The minute we disclose the fact that we're gone through family violence, the Department is notified. And that alone makes women not want to disclose...it took me six years to even tell...I wanted out of the situation I was living in, but I was too scared because my babies. And in the end, I lost them anyway...held on for as long as I could and still couldn't protect my children.” - Aboriginal woman

The specialist family violence sector has a critical responsibility to improve service responses and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When non-Aboriginal services fail to demonstrate confidence or competence, it is Aboriginal communities that bear the cost:

“I get the fear around it. People were so scared of saying and doing the wrong thing. But that's not my problem and it's not our community's problem. Do whatever the hell you gotta do to train yourself up because our community shouldn't have to be the ones that are paying for your lack of confidence in this space.” - Aboriginal family violence service

It is imperative for the non-Aboriginal family violence services to foster equitable

*Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028*). Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

relationships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, without imposing demands and expectations. Ultimately, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services are working towards the same intention, to ensure the safety and agency of Aboriginal people experiencing family violence:

“I guess for those who work in family violence, we all want the same outcome. We just want that person experiencing family violence to be safe.” – Aboriginal family violence service

This report summarises relevant research, policy frameworks, and Aboriginal women’s lived experiences, alongside insights from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence service providers. It examines the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in non-Aboriginal family violence services support for Aboriginal people. By providing a foundation for informed and principled commitment, these findings will guide the development of actions to ensure non-Aboriginal family violence services uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s rights to self-determination, choice, and safety.

## **Summary of Insights**

### **Strengths of culturally responsive practices and cross-organisation collaboration in non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services**

#### **1. Upholding Aboriginal self-determination**

**Insight:** Upholding self-determination means providing options and space for Aboriginal people to be the leader of their own journey.

**Insight:** Some accommodation services respond to Aboriginal people’s right to maintain or restore cultural connections by developing

robust safety plans with residents and supporting them to spend time away from the refuge.

#### **2. Enabling person-centred and flexible practice**

**Insight:** Working at the pace of Aboriginal people experiencing family violence is enabled by centring the rights and unique needs of the person and supportive organisational leadership.

**Insight:** Some family violence services apply person-centred and flexible approaches and actively recognise and remove service barriers.

**Insight:** Some non-Aboriginal refuge and accommodation services create opportunities to strengthen and restore cultural wellbeing and connections of Aboriginal children and young people.

#### **3. Working in solidarity and justice-doing**

**Insight:** Some non-Aboriginal services described demonstrating allyship with Aboriginal communities through amplifying their voices and standing alongside them in their advocacy against harmful systems.

#### **4. Supporting collaboration and coordination**

**Insight:** Some non-Aboriginal services have processes in place that afford Aboriginal people a degree of priority, enabling timely access to assessment and support. This includes protocols with Aboriginal services for direct referral to non-Aboriginal family violence services and an immediate response.

**Insight:** Some services described examples of strong collaborative practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services, enabled by open communication, clearly defined roles and flexible, person-centred approaches to service delivery.

## **5. Building workforce capability and sustainability**

**Insight:** Engaging in critical reflection at organisational leadership and practitioner levels enables an examination of how power structures and dynamics can undermine the provision of inclusive and socially-just services.

## **6. Demonstrating accountability**

**Insight:** The provision of culturally responsive services is enabled by leaders who communicate honestly, are willing to listen and are genuinely committed to implementing the change required.

**Insight:** Many non-Aboriginal services are implementing frameworks to guide their organisations' journeys towards anti-racist and culturally responsive and inclusive services.

**Insight:** Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a non-Aboriginal person or service requires hard work to build trust over time, consistent demonstrations of cultural humility and self-reflection, accountability and transparency, particularly in response to feedback.

## **Gaps in culturally responsive practices and cross-organisation collaborations in non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services**

### **1. Undermining Aboriginal self-determination**

**Insight:** Without meaningful investment, Aboriginal-led Frameworks get lost in the cycle of reform and policy making and their impact never fully realised.

**Insight:** The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definition of family violence is not consistently embedded in the practice of non-Aboriginal services.

**Insight:** Aboriginal people are not always given all the information they need to make an informed decision about what type of service they can access. At times, choices are not upheld, through assumptions or a lack of service capacity.

### **2. Barriers to person-centred and flexible responses**

**Insight:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people look for signs of safety and inclusion, but actions speak louder than flags.

**Insight:** Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have distrust of non-Aboriginal services. It takes time to earn, build and maintain trust.

**Insight:** Non-Aboriginal services are not always confident to explore cultural/community connections and understand their impact to risk, safety and protective factors. This is a missed opportunity to provide tailored support to Aboriginal people.

**Insight:** For non-Aboriginal services, working at pace can inhibit flexible, person-centred and culturally responsive practice. It elevates other concerns (such as managing demand, targets, organisational processes) over the needs and rights of Aboriginal people experiencing family violence.

**Insight:** Non-Aboriginal family violence services recognise the importance of child-centred practice, but approaches do not always centre the voices and rights of Aboriginal children and young people.

### **3. Colluding with systemic harms**

**Insight:** Non-Aboriginal services are working on unceded Aboriginal land, in places, spaces, and contexts that cause direct harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



**Insight:** Aboriginal women often delay seeking help from services due to legitimate fears of child removal. While specialist family violence services have a history of a rights-based advocacy with statutory agencies to uphold the rights of women, this is not always reflected in the experiences of Aboriginal women accessing these services.

**Insight:** There is often a reliance from non-Aboriginal services on police, which does not acknowledge of the historical and ongoing harms to Aboriginal communities caused by the justice and legal systems.

**Insight:** Aboriginal services described experiences of some non-Aboriginal services failing to enact anti-oppressive and trauma informed practices and labelling Aboriginal people.

**Insight:** Regardless of whether service rules are intended to keep women safe, requirements that Aboriginal women disconnect from community are often unrealistic and may result in them leaving the service and potentially increasing the level of family violence risk.

#### **4. Interrupting collaboration and coordination**

**Insight:** Aboriginal services experience a ‘handballing’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from non-Aboriginal services.

**Insight:** At times, a lack of facilitated referral and handover between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence service creates challenges for providing adequate support and ultimately impacts the Aboriginal person’s support and safety.

**Insight:** For coordinated and collaborative responses to be realised, they need to be underpinned by two-way relationships, trust, good will and accountability. Aboriginal family

violence services are not adequately resourced to respond to secondary consultations.

**Insight:** Aboriginal family violence services can experience extractive dynamics and have their expertise undermined by non-Aboriginal family violence services.

**Insight:** Many non-Aboriginal services recognise the critical importance of having strong relationships with Aboriginal services, but are unsure how to build and maintain reciprocal relationships that can withstand staffing changes.

**Insight:** Aboriginal family violence services have inconsistent experiences accessing resources managed by non-Aboriginal family violence services, in particular Personal Safety Initiative packages.

**Insight:** Some Aboriginal services working with men using violence report resistance from some non-Aboriginal services, in response to information sharing requests.

#### **5. Weakening workforce capability and sustainability**

**Insight:** Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in non-Aboriginal family violence services experience colonial load and could be better supported by their organisations.

**Insight:** Some non-Aboriginal service providers allow worries about doing the wrong thing to impede actions. Ultimately, it is Aboriginal communities that bear the burden of service providers’ lack of confidence.

**Insight:** There is a lack of Aboriginal-led training tailored for the diverse needs of the specialist family violence sector workforce. For training to result in meaningful and sustainable change, it must be reflected and embedded in policy, practice guidance, processes, and position descriptions.

## **6. Lacking accountability**

**Insight:** To Aboriginal women and Aboriginal services, accountability means being open to feedback, acknowledging mistakes, and importantly, demonstrating or describing how change will be achieved. Often, Aboriginal services and communities do not see this demonstrated by non-Aboriginal family violence services.

**Insight:** The lack of monitored accountability mechanisms embedded within key system frameworks creates inconsistencies in services' alignment to these frameworks. Ultimately, this has impacts for Aboriginal people.

**Insight:** Strengthening the cultural responsiveness of the family violence sector is occurring within the existing colonial systems.

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## **Introduction**

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and children experiencing family violence have a right to access culturally responsive, inclusive and equitable service responses, regardless of where they receive support. It is the responsibility of specialist family violence services to provide equitable access to services that are culturally responsive and are demonstrably accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing family violence. This is an ongoing process that must be conducted in relationship with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) where possible, while ensuring that the burden of change sits with the non-Aboriginal service and that it is understood that ACCOs are not responsible for correcting the wrongs of racism and colonisation.

The specialist family violence sector has a responsibility to take proactive actions to improve service responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This report provides a foundation on which the sector can make a well-informed and principled commitment. The findings of this report will help inform the development of actions to ensure non-Aboriginal family violence services are upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's rights to self-determination, choice and safety. This report draws together relevant research, policy frameworks and insights gained through the experiences of Aboriginal women, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence service providers. It explores the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in service delivery by non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services to Aboriginal people.

This report:

- Shares the approach to developing this work
- Foregrounds the history and resistance of Aboriginal-led solutions and services.
- Highlights the role of non-Aboriginal family violence services under the Dhek Dja Partnership Agreement
- Makes visible colonial violence, systemic racism and Whiteness
- Details current responsibilities under national and state policy frameworks
- Explores the current strengths and gaps of culturally responsive practice and pathways between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria
- Offers next steps and how the insights can inform sector change

### **Sharing the approach**

The process of collecting evidence and preparing this report seeks to apply Aboriginal participatory action research approaches to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices,

perspectives and decision making; and to facilitate self-reflective, collaborative and iterative processes across all phases of the work.<sup>2</sup>

- **We reviewed the relevant Victorian and national policy frameworks and workforce development strategies** (See Appendix for summary of frameworks). This review outlined existing responsibilities of non-Aboriginal family violence services related to culturally responsive service provision and will help to inform our understanding of the transformational change that is required. Many of these frameworks are community-led, or draw on the extensive knowledge, expertise and advice of Aboriginal communities and services related to preventing and responding to family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- **We listened to Aboriginal women and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service providers** to deepen our understanding of the current strengths and gaps in culturally responsive service provision. We heard from:
  - Five Aboriginal women who have accessed family violence services
  - 38 people working in 13 Aboriginal family violence services – we prioritised connecting with people in-person at their service
  - 52 people working in 33 non-Aboriginal family violence services – through online roundtables and communities of practice
- **We used a sense-making process with the project’s Steering Group to collaboratively explore the evidence gathered.** The process brought to the surface different voices, values and perspectives, and gave time and weight to these, before jumping to action.

See Appendix 1 for a detailed methodology.

## **Foregrounding the history and resistance of Aboriginal-led services and solutions**

*“Violence against Aboriginal women will never be addressed while Aboriginal women’s expertise and leadership is denied and undermined.”<sup>3</sup>* -Dr Hannah McGlade, from the Kurin Minang people, and Human Rights Expert and Law Academic.

Victorian Aboriginal communities and peoples are culturally diverse, with rich and varied heritage and histories. The ongoing impacts of colonial occupation – while having devastating

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Mcglade, H (2024). Women must be heard. The West Australian

effects – have not diminished Aboriginal peoples’ deep and enduring connections to culture and Country.

Family violence is not part of Aboriginal cultures. Violence against Aboriginal people is disproportionately perpetrated by non-Aboriginal people. It is a devastating problem for the whole of our society to address.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long and rich history of leading solutions to prevent and respond to family violence against their communities. Aboriginal communities have been resisting, organising and advocating to dismantle the policies and practices that impact their lives since invasion and colonisation began in 1788.

*“Aboriginal people are the custodians of over 60,000 years of culture, knowledge and stories that must be heard and protected, and continue to be guided by the wisdom and expertise of Elders and the emerging voices of the younger generation and new leaders.”*  
– Dhelk Dja Agreement<sup>4</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led services exist across a wide range of community sectors and bring together local community knowledge and experiences to deliver tailored and appropriate solutions and outcomes. In 1976, Aunty Elizabeth Morgan, alongside other Aboriginal women, cofounded the first Aboriginal family violence refuge in the country. Named in recognition of her leadership and lobbying, Elizabeth Morgan House, located in Narm/Melbourne continues to uphold the rights of Aboriginal women, children and trans and non-binary people against gender and racial violence.<sup>5</sup> There are now many Aboriginal Community Controlled family violence programs and support services across Victoria. Services and solutions designed and delivered by community for community are highly effective in providing care grounded in cultural and community connection, enabling culturally safe, healing-informed support and outcomes at an individual and community level.<sup>6</sup>

The *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families*<sup>7</sup> Agreement commits the Victorian Government to transform the system and prioritise sustainable funding for Aboriginal-led family violence services to increase the safety, healing and wellbeing of children, young people and families.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. p34

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Morgan House (2023). Who is Elizabeth Morgan? <https://www.emhaws.org.au/who-is-elizabeth-morgan>

<sup>6</sup> National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. What is the history of ACCHOs? <https://www.naccho.org.au/acchos/>

<sup>7</sup> The *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)* is the key Aboriginal-led Victorian Agreement that commits the signatories – Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal services and government – to work together and be accountable for ensuring that Aboriginal people, families and communities are stronger, safer, thriving and living free from family violence.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. p39

*“Consistent with self-determination, the service system needs to be transformed so that Aboriginal services with the required specialisation and expertise are resourced to lead the way as the primary providers of family violence services for Aboriginal people who experience family violence and who use family violence.” – Dhelk Dja Agreement<sup>9</sup>*

The *Korin Korin Balit-Djak* plan, meaning ‘growing very strong’ in the Woi Wurrung language, provides a framework for action to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of Aboriginal people. *Korin Korin Balit-Djak* commits to increase access to Aboriginal community-led family violence prevention, by providing strong referral pathways and awareness of specialist family violence support and legal services to ensure Aboriginal adult and children experiencing family violence have access to culturally safe and specialist services. In addition to supporting and resourcing refuges, emergency accommodation and support services to ensure the provision of responsive supports.<sup>10</sup>

Safe and Equal member services that are Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations have anecdotally reported receiving a significant rate of direct referrals – people contacting the service directly compared to being referred via The Orange Door, police, or another service. This was reflected in the *Measuring Family Violence Service Demand and Capacity* report, which found that targeted family violence services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations receive higher proportions of direct referrals compared with other specialist family violence services.<sup>11</sup> Direct referrals require services to undertake additional intake activity compared with people accessing their service through a dedicated intake service such as the Orange Door. However, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations do not receive additional funding to reflect this.

The failure of governments to resource and adopt Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions is distressingly evident when considering the increasing and unacceptable rates of child removal, incarceration and family violence Aboriginal people experience.<sup>12</sup> The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor reported that Aboriginal-led programs are under-resourced and require increased and sustainable funding to enable them to continue and grow their work and impact.<sup>13</sup> The lack of ongoing funding from governments means Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations regularly face funding cliffs. This funding insecurity compromises services’ ability to plan and measure outcomes. It also destabilises the workforce, creating higher staff turnover and, in turn, a loss of knowledge and expertise.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. p38

<sup>10</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2017). *Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017-2027*. Victorian Government. Melbourne. p61

<sup>11</sup> Safe and Equal (2023). *Measuring Family Violence Demand and Capacity: An emerging picture of the specialist family violence sector*.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2022). *Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention*. ISBN: 978-0-6454873-2-9 (PDF/online)

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2022). *Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention*. ISBN: 978-0-6454873-2-9 (PDF/online)

<sup>14</sup> Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2022). *Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention*. ISBN: 978-0-6454873-2-9 (PDF/online)



Yoorrook Justice Commission has made similar calls, highlighting the urgent need for significant investment and equitable funding in Aboriginal-led frontend services to deliver culturally safe, self-determined prevention and early help services as “ACCOs know how to work in ways that work best for First Peoples families, taking the time to build relationships of trust, mutual respect, and support”.<sup>15</sup>

The underfunding of Aboriginal Community Controlled services, disproportionate to the funding received by non-Aboriginal services has not come about by accident. It is a policy decision.

### **Highlighting the sector’s role as critical partners in providing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

*Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families* (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028) is the key Aboriginal-led Victorian agreement that commits the signatories – Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal services and the Victorian Government – to work together and be accountable for ensuring that Aboriginal people, families and communities are stronger, safer, thriving and living free from family violence.

*Dhelk Dja* recognises non-Aboriginal service providers as critical partners in taking action and being accountable for delivering culturally safe and responsive services. The Agreement outlines a government commitment to ensure that funding and service agreements support self-determination, cultural safety and the strategic priorities of *Dhelk Dja*.

Under Priority Four: System transformation based on self-determination, *Dhelk Dja* states that the whole service system, including the specialist family violence sector, “must be culturally safe and deliver equitable access for everyone, including Aboriginal people, children, and extended families. This will ensure that Aboriginal people can exercise their right to access culturally safe and appropriate service options from any part of the service system. It will also support individual choice to access an Aboriginal or a non-Aboriginal service.”<sup>16</sup>

In some circumstances, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may receive support from non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services. This can be for a range of reasons, including – but not limited to – a person not disclosing that they are Aboriginal (or not being asked), being disconnected from community, not being provided with a choice, or opting for a non-Aboriginal service for safety reasons. For Aboriginal children and young people, they may not have a choice of service type when accessing services accompanied by a parent or carer.

*Dhelk Dja* identified that stronger connections between the Aboriginal service sector and non-Aboriginal services will enable more choice and better outcomes for Aboriginal people experiencing family violence. To support action under this priority, the Victorian Government committed to investing in strong partnerships and collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services to ensure policies, programs and the service system are responsive and not

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<sup>15</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023). *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria’s Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*. <https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/>

<sup>16</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. p40

siloes, investing in Aboriginal-led approaches and decision making to ensure the broader family violence service system is strengths-based, culturally safe, trauma informed and equitable; and supporting Aboriginal services to strengthen their connections with broader family violence and universal services, creating a more integrated, specialist and culturally safe service system.<sup>17</sup> *Dhelk Dja* committed to upholding self-determination within this priority through:

- ensuring that government and the service system is culturally safe, transparent and accountable
- ensuring that Aboriginal people have access to culturally informed, safe service provision and programs by the non-Aboriginal service sector
- collaborating and sharing best practice across Aboriginal communities and services with broader family violence services.<sup>18</sup>

Treaty and truth-telling processes in Victoria may also have a significant impact on government policy, governance and funding across all areas of Aboriginal people's lives. The Victorian Government has made a commitment to amend the *Dhelk Dja* Partnership Agreement and Action Plans, including governance and funding arrangements, as required to align with progress in Treaty negotiations and the recommendations from the Yoorrook Justice Commission.

## **Making Whiteness Visible**

**Insight: Whiteness is invisibly and strategically embedded within non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services' knowledge, practices and frameworks. Without explicit focus on disrupting Whiteness, the specialist family violence sector will continue to perpetuate harms against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**

Here in Australia, violence is not only a tool of patriarchy, it is also a tool of colonialism. As outlined by Darumbal and South Sea Islander journalist and academic Amy McQuire:

*"When we talk about eliminating violence against Aboriginal women, we aren't just talking about individual acts, or solely interpersonal violence...The abuse of our women shows how colonialism is not just a vestige of the past, but still alive in the institutions that normalise the violence inflicted upon us – most notably in the justice, health and child protection systems."*<sup>19</sup>

Family violence must be understood as a current symptom of colonisation's impacts on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.<sup>20</sup> The drivers of violence against Aboriginal and Torres

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<sup>17</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. p41

<sup>18</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. p41

<sup>19</sup> McGuire, A (2018). We can't dismantle systems of violence unless we centre Aboriginal women. IndigenousX. <https://indigenousx.com.au/we-cant-dismantle-systems-of-violence-unless-we-centre-aboriginal-women/>

<sup>20</sup> Our Watch (2018). Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children, Our Watch, Melbourne.

Strait Islander women, children, sisters and brotherboys include the ongoing impacts of colonisation, racism and racialised-gender inequality.<sup>21</sup> Family violence against Aboriginal people, inclusive of community and lateral violence, is not part of Aboriginal cultures, but a consequence of colonialism and patriarchy.

### **Whiteness and systemic violence in community services**

Whiteness is a tool of colonisation that was created to justify the erasure of violence against non-White communities. Racialised-gendered violence can't be dismantled without unpacking Whiteness. Whiteness is not reference alone to skin tone. It refers to structural privilege, a set of unnamed cultural practices, and a position from where those who are non-White are viewed.<sup>22</sup> Geonpul woman and scholar Dr Aileen Moreton-Robinson identifies Whiteness as “the invisible norm,” and a hidden benchmark against which everyone is measured in subtle ways.<sup>23</sup> Moreton-Robinson describes Whiteness as “not just a colour but as a culture that controls and creates institutions based on the values, beliefs and assumptions that govern that culture”.<sup>24</sup>

Whiteness is an enabler of the structural racism perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Some of the most devastating colonial abuses were carried out by White settler-colonial people and institutions that designated themselves as ‘protectors’ or ‘saviours’. Moreton-Robinson and Professor Irene Watson, who belongs to the Tangane-kald, Meintang and Boandik peoples, points out how the construction of Aboriginal women as ‘less than’ or ‘inferior’ was used to justify White women’s efforts to ‘civilise’ and ‘assimilate’ Aboriginal women and children into White society and ‘save’ them from Aboriginal men.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the feminist movement centred White women self-servingly, as the liberators of Aboriginal women.<sup>26</sup>

As a result, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long and legitimate distrust of non-Aboriginal and White feminist organisations, in part due to the government mandated use of police, schools and hospitals to remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and other experiences of systemic racism and state-based violence. As described by Dr Hannah McGlade, “too often White feminist approaches prioritise laws and policing, even

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2022) Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices) First Nations Women’s Safety Policy Forum Outcomes Report. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/wiyi-yani-u-thangani-6>

<sup>22</sup> Frankenberg R (1993). *The social construction of Whiteness: White women, race matters*. Routledge, London p1

<sup>23</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2004). “Whiteness, epistemology and Indigenous representation”. In *Whitening Race*, Edited by: Moreton-Robinson, A. 75–88. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press

<sup>24</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin’ up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism*. University of Queensland Press. p172

<sup>25</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin’ up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism*. University of Queensland Press; Watson, I. (2014). *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*. Taylor & Francis Group.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rmit/detail.action?docID=1818174>

<sup>26</sup> Manzoor-Khan, S. (2016, November 8). Decolonising Feminism. *The Brown Hijabi*. <https://thebrownhijabi.com/2016/11/08/decolonising-feminism/>

though this hurts our women and children.”<sup>27</sup> The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence and, more recently, the Yoorrook Justice Commission hearings and recommendations have highlighted the profound and ongoing systemic injustices and impacts of colonisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Yoorrook Justice Commission highlighted how systemic racism is weaved into the fabric of law and policies:

*“Systemic racism is racial discrimination that occurs through systems and institutions and goes beyond individual racist acts. It refers to laws, policies or practices that may, on their face, look neutral and applied equally, but which in practice unfairly disadvantage certain racial groups and advantage others.”* – Yoorrook Justice Commission Report <sup>28</sup>

The enactment of state-based systemic violence is evident in the misidentification, over-policing and criminalisation, and rates of child removal experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.<sup>29</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, under racist policies, are removed from their families at disproportionate rates with devastating, lifelong and intergenerational impacts.

Establishing an honest and true account of events and processes the community and family violence sector has been complicit in, both historical and contemporary, is essential to forming mutual understanding between non-Aboriginal services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.<sup>30</sup> Despite this recognition, Whiteness continues to be invisibly and strategically embedded within community services<sup>31</sup> through ideas of charity, White saviourism, service provider/consumer constructs and colonisation masking as ‘care’. However unconsciously, many practitioners and leaders within non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services are undoubtedly working from experiences, education, practices, and frameworks grounded in Whiteness.

Wurundjeri/Ngurai Illum Wurrung woman Sue-Anne Hunter, Mineng Noongar woman Jacynta Krakouer, and Palawa woman Maggie Walter emphasise the critical importance of making visible and interrupting the Whiteness operating within social work. They highlight:

*“Social work academics, educators, students and practitioners alike are all responsible for interrogating Whiteness in social work’s knowledge systems and in shifting the gaze*

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<sup>27</sup> McGlade H. (2024) Opinion: Indigenous women are the most impacted by violence but are still fighting to be heard. NITV News. <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/opinion-indigenous-women-are-the-most-impacted-by-violence-but-are-still-fighting-to-be-heard/j7j4s2i20>

<sup>28</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023). Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria’s Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems. <https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/>

<sup>29</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023). Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria’s Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems. <https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/>

<sup>30</sup> Department of Social Services (2023). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Children*. <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-action-plan-2023-2025>

<sup>31</sup> Hunter, S., Krakouer, J. & Walter, M. (2024). The Maintenance of the Dominance of Whiteness in Australian Social Work. *Handbook of Critical Whiteness* (pp. 1-17). Springer Nature Singapore.

from 'knowing' the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander subject to knowing and disrupting Whiteness, in all its subtle and manifest forms."<sup>32</sup>

Without explicit and visible attention to Whiteness in community sectors and family violence services specifically, the specialist family violence sector will continue to reproduce and perpetuate harm and injustices against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.<sup>33</sup>

As Moreton-Robinson points out, if non-Aboriginal settlers and organisations are really serious about working in solidarity with and being allies to Aboriginal people, "White feminism in Australia will have to do more than offer good intentions and a haphazard willingness to accommodate minorities within their already defined boundaries".<sup>34</sup> Non-Aboriginal settlers and services have to make room for Aboriginal women's agendas and their voices and be willing to de-centre themselves, for their work to benefit Aboriginal communities.

### **Whiteness and 'barriers' to services**

There are a lot of reasons why Aboriginal people experiencing family violence may not be able to, or may choose not to, access non-Aboriginal services. It is the services' and the system's responsibility to address these barriers, which include:<sup>35</sup>

- past and ongoing experiences of systemic, individual and collective racism, judgement, unconscious bias or privilege, or a lack of cultural competency from services
- current and historical rules, laws, policies and practices that continue to cause systemic harm and discrimination against Aboriginal communities
- experiences of systemic collusion in which systemic harm is enable, or compounded by taking direct actions that increase the harm, or by failing to respond to the harm and abuse
- fear of having children removed, current and historic forcible child-removal policies, including family separation and disconnection from culture and country<sup>36</sup> Disclosing family violence within a service system can initiate a process of notification or mandatory contact with other state authorities
- ongoing impacts of institutionalised abuse experienced by many removed children that continue to affect Aboriginal communities, reinforced with experiences of discrimination, oppression and racism within and across the community from the dominant White-settler culture
- a fear of what may happen to their Aboriginal partners or family members in custody<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Hunter, S., Krakouer, J. & Walter, M. (2024). The Maintenance of the Dominance of Whiteness in Australian Social Work. *Handbook of Critical Whiteness* (pp. 1-17). Springer Nature Singapore.

<sup>33</sup> Hunter, S., Krakouer, J. & Walter, M. (2024). The Maintenance of the Dominance of Whiteness in Australian Social Work. *Handbook of Critical Whiteness* (pp. 1-17). Springer Nature Singapore.

<sup>34</sup> Moreton-Robinson (2000) p67

<sup>35</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). *MARAM Practice Guides: Foundation Knowledge Guide*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

<sup>36</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2020) Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future report. Canberra

<sup>37</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2020) Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future report. Canberra

- feeling a responsibility to ‘stay strong’ for each other<sup>38</sup>
- continued bias in service delivery across multiple systems.<sup>39</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who experience compounding systemic oppression, for example in response to their disability, mental health, criminalisation and substance use, can encounter additional barriers and greater gaps in service provision. They may require coordinated responses to ensure that they do not fall through systemic gaps and receive holistic, integrated support from specialist family violence services working together with other agencies such as mental health services, drug and alcohol services, and services that provide disability support.<sup>40</sup>

### Whiteness and intersectional feminism

In Victoria, intersectionality, or intersectional feminism, has been adopted in sector-based and Victorian Government policy relating to family violence.<sup>41</sup> It is often framed as the tool or solution to address the barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience in accessing support and safety. When applied as intended, intersectional feminism can help expand understandings of family violence from a single axis issue to an analysis of the many ways in which multiple structural inequalities can overlap and perpetuate harm – it is a political analysis of the impact of power, privilege and oppression on the lives of people experiencing family violence.<sup>42</sup> Some interpretations and applications, particularly those by governments, incorrectly reduce intersectionality to a consideration of identities that an individual may have.

Despite its roots in Black feminism and activism in the United States<sup>43</sup>, intersectional feminism continues to be co-opted by White women’s voices.<sup>44</sup> Moreton-Robinson argues that decentring the middle-class, White woman subject position is more complex than simply including Aboriginal women and women of colour in mainstream discourses.<sup>45</sup> White ‘intersectional’

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<sup>38</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2020) Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future report. Canberra

<sup>39</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023). Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria’s Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems. <https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/>

<sup>40</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

<sup>41</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic; Family Safety Victoria. (2018). Everybody Matters: Inclusion and Equity Statement. <https://www.vic.gov.au/everybody-matters-inclusion-and-equity-statement> .

<sup>42</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

<sup>43</sup> Combahee River Collective (1977). A Black Feminist Statement. In Nicholson, L. (1997), The second wave: a reader in feminist theory. New York, NY: Routledge; and Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989 (1), Article 8, 139-168.

<sup>44</sup> Little, C. (2017). Rantings of an Aboriginal Feminist: Trouble at the Intersection - speech from the Melbourne Anarchist Bookfair. Rantings of an Aboriginal Feminist.; Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). Talkin’ up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism. University of Queensland Press.

<sup>45</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). Talkin’ up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism. University of Queensland Press. p149.

feminists often give attention to systems of oppression, while continuing to ignore their own position and White/race privilege as a location of power in itself.<sup>46</sup>

It is important for non-Aboriginal family violence services to be aware of 'moves to settler innocence', whereby non-Aboriginal people, particularly White people, unconsciously re-centre Whiteness in their attempts to work in solidarity with Aboriginal people.<sup>47</sup> Moves to settler innocence can appropriate Aboriginal people, while re-centring Whiteness.<sup>48</sup> White feminists who align themselves with progressive and anti-racist politics are at high risk of moves to settler innocence.<sup>49</sup> As Dr Alissa Macoun, a White scholar, describes:

“White settlers who identify as critical thinkers or progressives can be particularly invested in being good people, in doing good things, in engaging with destructive histories or problematic power structures, and thus most invested in our own innocence”.<sup>50</sup>

Moves to identify as a 'good settler' can result in acts of 'settler benevolence', where attempts are made to 'help' or include Aboriginal people while upholding power imbalances that further colonise, co-opt and misappropriate their concerns.<sup>51</sup>

## **Current responsibilities that apply to Non-Aboriginal Family Violence Services**

**Insight: Specialist family violence services have many responsibilities and requirements outlined in essential system frameworks. However, relying on processes of organisational self-assessment in the absence of strong accountability mechanisms creates conditions for these responsibilities to be upheld inconsistently.**

There are several essential Victorian and national policy and practice frameworks that set out important responsibilities of the specialist family violence sector. While some of these frameworks are legislated and others bring a strong mandate, they often rely on a process of organisational self-assessment and are not always consistently or independently monitored. The frameworks are, by design, adaptable for different contexts and service settings, without

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<sup>46</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin' up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism*. University of Queensland Press. p147.

<sup>47</sup> Mawhinney, J. (1998). *'Giving up the ghost': Disrupting the (re)production of white privilege in anti-racist pedagogy and organizational change* [ProQuest Dissertations Publishing]; Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). *Decolonization is not a metaphor*. 40.

<sup>48</sup> Fortier, C. (2017). *Unsettling Methodologies/Decolonizing Movements*. 6(1), 17.

<sup>49</sup> Mecham Stannard (2020). *Intersectional Feminism and being allies to Aboriginal people: A discussion paper for Domestic Violence Victoria and the specialist family violence sector*. (unpublished)

<sup>50</sup> Macoun, A. (2016). *Colonising White Innocence: Complicity and Critical Encounters*. In S. Maddison, T. Clark, & R. de Costa (Eds.), *The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation: Non-Indigenous People and the Responsibility to Engage* (pp. 85–102). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2654-6\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2654-6_6) (p87).

<sup>51</sup> Fortier, C. (2017). *Unsettling Methodologies/Decolonizing Movements*. 6(1); Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin' up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism*. University of Queensland Press. Macoun, A. (2016). *Colonising White Innocence: Complicity and Critical Encounters*. In S. Maddison, T. Clark, & R. de Costa (Eds.), *The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation: Non-Indigenous People and the Responsibility to Engage* (pp. 85–102). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2654-6\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2654-6_6) (p87).

strong accountability mechanisms and close monitoring, which can result in inconsistent fulfilment of the responsibilities.

### United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Australia endorsed the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in 2009, but it is yet to ratify this into domestic law. Ending family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires the protection of Aboriginal rights for future generations. Services can choose to adopt the standards in the Declaration into policy statements and guidelines and build their workforces' knowledge of and ability to respect and uphold the rights of Aboriginal peoples.

### Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families 10 Year Agreement

The *Dhelk Dja Partnership Agreement* is an Aboriginal-led agreement that commits the signatories – Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal services and the Victorian Government – to work together and be accountable for ensuring that Aboriginal communities are living free from family violence. The Agreement is grounded in the principles of self-determination, collaboration and partnerships, strengths-based, cultural and trauma informed resilience and healing approaches, safety and accountability, transparency and honesty.<sup>52</sup>

The Dhelk Dja Partnership Forum leads the governance of Action Plans. The second Dhelk Dja three-year Action Plan is being implemented from 2023 to 2025.

### DFFH Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework*<sup>53</sup> aims to assist non-Aboriginal services to create culturally safe environments, services and workplaces. The *Cultural Safety Framework* provides a continuous quality improvement and ongoing learning journey model for culturally responsive services. The *Cultural Safety Framework* has three domains for action:

1. Creating a culturally safe workplace and organisation.
2. Aboriginal self-determination, and
3. Leadership and accountability.

### MARAM Framework

The *MARAM Framework* establishes a system-wide shared understanding of what family violence is and how to respond to it. Despite being established under law, legislated under the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic), organisational alignment to MARAM is described as a maturity model and there is no formal accountability or monitoring mechanism.

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<sup>52</sup> The *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim Survivors* (the Code) encourages services to support the goals and incorporate Dhelk Dja into service design and strategic planning.

<sup>53</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2019) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework*. Available at: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202004/Part%201-Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20cultural%20safety%20framework-20190620.pdf>



### The Case Management Program Requirements

The *Case Management Program Requirements* and associated *Crisis Response Model* establish a set of consistent, statewide expectations for specialist family violence services in the delivery of case management and crisis responses for adult and children experiencing family violence.<sup>54</sup> Similar to MARAM, services need to work to align with and embed the requirements into service delivery. Safe and Equal is leading implementation support and has developed self-assessment tools and action plan templates.

### The Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim Survivors (the Code of Practice)

The *Code of Practice* is a resource and guide to inform service design and continuous quality improvement. Specialist family violence services commit to aligning to the *Code of Practice* when they become full members of Safe and Equal. The *Code of Practice* is supported by an Audit Tool and, while Safe and Equal cannot manage service compliance, the peak can assist services with understanding and implementing the *Code of Practice* in their service context.

The *Code of Practice* is available for use by Aboriginal family violence services and programs, however, with respect to Aboriginal self-determination and choice, Aboriginal services may prefer to use other resources more suitable to their cultures and communities.

### Child Safe Standards

Victoria's legislated *Child Safe Standards* are a set of mandatory requirements to prevent, respond and promote the safety of children and young people. Standard 1 commits organisations to 'establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued.'<sup>55</sup> The Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People are responsible for administering the Standards and regulating organisations that work with children.

### Social Services Regulations

The legislated *Social Services Regulations* create a framework to support the safe delivery of social services. A Social Services Regulator is responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with six social services standards, including '*Aboriginal Cultural Safety and Inclusion*'. (Aligned with the cultural safety standard included in the Child Safe Standards).<sup>56</sup>

*For a summary of policy frameworks and agreements, see Appendix 2.*

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<sup>54</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2022). Case Management Program Requirements. <https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/assessing-managing-risk/case-management-program-requirements/>

<sup>55</sup> Commission for Children and Young People (2022). Child Safe Standards. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/the-11-child-safe-standards/>

<sup>56</sup> Social Services Regulator (2024) Social Services Standards Overview. <https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards#social-services-regulator-guidance-and-information-webinars>

While all responsibilities contained in these frameworks are relevant to working with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, there are some responsibilities that are particularly relevant to the provision of culturally responsive and inclusive services. These can be grouped into six broad themes:

### **1. Aboriginal self-determination**

The rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination and cultural safety are enshrined in multiple international and Australian human rights instruments.<sup>57</sup> Family violence services have a legislated requirements through The Social Services Regulations, the Child Safe Standards and MARAM to uphold Aboriginal self-determination and cultural safety. Non-Aboriginal people and organisations cannot set the terms of self-determination.

*The Dhelk Dja Partnership Agreement* defines Aboriginal self-determination as “our most fundamental of all rights. It means exercising true freedom, full and total control of our own safety, healing, connections to land and culture, communities, futures and lives. Aboriginal self-determination in a family violence context is 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.”<sup>58</sup>

Family violence services must recognise the Aboriginal definition of family violence, the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation and structural racism and uphold Aboriginal people’s right to self-determination and connection to culture and community through service provision.

### **2. Person-centred and flexible responses**

Family violence services have a responsibility to provide flexible and person-centre responses to all people, including Aboriginal people, experiencing family violence. The *Code of Practice* outlines that people experiencing family violence are able to decide the intensity and duration of their engagement with the service.<sup>59</sup>

*The Case Management Program Requirements* stipulate that “case management should be flexible and dynamic, holistic, culturally sensitive, person-centred and strengths based. Interventions vary in intensity and duration depending on the risks and needs of all victim-survivors in the family group”.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (1966); Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic).

<sup>58</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

<sup>59</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

<sup>60</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2021). *Case Management Program Requirements for specialist family violence services which support victim survivors*. State of Victoria. <https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/assessing-managing-risk/case-management-program-requirements/>

Non-Aboriginal family violence services must respond to Aboriginal people's rights to maintain or restore connections with culture, Country, family, kinship and community networks. As well as offering choice and control of service provision – determining whether a person would prefer to access support from an Aboriginal family violence service, and facilitating a warm referral.

### **3. Justice-doing**

Specialist family violence services must partner with Aboriginal people experiencing family violence to identify system oppressions and resist colonial systemic collusion.

The *Code of Practice* outlines the responsibility of family violence services to use advocacy approaches when coordinated responses are not improving or creating just outcomes for Aboriginal people experiencing family violence or when other services and systems are not fulfilling their responsibilities.<sup>61</sup> Family violence services have a responsibility to centre ethics, work in solidarity and critically engage with and address power<sup>62</sup> when working alongside Aboriginal people and organisations.

Non-Aboriginal family violence services must critically reflect on where they may be perpetuating colonising approaches and discriminatory practices.<sup>63</sup> Services must take active measures to ensure they don't perpetuate racist policy that risks becoming normalised and invisible within the family violence system.

### **4. Collaboration and co-ordination**

In accordance with MARAM Framework responsibilities, specialist family violence services have a central role in leading collaborative and coordinated responses with other agencies to promote safety and accountability of the person/s using violence.<sup>64</sup> Coordinated responses minimise silos and duplication between services and help address the specific needs of the person or family experiencing family violence, it includes facilitated referral pathways, secondary consultations, co-case management, and multi-agency programs or colocation responses.<sup>65</sup>

Coordinated responses are important for removing barriers and ensuring culturally responsive and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing family violence. Particularly Aboriginal people from different age groups and those who face intersectional oppression. This involves removing barriers that may be obstructing an inclusive and equitable service response and ensuring that service provision is tailored to the person's support and safety needs.

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<sup>61</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

<sup>62</sup> Reynolds, V. (2013). *Justice doing in community work and therapy: from burnout to solidarity*.

<sup>63</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic. p51

<sup>64</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2018). *Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

<sup>65</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). *MARAM Practice Guides: Responsibility 9 & 10: Contribute to Coordinated and Collaborative Risk Management Including Ongoing Risk Assessment*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.; Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

The *Code of Practice* articulates a standard for specialist family violence services to develop partnership with Aboriginal organisations to inform service design and enable effective referral pathways and coordinated responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>66</sup>

## 5. **Workforce capability and sustainability**

The sector has a highly skilled, dedicated, and resilient workforce. Specialist family violence services have a responsibility to promote the professional development and sustainability of the workforce to enable culturally responsive services. The dedicated *National Action Plan to End Violence Against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women and Girls* identified the need to promote engagement with culturally informed training on anti-racism and cultural safety in services that intersect with family violence.<sup>67</sup>

The *Code of Practice* commits specialist family violence services to:

- regularly review and address their capability to provide culturally safe services using guidance provided by Aboriginal organisations and resources;<sup>68</sup>
- ensure professional development includes cultural safety training provided by Aboriginal organisations that addresses the intersection between family violence, and the historic and ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal families and communities;<sup>69</sup> and
- provide regular individual supervision and group reflection to collectively evaluate and strengthen specialist family violence praxis.<sup>70</sup>

For decades, the sector has embraced the importance of supervision and reflective practice, an active process of witnessing an experience, examining it, and learning from it.<sup>71</sup> As the prevalence and severity of family violence witnessed by the sector has escalated, combined with the prescribed responsibilities under the MARAM Framework, including a greater focus on collaborative practice and intersectionality, means providing effective supervision has never been more crucial.<sup>72</sup>

## 6. **Accountability**

The governance processes and leadership roles of specialist family violence services are ultimately accountable to victim survivors. This is part of the ongoing development of specialist family violence praxis, which is informed by people experiencing family violence own voice,

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<sup>66</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic. Standard 7.2e

<sup>67</sup> Department of Social Services (2023). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Children*. <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-action-plan-2023-2025>

<sup>68</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

<sup>69</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

<sup>70</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

<sup>71</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2023). *Best Practice Supervision Information Sheets*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-information-sheets>

<sup>72</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2023). *Best Practice Supervision Information Sheets*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-information-sheets>

lived experiences, knowledge and expertise. Services must have procedures for collecting and analysing feedback from Aboriginal people, including from children and young people, accessing their services.<sup>73</sup>



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<sup>73</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic; Family Safety Victoria (2021). Case Management Program Requirements for specialist family violence services which support victim survivors. State of Victoria; Commission for Children and Young People (2022). Child Safe Standards. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/the-11-child-safe-standards/>; Social Services Regulator (2024) Social Services Standards Overview. <https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards#social-services-regulator-guidance-and-information-webinars>

## **Deepening our understanding of current practices**

While the policy landscape provides us with critical context about the responsibilities of family violence services, hearing directly from Aboriginal people who have experienced family violence and people working in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services provides the most current picture of what is happening on the ground.

### **What are the current strengths of culturally responsive practices and cross organisation collaboration in non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services in Victoria?**

Reflecting on examples of good practice by non-Aboriginal services in the provision of support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people provides an opportunity to consider how these can be applied more consistently and adapted in different services and regions.

Recognising that Aboriginal communities have been calling for improvements to practice and systems for years, this is an opportunity for non-Aboriginal people and services to come with openness and commitment to driving the significant change that is needed to meet the needs and uphold the rights of Aboriginal people.

#### **1. Upholding Aboriginal self-determination**

**Insight: Upholding self-determination means providing options and space for Aboriginal people to be the leader of their own journey.**

With respect for Aboriginal self-determination, choice and cultural safety is an essential component of specialist family violence service provision and advocacy. The role of specialist family violence services is to counter the negative impacts of a person using violence's abuse and control by supporting Aboriginal women to meaningfully restore dignity and control over their lives without coercion or negative judgement.<sup>74</sup>

Aboriginal women reflected on experiences of culturally responsive support where their self-determination was upheld:

“Let you be the leader of your own journey. They can give you directions and give you options, but won't tell you how to do it. Let you lead the way. And that's what I think needs to happen, give you those option opportunities to be to be in charge of your own game.”- Aboriginal woman

“They give you the all the tools to empower you as a woman and as a mum. And they'll be there to support you and your way. But they don't force you to do anything. And that's

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<sup>74</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

a massive thing. To be given that opportunity to be your own leader in your own journey is a big thing.” – Aboriginal woman

**Insight: Some accommodation services respond to Aboriginal people’s right to maintain or restore cultural connections by developing robust safety plans with residents and supporting them to spend time away from the refuge.**

Family violence services have a responsibility to respond to Aboriginal people’s rights to maintain or restore connections with culture, Country, family, kinship and community networks.<sup>75</sup>

We heard examples of non-Aboriginal services making efforts to offer and uphold choice, and community connections, at every point of service provision:

“We sometimes have [Aboriginal] clients who come to our refuge. Even though the referral came to us, we always have the conversation with them, asking them if they want to be supported by an Aboriginal service, or if being referred to [our service] was their choice or was it the only option available at that point in time? Would they like us to link with Aboriginal services?” Non-Aboriginal family violence service

Although it is not a currently common practice for non-Aboriginal accommodation services to enable women to have time away from refuges to maintain or restore connections with culture, Country, family, kinship and community networks, it was found that refuges who enable this to happen are responding to their social, cultural and spiritual wellbeing, as highlighted by a Manager at an Aboriginal family violence refuge:

“We see it as one of the most important parts of their social and emotional wellbeing. As long as it’s safe to do so. We do the safety planning as we would for an overnight stay outside of the refuge. We assess [risk] around where the perpetrator is at that point in time. It’s got to be about individual circumstance, allowing flexibility, otherwise we can cause more harm.” – Aboriginal family violence service

A manager at a non-Aboriginal family violence refuge described how their service will develop robust safety plans to enable Aboriginal people time away from refuge to re-connect with community and Country, while maintaining their accommodation at the refuge:

“We have Aboriginal clients that may travel to different parts of Victoria or Interstate for Sorry Business. We try to support them, understanding that they might need some time away from the accommodation and return... We try to implement some robust safety planning that enables them to return to Country.” –non-Aboriginal family violence service

Recognising the importance of restoring connections, we also heard an example of a non-Aboriginal service supporting a woman at serious risk of harm from family violence to relocate

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<sup>75</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2018). Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

for safety reasons and then working with her to through a plan that ultimately saw her safely return to her community:

“One client at [non-Aboriginal refuge] and the risk even was too high to manage while she was in there. So, they relocated her interstate at a different refuge, they still stayed involved. So then when she came back, it wasn't that they had ever stopped that regular contact which for the client was really good, because coming back home and settling back into this community was a really big priority for her.” – Aboriginal family violence service

## **2. Enabling person-centred and flexible responses**

**Insight: Working at the pace of Aboriginal people experiencing family violence is enabled by centring the rights and unique needs of the person and supportive organisational leadership.**

Welcoming, inclusive and equitable support considers who the person is, not only as a survivor of family violence, but as an individual with their own complex background, life experiences, perspectives, identities, strengths, hopes and needs. Person-centred and flexible service provision requires an ‘open door’ approach, whereby people experiencing family violence can decide the intensity and duration of their engagement with the service.<sup>76</sup>

We heard an example of person-centred, flexible practice, tailored for an Aboriginal woman’s needs. This helped to create an environment where she chose to share her culture and connections:

“Everyone’s time poor and all that...but she needed that time. I remember one of the elderly ladies that I worked with, we only got to do her MARAM by sitting down and having a cuppa. I'm not gonna sit here with the paper. I know the questions that I need up here. I'm not gonna have a pen. We were sitting outside and she said, ‘there's a crow there. That's my dad. You know, that's my connection’.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

We heard, from people working in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services, that this practice is contingent on knowing you have the support, understanding and trust, and backing of the people in leadership within your service:

“It's the backing of our CEOs, our directors and our board. My Director will go to bat for me with the funders or if something's late because she knows that we have been doing the work with our women and that's why we can't get that report in. Whereas I feel mainstream services maybe don't have that same mentality of really backing their staff and trusting in their staff that they're really doing the hard work.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Also backing from your bosses, from the senior staff and that they understand. Where short term stay is meant to be four weeks, we've had people stay seven or eight months.

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<sup>76</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic



And the CEO, she doesn't care about targets and it's always been like that, so it's helpful so we don't have to rush.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

The interpretation of service requirements, such as length of support and service targets, varies amongst service providers. Where predetermined targets are not met due to upholding person-centred and flexible practice, service leaders can navigate conversations with Agency Performance and System Support (APSS) managers about targets and highlight how the service has been working aligned to essential system frameworks.

**Insight: Some family violence services apply person-centred and flexible approaches and actively recognise and remove service barriers.**

We heard some service will ‘bend the rules’ in recognition that services are not designed in a way to meet the rights and needs of Aboriginal people:

“We bend the rules because the system ...all these services are set up without the understanding of the needs of Aboriginal clients. So we really have to take the lead from them....[Examples include] curfews.. staying out... people have Sorry Business... visitors because there's a need for family at a certain point in their life.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

A manager in an Aboriginal family violence refuge described their response when the service rules are breached, and exploring how the person can best be supported:

“Women breach rules and, if running on emotion, the reaction might be, ‘nah, you’re out’. We take pause, discuss together ‘okay what was the impact of the behaviour, how will our decision impact the woman? Can this woman be supported through this? Can we support them to manage this?’. We know women might be using or drinking, as long as it’s not being done in the open, not impacting others. We recognise her wellbeing might be compromised and use of drugs or alcohol is to cope. I don’t want this refuge to be driven by hierarchy, power, western ways. We stay true to our ways, our cultural ways.” – Aboriginal family violence service

Acknowledging the significant fear of Child Protection involvement and child removal, we heard recognition of the importance of ensuring a ‘no wrong door’ approach:

“Totally agree about the full nature of Child Protection being a barrier for people accessing specialist family violence services and I’m grateful that we’ve moved back to a no wrong door approach for that very reason.” – Non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

**Insight: Some non-Aboriginal refuge and accommodation services create opportunities to strengthen and restore cultural wellbeing and connections of Aboriginal children and young people.**

Keeping children’s rights and safety at the forefront of service provision is essential, even where direct engagement is limited. The residential nature of accommodation services, and on-site support offers important opportunities for direct support of Aboriginal children, young people

and their families. We heard that refugees are well placed to explore and begin to support the cultural connections of Aboriginal families accessing their service, including through Aboriginal Community Controlled childcare:

“If the parent does want [connection to culture or community], then we would ensure that the child is connected into that space as well. We will take the lead from the parent. We recently had an Aboriginal mother and a child [come to refuge]. The mother was really wanting to re-connect with culture. We set up a canvas on the wall outside and she's a beautiful artist...We explored Bup Bup Willam as an option where the child could be connected to culture through their childcare experience.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

Where supporting families in which a parent is non-Aboriginal and the children are Aboriginal, services described approaching conversations with care and centring the cultural needs of the children:

“We had a family [in refuge], the children were Aboriginal, the mother was not. We have children and young people's practitioners on site, so we had a conversation with mum about the kids' connections to Country and their culture. We needed to have an understanding of what it would mean to speak about culture to the children, for mum, but also we wanted to acknowledge the children's cultural needs. Both the local school and us were starting to have conversations, bring some books, watch some videos and do some drawing. Sometimes mum would join in, but sometimes she would opt out.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

One non-Aboriginal family violence service described the refuge's therapeutic garden program, and how with the knowledge and support of an Aboriginal staff member, the program had become a way for all children to learn about native plants and their traditional uses. For Aboriginal children this also created opportunities for them to strengthen their connections to culture:

“We have a therapeutic garden program, there's some native plants and it's, we're lucky we have a staff member who's Aboriginal and she's really involved in making sure it's got the right language, what it's used for and what it's always been used for. So, within the Therapeutic Garden Program, Aboriginal kids get involved.” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

### **3. Working in Solidarity and Justice-Doing**

**Insight: Some non-Aboriginal services described demonstrating allyship with Aboriginal communities through amplifying their voices and standing alongside them in their advocacy against harmful systems.**

Genuine allyship requires relationships and individual and systemic advocacy to promote Aboriginal rights and safety and progress social change. It is the responsibility of non-Aboriginal services to develop practices that are aligned with the leadership and goals of Aboriginal

communities.<sup>77</sup> Some non-Aboriginal family violence services reflected on the relationships they have with Aboriginal communities and how they seek to elevate and amplify their voices:

“Because we do have really close relationships, we elevate the voices of mob... particularly when it comes to things like the Poccum’s Law. We do a lot of advocacy and elevate First Nations voices.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service.

“There's a lot of work happening within [our] senior management space in terms of engaging and amplifying the needs within the community or facing the unique challenges. We try to amplify the voice of other targeted services like ourselves.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

Non-Aboriginal family violence services highlighted the importance of demonstrating allyship through continuing to challenge systems and policies that continue to perpetuate harmful outcomes for Aboriginal communities. Allyship actions need to extend beyond the strategic priorities of the non-Aboriginal organisation to the self-determined priorities of Aboriginal communities, this might mean taking actions and demonstrating allyship beyond family violence campaigns or work.

“Services can be good allies by supporting campaigns that First Nations orgs are running. This can help to demonstrate that the organisation is trusted and can be approached. Also challenging the department and work around the system to make it work for Aboriginal people ... Listening to Aboriginal communities about what they need to be able to access the system and making those changes is an important part of being a good ally. – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

Having a visible presence and turning up for community was seen as valuable:

“[It’s] important for people to get to as many local events as possible, so people get familiar with people's faces so when people are ready to reach out there is a familiar face and a certain amount of trust established.” Aboriginal practitioner in non-Aboriginal service

Demonstrating allyship and solidarity with Aboriginal people should not extend to or be confused with appropriating their ideas, concepts or concerns.<sup>78</sup> As White, Canadian social justice advocate Vicki Reynolds says about allyship, it is messy work and we are likely to get it wrong many times.<sup>79</sup> However, if allies have been able to establish equal, respectful and trusting relationships with Aboriginal people in which they, as settlers and as non-Aboriginal family violence services, are willing to remain vulnerable and open to being told when they have messed up, they stand a better chance of being good allies, and not appropriating Aboriginal peoples’ concerns.

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<sup>77</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p.5

<sup>78</sup> Mecham Stannard (2020). Intersectional Feminism and being allies to Aboriginal people: A discussion paper for Domestic Violence Victoria and the specialist family violence sector. (unpublished)

<sup>79</sup> Reynolds, V. (2013). ‘Leaning In’ as Imperfect Allies in Community Work. *Narrative and Conflict: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, 1(1), 53–75.

#### **4. Supporting collaboration and coordination**

**Insight: Some non-Aboriginal services have processes in place that afford Aboriginal people a degree of priority, enabling timely access to assessment and support. This includes protocols with Aboriginal services for direct referral to non-Aboriginal family violence services and an immediate response.**

There are a range of systemic and structural barriers, compounded by historic and ongoing discrimination, that make it very difficult for Aboriginal women and children experiencing family violence to get the help they need. This is further exacerbated for Aboriginal people experiencing homophobia or transphobia, ablism, ageism or criminalisation. Developing relationships with Aboriginal organisations to inform effective referral pathways and coordinated responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is important.<sup>80</sup> A number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations spoke about having built strong relationships with local non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services which have resulted in the services prioritising Aboriginal families for support:

“We worked hard on creating a good relationship with [non-Aboriginal family violence service]. now they will fast track Aboriginal women through for support.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Sometimes if we want to refer in [to local non-Aboriginal refuge], we'll refer to Safe Steps, but also CC [the refuge] in. They have really great comms. If they haven't been able to accept a referral for whatever reason, normally they will say ‘have you tried XYZ’? They're just really great.” – Aboriginal family violence service

A manager from a regional non-Aboriginal family violence service described how they have informal arrangements with a local Aboriginal refuge, on occasion supporting each other's employees if they are experiencing family violence, or supporting clients when the refuge has limited capacity:

“We have an arrangement with [local Aboriginal refuge], where they were offline for a while and we took some of their women into our facility. We have a conversation if there's a conflict of interest. So, if we've got a staff member within our organisation that needs support, they may support them. Likewise, we can support their staff. It's just about our relationship with that service and it's not formal.” – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service.

Because the specialist family violence service system is enabled by state-wide processes and protocols, local area arrangements alone are insufficient in ensuring consistently responsive services. State-wide arrangements that provide clear direction for non-Aboriginal services in responding to referrals of Aboriginal people are also required to ensure that collaborative practice across the sector is supported and Safe Steps has access to accurate information

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<sup>80</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

regarding vacancies. This strengthens service and system responsiveness while upholding local area arrangements.

**Insight: Some services described examples of strong collaborative practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services, enabled by open communication, clearly defined roles and flexible, person-centred approaches to service delivery.**

Family violence services provide direct service to clients and coordinate and mobilise other service responses to address family violence risk and achieve case plan goals.<sup>81</sup> Some services described co-case management arrangements with ACCOs to support Aboriginal people experiencing family violence. These arrangements can take various forms, with either the Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal service providing a key contact for the client. The service providers interviewed described co-case management arrangements with an ACCO being the key contact and providing cultural, social and emotional support, while a non-Aboriginal service provided other aspects of case management support. This approach was particularly valuable to Aboriginal family violence service providers where they had a small team of family violence practitioners who could not meet demand for services, or less access to sector resources, or where their practitioners were relatively new to working with family violence and the complexities of the service system.

“We joint case manage clients with [the non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service]....Generally they do background stuff because they have more resources and a bigger team, and we will have a client focus. We would do the home visits, the phone contacts and things like that. [This works well when] there's communication between us and the other caseworker. Being very open with the client that there is another service involved, but they don't have to go through numerous people.” –Aboriginal family violence service.

“We've been developing a great relationship with [local ACCO]. They've got some specialist family violence funding. We've been able to develop pathways where we're able to support in a way that minimises the need [for the person experiencing family violence] to retell their story or have too many services involved. It's a work in progress to streamline and build that relationship but it's exciting and we've seen some good results and feedback so far. [This was enabled by] some change in in our own systems ... so we've had more capacity to reach out [to ACCOs].” - non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

We heard examples of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal specialist family violence accommodation services working collaboratively to support Aboriginal women in refuge:

“We have a really great relationship with [local non-Aboriginal refuge]. They really value and respect [our] opinion around the Aboriginal women that are in there and we will still normally either like co-case manage or support in whatever way if we do have [an Aboriginal] client that's in the refuge.” – Aboriginal family violence service

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<sup>81</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

For larger or more established Aboriginal family violence case management services, co-case management wasn't seen as necessary, with a sense that working in that way could create duplication:

“We don't work a lot with [the local non-Aboriginal family violence case management service], it's more often one or the other because we do the same thing. Or if goals weren't met through the [non-Aboriginal] service, and then they come back through to us.” – Aboriginal family violence service.

Another consideration, with regards to collaborative practice, is in cases where an Aboriginal person chooses, for any reason, to work with a non-Aboriginal service. In these cases, secondary consultation with an ACCO can help maximise the cultural responsiveness of the service provider.

Importantly, service providers shared that, for collaboration to be effective, there is a need for openness, clear communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities and a flexible, client-centred approach to meet the needs of the person experiencing family violence.

“It's supported by open communication, ensuring we are all on the same page and clear on each other's role, this also helps the client to understand our different roles. ...requires flexibility to meet the client's needs, undertaking joint home visits or meeting client at the co-op. Being creative, mindful of the dynamics of any working relationship, and avoid setting unrealistic expectations of what might be provided by other services without exploring this with the service.” – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

Collaborative practice underlines a commonality – that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services are working to achieve the same goal, to ensure the safety and agency of Aboriginal people:

“I guess for those who work in family violence, we all want the same outcome. We just want that person experiencing family violence to be safe.” – Aboriginal family violence service.

## **5. Building workforce capability and sustainability**

**Insight: Engaging in critical reflection at organisational leadership and practitioner levels enables an examination of how power structures and dynamics can undermine the provision of inclusive and socially-just services.**

Reflective practice (also known as critical reflection or reflexivity) is a dynamic process of continuous reflection, analysis and action to examine the values, assumptions and biases that affect inclusive and socially-just service provision.<sup>82</sup> It is the responsibility of non-Aboriginal family violence services to critically reflect on where they may be perpetuating colonising approaches and discriminatory practices and, in-turn, work to promote culturally responsive

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<sup>82</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p31

services responses.<sup>83</sup> We heard examples of non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services holding dedicated spaces for reflective practice focused on cultural responsiveness:

“[Our service has] also started cultural self-reflective sessions... [we have] have found these very powerful and create space to talk about Aboriginal history that we are not aware of.... It is never something that is finished but always working toward trying to be culturally safe.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“Acknowledging and then just challenging the unconscious bias within the service... we're reviewing case plans....when we have conversation with team leaders, what steps are we taking to appreciate cultural diversity within practice and really hearing from the clients and how can we be flexible in meeting [their] needs and acknowledging the impact of the environment on the person in a trauma-informed manner.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

Reflective practice was identified as important, not just to inform direct practice, but also to enable leaders to listen to practitioners, learn to be reflexive, and to demonstrate cultural humility:

“I have to keep reiterating [this], particularly to senior leaders, not practitioners – practitioners understand reflection because it's part of their practice. The senior leaders are eager to get on with it. No, you've gotta think about it. You've gotta reflect. You don't jump to solutions just because you think they're right. You've gotta get information. You've gotta talk to people. Gotta build partnerships. You've gotta find out 'is that the right thing?' Don't just assume.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

## **6. Demonstrating accountability**

**Insight: The provision of culturally responsive services is enabled by leaders who communicate honestly, are willing to listen and are genuinely committed to implementing the change required.**

Both people working in Aboriginal family violence services and Aboriginal practitioners in non-Aboriginal services highlighted the power of organisational leaders in establishing cultural safety practices. When they can recognise where they have got it wrong, and are committed to make changes, this improves practice across the service. However, it was identified that this doesn't happen often, which hinders meaningful change:

“It starts with leadership, if the leaders don't demand it, it won't be happening.” – Aboriginal Manager

“Leadership in any organisation, they've got their protective cloak on. It's not gonna be the end of anything if any organisation never admits 'we probably haven't done the right thing for a long time'...Just to hear someone say that out loud... Excuse my language, but 'we've been a bit shit at this. We're gonna try and be better' is powerful. It's

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<sup>83</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p50

monumental, even though it might look minor.” - Aboriginal practitioner in a non-Aboriginal organisation

Non-Aboriginal family violence services reflected that authentic leadership, including a willingness to prioritise and resource the work that is required to be culturally responsive, being open to challenging conversations and adapting practice and processes, was critical to support organisations’ journeys towards cultural responsiveness:

“The most powerful thing [is] authentic leaders who are willing to put their hand up and say ‘we’re ignorant. We don’t know what we’re doing, but we’re gonna learn and we’re gonna get better at this, and we’re gonna make the time [*to do it*]. We’re going to give the priority to make this work effective and real and not just window dressing.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“The authentic commitment in the leadership team has impressed me and that goes all the way to the Board. That’s not to say there haven’t been some pretty challenging conversations along the way, but the willingness to listen... to adapt internalised ideas of what success and achievement look like has made it a much more authentic process.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Insight: Many non-Aboriginal services are implementing frameworks to guide their organisations’ journeys towards anti-racist and culturally responsive and inclusive services.**

In alignment with the *Code of Practice*, family violence services have a responsibility to regularly review and address their capability to provide culturally responsive services for Aboriginal people, and to seek and apply guidance provided by Aboriginal organisations and resources.<sup>84</sup>

Some non-Aboriginal family violence services are implementing frameworks to identify and support change in their services, such as Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs). These instruments aim to enable organisations to take meaningful actions towards reconciliation with Aboriginal communities based on the following core pillars: relationships, respect and opportunities.<sup>85</sup>

We heard that some non-Aboriginal family violence services are working towards or have an endorsed RAP. Most commonly this was the first of the four levels of RAPs, a ‘Reflect’ RAP:

“We just got our first [Reflect] RAP approved. It’s taken us a lot of back and forth, learning a lot. With the self-determination of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people, how it is that our service approaches this work. Last financial year, 27% of our clients were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. We want to make sure this place is

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<sup>84</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

<sup>85</sup> Reconciliation Australia (2024). *The RAP Framework*. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/the-rap-framework/>



comfortable and that they are welcome here... And we hope that they feel safe here.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

“[Our service] has been participating in truth-telling sessions, reviewing policies and procedures, all staff have participated in cultural sensitivity training. The Reconciliation Action Plan was the driver for much of the work.” Non-Aboriginal family violence service

“Our Reflect RAP has just been endorsed by the Board. We've submitted it to Reconciliation Australia. The process of developing it has been really rich, robust and really good, sometimes hard, conversations. Everyone in the organisation was offered an opportunity to participate in pulling it together. Not everybody availed themselves of that opportunity. What emerged from the process: There's a willingness and desire to do better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. People rely heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, in partner organisations or within our own organisations – cultural load falling to them, and non-Indigenous workers expressed lack of confidence and fear that they'll get it wrong.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

A critique of the RAP is that it centres the perspective of non-Aboriginal people, in contrast to the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal people, and it can uphold and reproduce, rather than reconfigure, existing power imbalance in the relationship.<sup>86</sup> RAPs do not automatically translate into the practice of service delivery within an organisation. Change needs to be embedded in organisational policy, procedure, training, reflective practice and supervision. Without which, it can be ineffective in creating the necessary change for those often most harmed by the system. However, they can be an important mechanism for organisations to create space for conversations, identify tangible actions and commit resources and time towards centring Aboriginal communities in their organisations. RAPs rely on a commitment of the organisation and don't bring the same power as a compliance mechanism. This means they are not compulsory for family violence services. Additionally, it is important to highlight that conversations about race need to happen for any real efforts towards reconciliation, and this requires a shift away from centring feelings and intentions towards a commitment to transforming how power operates.<sup>87</sup>

We heard that some non-Aboriginal family violence services are working to increase their race literacy and embed anti-racist frameworks. Increasing race literacy can be done as part of, in addition to or instead of a RAP process. It does not need to be one or the other and one is not necessarily better than the other.

“We have a racism ‘It stops with me campaign’ at [our service], which is our framework for what we wish for our residents and for our staff in terms of respectful communication and no tolerance to discrimination policy within our refuges and also with our external stakeholders.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

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<sup>86</sup> Bond. C. (2019). The Uncomfortable truth about Reconciliation. NITV News. <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/the-uncomfortable-truth-about-reconciliation/bg1z5zfgc>

<sup>87</sup> Bond. C. (2019). The Uncomfortable truth about Reconciliation. NITV News. <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/the-uncomfortable-truth-about-reconciliation/bg1z5zfgc>

**Insight: Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a non-Aboriginal person or service requires hard work to build trust over time, consistent demonstrations of cultural humility and self-reflection, accountability and transparency, particularly in response to feedback.**

People working in Aboriginal family violence services reflected on their expectations of non-Aboriginal practitioners working within their services. We heard that the onus is on non-Aboriginal people, particularly White people, to demonstrate that they can be trusted and to foster relationships and rapport with Aboriginal people:

“For our non-Indigenous workers, they [Aboriginal clients] already have this distrust with [Child Protection], with the police, with White people in general. They’ve gotta work harder to build that rapport with them.” – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander manager

“As a whitey, always focusing on the importance of trust and the relationship. Understanding that if there is any resistance or distrust or hesitancy...almost welcoming it in a way and understanding that’s OK. Trust and rapport building [is at] the core of the work.” – non-Aboriginal practitioner working in an Aboriginal family violence service

“Don’t be offended if Aboriginal people don’t want to work with you. You have to have a hard shell. You have to bust your ass to be trusted to hear their story. They know when you are bullshitting. Be respectful but real.” – non-Aboriginal Team Leader in an Aboriginal family violence service

Working alongside Aboriginal people as a non-Aboriginal person requires humility, self-reflection and self-awareness, understanding your assumptions, biases and the impact of your behaviour. Knowing when to listen and when to speak up:

“I think it's great that [non-Aboriginal workers] want to understand and want to learn, but if you come into this work and you think you know what’s best because you've read a book...that's the problem. You're going to not listen to people. You've always got to be open minded and willing to learn.” – Aboriginal woman

“We are relational. Working in an ACCO, or anywhere with Aboriginal people. There’s a responsibility in coming to work here. You need insights into your own behaviour and your impact on others.” – Aboriginal manager

“Know when to talk and when to give respect.” - Aboriginal Manager

“As White women working in an Aboriginal Community Controlled Org[anisation] it should be something that we do all the time, every day, continuous self-reflection.” - non-Aboriginal practitioner working in an Aboriginal family violence service

“I don't think I'm ever going to be culturally competent. You’re always working towards it... it's just shutting up and listening to what people have to say.... if you are wrong, just being like, ‘yeah, I fucked up’ ... deep listening is what I expect of myself.” – Non-Aboriginal Team Leader working in an Aboriginal family violence service

We heard that being open to and inviting feedback from Aboriginal colleagues and Aboriginal people you are supporting is critical. Recognising that, as a non-Aboriginal person, there will be times when you misstep or could do better:

“Some of our staff are white. I check in with the women on the way out [of the service], ‘how did you find it, were you culturally safe?’. I say to our non-Aboriginal staff, I can put up the paintings and the flags, but that’s not what’s going to make people feel safe and connected, it’s how you act and how you treat the women.” – Aboriginal manager

“Seeking feedback, constantly checking in... knowing that cultural safety and awareness is ongoing. Having kindness and knowing it’s a slow process of understanding the story overtime.” – non-Aboriginal practitioner working in Aboriginal family violence service

“When working with clients, letting them know I'm not Aboriginal. Inviting them to say if there's something I'm not doing right...I'm not always gonna get it right. I'm learning. Please pull me up. I've got real thick skin, creating that space at the beginning and throughout the work. If there's anything that you don't feel culturally safe to speak to me about, there are Aboriginal women in the organisation that they can yarn to.” - non-Aboriginal practitioner working in Aboriginal family violence service

## **What are the current gaps in culturally responsive practices and cross-organisation collaborations in non-Aboriginal Specialist Family Violence Services in Victoria?**

There are truths shared in this section about harmful impacts of the family violence system on Aboriginal women, children and communities. In identifying gaps within service provision by non-Aboriginal family violence services, we aim to understand the practices and processes across the sector, while also making visible the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

While for many people, this content will not be surprising, please read with care. We live and work within oppressive white structures and colonial systems, and it is through the generosity of Aboriginal women and services, that non-Aboriginal people, when coming with openness, can understand these more deeply.

### **1. Undermining Aboriginal self-determination**

**Insight: Without meaningful investment, Aboriginal-led Frameworks get lost in the cycle of reform and policy making and their impact never fully realised.**

It is crucial that non-Aboriginal organisations are accessible for, and workforces are skilled to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking family violence support. We

heard there is limited understanding or implementation of the DFFH Cultural Safety Framework in non-Aboriginal services, despite it forming part of accreditation:

“Lack of legislative and framework knowledge. For example, there is no awareness of Cultural Safety Framework or audit despite accreditation processes.” – Aboriginal family violence service

The Royal Commission into Family Violence recommended that government ensure funding agreements for non-Aboriginal family violence services incorporate a requirement for services to conduct cultural safety reviews and action plans.<sup>88</sup> In response, the Aboriginal-led Strengthening Cultural Safety of Family Violence Services project was established. This work aimed to support non-Aboriginal services to undertake cultural safety assessments and action plans aligned to the DFFH Cultural Safety Framework.<sup>89</sup> Ten Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations received funding to provide advice to mainstream family violence organisations on taking action to embed cultural safety for Aboriginal Victorians and undertake cultural safety reviews, develop action plans and deliver training aligned to the Cultural Safety Framework. The project resulted in the development of The Strengthening Cultural Safety in Family Violence Services Assessment Tool.<sup>90</sup>

In 2021, the project was funded by Family Safety Victoria to focus on the Orange Door network to support the acquittal of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office recommendations. This leaves a gap in encompassing the broader specialist family violence sector. Despite this work, service funding agreements do not include a requirement for services to conduct cultural safety reviews and action plans. Services providers can adopt the Cultural Safety Framework, particularly as evidence for meeting Social Services Regulations and Child Safe Standards, however it is not mandated.

Despite this, we heard some non-Aboriginal family violence services are looking to align to these standards:

“We looked at the work in the Orange Doors around Aboriginal cultural safety standards and the work that VACCA is driving across all Orange Doors statewide, and how that can be aligned with our RAP. There was a lot of value in those standards and alignment to what’s in our RAP. The standards add tangible things that we can do to realise our desire to be more culturally responsive.” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

We also heard that the lack of consistent expectations undermines consistency and accountability:

“If there's not a consistent set of guidelines for people to invest their time and energy into, how can we guarantee any kind of consistency or accountability across the non-Aboriginal service sector? It feels like a lost opportunity.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

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<sup>88</sup> <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-recommendations/require-services-conduct-cultural-safety-reviews-and-action-plans>

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-recommendations/require-services-conduct-cultural-safety-reviews-and-action-plans>

<sup>90</sup> The tool is not publicly available online

**Insight: The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definition of family violence is not consistently embedded in the practice of non-Aboriginal services.**

An Aboriginal definition of family violence has been included in family violence legislation and key frameworks including MARAM, the *Code of Practice* and the Case Management Program Requirements. This definition challenges the colonial conceptualisation of family as a nuclear entity and recognise that extended families, kinship networks and communities are also part of the family in Aboriginal communities. However, we heard that non-Aboriginal services do not uphold this concept in their service delivery and are often still focused on responding only to violence in intermate partner relationship and excluding violent behaviour from extended family members. For instance, Aboriginal women and Aboriginal family violence services shared reflections on the ways family violence can present in different relationship types and how a person experiencing family violence may not be able or wish to end the connection to a person using violence:

“I think there needs to spread out a bit more because we've got children beating up mothers. It's not just intimate partners. Elder abuse. But there's so many forms of the abuse that I think people are so focused on that intimate partner stuff.” – Aboriginal woman

“A lot of community and blackfellas could be experiencing community violence. Services don't understand if it's a grandson who breaks nan's TV. Or a woman who's terrified of her brother on 'ice'. Or they haven't got an IVO. Or those in relationship with men using violence, they might stay in relationship for their life and our role is to be there, help them with safety.” – Aboriginal family violence service

Furthermore, this creates more work for Aboriginal services, which need to advocate for non-Aboriginal services to provide support to Aboriginal people experiencing family violence. The Aboriginal services expressed their frustration in having to do so, and sometimes failing, which means Aboriginal people not receiving the support they are entitled to:

“[There's a] narrow definition of family violence, not the Dhelk Dja definition, even though that's what it says on their website... there's a disconnect between the definition and what happens in practice. We've had issues with our clients accessing [refuge] outside of that really narrow definition [of intimate partner violence].” - Aboriginal family violence service

“We have so many issues getting them into refuge. Most of our clients actually end up in [an Aboriginal refuge]. We drive them up.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“It can also be hard to explain that sometimes it's community violence or kinship violence... not always necessarily one person perpetrating the violence. It could be one person using violence as well as their family members or their friends facilitating that. It's frustrating to have to explain that in context. A lot of communities are very like tightly

knit. I don't think [non-Aboriginal services] understand the interconnectedness of these communities sometimes.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“I can butt heads with [local non-Aboriginal family violence service] when they won't provide support to survivors if they won't leave the person using violence. Or if you return back, they won't keep working with them.” – Aboriginal family violence service

Where a 'narrow' definition of family violence is applied, this is in contradiction to Victorian legislation, policy and practice advice. The criteria for accessing family violence refuge and crisis accommodation outlined in the Victorian Family Violence Refuge Eligibility and Prioritisation Framework upholds the Aboriginal definition of family violence.<sup>91</sup> Non-Aboriginal refuge is generally only available to adults and children assessed under MARAM Framework as being at serious and imminent risk of psychological or physical harm, injury or death from a family violence perpetrator and in need immediate protection.<sup>92</sup> This narrow criterion, combined with the high level of demand for family violence accommodation across Victoria, often prevents Aboriginal people from accessing the safety features and specialised case management offered by family violence refuge. Where a person is not assessed as requiring this level of protection, other accommodation with case management support should be explored with the person and the services working alongside them.

Referrals to non-Aboriginal and some Aboriginal family violence refuges are managed through a statewide process coordinated by Safe Steps. Safe Steps' coordination role is critical for equitable refuge placement and ensuring refuge places are allocated to people who are at highest risk and most in need.<sup>93</sup> There are also times where a person or family requires rapid access and is placed in a local refuge through a locally coordinated refuge response.<sup>94</sup>

Additionally, the Refuge Eligibility and Prioritisation Framework provides for people at elevated risk, along with "other individual circumstances and support needs that might increase the need for a refuge placement or inform the decision about whether the secure model of care offered in refuge is the most appropriate option for that person or family".<sup>95</sup> Recognising the systemic barriers and racism that create additional harms for Aboriginal people, this could be leveraged to be inclusive of different conceptualisations of risk and applied to enable increased access for Aboriginal women, children and families.

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<sup>91</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2022) Victorian family violence refuge eligibility and prioritisation framework. State of Victoria. p7 <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/victorian-family-violence-refuge-eligibility-and-prioritisation-framework>

<sup>92</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2022) Victorian family violence refuge eligibility and prioritisation framework. State of Victoria. p7 <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/victorian-family-violence-refuge-eligibility-and-prioritisation-framework>

<sup>93</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2022) Victorian family violence refuge eligibility and prioritisation framework. State of Victoria. p8 <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/victorian-family-violence-refuge-eligibility-and-prioritisation-framework>

<sup>94</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2022) Victorian family violence refuge eligibility and prioritisation framework. State of Victoria. p9 <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/victorian-family-violence-refuge-eligibility-and-prioritisation-framework>

<sup>95</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2022) Victorian family violence refuge eligibility and prioritisation framework. State of Victoria. p12. <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/victorian-family-violence-refuge-eligibility-and-prioritisation-framework>

**Insight: Aboriginal people are not always given all the information they need to make an informed decision about what type of service they can access. At times, choices are not upheld, through assumptions or a lack of service capacity.**

It is important that Aboriginal women are provided with as much information as possible about their rights and responsibilities and are supported to exercise choices and decision-making. However, we heard that non-Aboriginal services do not always provide sufficient information about the services available to Aboriginal women, or expect Aboriginal women to follow their advice without exerting their own voice or self-determination:

“People need to be given information on the type of support they can receive from a service. It’s not enough to ask ‘Do you want an Aboriginal service or mainstream?’, but what can they expect from the services and the type of support? People need to be given the opportunity to make an informed choice.” – Aboriginal family violence service

People working within Aboriginal services described a tendency in non-Aboriginal services to reduce Aboriginal women as one-dimensional humans or single identities, and as a result this is what informed referral pathways without considering the wishes or needs of the woman. There is a challenge for services to resist applying a ‘one-size-fits all’ approach, instead ensuring that service provision is tailored and flexible, considering who the person is, not only as an Aboriginal woman or child experiencing family violence, but as an individual with their own complex background, life experiences, perspectives, identities, strengths, hopes and needs.<sup>96</sup>

“People see Aboriginal women as only able to access Aboriginal services. We had a disabled queer Aboriginal woman who actually wanted access like a queer-specific service, but she was referred through. We have Rainbow Tick Accreditation. But she didn’t really want to focus on her Aboriginality when it came to accessing family violence supports.” - Aboriginal family violence service

“We had a woman who told The Orange Door she didn’t want an Aboriginal service. We received the referral. The client said she felt almost pressured in like she had no choice other than to take an Aboriginal referral because she was told the mainstream [waitlist] was too long and if she was lucky enough to be able to refer to an ACCO, then she should be. She worked in another ACCO, an ACCO probably wasn’t going to be the best [for her], and that’s her choice.” - Aboriginal family violence service

It is well established that ACCOs are insufficiently funded. This is not accidental, it is a policy decision that impacts Aboriginal people being able to access services of their choice. Non-Aboriginal family violence services reported they are sometimes working with Aboriginal people experiencing family violence because their preferred service, the local Aboriginal service, did not have capacity:

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<sup>96</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p38; Family Safety Victoria (2019a). MARAM Practice Guides: Foundation Knowledge Guide. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria. Code of Practice + Family Safety Victoria (2019a); Miller, J. (2005). Person-centred Approach to Using Counselling Skills in Social Work Practice. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

“Services are stretched, very stretched, so sometimes...we might have an Aboriginal person coming to us because the [Aboriginal] service that they would have preferred had no capacity.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“[Aboriginal people are] coming here because the ACCOs aren’t adequately funded so don’t always have capacity. Some Aboriginal people don’t want to go to the ACCO for this reason or that. But we are often working with Aboriginal people who want an ACCO, but they aren’t able to pick them up. – non-Aboriginal family violence service

## 2. **Barriers to person-centred and flexible responses**

**Insight: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people look for signs of safety and inclusion, but actions speak louder than flags.**

The *Code of Practice* states that trauma and violence-informed services establish emotional, physical and cultural safety in service design, including in the physical service environment.<sup>97</sup> However, it also recognises that a focus only on the physical service environment is not enough. Emotional, physical and cultural safety needs to be embedded across all engagement and case management practice.<sup>98</sup> We observed that when a service makes visible in their offices and webpage that they welcome Aboriginal people, this is noticed by the women and other services. However, for this to have a real impact it needs to be backed up with genuinely safe and non-discriminatory behaviours and service delivery.

“I always noticed places have the Aboriginal flag up and when somewhere takes notice of the First People on the land, it makes it more welcoming.” – Aboriginal woman

“Is there information on the website that addresses how they support women, Aboriginal women, cultural safety?” – Aboriginal family violence service

“When they bought the signs that places would stick on windows that say ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait people are welcome here’ ...it's not enough just to have those, you've got to have the workers trained so they know what they're doing. – Aboriginal woman

“I'm all for having flags displayed but it's about the culture of the staff as a collective and how they interact with Aboriginal and Islander clients.” – Aboriginal practitioner working in a non-Aboriginal service.

“You even notice a difference between Aboriginal organisations and mainstream as soon as you walk through the door. It's got nothing to do with whether they got pictures on the wall, their Aboriginal artwork or anything like that. When you go mainstream service, it's this judgement before you walk through the door. But you go to any Aboriginal organisation, there's no judgement, you're straight in the fold. Coming to a place like [ACCO] where I feel really proud for being Aboriginal, because it's part of me

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<sup>97</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p33

<sup>98</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p37



that I was always put down for as a child. It makes me feel proud that I can go in there around other people that aren't ashamed, they are proud." – Aboriginal woman

**Insight: Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have distrust of non-Aboriginal services. It takes time to earn, build and maintain trust.**

It was recognised by Aboriginal women and some non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services that having a service staffed by predominantly non-Aboriginal people and operating among White policies generates distrust for Aboriginal women.

“Using a black service, the support and the caring is automatic...our services nurture our people. Where white services, it's a completely different feel all together. I feel awkward walking into a white service. I feel there is no cultural feeling. It doesn't matter what black service I walk into I know that there's an Aunty or an Uncle or Cousin that's always going to be there for me at the end. Coming into white services, you don't know who [you] can trust. Trust is a big issue, not just with me, but many of our people.”- Aboriginal woman

“Trust is built. You can't just automatically trust. You've got to be able to work with the people in that organisation also and get to know them. You know when someone's batting on your side and when they're not pretty quickly. And listening... when people are actually listening to you.” – Aboriginal woman

“Let's be honest, we're a white service. Building the trust is what takes time, and so it should, because the trust got broken a long time ago and we're the face of what they knew in the past and what their ancestors went through... That's their right and that's fine... We need to make sure that they know they can trust us. Let's be honest, the system is fucked, and strong advocacy is what they need and that's what we'll do.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Insight: Non-Aboriginal services are not always confident to explore cultural/community connections and understand their impact to risk, safety and protective factors. This is a missed opportunity to provide tailored support to Aboriginal people.**

The lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes was identified as a barrier for services to ask questions to Aboriginal women about their connections with Country and community. Although there is not a definitive guide on this, Aboriginal services expressed the importance of exploring people's connections in a way that doesn't assume that they are or aren't connected.

“Cultural safety and cultural barriers are different for each person and acknowledging that not every Aboriginal person is going to be connected the same as the next... not making them feel any less Aboriginal.”- Aboriginal family violence service

“Information about kinship is really important and seeing the strength and resilience of us mob...Understanding that we are all Koorie, but we are not all the one mob.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“It’s about being proud in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture regardless of how connected and non-connected you are you can still be staunch in asking. That’s how we build relationships. By non-Aboriginal staff not asking, they are missing that connectedness to Aboriginal people too, because how they will start to feel connected.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“There are ways of framing the question that doesn’t assume that someone is culturally connected or question their Aboriginality. Asking, “Are you currently connected to your mob?”, or “When do you feel most connected to your country or mob?” rather than “who is your mob?”. Gently drawing out if they want to find more ways of connecting to community and culture. All of it comes from having a taken time to properly engage with the impact of the Stolen Generations, both historically and current day.” – Aboriginal family violence service.

Non-Aboriginal family violence services can have a role in supporting people to begin to re-connect with community and pride in Aboriginal identity:

“I grew up with family violence and then I married a chauvinist white man and he was very racist. It took me a long time to get my confidence up and to have pride in [my] identity. I had a lot of shame around my Aboriginality and she [non-Aboriginal practitioner] was the one who encouraged me to identify, and she then went above and beyond and helped me to get support from ACCOs.” – Aboriginal woman

“More understanding and support for people who are Stolen Generation and don’t know their connections to community. Services need to work with them where they are at and link them up to begin doing that family research.” – Aboriginal family violence service

Some Aboriginal family violence services shared experiences where a lack of inquiry about Aboriginality and community connections had resulted in non-Aboriginal people being referred to their service. There is a role for services to play in ensuring demographics in client profiles are consistently reflected across systems and corrected where errors have been made.

“People are asked if they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander at the scene [by Police] or through intake to a mainstream service or TOD, and ticked and referred to an ACCO, but nothing around kinship connections is explored or provided to us. We’ve had times of people being identified as Aboriginal in the system, when they aren’t and it is difficult to correct.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Mainstream finding out if they are Aboriginal or not, instead of just putting them in [the client system] as that. [Regional town] is a small place when we know our community... I had to knock back four clients because they said they was Aboriginal, but they wasn't. You know all the local clans around here who they are.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“We’ve had times of people being identified as Aboriginal in the system, when they aren’t and it is difficult to correct. It’s important for us to understand community and kinship ties. This needs to happen before connecting in with women’s business or men’s business.” Aboriginal family violence service

Aboriginal women and Aboriginal services described the need to consider the broader kinship and community networks when responding to an Aboriginal woman's experience of family violence. It is these strong community and kinship structures that can be a source of strength, but may also bring different risks that need to be understood:

“A lot of Aboriginal culture is very family orientated, we're thinking about doing wrong to family, have guilt that getting help is going to hurt this Aunty, or hurt this cousin...it's a big a ripple.” – Aboriginal woman

“When you're talking about Aboriginal people here, when you work with them, you're not working with just that person... It's a whole, what's around it, extended families. [Non-Aboriginal services] just concentrated on one person. They don't see the bigger picture, especially in the Aboriginal community. You know, a young girl comes in and she starts too frightened of leavin' but in the community [is] the perpetrator's extended family.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Especially the importance of understanding community...the connections that this person has because when we talk about family violence for Aboriginal families, we know that kinship structures can be a little bit different, a lot stronger, more extended family, all those extra connections. That can come with more risk as much as it can bring protecting factors as well.” –Aboriginal family violence service

Without working with the person experiencing violence to understand their connections, attempts to put in place safety planning and risk management will not be appropriate or effective:

“I don't think people understand that this is a safety plan but ...it depends on the communities that they're in, how safe that plan is going to be. You know... those things may not work. And that's where I think it's about more talking and understanding where that person's coming from, because you don't know yet. It's easy to make assumptions that you do know.” – Aboriginal woman

**Insight: For non-Aboriginal services, working at pace can inhibit flexible, person-centred and culturally responsive practice. It elevates other concerns (such as managing demand, targets, organisational processes) over the needs and rights of Aboriginal people experiencing family violence.**

*The Code of Practice and the Case Management Program Requirements* outline that family violence case management should be flexible, holistic, culturally sensitive, person-centred and strengths based. Support should vary in intensity and duration depending on the risks and needs of the person/family group experiencing violence. Person-centred and flexible service provision requires an 'open door' approach, whereby people experiencing family violence are able to decide the intensity and duration of their engagement with the service. While there may be tensions with managing demand and the duty of care specialist services have to respond to

the risks of family violence, a person-centred approach must be prioritised as much as possible, as this will promote autonomy and personal power.<sup>99</sup>

Aboriginal women and Aboriginal services shared experiences and reflections of the importance of prioritising a relational way of working, listening deeply, and keeping the door open rather than pre-determined timeframes and ways of engaging:

“I've worked with different White services, I can't recommend any of them because the way they speak, the way they treat us. It just feels like they have a job to do and that's as far as it goes. When you're working with families and children, there's a way to do that. You need to be a caring person. You need to be loving. You need to be understanding.” – Aboriginal woman

“I think it's about the workers showing respect to people and listening to their stories and acknowledging their stories, because you can pick up when someone's not really listening, you know when someone doesn't treat you with respect to listen to what you're saying.” – Aboriginal woman

“In mainstream, I found you're treated like a number. Our ways are relational, it's more than just work. It's about when they are ready, not when you are ready.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Aboriginal women aren't necessarily going to fit a formalised, clinical approach or three-month service periods with no flexibility. It's awful. At [our service], we can be quite flexible, if it's not the right time, that doesn't mean you're done and dusted. A little bit down the track they can give us a call and be linked in with our services again.” – Aboriginal family violence service

The MARAM tools are not intended to be applied with a tick box approach or question and answer approach with any person experiencing family violence. Family violence practitioners should be conducting narrative based interviews, including risk assessments. This was supported by the Victorian Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework 5-year Evidence Review, conducted by Allen and Clarke Consulting, which recommended revising MARAM to encourage a yarning approach, reflect culturally appropriate language, and accommodate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of community and an individual's place within that community.<sup>100</sup>

Aboriginal family violence services emphasised the need for narrative approaches with Aboriginal people, offering reflections on the need to let the Aboriginal person yarn and lead the conversation, use language that makes sense to their experience, and listening for the information needed:

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<sup>99</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

<sup>100</sup> Allen + Clarke Consulting (2024). Summary Report Victorian Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework 5-year Evidence Review. <https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-04/MARAM-5-Year-Evidence-Review-Summary-Report-December-2023.pdf>

“Practice deep listening. They are the one telling the story. Any non-Aboriginal person, or even Aboriginal person from different mob, should feel privileged the person is willing to share with them. Let them talk. If they are sharing their story, let them. You can digest what they share and get the answer for your tick box. They pass wisdom and culture down through storytelling. Don’t put time restraints on it. It could take 60 minutes of yarning before you get to a question.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“From what I hear from the women, when they access [non-Aboriginal family violence] services, it’s a long process or they felt misunderstood. MARAM.. paper based, time consuming, you need to sit in deep listening and have a yarn, so people feel listened to and empowered.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Being able to get information from informal yarning as opposed to having to rely on women having to specifically articulate exactly how a non-Aboriginal service wants to hear that information.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Yarning for those conversations, you’ll be able to put together the picture ... it’s not filling in things or assuming stuff. But you’re actually listening properly to what they’re saying... not using specific words that are speaking in an assessment way or an interview way.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Not be robots. You know when [non-Aboriginal family services] are reading it from a script. With MARAM, they’re asking a question and the woman’s like ‘what?’ And I have to say it in another way. They say in courses, don’t use professional jargon. But then they teach you in jargon, and give you documents in jargon. Stop that. Change the language.” – Aboriginal family violence service

The application of guidelines and frameworks by non-Aboriginal family violence services are not meeting the needs of Aboriginal people, are creating barriers to practice in a culturally responsive way and resulting in practices that prioritise the needs of the service, such as completing a risk assessment, at the detriment to the Aboriginal people’s voices, needs and rights. Agency-imposed timeframes to meet targets and manage demand is an inadequate response and does not allow for the nuance needed in relation to case management practices:

“The way the system is set up does not account for intergenerational trauma, [they] need to change how mainstream do things to understand impacts on community. This stuff isn’t just family violence specific, a disjointed system and lack of knowledge of communities is common across the non-Aboriginal space.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“The Western system has a way and thinks there’s the step one, step two.... but that’s not how it is for everybody. Nor is it correct for us to think we know. So really taking it from them. Ensuring that they have the information that they need to make their own decisions in the way that they want to do it, rather than the way the system expects it.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

“A gap exists between the policy of Family Safety Victoria where structured bureaucratic processes don’t accommodate identified culturally responsive practices.

Timelines of two-week assessments don't allow practitioners to build a trusting relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. There is a disconnect between policy drivers, departmental, colonialist, bureaucratic structures/systems and funder expectations and targets present major inhibitors to actually being able to adapt practice to be more culturally responsive.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“We're a short-term crisis response service. I have friends who work in ACCOs and when we have discussions about the time frames ... it's not unusual for them to have a client for three or four months before they even start having discussions about family violence. We don't have the timeframes to do that work, we have eight clients we need to see that day. If we are going to meet our funding targets, our service hours, we can't have the time for that. As much as they need it and as much as we would love to...service hours wouldn't be met with what we need to do for funding requirements.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

The family violence sector has experienced unprecedented transformation and reform since 2016. Research into service demand demonstrates that services consistently provide services above funded targets, yet there remain long wait times for people to be allocated case management support, which increases level of risk and has a corrosive impact on practitioners and services.<sup>101</sup> Family violence services manage higher caseloads with increased risk and complexity while they operate in a context of insecure funding and systemic barriers.<sup>102</sup>

In reality, current funding models and targets, demand pressures and broader systemic failures do not flexible, holistic, culturally sensitive, person-centred and strengths-based approaches to be consistently applied across services. People experiencing family violence in combination with experiences of systemic barriers and/or complex trauma require concentrated case management support periods to respond to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation, and experience further disadvantage in having their family violence identified and needs met.<sup>103</sup>

**Insight: Non-Aboriginal family violence services recognise the importance of child-centred practice, but approaches do not always centre the voices and rights of Aboriginal children and young people.**

Child-centred practice requires recognition that infants, children and young people are victim survivors, requiring their own risk assessments, risk management plans and case plan goals. While direct engagement with infants, children and young people is ideal for assessing and responding to their individual needs, the extent of engagement can vary due to factors including the nature of their parents' or carers' voluntary engagement with the service, the child's age and stage of development, and the service context and setting. Nevertheless, keeping

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<sup>101</sup> Safe and Equal (2022) Measuring Family Violence Demand Project Phase One Report.

<https://safeandequal.org.au/policy-and-advocacy/research-reports/>

<sup>102</sup> Safe and Equal (2022) Measuring Family Violence Demand Project Phase Two Report.

<https://safeandequal.org.au/policy-and-advocacy/research-reports/>

<sup>103</sup> Family Violence Implementation Monitor 2022, 'Additional barriers for certain cohorts',

<https://www.fvrim.vic.gov.au/monitoring-victorias-family-violence-reforms-early-identification-family-violence-within-universal-9>.

children’s rights and safety at the forefront of service provision is essential even where direct engagement is limited. Despite this recognition, non-Aboriginal family violence services reflected that practice approaches with all children and young people, particularly Aboriginal children and young people, need to be strengthened:

“We need to do a better job at working with children, hearing the voices of children and having an understanding of what their needs are instead of just relying on the parent so. We are doing more professional development and training with the real focus on upskilling our existing workforce in how to have those conversations and what that looks like. Generally, we're not great with working with children and I think and that probably impacts whether or not we're working with Aboriginal children well.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

Aboriginal women reflected on the lack of therapeutic healing programs to support families to heal and reconnect following the devastating impacts of family violence:

“There needs to be healing for the families. There's healing for the women, don't get me wrong. And there's counselling for the kids. I think there needs to be more for the actual entire family. Because in my position, I did my own healing. I've done a lot of healing and I'm still doing healing now. I think more family counselling for the entire family together would be a massive benefit. I think family counselling is a big thing because so many families are torn apart by [family violence].” – Aboriginal woman

### **3. Colluding with systemic harm**

**Insight: Non-Aboriginal services are working on unceded Aboriginal land, in places, spaces, and contexts that cause direct harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**

The past impacts on the present and future. Everything that happens in Victoria happens on unceded Aboriginal land, including responses to family and gender-based violence. The Victorian specialist family violence sector, with its origins in the grassroots women’s liberation movement, operates within the context of historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation:

“We work from the Queen Victorian Women Centre...white folks that come in and say, ‘Ohh I was born here,’ and mob had to give birth on the balcony because they weren't allowed into the hospital. There's a lot of harms associated for even the physical building, [which] in itself is not a safe space for folks to be.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“We have a number of massacre sites here...and up until about 45 years ago, Aboriginal people needed a permit to come in from the mission to town. So, a lot of trauma, that's still current.” – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

It is the responsibility of non-Aboriginal family violence services to critically reflect on where they may have historically or may currently be perpetuating colonising approaches and

discriminatory practices and proactively remove barriers to culturally responsive service provision.<sup>104</sup>

Some organisations played a direct role in the Stolen Generation and institutional child abuse:

“The [local non-Aboriginal family violence service provider] was religious didn't have a great past for First Nations people.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Insight: Aboriginal women often delay seeking help from services due to legitimate fears of child removal. While specialist family violence services have a history of a rights-based advocacy with statutory agencies to uphold the rights of women, this is not always reflected in the experiences of Aboriginal women accessing these services.**

Specialist family violence services have a history of political and social justice advocacy, which is distinct from that of statutory agencies. Rights-based advocacy has always been fundamental to specialist family violence practice, which includes undertaking individual and systemic advocacy to promote the rights, safety, access to resources and service entitlements of people experiencing family violence, to address perpetrator accountability, to prevent family violence and to progress social change.<sup>105</sup> The Yoorrook Justice Commission noted that family violence services can be seen as collaborating with Child Protection, and that Aboriginal women may be afraid to access the Orange Door due to the presence of Child FIRST in its service model.<sup>106</sup>

A staunch Aboriginal mum reflected that Aboriginal women should be able to get support, but the fear of child removal delays or prevents this:

“How can you expect any Aboriginal woman to walk into a place where the Department is? You might walk in with your kids, and walk out without your kids.” – Aboriginal woman

“Women should be able to contact the police or [non-Aboriginal family violence service] and know that they're going to be safe, that their children are going to still be with them no matter what. But we don't have that. We don't know that that's going to be the case. So many women won't report the violence, won't get the help because they're worried about keeping their kids together. And so many of us mums, we're only here because of our kids. If we don't have our kids, we got nothing.” – Aboriginal woman

We heard from many Aboriginal women and Aboriginal services that racism against Aboriginal families contributed to the risk of child removal, and that where services should be a source of safety, they can present additional risk that women must try to protect their children from.

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<sup>104</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

<sup>105</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

<sup>106</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023). Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems. <https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/>



When children are removed, women can internalise the same blame that the system projects on them:

“The odds are all stacked against us. We’re a Black family. We’re going through family violence. You want to get out, you want to get the help. But the first thing we always worry about is our babies. The minute we disclose the fact that we’re gone through family violence, the Department is notified. And that alone makes women not want to disclose...it took me six years to even tell...contact the police...I wanted out of the situation I was living in, but I was too scared because my babies. And in the end, I lost them anyway...held on for as long as I could and still couldn’t protect my children.” - Aboriginal woman

Aboriginal family violence services spoke about the significant level of advocacy they undertake alongside Aboriginal women when Child Protection is involved, to promote Aboriginal women’s and children’s rights and safety, access to resources and to change inequitable and discriminatory practices:

“Just the amount of advocacy work that we do on behalf of our women... Particularly for their self-determination. Have you invited them to the care team meeting space? Where is their voice in the decisions that are being made here? Usually it’s us advocating at the beginning because they have their voice and they know exactly what they need.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“We don’t wait for Child Protection to make contact, we reach out and introduce ourselves and we seek a care team meeting. We speak about family violence risk and the person using violence, challenging any deficit model... ensuring they are upholding what they are meant to be doing. Where there are conditions that are unrealistic we seek to get them reduced. Our case managers are very familiar with the CP manual, quoting their manual to them and sending them their own policies. - Aboriginal family violence service

“An example of successful advocacy was CP didn’t host AFLDM [Aboriginal family led decision making], which is part of their policy, they had skipped that step. We ensured it took place and obtained verbal and written apology. We advocate that the woman is invited into all meetings, that she’s present and informed, and part of decisions about her and her children.”- Aboriginal family violence service

Non-Aboriginal family violence services recognised the legitimate fear of Child Protection involvement and child removal. Non-Aboriginal service providers we heard from highlighted the importance of transparency in circumstances of making a notification. However, they were less confident speaking to how their services work to uphold the rights of Aboriginal families through involvement with Child Protection:

“I think we’re really uniquely placed to offer a lot of those sort of wrap around supports for families who might be struggling a bit. But before we notify, its transparency and actually doing the notification with the family is really important, especially for Aboriginal communities, rates of removal are absolutely horrific and there’s a lot of very well-founded fear and the threat having children removed is something that’s so often

used by perpetrators. Having those really transparent practices [is important] for that family and that woman throughout that process.” - non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

**Insight: There is often a reliance from non-Aboriginal services on police, which does not acknowledge of the historical and ongoing harms to Aboriginal communities caused by the justice and legal systems.**

The advocacy and activism of grass-roots feminist movements helped lead to the criminalisation of family violence under law. While this has increased awareness of family violence as a community issue, and for some women created pathways towards safety, many issues in the justice system remain. These include the racialised over-policing of black bodies, criminalisation and mis-identification as the person using violence - racial profiling by another name<sup>107</sup> - of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal deaths in custody.

As a result of racism and bias among police and service providers, Aboriginal women and gender diverse people are more likely to be racially profiled/misidentified as the person using violence simply because they are Aboriginal, particularly for Aboriginal people in a relationship with a non-Aboriginal person'.<sup>108</sup> This is reflected in police data which shows that in 2020, close to 80 per cent of Aboriginal women named as a respondent in police Family Violence Reports had been previously recorded as an affected family member.<sup>109</sup>

The over-reliance on the colonial justice system is a White feminist legacy from this activism that we continue to perpetuate today and has created a service system where some women feel policed. Many Aboriginal women have police attend family violence incidents, whether they call them or not. Of course, some Aboriginal women choose to call police, particularly when they have no other options.

We heard from Aboriginal women and Aboriginal services that there exists an over reliance on police and the justice system as a method of risk management. However, this fails to recognise the historical and current role of police in causing harm to communities:

“There’s this reliance on police in safety planning or police intervention [that] doesn’t acknowledge the history of police, and what it can mean for people if they are the one to phone police. Mainstream [services] wonder why [Aboriginal women] won’t get an IVO, but they’re scared to ring police...and the courts are not kind to the women. They need other ways that’s not calling police.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“I learnt as a teenager, if you get hurt you can’t go to the police, because you hurt other people in the community by going to the police.” – Aboriginal woman

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<sup>107</sup> Caulfield, L. (2024). ‘What Will It Take for a Reckoning? Family Violence and the Harms of Policing.’ in Gorrie, V. (ed.), *When Cops Are Criminals*. Scribe, p. 150.

<sup>108</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (2022). Policy Paper Addressing Coercive Control Without Criminalisation: Avoiding Blunt Tools that Fail Victim-Survivors, Victoria. pp. 26-27.

<sup>109</sup> Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2021). Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms. Accurate identification of the predominant Aggressor.

Police are not always a safe option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Palawa woman and Professor Kylie Cripps' research into the intimate partner homicides of 151 First Nations women revealed patterns of police responses that indicate systemic racism and discrimination. Professor Cripps identified profound system failings at the intersections of law, policy and police practice contributed to these women having lost their lives.<sup>110</sup>

We heard examples of misidentification by police of Aboriginal women as the predominant aggressor and police colluding with the person using violence. When this occurs, it's important for service providers to advocate on behalf of their clients, correct the information held by police and other agencies and to use complaints processes when appropriate:

“And that misidentification is a huge thing too with the police. That's massive - the police [see] this woman's going crazy and the bloke sitting there like, [he] is the nicest bloke like in the world.” - Aboriginal woman

“We requested a welfare check from police, and the client was arrested.” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

“We've had experiences of police colluding with the person using violence and trying to convince you to see the incident or circumstance the way they do. A woman went to police to seek help for family violence, they sent an officer to speak with the person using violence who told them she had mental health issues and scratched him. Person using violence used mental health diagnosis against her.... Police can be a big barrier, we have even supported people to go to the Commissioner. – Aboriginal family violence service

Some Aboriginal family violence services were clear that police business is not welcomed in their service, and if community felt they were colluding with police, this would be detrimental to their ability to support community:

“We won't call police to [our service], this is a safe space so police can pick someone up when they leave if they want. We won't get anyone through the door if we had that kinda stuff happening.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Police business isn't welcome here. They're not to come here looking for women, we're not here to do their business. They can't come here looking for a woman with a warrant.” – Aboriginal family violence service

Other Aboriginal family violence services described circumstances where an Aboriginal person requires medical attention or wishes to make a statement to police, and they will advocate to ensure the interaction is trauma informed:

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<sup>110</sup> Cripps, K. (2023). Indigenous women and intimate partner homicide in Australia: confronting the impunity of policing failures. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 35(3), 293–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2023.2205625>

“We’re really staunch with the police. We ask for a female and the Family Violence Police Unit. We’ll meet them at the door. We have the talk..., ‘this is how I expect you to be respectful’, we will be in the room for the interview and able to intervene and watch their tone. We show our women they can get a good response from police. Builds a bridge and might mean that the woman has the confidence to call police in the future.”  
– Aboriginal family violence service

Advocacy skills and knowledge in relation to police are essential for family violence practitioners. Practitioners need to understand distrust of police and look for alternatives when safety planning.

**Insight: Aboriginal services described experiences of some non-Aboriginal services failing to enact anti-oppressive and trauma informed practices and labelling Aboriginal people.**

The *Code of Practice* describes how anti-oppressive practice approaches are enacted when services acknowledge their responsibility to take a stand against injustice, and recognise clients as active agents of change who have their own strengths and strategies in response to their experiences of violence, oppression and discrimination. It requires a commitment to reflective practice at organisational and practitioner levels, to examine and disrupt the biases, beliefs and structures that perpetuate systemic power imbalances both externally and within the organisation itself.<sup>111</sup> Family violence services must be both trauma and violence-informed by accounting for the impact of traumatic events alongside the structural inequalities impacting on people’s lives.

We heard experiences from Aboriginal women and Aboriginal services of non-Aboriginal services failing to uphold anti-oppressive and trauma informed practice and using judgemental and oppressive language to describe the actions, or reactions, of Aboriginal women:

“The moment you raise your voice, you’re aggressive and they cut you off. But you’re just scared, upset, so much fear. Fear is the biggest thing. It’s not directed at them, it’s the fear factor. I got removed from refuge because I raised my voice when another lady told me to shut my kid up. My daughter was just a baby crying.” – Aboriginal woman

“Some workers [say]...‘she got aggressive’. Mainstream services are good at holding people to account for use of oppressive or blaming language about women. But when it comes to [talking about] Black women, they won’t challenge their language. Find other language to say what’s happening – she’s frustrated, upset, disappointed. We’re sick of hearing it labelled whatever suits their words.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Organisations talking about intergenerational trauma, but not really putting it into practice. For example, using disempowering language, judgmental or blaming, ‘they

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<sup>111</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic; Boucher, L. (2018). *Radical Visions, Structural Constraints: Challenges to Anti-Oppressive Practice in Feminist Organizations*. *Journal of Women and Social Work*, 33, 24-38; Dominelli, L. (1996). *Deprofessionalizing Social Work: Anti-Oppressive Practice, Competencies and Postmodernism*. *British Journal of Social Work* 26, 153-175.

behaved in this way' without trying to understand why they might have had a reaction.” –  
Aboriginal family violence service

We also heard that Aboriginal women are labelled and reduced to single-axis identity, which fails to recognise the whole person or the compounding systemic oppression Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing family violence can encounter when they also experience other forms of systemic disadvantage. Ultimately one-dimensional assumptions like this limit a service's ability to meet victim survivors' needs and uphold their rights:

“In terms of labelling women with issues, Aboriginal women are already subjected to being reduced to like a very one-dimensional identity in everyday life, and then in the system ... That's just reinforced, but they're just reduced to a list of issues.” – Aboriginal family violence service

We heard an example where assumptions were made, and labels applied about an Aboriginal woman's mental health based on White, colonial expectations of how people should act and engage:

“We had an Aboriginal client in refuge. ... some of the staff talked about how she would talk a lot about the birds... she kept going off topic, they wondered if it was mental health. It's very easy to go 'She's not coping and she's traumatised.' When they spoke to her about it, she told them it was because the birds on the fence were significant ... her totem and there was connection to that... because we don't work with [Aboriginal people] a lot, we don't know what we don't know.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

This example offers critical learnings around the importance of demonstrating humility and being curious to understand a person's experience before applying assumptions with potentially harmful impacts for the person.

**Insight: Regardless of whether service rules are intended to keep women safe, requirements that Aboriginal women disconnect from community are often unrealistic and may result in them leaving the service and potentially increasing the level of family violence risk.**

We heard that service rules or expectations that replicate colonial and paternalistic ideas of maintaining safety, such as leaving an area or cutting off contact with community, can create harm:

“When you go into refuge, you can't tell anybody where you are. That's hard. I think as a woman, we know our connections [and who our] is community. If I was just able to contact somebody from community, it would have helped. I think that should be left to us women to be able to make that decision on who is a safe person to be able to talk to. Because to be...told you've got to cut off all connections until after you're out of that service, it's very harmful.”- Aboriginal woman

“Another girl was put into a refuge somewhere a thousand miles away from where she actually lived, which I find a bit of a frustrating thing because I know women who have

said, 'I'm not going from up here. I'm not going to Melbourne, I'd rather stay with him than get sent to Melbourne.' - Aboriginal woman

Aboriginal women need community and are needed in community:

“For Aboriginal women not to be surrounded by community when you’re from community... They are brave enough to remove themselves from the situation and access a crisis refuge, to be totally out of community which is all they’ve know and into a white organisation, how hard is that. There’s another sense of loss, that’s where you find that clients do go back because they miss community or they’re needed in community.” – Aboriginal practitioner working in non-Aboriginal family violence service.

“It’s a White space and having the intersections of being a blackfella and also being criminalised...homelessness and mental health and AOD and so many other complexities that go along with it that, there's not a lot of safety in services... [This] becomes a barrier for mob to access those services. The solutions and the support that they need, they'll find within the community.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

In situations where women have returned to community or relationships where there is violence, there can be judgement and a lack of understanding from non-Aboriginal family violence services:

“It’s challenging to listen to staff saying, ‘she went back like even though there’s an intervention order, she went back over the weekend to the family home where it's not safe.’ It's getting them to understand that the client might be the head of that family and everybody relies on her. It's different for mob. You're not just a figure in one family, you’re part of an extended network, there are things that they do have to do, put themselves back into an unsafe space to be able to be there for family or for Sorry Business.” – Aboriginal practitioner working in non-Aboriginal family violence service

We heard that for people living in border towns, where services operate within the bounds or across colonially imposed state lines, Aboriginal people may be prevented from accessing services:

“We’re on a border town, and [the former mission] is in NSW. We’ve had people come off the mission and try to get help, but because they are in NSW no one supports them...‘out of area’. But there’s no such thing as Vic and NSW in community.” – Aboriginal family violence service

#### **4. Interrupting collaboration and coordination**

**Insight: Aboriginal services experience a ‘handballing’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from non-Aboriginal services.**

People experiencing family violence often find themselves in a tangled web of services and systems when they seek help. Family violence services have a central role in leading coordinated responses to reduce silos and minimise duplication between services in the response system; to provide seamless, connected and integrated support for adults and children experiencing family violence.

We heard from Aboriginal family violence services that Aboriginal people are often ‘handballed’ by non-Aboriginal family violence services. In doing so, non-Aboriginal services are not meeting their responsibilities under MARAM Framework, Case Management Program Requirements or the Crisis Response Model. Aboriginal services reflected that non-Aboriginal family violence services are not taking the time to explain or unpack the type of service and support that Aboriginal people need or want, or what they might expect from an Aboriginal service or a non-Aboriginal service:

“A lot of people just hear 'Aboriginal' and then panic when referring in clients. We have worked hard on doing secondary consults before we accept any referrals just to make sure [there is an] understanding [of] the support needs of the client, what supports we can provide. So, we find a lot of services do tend to panic and go 'this person's Aboriginal, we can't support them'.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“As an example, last week a woman was on a train coming to Melbourne and she mentioned she's Aboriginal, [the non-Aboriginal family violence service] didn't do any risk assessments, didn't do anything, but went ‘here's [Aboriginal family violence service]'s phone number please call’. So, we had a woman on a train coming from [regional town]. No accommodation, no supports. Who made one phone call, they heard she's Aboriginal [and] went ‘okay not us’.” - Aboriginal family violence service

“Mainstream organisations tend to get a black face and it's, ‘go to [local ACCO]’. They come in, do an intake and then just handball it.... Mainstream not taking enough time to do their assessments.” Aboriginal family violence service

“When [non-Aboriginal services] handball a little too quick rather than giving [the Aboriginal person] options. They see an Aboriginal person and are so quick to send them to an Aboriginal service rather than taking time to understand what they want and need, and if this is the best service for that? Stop panicking when Aboriginal people walk in. Try and provide service like anyone else... [don't] put them in the too hard basket.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“What I appreciate with non-Aboriginal services is when they really take the time to actually ask the woman, do they want an Aboriginal specific services or a mainstream service? [Rather than] just assuming that based on an identity factor.” – Aboriginal family violence service

**Insight: At times, a lack of facilitated referral and handover between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence service creates challenges for providing adequate support and ultimately impacts the Aboriginal person’s support and safety.**

Coordinated responses are particularly important for supporting Aboriginal adults and children who may face intersecting oppressions. This involves removing barriers that may be obstructing

an inclusive and equitable service response and ensuring that they do not fall through systemic gaps and receive holistic support.<sup>112</sup>

We heard that sometimes when Aboriginal family violence services receive or facilitate referrals, they are not supported by a handover conversation or the ability to speak to the previous worker if they have other questions or need further information:

“When [non-Aboriginal family violence service] or Orange Door close, they'll send through the MARAM and when you try to speak to a worker it's kind of like, ‘What? They're closed now.’ You can't really have those conversations sometimes... It's often just hard to actually get in contact with the worker or understand who the worker was.”  
– Aboriginal family violence service

“It's pretty rare that mainstream services will reach out and have those yarns, even though it would make it a lot better for the woman's experience. They sometimes make it difficult for you to access information from them. If a woman wants to come through to us, there's not as much voluntarily sharing information or risk assessment, sometimes [it's] pretty hard to access those... Sometimes it's The Orange Door. Sometimes, it's [non-Aboriginal family violence service] and they're like, ‘they aren't engaged anymore.’...it can be pretty hard to chase that information up.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“You get the generic response, ‘thank you for your referrals.’ I don't know if I've ever really had that much of a response like, ‘yes, this has been received, this is the case manager’. I never have a name, a face or contact details, how to even reach out and try and double check that the referral's being picked up. I understand it streamlines their processes, but it definitely does create a bit of a gap...something could get missed easily.” – Aboriginal family violence service

While it may be driven by demand and capacity pressures, the reluctance or inability to facilitate handover is incredibly challenging for the service receiving the referral and ultimately impacts on the quality of support for the person experiencing family violence. Having an opportunity to connect with the other service or worker will increase understanding of the situation and give the person experiencing family violence opportunity to get to know the service. When this happens, the workers also have increased confidence in the new service and new worker's ability to support the Aboriginal person:

“Handovers and warm referrals and conversations, maybe like a week transition period, time for the woman to get adjusted with the services and you're confident that you can get more of an understanding around family context and more of an overall picture. – Aboriginal family violence service

“This lady [from non-Aboriginal service] was straight on the ball which was great. She was easy going to get along with and that was really good. I felt that I had a yarn to the

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<sup>112</sup>Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p4



lady that was actually going to work with [the Aboriginal woman]. She was quite good. We had that yarn and she did what she said she would do”. – Aboriginal family violence service

**Insight: For coordinated and collaborative responses to be realised, they need to be underpinned by two-way relationships, trust, good will and accountability. Aboriginal family violence services are not adequately resourced to respond to secondary consultations.**

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are under increasing demand to provide consultation and undertake cultural capacity-building work without appropriate remuneration for the time and expertise this required.<sup>113</sup> Aboriginal services are also not adequately resourced to respond to secondary consultation requests. For some Aboriginal services, where this does occur is where there are existing relationships or shared clients:

“We aren’t resourced for secondary consultation, so we don’t really advertise it as we wouldn’t necessarily be able to respond. Where it does currently happen is where there’s existing relationships, such as through care teams. We hear so much fear from non-Aboriginal services of adding to cultural load.” – Aboriginal family violence service

We heard a recognition from some non-Aboriginal family violence services that their practice could be strengthened by seeking secondary consultation more often. We also heard a fear of requesting secondary consultations contributing to extractive power dynamics:

“Our team could do better at reaching out for secondary consults, [we] need cultural shift to do this. We do refer clients if they’ve requested ACCO services. But otherwise, [we] don’t seek many secondary consults.” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

“It’s not a First Nations person’s job to educate us and we need to do that work ourselves. I’m thinking about secondary consultation and trying to work collaboratively with ACCOs...I guess it is a little bit transactional, we’re often needing to get support from them.” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

“One of the worries that we might have is gathering information without much return for Aboriginal community groups. Which I don’t know if that’s just an unfounded kind of fear. I think building that relationship for us would be really awesome.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

Aboriginal family violence services recognised this fear but see a difference between having their knowledge extracted or exploited, and operating within their role as family violence practitioners:

“I understand the fear of being extractive... ‘cause with educating people a lot of [Aboriginal] people feel frustrated or offended, feeling of people being extractive for their information. [But] when it comes to social services, our specific role is providing

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<sup>113</sup> Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2022) Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention. ISBN: 978-0-6454873-2-9 (PDF/online)

knowledge relevant for the support. The woman is at the forefront, more than anything else.” – Aboriginal family violence service

We heard examples where non-Aboriginal family violence services sought secondary consultation or co-case management, but at times establishing contact was difficult or by the time the service was able to respond, circumstances had changed:

“We do our best to contact local ACCOs. We have had some really successful secondary consults that have broadened our thinking around scenarios. Sometimes establishing contact is difficult. We always attempt to, but it depends on whether or not we're able to connect.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

“When we have reached out to others for secondary consults, sometimes we don't hear back from them at all or when we do hear back from them...unfortunately the situation has changed, or the client has moved on, so we've had to proceed without that secondary consult. But that doesn't mean that we...stop reaching out.” – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

“When we want to co-case manage and we send the referral through [to an ACCO]...sometimes by the time that we hear about the service that could have supported as well, our client might be at the end of their journey” – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

Some non-Aboriginal family violence services rely on The Orange Door for this secondary consultation support:

“From a secondary consultation perspective, we do tend to rely quite a bit on the Local Orange Door. I am trying to expand a little bit more and see how we can collaborate more with other ACCOs in the area” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

Where non-Aboriginal family violence services have sought secondary consultation, this was valued by the Aboriginal family violence service:

“I had a good one with [non-Aboriginal family violence service] the other day...they asked how they can make it more culturally safe and better for the Aboriginal woman and the type of supports and plans they can put in place for that woman.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“We find a lot of services do tend to panic, ‘this person's Aboriginal, we can't support them'. Sometimes just even us having the conversation, 'now you've already done all this amazing work and you are a specialist family violence service.' I think people don't realise how well they're actually doing.” – Aboriginal family violence service

We heard examples of co-location being beneficial to support relationship building, knowledge exchange and strengthen practice:

“Previously we did have a co-located case manager with the local ACCO...it was a formalised partnership where they were able to not only case manage our clients, but support our secondary consultation and support that day-to-day practice. It was really

beneficial, so I hope we can work towards doing something like that again.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service.

**Insight: Aboriginal family violence services can experience extractive dynamics and have their expertise undermined by non-Aboriginal family violence services.**

Despite some non-Aboriginal services seeking collaborations with Aboriginal services, Aboriginal services shared examples where they received extractive requests for their involvement or support, without the presence of genuine relationships:

“When we started, I reached out to the services that our workers would need to work with for a yarn. I don’t know if it’s [our service], or blackfella’s don’t have the respect...could be just me. [Or] they’ll invite you to a meeting just to invite you. It’s tokenistic. I get that feeling and that shift that blackfellas get. We just want to get on with the business of supporting women. We don’t want to be dealing with this shit.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“It’s your NAIDOC day...organise it yourself.... You want to take a photo of me for 16 Days...yet we haven’t spoken all year.” – Aboriginal family violence service

Aboriginal services shared experiences of their voice and expertise not being valued or being actively undermined or challenged. White, colonial perspectives and policies related to Child Protection and police continue to be centred over the knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal people.

“Where we have knowledge, it might not be given the value that it deserves. There is pushback from time to time...you make a point about the importance of cultural connections and someone will say, ‘yes, but you have to put the risk of the children at the forefront’. We work at an ACCO and ultimately don’t want kids being in out of home care, but of course we don’t want kids in unsafe places. When someone says something like that, that shows you that the lens they’re viewing what you’re saying [through].” - Aboriginal family violence service

Where non-Aboriginal services do seek the input of Aboriginal services, the requests often fail to recognise the full range of expertise they have to offer, so Aboriginal people will stop offering it or step back from spaces all together:

“It’s exhausting. Why do we constantly have to be fighting. We’re sick and tired of not being respected or treated on the same level. You want to talk about flags and I want to talk about risk and safety of Aboriginal women. We’re experts in that.... You don’t occupy spaces where you aren’t welcome.” - Aboriginal family violence service

“When I first started in this role, I tried to contribute outside of the Aboriginal space...case studies and stuff like that. But people would look at me like I had three heads and didn’t wanna hear it. So now, often in these long meetings I’ll just have my camera off, do what I’ve gotta do. As soon as I hear my name, or ‘Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander’ I know they’re about to want to talk to me.” – Aboriginal family violence service

In other examples, Aboriginal people shared experiences of their advice being sought and then ignored:

“Run things by me, sure. If I tell you, ‘don't go down that road because there's lots of potholes and at the end there's a waterfall with no fence’. I told you I probably wouldn't go that way. There's a paved road over there. And you decide to drive that way...I'll directly say I'm very uncomfortable with that.” - Aboriginal practitioner in a non-Aboriginal service

Aboriginal people shared experiences of White people within non-Aboriginal services tone policing and enacting White innocence and White fragility. This is contrasted against portrayals of black rage and acts to sustain White supremacy.<sup>114</sup> The stereotype of ‘angry black women’ assigns power while simultaneously taking it away.<sup>115</sup> Women of colour experience this racist labelling because of intersecting, deep-rooted forces operating within (un)conscious racism.<sup>116</sup>

“I talk about White fragility with a White social worker friend, we can talk about it, she gets it. But other whitefella's wouldn't want to hear it from me. I can't use those academic words, but you can.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“We're too loud and too proud.... I'm not yelling, you're not listening. Can't talk because can't be a prim and proper White woman, yet they are apparently trauma informed. We're not going to go places where we are unsafe. With a room full of black women, we can talk at length, laugh, cry...where there's anger, we know where it's directed. – Aboriginal family violence service

A non-Aboriginal family violence service shared that in their experience, racist assumptions are made about why an Aboriginal service might not be coming into a space:

“Some of the ACCOs might not regularly turn up for certain meetings and people nitter-natter instead of asking, ‘is there something stopping you from coming to the meeting?’ And at times, there actually has been, we've sent incorrect links or there's some [other] reasons for it. It can be unintentionally racist, to say ‘ohh the ACCOs haven't turned up again’. Whereas, I think ‘no, we should be reaching out saying we really want you present. Is there something stopping you? Is this a culturally safe environment?’” – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service.

Despite this, Aboriginal people continue to resist, advocate and show up to create change for their communities:

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<sup>114</sup> Watego, C (2021). Always bet on Black (Power). Meanjin. <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/always-bet-on-black-power/>

<sup>115</sup> Kent, J. (2021). Scapegoating and the ‘angry black woman’. Group Analysis, 54(3), 354-371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316421992300>

<sup>116</sup> Kent, J. (2021). Scapegoating and the ‘angry black woman’. Group Analysis, 54(3), 354-371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316421992300>

“[For] ACCOs...giving [non-Aboriginal services] time and wanting to contribute is because we want to be at the table, like we want our voices heard and we want to make a difference for the women in our communities.” – *Aboriginal family violence service*

**Insight: Many non-Aboriginal services recognise the critical importance of having strong relationships with Aboriginal services, but are unsure how to build and maintain reciprocal relationships that can withstand staffing changes.**

We heard that non-Aboriginal family violence services feel nervous and unsure about how build relationships with Aboriginal services, they shared worries that it might be extractive, might not benefit the Aboriginal organisation or might take up space that it shouldn't:

“We are looking to build relationships with Aboriginal services and want to make sure we are offering things in the region that's of value to them...reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship, offering something of value or need...but not super confident how to negotiate that, so looking for advice or insights for building those relationships. Feeling nervous about doing something wrong and accidentally damaging a relationship.... Feel unskilled in this area, and an eager, happy sponge.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“Definitely fostering relationships with all the different ACCOs...sometimes I'm unsure about different sort of spaces and community we should be involved with and what's not our space?” - non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

Relationships must be built on Aboriginal peoples' terms and within their timelines. Non-Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal family violence services should not begin dialogue with preconceived ideas of what an outcome might be or with deadlines. Non-Aboriginal services must be prepared for these conversations to be uncomfortable, to be challenged and through them to be radically changed.<sup>117</sup> Investing in relationships requires creating the time, being patient and not rushing the process:

“We want to form meaningful connections that are not transactional. How do you do that? I guess you've got to, if you want it to be meaningful, you've gotta set aside the time. The big theme for us is allocating the time and not rushing the process and having patience.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services described staffing changes impacting inter-organisational relationships and collaborations. We heard examples of (re)building relationships through coming together to talk and through offering combined training:

“It went to the wayside. Before, four, five years ago, we had a great connection. Again, new managers come in then the relationship just went to side. The manager just didn't know how it all worked, but we're trying to work on it. We still do meetings, we're going

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<sup>117</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin' up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism*. University of Queensland Press.; Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). *Decolonization is not a metaphor*.

to sit down and chat. And when we do training...I open it up to all services, non-Aboriginal, [to] come in and listen to an Aboriginal trainer.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“One challenge that I have had has been where I've had a really great working relationship with somebody at an ACCO. It was two-way because they would send a client to [our service], know they could call anytime, and if there was a vacancy they'd be prioritised. On the other side, I could have secondary consults. But then they left the organisation and so did their colleague who I would speak to as well, and now there's all these new people and I don't know them, and they don't know me. If we have personal working relationships with the person rather than just on a paper level, that's when it works. When we all know we're trying to do the right thing for the people we work alongside.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

Services working in regional areas reported benefits of working in a small town for relationships:

“We've got [local ACCO] who's literally next door.... We are part of lots of different governance groups generally and The Orange Door. We all attend allocation. When you're in a small town, you've made those connections. It can be quite easy to mosey into a different area of the sector, but keep those relationships.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

We heard that having long term inter-organisational relationships and experience working together is protective against relationship breakdown and can at times weather staffing changes:

“Us and team at [local non-Aboriginal family violence service] work well. It helps having those six or seven years where we've been in the game as well.... They've had a few staff turnover, sort of lose some of those connections, but it's still pretty good.” – Aboriginal family violence service

“Time is what strengthened the relationship, but at the first it was probably they just wanted to refer someone here and we would have a laugh or connect with people, sometimes I think it's something simple.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Insight: Aboriginal family violence services have inconsistent experiences accessing resources managed by non-Aboriginal family violence services, in particular Personal Safety Initiative packages.**

Specialist family violence services have a leadership role in coordinated responses to people experiencing family violence, as per their responsibilities under the MARAM Framework.<sup>118</sup> They promote the rights of people experiencing family violence and provide dedicated resources to address their safety and support needs. A manager in non-Aboriginal family violence services highlighted their service's responsibility to ensure equitable access to the region's resources:

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<sup>118</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). MARAM Practice Guides: Responsibility 8: Comprehensive Risk Management. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

“We are stewards of a lot of the region’s resources...not owners of them.... We have a responsibility to ensure access to them.” – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

Some Aboriginal family violence services shared positive examples from their region of accessing PSI and the response being supportive and timely:

“The PSI co-ordinator, they're really good honestly, I can't fault them and they couldn't be any more supportive. I know there's been a couple that they might not necessarily fit well with what they're allowed to fund, and so they'll offer suggestions...‘we can't fund that, but we could pay for X and then they could use that money for that’. They are really responsive to us.... I've had one sent in the morning and give it half an hour and they get back saying ‘I'm looking at it. This is what else we need.’ they'll be doing everything they can to tell us what we need.”–Aboriginal family violence service

Both the Flexible Support Package (FSP) and Personal Safety Initiative (PSI) guidelines outline that responses provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be “culturally responsive and safe, recognising Aboriginal understanding of family violence, and rights to self-determination and self-management, and take account of their experiences of colonisation, systemic violence and discrimination and recognise the ongoing and present-day impacts of historical events, policies and practices.”<sup>119</sup>

According to the FSP Guidelines, in practice and considering Aboriginal whole-of-family approaches, the person using violence can still be residing with the person experiencing violence.<sup>120</sup> According to the PSI Guidelines, generally before a PSI response is implemented a family violence intervention order (FVIO) should be sought to exclude the person using violence from the property. Importantly, according to these guidelines and considering experiences of colonisation, systemic violence and discrimination, where a risk assessment has indicated that there are barriers to accessing a FVIO, or it could place the person at further risk, the PSI Coordinator should consider each situation on a case-by-case basis.<sup>121</sup>

Despite the expectation of reviewing on a case-by-case basis, Aboriginal family violence services described receiving pushback to their applications on behalf of Aboriginal clients, especially if there is no FVIO in place or where the person using violence is not an intimate partner.

“We find a lot of the time with PSI, if there's no IVO, while it's in their guidelines that they need to understand Aboriginal context around that, we still have to heavily advocate with the coordinators around why there's no IVO, especially if it's their child that's using violence.” – Aboriginal family violence service

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<sup>119</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). Personal Safety Initiative Operational Guidelines. p14; Family Safety Victoria (2024). Program Requirements for the delivery of family violence flexible support packages. State of Victoria p9.

<sup>120</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2024). Program Requirements for the delivery of family violence flexible support packages. State of Victoria. p14.

<sup>121</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019) Personal Safety Initiative Operational Guidelines. State of Victoria. p17 <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/personal-safety-initiative-operational-guidelines>

“In doing PSI there is sometimes a lack of understanding of community violence and violence that’s not intimate partner violence, advocating for PSI where there are multiple PUVs and sometimes then they’re not getting accepted. It’s really frustrating.” - Aboriginal family violence service

The statewide implementation of the Personal Safety Initiative aims to strengthen the quality of personal safety, security and technology responses delivered in Victoria.<sup>122</sup>As of October 2024, there are no PSI providers embedded within an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation. Instead, Aboriginal family violence services are required to apply on behalf of their clients through a non-Aboriginal PSI provider and sometimes encounter challenges to their expert assessment. Many Aboriginal family violence services highlighted inconsistent responses when accessing PSI for their clients across regions. Some Aboriginal services had experienced challenges in advocating for self-determination and experienced condescending questioning:

“We have mixed experiences with PSI coordinators across the regions. Some that are really hard to work with and make you jump through hoops [saying] ‘the camera will be too expensive, are you sure that’s wise?’ Or experience of condescending questions [like] ‘do you think that’s in the best interests of the client?’ – not done in a way to unpack or tease out further information. It’s done to say they know better than you. Whereas some go above and beyond to help.” – Aboriginal family violence service

This contrasts with Flexible Support Packages, in which the guidelines state: “FSP applications for Aboriginal victim survivors should be submitted to an ACCO FSP provider for a culturally safe assessment of the package, unless there is an expressed preference of the victim survivor to be referred to a mainstream FSP provider.”<sup>123</sup> This recognises the family violence and cultural expertise of ACCOs as fundamental to the assessment of suitability of a package. Requiring ACCOs that hold FSP to then seek PSI endorsement from non-Aboriginal services undermines the culturally safe assessment undertaken by ACCOs.

“I find it almost redundant that we have to go through a PSI coordinator for approval when we’ve already spoken to our manager who understands the risks for this woman and especially understanding the cultural safety.” - Aboriginal family violence service

As of June 2024, Family Safety Victoria (FSV) advised the Flexible Support Packages Providers Forum that funding for a Statewide Aboriginal PSI Coordinator role has been endorsed by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services in May 2024 and the process for the design and implementation of this role in 2024-2025 is being finalised. FSV also indicated that they are aiming to review the PSI and FSP Guidelines in the next 18 months.

**Insight: Some Aboriginal services working with men using violence report resistance from some non-Aboriginal services, in response to information sharing requests.**

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<sup>122</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019) Personal Safety Initiative Operational Guidelines. State of Victoria. p17 <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/personal-safety-initiative-operational-guidelines>

<sup>123</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019) Program Requirements for the delivery of family violence flexible support packages. State of Victoria <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/program-requirements-delivery-family-violence-flexible-support-packages>



Information sharing and coordinated responses are an important enabler of accountability for people using violence (PUV). The *Code of Practice* outlines that any action undertaken by family violence services to promote PUV accountability must prioritise the person experiencing family violence's safety, consent and decision-making (in accordance with privacy and information sharing legislation) to prevent the exacerbation of risk and further harm.<sup>124</sup> Where the person using violence is engaged with a behaviour change program, the family members experiencing violence are involved in decision-making about how a Family Safety Contact worker and other specialist practitioners should coordinate their responses and communications. Information sharing between services is a central component of the MARAM Framework and a tool to support collaborative practice. Sharing risk assessment information at the point of referral is fundamental to enabling each service to understand the level and nature of the risk of family violence harm and to prevent people experiencing violence from having to provide the same information multiple times. When supporting Aboriginal women, sharing risk assessment information enables the service provider and practitioner that receives the referral to build rapport and trust slowly, without the need to elicit a lot of additional information.

We heard that Aboriginal services and programs working with men using violence sometimes experience resistance to sharing relevant information from non-Aboriginal services working with victim survivors.

“There's definitely hesitance to share with us in relation to perpetrators. Occasionally we'll get some pushback in relation to information that we might be requesting. Particularly if you get a little bit old school view. It's vastly improved compared to what it was prior to the legislation coming in but we do come across some obstacles when we're trying to manage some risk.” – Aboriginal family violence service working with men using violence

“We're not getting all the info from The Orange Door, [we] don't always get the comprehensive risk assessment. We need to have the full picture. We need to make big decisions. Is he ready for group? We don't know if he's using weapons? We're doing the work for the safety of women and children and work to build that trust.” – Aboriginal family violence service working with men using violence

As a key referral service that is most often the first to undertake a risk assessment following an incident of family violence, The Orange Door is the source of a significant proportion of referrals to specialist family violence services and risk assessment information would be a standard expectation at the point of these referrals. A failure by the Orange Door to provide this information not only puts an impost on the person experiencing violence who must tell their story again to someone new, but also decreases the capacity of the service provider receiving the referral to accurately assess the level of risk and assist the client to reduce that risk level.

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<sup>124</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p5

## 5. Weakening workforce capability and sustainability

**Insight: Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in non-Aboriginal family violence services experience colonial load and could be better supported by their organisations.**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in the family violence sector hold valuable knowledge and skills and are powerful advocates and agents of change. The physical safety, security and health and wellbeing of the specialist family violence workforce is essential for enabling sustainability.<sup>125</sup>

We heard from Aboriginal practitioners and leaders that efforts to create a culturally welcoming environment within non-Aboriginal family violence services, increase awareness and access to resources, and engage with community events often fall to Aboriginal staff:

“Anything that has changed [at the organisation] for the women that come into the organisation is...my doing. I've created a wall in the dining room with what's on, what's happening at [ACCO], courses, events, yarning circles.... Walk down the road...for the smoking ceremony...encouraging non-Aboriginal staff members to go along as well.” – Aboriginal practitioner in non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

“For Aboriginal people working those roles, they are valuable and their opinions are valuable. It's a massive load for them as well. It becomes every stupid little thing to do with culture is suddenly you're problem...even when you have one Aboriginal person who works in a non-Aboriginal organisation...but all of us are still constrained by our own organisational culture and demands and guidelines, so it still limits the ability for somebody to stick within their practices”. – Aboriginal family violence service

While some non-Aboriginal services we heard from were conscious of the additional pressure on Aboriginal staff to educate non-Aboriginal colleagues, a cultural load persists for Aboriginal staff. Another way of understanding this is as colonial load,<sup>126</sup> a term which positions and makes visible the source of the burden:

“We are mindful to ensure Aboriginal Staff are not expected to educate or answer all the questions.” - Non-Aboriginal family violence service

“We call it a cultural load, [if] you're the only Aboriginal worker in that space, all the cultural load is on you, instead of the organisation looking inwards themselves, it's like 'well here's the answer we've got the Aboriginal worker'.” – Aboriginal family violence service

We heard a recognition from non-Aboriginal family violence services of the limitations of their structures, policies, procedures and supervision:

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<sup>125</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p9

<sup>126</sup> Weenthunga Health Network. (2023) November eNews: Reframing Cultural Load.  
<https://mailchi.mp/a7cf6d02dabc/nov-eneews30112023>

“I supervise a staff member who's Aboriginal.... [I've] been very clear that if you need cultural supervision, that is absolutely your right, because I'm not gonna be able to provide that.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

“I think that the way that we operate now and the fact that the cultural load for Aboriginal community is so extreme.... I don't know whether our organisational structures have the sophistication to be able to work with Aboriginal employees to the extent required. We demonstrate a very White, mainstream processes and procedures.” Non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services

This is consistent with the Best Practice Supervision Guidelines, developed by Family Safety Victoria in collaboration with the sector, which recognises that being the only Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander practitioner in an organisation can be challenging and isolating. It can create cultural load (or colonial load) with the expectation to carry it alone. There can be a feeling of responsibility to accurately represent the community. It can also involve experiences of racist or unintentional cultural ignorance or cultural assumptions by other non-Aboriginal team members.<sup>127</sup>

Aboriginal practitioners shared experiences of needing time away from work for caring and community responsibilities, and ultimately being financially disadvantaged due to leave provisions not adequately recognising this:

“You only get X number of days and don't get any extra days if attending Sorry Business. That would just come out of annual leave or personal leave. Last week I had to take two days off to be a carer. I thought maybe it wouldn't come out of personal leave. If I didn't have personal leave, it would have come out of my annual leave. That sucks, you're out of pocket because you're helping community.” – Aboriginal practitioner working in non-Aboriginal family violence service

Aboriginal practitioners identify the value of coming together in a facilitated space with other Aboriginal people working in non-Aboriginal services for a sense of solidarity and support:

“Coming together [with other Aboriginal practitioners would provide] a safe space to share how I feel, without judgement, that could be our peer supervision. That would be just gold. It would be so valuable. That's exactly what the sector needs”. – Aboriginal practitioner working in non-Aboriginal family violence service

Supervision is central to developing and sustaining family violence workforces and can allow exploration of how to embed cultural safety – in line with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework – and provide First Nations practitioners with support to address colonial the load.<sup>128</sup> The Best Practice Supervision Guidelines can be applied to inform policy development and guidance to organisations on cultural safety needs of the Aboriginal

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<sup>127</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2024). Best Practice Supervision Guidelines: Family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing. Victorian Government. Melbourne. <https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines>

<sup>128</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2023). Best Practice Supervision Information Sheets. <https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-information-sheets>

workforce in non-Aboriginal services and being effective supervisors, cultural load, cultural empowerment.<sup>129</sup> Aboriginal practitioners need to have the additional load recognised and respected. Culturally safe supervision can create spaces to reflect on this role and its impact. Importantly, Cultural meaning and practices are different from non-Aboriginal norms and belief systems. As a result, non-Aboriginal services need to recognise that some elements of cultural empowerment and connection can only be shared between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>130</sup>

**Insight: Some non-Aboriginal service providers allow worries about doing the wrong thing to impede actions. Ultimately, it is Aboriginal communities that bear the burden of service providers' lack of confidence.**

We heard that people working in non-Aboriginal family violence services worry that they will make a mistake or miss something when it comes to supporting Aboriginal people experiencing family violence:

“From what I can see from people in my team, we are often worried about not doing the right thing, not on purpose, but maybe saying something or taking a direction and not realising that it wasn't a properly considered.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

“I think that for the practitioners, they are always wondering ‘am I providing the right level of service? Did I miss something from a culturally appropriate support that I could have provided?’” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

While having humility and not assuming you know everything is important, Aboriginal services remind us that ultimately it is Aboriginal communities that will pay the price of non-Aboriginal services' lack of confidence or competence:

“I get the fear around it. People were so scared of saying and doing the wrong thing. But that's not my problem and it's not our community's problem. Do whatever the hell you gotta do to train yourself up because our community shouldn't have to be the ones that are paying for your lack of confidence in this space.” - Aboriginal family violence service

We heard that recognising gaps in knowledge or practice, and seeking to address them, is critical:

“Remind them, never be embarrassed.... ‘Don't be shamed. Be game.’ Be game to show what you don't know. Because then you're just ignorant at that point. If you show what you don't know and you don't fix it, then you're arrogant.” – Aboriginal practitioner in a non-Aboriginal service.

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<sup>129</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2024). Best Practice Supervision Guidelines: Family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing. Victorian Government. Melbourne.  
<https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines>

<sup>130</sup> Western Sydney Aboriginal Women's Leadership Program (2013). Understanding the importance of cultural supervision and support for Aboriginal workers.  
[https://leadpda.org.au/documents/leadpda\\_rap\\_supervisionsupportaboriginalworkers.pdf](https://leadpda.org.au/documents/leadpda_rap_supervisionsupportaboriginalworkers.pdf)

**Insight: There is a lack of Aboriginal-led training tailored for the diverse needs of the specialist family violence sector workforce. For training to result in meaningful and sustainable change, it must be reflected and embedded in policy, practice guidance, processes, and position descriptions.**

The *Code of Practice* outlines the expectation that professional development should include cultural safety training provided by Aboriginal organisations, that addresses the intersection between family violence and the historic and ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal families and communities.<sup>131</sup> We heard that the training available to practitioners in The Orange Door is valuable, but it isn't accessible to the broader specialist family violence sector:

“Training [is] delivered to The Orange Door as part of Strengthening Cultural Safety Project and the result of a recommendation from the VAGO report. That training is amazing – it's Elder led, it's deep training and truth-telling. We need training like this for the whole system.” - non-Aboriginal family violence service

We heard the importance of gaining understanding grounded in the local context and ensuring the training is provided by Aboriginal organisations with family violence knowledge:

“Last week we completed cultural awareness training that was facilitated by our local ACCO which was really beautiful, to bring in that local cultural wisdom, but also how we can always do better working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as well, and we learned a lot more about the history for our local area.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“Where and who is the training coming from? You need training more than once and it needs to be different for different organisations. Cultural awareness in a family violence setting is different to cultural awareness in education settings. You need the right mob to do the training” – Aboriginal woman

Of course, training alone will not drive the sustained change that is required to improve services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Training introduces new knowledge and ideas, but to embed this learning into practice it must be supported by operational tools such as documented policies, processes, procedures, position descriptions and inclusion in reflective practice and supervision processes.

“I think a lot of workers too, they need to do cultural training. But a lot of organisations do cultural training via a book or jump online for three hours. And it's like you have no idea and still they're so closed.” – Aboriginal woman

“The only way it will change, it's not by cultural awareness training that's three hours.... What about 20 years later? Not just about doing one training...good, done. But they need to really connect with it, feel it. People might go into it with all the right thoughts and education...but structures, jobs, the bureaucracy, push how they work into a box.

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<sup>131</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic

To move up in an agency, you should have to demonstrate in real ways cultural competency in everyday work and practice.” – Aboriginal family violence service

This supports the findings of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor<sup>132</sup> that highlighted the need to build the capacity of the non-Aboriginal family violence workforce’s ability to engage in a culturally safe way with Aboriginal clients with experiences of family violence, outlining that “mainstream organisations need to commit to further concrete actions to progress cultural capability building within their organisation as part of the next Dhelk Dja action plan.”<sup>133</sup> The report identified that this has not happened in a consistent and embedded way and there needs to be increased responsibility to work appropriately with the Aboriginal community, “running a single cultural awareness training session isn’t enough – there needs to be ongoing development and commitment to culturally safe workplaces and services.”<sup>134</sup>

We heard that training and capacity building offerings need to explore the intersections of colonisation and be tailored for different levels of knowledge, including practitioners earlier in their learning journey, and offerings for more experienced practitioners to continue to build on their understandings.

“I think that they all need training on how to work properly. And I don't think it's just with Aboriginal people. It's with everybody...people from different communities, with disabilities, LGBTQT, and all that. Because Aboriginal people have disability too. The other day they were talking about intersectionality. And I went, ‘Oh, that's a big word, isn't it, that everyone throws around’, no one does it.” – Aboriginal woman

“Lots of cultural competency training is pretty basic and more of a refresher for staff that bring more experience.... It would be beneficial to have access to training that caters for different levels.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

“[We need] tailored training to meet the diverse needs of staff, including those who are newer arrivals to Australia to build their knowledge and understanding.... With a focus on colonisation, trauma-informed care and intersectionality. Resources, training programs, or communities of practice addressing intersections of disability and colonisation, AOD and colonisation, LGBTIQ+ experiences and colonisation and tailored opportunities that allow experienced practitioners to build on their knowledge base and continue the learning to apply to their practice.” – non-Aboriginal family violence service.

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<sup>132</sup> The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (the Monitor) was formally established in 2017 as an independent statutory officer after the Royal Commission into Family Violence released its report in 2016. The role is responsible for monitoring and reviewing how the government and its agencies deliver the family violence reforms as outlined in its 10-year implementation plan Ending Family Violence: Victoria’s Plan for Change.

<sup>133</sup> Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2022) Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention. ISBN: 978-0-6454873-2-9 (PDF/online)

<sup>134</sup> Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2022). Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention. ISBN: 978-0-6454873-2-9 (PDF/online)

## 6. Lacking accountability

**Insight: To Aboriginal women and Aboriginal services, accountability means being open to feedback, acknowledging mistakes, and importantly, demonstrating or describing how change will be achieved. Often, Aboriginal services and communities do not see this demonstrated by non-Aboriginal family violence services.**

The governance processes and leadership role of specialist family violence services must be accountable to people who have experiencing family violence. This is part of the ongoing development of specialist family violence praxis, which must always be informed by people who have experienced family violence’s own voices, lived experiences, knowledge and expertise.<sup>135</sup>

Reactions that centre the non-Aboriginal service or practitioner’s own feelings and responses of White fragility to feedback from Aboriginal services or people get in the way of genuine reflection and accountability:

“Be open to having an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person being able to say ‘that actually offends me’. [It] doesn’t mean I dislike you. But I have the right in our spaces to be able to say ‘that’s not OK’, without you getting all upset.” – Aboriginal family violence service

Mistakes or actions will be made and will damage trust and relationships. This is the nature of relationships and of service provision. But when mistakes are made, it is critical to own this and seek to repair the relationships, whether with another service or with an Aboriginal person accessing your service:

“We own our own shit. Often when mistakes are made or trust broken with a woman by [a] mainstream [service], we have to rebuild the trust and relationship. Try it, fuck it up, but be accountable when you do.” – Aboriginal family violence service

We heard that accountability cannot be achieved without a change in behaviour or taking meaningful actions to work differently:

“Holding services accountable, how do we hold them accountable? You know, you say you do this, but we’re not seeing it on the ground, you got to see that change.” – Aboriginal woman

“...don’t see much accountability.... I sent an email saying things could have been done different and they sort of acknowledged, emailing back saying, ‘yeah, we understand it could have been different.’ But since then, nothing has changed. It’s still the exact same. So there was acknowledgement. [But] no change. No accountability”. – Aboriginal family violence service

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<sup>135</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p10

**Insight: The lack of monitored accountability mechanisms embedded within key system frameworks creates inconsistencies in services' alignment to these frameworks. Ultimately, this has impacts for Aboriginal people.**

We heard that the lack of requirement on services to demonstrate and report against their alignment to essential system frameworks means they are inconsistently applied:

“MARAM relies on collaborative practice. However, there is no requirement to engage or participate... [There's a] lack of accountability to drive the level of engagement that's needed. It's not embedded through whole of practice accountability, without which it continues to be ad hoc in nature” – non-Aboriginal family violence service

While Social Services Regulations offer a stronger accountability mechanism, through legislated compulsory reporting and compliance, the requirements are intentionally broad to reflect that each provider will be at a different stage of the cultural safety continuum and therefore require different approaches to fulfill this service requirement.<sup>136</sup> We heard some non-Aboriginal family violence services are disappointed by this and feel it represents a missed opportunity to build on and embed existing Aboriginal-led frameworks:

“In the context of the new Social Services Regulation, we are disappointed to discover that the [Strengthening Cultural Safety Project] being applied in Orange Door hubs, which have been developed by ACCOs for the family violence sector and applied over the last three or four years, appear to have been overlooked in the regulations process. SSR have one regulation that speaks to Aboriginal cultural safety, which they've drawn from the child safety standard. This regulation is deliberately broad, somewhat ambiguous and open to interpretation. The Human Services Standards had a comprehensive sub-section on cultural safety, which is no longer part of the SSR. It will be up to the Regulator whether or not more developed, specific cultural safety requirements will be included.” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

Services expressed that this effectively weakens the Victorian Government's efforts to uphold cultural safety and undermines efforts to improve non-Aboriginal services:

“There is little evidence of [government's] statements of commitment being appropriately actioned through the Social Services Regulation [and this fails] to leverage all this great work for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and help mainstream orgs to lift their game. It makes it a harder for mainstream organisations to overcome that lack of confidence and knowing what to do within their workforce to improve cultural safety and build trust with ACCOs”. – non-Aboriginal family violence service

The Social Services Regulations, while mandatory, are intentionally broad and cover a range of community services sectors. Specialist family violence services have a complementary yet distinct role from other services that provide support to families and to victims of crime. The specialist family violence service sector is a group of service providers whose shared role is to work directly with people experiencing family violence, providing dedicated resources and

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<sup>136</sup> Social Services Regulation 2023 Statement of Reasons



advocacy to promote their rights and respond to their safety and support needs.<sup>137</sup> Specialist family violence practice is fundamentally different to other sectors and as a result requires tailored approaches. The sector's *Code of Practice* and Case Management Program Requirements, when applied alongside the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework, offer scaffolding and direct services to ensure their capability to provide culturally responsive services for Aboriginal people is regularly reviewed and addressed, using guidance provided by Aboriginal organisations and resources.<sup>138</sup>

**Insight: Strengthening the cultural responsiveness of the family violence sector is occurring within the existing colonial systems.**

We heard that efforts to work towards cultural responsiveness continue to uphold the dominant, White, colonial structures and do not go far enough. We were reminded that decolonising the family violence sector should be the ultimate aim:

“Cultural responsive’ is just adapting and maintaining the dominant colonial system. The onus should be to decolonise frameworks” – Non-Aboriginal family violence service

Non-Aboriginal family violence services continue to operate within the colonial system, and under government policy and legislation. For the purposes and scope of this current project, using language of decolonising could risk being disingenuous or potentially co-opt the use of the word. However, non-Aboriginal family violence services can and must recognise and understand how Whiteness and racism operate in service delivery and take steps to disrupt this, while continuing to work towards reimagining systems and power structures to be truly self-determining and Aboriginal-led, and can continue to stand alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their fight for Treaty, land back and self-determined solutions to family violence.

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<sup>137</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p16

<sup>138</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic p51

## Next steps

These insights provide a deeper understanding of the current strengths and gaps that both enable and undermine the delivery of culturally responsive, inclusive and trauma informed services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

These insights will form the foundations for a sector-wide commitment to action, outlining what we have heard and the tangible actions we will take as a sector to strengthen family violence responses and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The commitment to action will be designed in collaboration with leaders from non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal family violence services, with guidance from this project’s steering group. The intent is that the commitment to action is ultimately owned and advanced by the specialist family violence sector, with stewardship from Safe and Equal and explicit, ongoing accountability to Aboriginal people and Aboriginal family violence services.

## Key terms

<p><i>Aboriginal definition of family violence</i></p>	<p>Family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples carries its own self determined definition. It is situated within the context of historic and ongoing impacts of colonisation, genocide, systemic violence, racism, family separation and intergenerational trauma<sup>139</sup>. The Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force defined family violence against Aboriginal people as “a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities ... [i]t extends to one-on-one fighting, abuse of Indigenous community workers as well as self-harm, injury and suicide”.<sup>140</sup> This definition recognises the spiritual and cultural perpetration of family violence by non-Aboriginal people against Aboriginal partners, children, young people and extended family members, abuse of Elders, and lateral violence within Aboriginal communities.<sup>141</sup> This Aboriginal definition of family violence must be understood and embedded into specialist family violence service responses and across the broader system.<sup>142</sup></p>
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<sup>139</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

<sup>140</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

<sup>141</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

<sup>142</sup> Domestic Violence Victoria (2020). *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: DV Vic.

<p><i>Aboriginal Self-determination</i></p>	<p>In Victoria, <i>Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families</i> (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028) defines 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”.<sup>143</sup></p>
<p><i>Cultural Safety</i></p>	<p>The term cultural safety was coined by Māori nurse Irihapeti Ramsden who voiced “the idea of the nurse ignoring the way in which people measure and define their humanity is unrealistic and inappropriate... People are still prepared to die in order to maintain their cultural, religious, and territorial integrity.”<sup>144</sup></p> <p>A culturally safe environment is one where people feel safe and where there is no challenge or need for the denial of their identity.<sup>145</sup></p> <p>From an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, cultural safety is self-determined, “Cultural safety is an experience that Australian First Nations people have – its presence or absence can only be determined by them.”<sup>146</sup> Working towards cultural safety is an ongoing journey with everyone beginning from different starting points. It is the responsibility of each individual to continue their learning and demonstrate their commitment.<sup>147</sup> Culturally safe practice is to work with each person experiencing family violence with care and insight for their culture while being mindful of one’s own. For Aboriginal people, ‘culture is about family networks, Elders and ancestors. It is about relationships, languages, dance, ceremony, and heritage. Culture is about spiritual connection to our lands and waters. It is the way we pass on stories and knowledge to our babies and children; it is how we greet each other and look for connection. It is about all the parts that bind us together.’<sup>148</sup></p>

<sup>143</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2018). *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families (the Aboriginal 10 Year Family Violence Agreement 2018-2028)*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.

<sup>144</sup> Ramsden, I. (1990). Moving on: A graduation address. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 5(3), 34- 36.

<sup>145</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). *MARAM Practice Guides: Foundation Knowledge Guide*. Melbourne, Vic: State of Victoria.; Williams, R. (1999). Cultural Safety – What does it mean for our work practice? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 23(2), 213-214.

<sup>146</sup> Gollan, S. and Stacey, K. (2021). Australian Evaluation Society First Nations Cultural Safety Framework, Australian Evaluation Society, Melbourne.

<sup>147</sup> Djirra (2021) Staff Induction Handbook

<sup>148</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2022). Case Management Program Requirements – Service delivery requirements for specialist family violence services that support victim survivors. Victorian Government. Melbourne.

	<p>This report uses cultural safety in the context of Aboriginal-led services and for consistency when it used in specific frameworks or policy.</p>
<p><i>Cultural responsiveness</i></p>	<p>Cultural responsiveness describes the capacity to respond to service needs and to provide client-centred care, taking into account cultural, linguistic, spiritual and socio-economic background. It requires knowledge and capacity to develop systemic, organisational, professional and individual responses. The term is often used to refer to services that are respectful of, and relevant to, the beliefs, practices, culture and linguistic needs of diverse client populations and communities. It requires knowledge and capacity at different levels of intervention: government, systemic, organisational, professional and individual.<sup>149</sup></p> <p>As Indigenous Allied Health Australia notes, cultural responsiveness:<sup>150</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• holds culture as central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing</li> <li>• involves ongoing reflective practice and life-long learning</li> <li>• is relationship focused</li> <li>• is person and community centred</li> <li>• appreciates diversity between groups, families and communities</li> <li>• requires access to knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, peoples and cultures.</li> </ul> <p>This report uses the term cultural responsiveness in the context of non-Aboriginal services, recognising that cultural safety can only be self-determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.</p>
<p><i>Settler / White-settler</i></p>	<p>Non-Aboriginal people – including people of colour - living on unceded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands have inherited the benefits of the violent dispossession of Aboriginal peoples through settler-colonialism.</p> <p>Many people of colour, or racialised settlers, have been forced to live in a settler-colonial state because of histories of colonisation, displacement and marginalisation. These communities often experience racism, discrimination and marginalisation within the White settler-state and as a result it is important to distinguish from white-settlers.<sup>151</sup></p>

<sup>149</sup> Department of Health (2009). Cultural Responsiveness Framework Guidelines for Victorian Health Services, Victorian Department of Health, Melbourne.

<sup>150</sup> Cultural Responsiveness in Action: An IAHA Framework, Indigenous Allied Health Australia, 2015, p. 7.

<sup>151</sup> Dhamoon, R. (2015). A Feminist Approach to Decolonizing Anti-Racism: Rethinking Transnationalism, Intersectionality, and Settler Colonialism. *Rethinking Transnationalism*, 4, 18.; Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). *Decolonization is not a metaphor*. p 40.

Whiteness	A set of unnamed cultural practices and structural privilege, and the invisible norm position from where those who are non-White are viewed and measured in subtle ways. <sup>152</sup>
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## Appendix

### **Appendix 1: Methodology**

This report has been written with the knowledge that research has been used historically as a colonial tool to exploit, dehumanise, discriminate and harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since invasion.<sup>153</sup> Those colonising tendencies continue to surface in research today. For example, some research methods are grounded in colonial ways of knowing that privilege settler-colonial language and forms of evidence and which tend to assume the existence of an objective truth.

The process of collecting evidence and preparing this report seeks to apply Aboriginal participatory action research methodologies; to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, perspectives and decision making; and to facilitate self-reflective, collaborative and iterative processes across all phases of the work.<sup>154</sup> This work has been strengthened and expanded through our relationships with others, and the relationship built between participants in the process, built by listening to and privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and experiences.

### **Principles**

The table below sets out how this report has been developed using the Indigenous research principles and methodologies of Aboriginal-led action research, data sovereignty and culturally safe data collection.

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<sup>152</sup> Frankenberg R (1993) *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White women, race matters*. Routledge, London p. 1; Moreton-Robinson, A. (2004). *Whiteness, epistemology and Indigenous representation*. In *Whitening Race: Essays in social and cultural criticism*. Edited by: Moreton-Robinson, A. p75– 88. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press

<sup>153</sup> 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.

<sup>154</sup> 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.

Aboriginal-led action research	Data sovereignty	Culturally safe data collection
<p>Privilege the Aboriginal voices, ways of knowing and being, shaped by relationship to each other, Country and systems.<sup>155, 156</sup></p> <p>Acknowledge the history and ongoing impact of “research” as a colonial tool to exploit, dehumanise, discriminate and harm Aboriginal people since invasion.<sup>157, 158</sup></p> <p>Prioritise collaborative and iterative process that centres Aboriginal voices and decision-making.<sup>159</sup></p>	<p>Uphold Aboriginal people’s rights to control their data and cultural property – including creation, development, analysis and dissemination.<sup>160</sup></p> <p>Prioritise Aboriginal decision-making on how data is collected, stored, interpreted, and applied.<sup>161</sup></p> <p>Ensure data about Aboriginal communities reflects their priorities, values, cultures, worldviews and diversity.<sup>162</sup></p>	<p>Ensure data collection is ethical, culturally safe and provided with free and informed consent.<sup>163</sup></p> <p>Uphold and promote the pride, dignity, cultural strength and resilience of Aboriginal communities.</p> <p>Offer choice and minimise imbalances of power through positioning each person as knowers and learners in the process.<sup>164</sup></p> <p>Listen deeply to what is communicated, and to what is not said.</p>

## Reviewing

There are several existing policy frameworks that guide the work of the specialist family violence sector, developed by Aboriginal communities, the family violence sector and governments. Many of which are community-led, or draw on the extensive knowledge, expertise

<sup>155</sup> Moreton-Robinson A. (2017). Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm. *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*. United Kingdom: Routledge. p. 69–77.

<sup>156</sup> 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.

<sup>157</sup> 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.

<sup>158</sup> Borch M. (2021). Rethinking the origins of terra nullius. *Aust Hist Stud*. 2001;32(117):222–39.

<sup>159</sup> Wicks, P. G., Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). Living inquiry: Personal, political and philosophical groundings for action research practice. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 15–31).

<sup>160</sup> Maiam nayri Wingara Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Sovereignty Collective (2018). *Indigenous Data Sovereignty Communique: Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit*. Canberra.

<sup>161</sup> Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective (2024). *Taking Control of Our Data: A Discussion Paper on Indigenous Data Governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Communities*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

<sup>162</sup> 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.

<sup>163</sup> *Djirra Culturally Safe Data Collection Guidelines*

<sup>164</sup> Bessarab, D. and Ng’andu, B. (2010). Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 3:1

and advice of Aboriginal communities and services related to preventing and responding to family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is critical to learn from and build on the findings and recommendations that already exist – recognising the colonial load on Aboriginal leaders and services to be consulted and provide the solutions, understanding that often recommendations are repeated across frameworks. We reviewed the relevant Victorian and national policy frameworks (*See Appendix for summary of frameworks*). This review outlined existing responsibilities of non-Aboriginal family violence services related to culturally responsive service provision and will help to inform our understanding of the transformational change that is required.

### **Listening**

While the policy landscape provides critical information about specialist family violence service responsibilities, hearing directly from Aboriginal people who have accessed services and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services provides the most current picture of what is happening in practice.

We connected with 95 people through 27 group and individual semi-structured yarns/interviews. The yarns/interviews were led by Anna, a White woman who is the descendant of English and Irish settler colonisers.<sup>165</sup> We heard from:

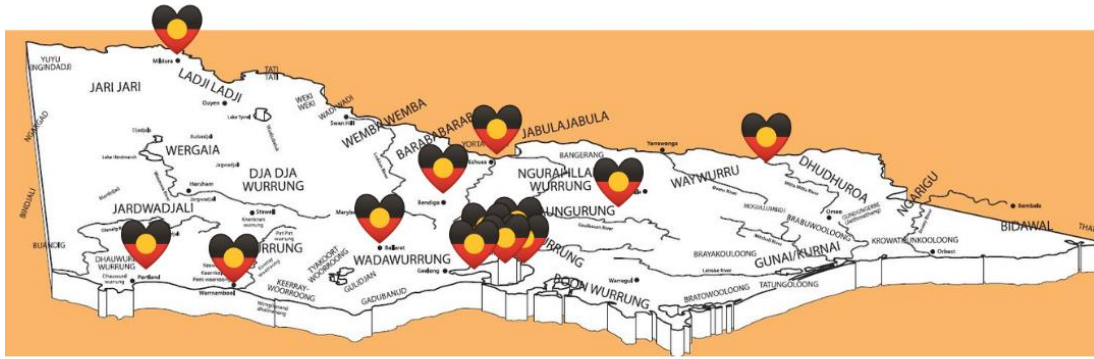
- Five Aboriginal women who have accessed family violence services. The staunch women were offered the choice of how they would like to participate and the option of having a support person present. Three of the women chose to yarn in-person, one on a video call, and one over the phone. Each of the women received payment in recognition of the time and knowledge they contributed.
- 38 people working in 13 Aboriginal family violence services.<sup>166</sup> We prioritised connecting with people in-person at their service.
- 52 people working in 33 non-Aboriginal family violence services through online roundtables and communities of practice.

Each yarn/interview was supported by a semi-structured interview guide and was recorded and transcribed. Summary notes were provided to participating people for the opportunity to correct or clarify what they shared. Care was taken to ensure that Aboriginal women understood how their words and experiences were being included in this work – including holding follow up meetings to talk through the insights and next steps the work generated. Where we could not contact women for this follow up, their direct quotes were not included in this report.

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<sup>165</sup>See author positionality for more details

<sup>166</sup> [Djirra. Elizabeth Morgan House. Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service. Gunitimara Aboriginal Co-Operative. Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation. Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation. Bendigo District Aboriginal Co-Operative. Njernda Aboriginal Corporation. Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-Operative. Mallee District Aboriginal Service. Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation. Ballarat District Aboriginal Service and Dardi Munwurro.](#)



**Image:** A map illustrating the locations of the 13-family violence Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations we heard from.

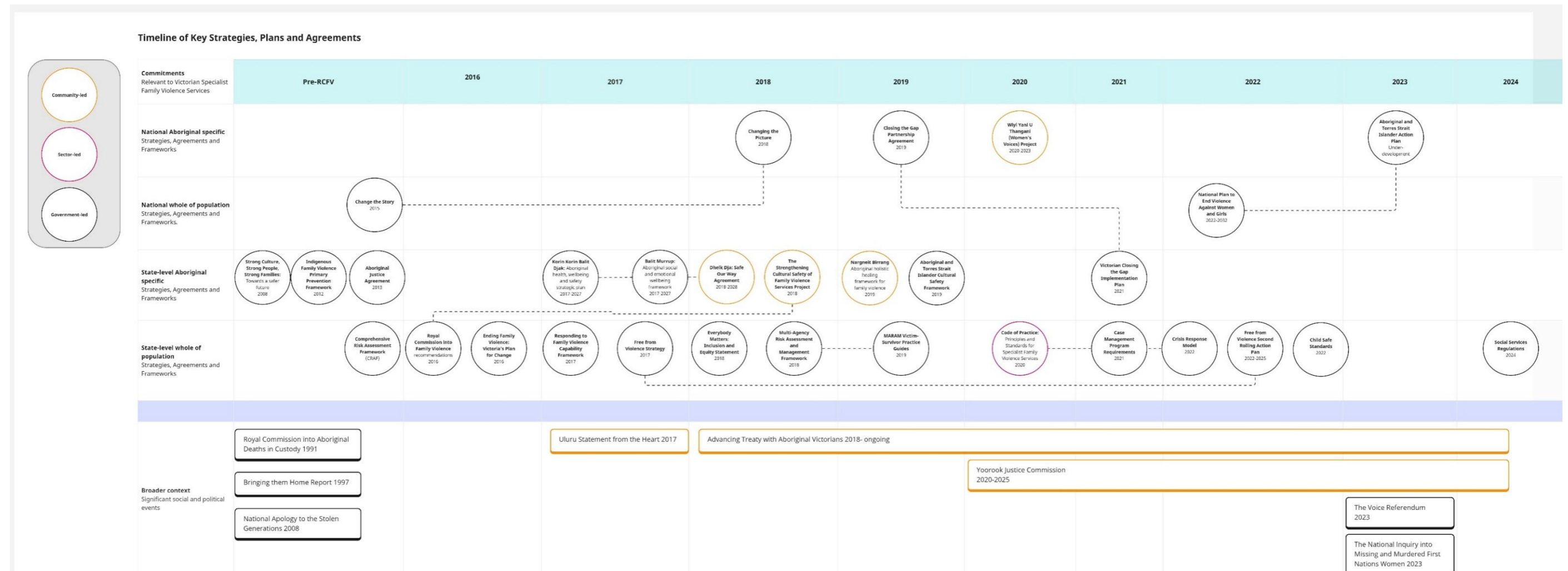
### **Sense-making**

Data collection, interpretation and coming to recommendations is not neutral. In order to foreground Aboriginal voices and insights, we used a collaborative process with the Steering Group to make sense of what we heard during the yarns/interviews. This approach involved reading out key quotes as a group, discussing what confirms our hunches, what was surprising or left us with more questions before identifying the key messages. This process helped to shift from a top down, extractive and disempowering approach to research and supported moves towards Data Sovereignty. The process brought to the surface different voices, values and perspectives, and gave time and weight to the voices and evidence gathered and time to reflect collectively, before jumping to action.



## Appendix 2: Timeline of Strategies, Agreements and Frameworks

This timeline was compiled in 2023. It summarises key frameworks but is non-exhaustive.<sup>167</sup>



<sup>167</sup> A written summary of each of the strategies, agreements and frameworks including focus, governance and accountability mechanisms can be requested from the authors.