

# **CULTURAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF CHILD ABUSE AND RESPONSES TO IT: AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE**

Sue Gordon<sup>1</sup>  
Magistrate, Children's Court  
Western Australia

## **Abstract**

Although the impact of child abuse infiltrates communities at all socio-economic and cultural levels, its prevalence in indigenous Australian communities is of particular concern. Any level of child abuse or neglect is unacceptable in any community, and for too long a veil of silence has surrounded the extent of the problem facing indigenous populations as a result of the false assumption that violence and abuse are culturally ingrained. Indigenous experiences of violence and abuse are different from those of non-indigenous Australians, as are responses to the problem, perpetuating the systemic cycles of violence plaguing many indigenous communities. In recognising this, family and child abuse must be seen within the broader context of historical and present factors, and the multitude of underlying issues that shape indigenous experiences of abuse must be addressed in order to achieve any real outcomes in protecting indigenous children. This paper addresses the issue of child abuse and neglect within the context of a cultural conceptualisation of the problem itself and responses to it, from the perspective of an indigenous leader, Children's Court Magistrate and Chair of the Gordon Inquiry.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The abuse and neglect of our children is still widespread in our modern society, and is of particular concern in indigenous communities in Australia. Although this is not a new or emerging problem, for too long silence has surrounded the prevalence of abuse and neglect that indigenous children are subjected to, often under the false assumption that violence is culturally ingrained in our indigenous heritage. In order to protect our children, it is vital that we bring this issue into the open and ask the hard questions: Why are indigenous children at greater risk of becoming victims of child abuse than

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### **Correspondence**

Secretariat, National Indigenous Council, Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, Department of Families, Community Service and Indigenous Affairs, PO Box 17, Woden, ACT 2606, Australia.

other Australian children? Why have we put our children at risk and allowed this to become an epidemic in our communities? And what are we doing about it?

It is important to acknowledge that indigenous experiences of abuse and violence differ from those of non-indigenous Australians, and recognise the role that this difference plays in continuing the cycle of systemic abuse. In acknowledging this, family violence and child abuse must be seen within the broader context of historical and present factors, and the multitude of underlying issues that shape indigenous experiences of abuse must be addressed in order to achieve any real outcomes in protecting indigenous children. The Australian Government has recognised this and, through the new arrangements being implemented in indigenous affairs, has committed to a whole-of-government approach to tackling family violence and child abuse in indigenous communities. I will return to this later.

This paper will cover the prevalence of family violence in indigenous communities, while making reference to the many and complex causes behind family violence. The paper will focus on the current picture and the policies that are addressing the issue in Australia. I will examine the Australian Government's new arrangements in indigenous affairs and how these enhance our ability to tackle this problem. I will also discuss commonwealth and state governments' policies and programmes to address child abuse and family violence, including my work on the Inquiry into the Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities (the Gordon Inquiry).

## CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse and its ramifications are a severe and continuing blight on our communities and a matter of ongoing concern. I personally see the effects of this violence every day in court, both in our criminal jurisdiction and in our civil jurisdiction of care, and in this paper I will outline its prevalence in Australia's indigenous communities.

Although it is generally difficult to obtain accurate figures on the extent of child abuse Australia-wide, and even more so for indigenous communities, it is clear that indigenous children are significantly over-represented in the statutory child protection system. The Australian Productivity Commission (SCRGSP 2006) reported that 4,887 indigenous children under the age of 17 had some form of abuse substantiated – that is, proven by the statutory protection authority – during the period 2004/2005. This rate of substantiation is on average 3.6 times higher for the indigenous population than for non-indigenous Australians. Indigenous children are also six times more likely to be on care and protection orders than other Australian children. While indigenous children comprise less than 3% of children in Australia, they constitute a massive 24% of those placed in out-of-home care.

Due to guideline variations in each state, rates of substantiation are not comparable, but they are higher for indigenous children than their non-indigenous counterparts – ranging from two times to up to 12 times higher – in every state except Tasmania. Perhaps the most alarming statistic is that since 1998/1999, the rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has *increased* in all states except Western Australia (AIHW 2006). Western Australia is currently the only state or territory that does not have mandatory reporting of child abuse, with the recently appointed Premier of Western Australia indicating that there are no plans to initiate it.

Because accurate data on the extent of child abuse are difficult to come by, and these figures are based upon *reported* instances of child abuse and neglect, they are likely to be an underestimate of actual levels of maltreatment. It is estimated that less than 30% of sexual assaults on children are actually reported, and that this rate is a lot lower in indigenous communities (Stanley et al. 2003). This situation has changed little since identified at the First Aboriginal Child Survival Seminar in 1979.

### A Bigger Picture and Some Hard Facts

In my role as a Children's Magistrate, and as Chair of the Gordon Inquiry (which I will discuss later), I see on a daily basis the devastating trauma and long-term impacts that child abuse inflicts upon children, families and the community. We cannot afford to let this continue.

So how do we deal with this problem that has become pandemic across indigenous communities? In order to address this issue and its effects on indigenous children and communities, it is vital that we gain a strong awareness of indigenous-specific experiences of abuse. Intrinsic to this is an understanding of the indigenous conceptualisation of child abuse, which locates child abuse within the broader framework of family violence.

- One-fifth of indigenous people reported that they had been a victim of physical or threatened violence in the past 12 months, more than double the victimisation rate of non-indigenous Australians (19.5% compared with 8.9%) (ABS 2004).
- Police records indicate that indigenous females were six times as likely to be a victim of domestic-violence-related assault as all the females in New South Wales in 2002. In Western Australia indigenous women are 13 times more likely to be a victim of assault than non-indigenous females (SCRGSP 2004).
- Indigenous females are 30 times more likely to be hospitalised for assault than non-indigenous females.
- Over half (54%) of indigenous homicides occurred between family members, whereas only 38.1% of non-indigenous homicides occurred between family members.
- Up to 88% of all rapes in indigenous communities go unreported (Richardson 2005).

This is the grim experience (with far-reaching consequences) for too many indigenous children, many of whom are growing up in communities where violence is the norm. While I believe that any level of family violence in the community is unacceptable, the problem is particularly prevalent in indigenous families, and these disturbing statistics need to be addressed. However, the best solutions often come from the communities themselves and are implemented at the grassroots level. Governments and communities together must tackle not only the end results but also the underlying issues concerning child abuse and family violence in indigenous communities.

## INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES

In addressing this issue, it is important to recognise several important factors before we can achieve a culturally appropriate response. One of these factors intrinsic to combating child and family violence is acknowledging that indigenous concepts of violence are much broader than usual mainstream definitions of domestic violence. For indigenous peoples, the term family violence rather than domestic violence better reflects the often interconnecting and trans-generational experiences of violence within indigenous families and communities (Stanley et al. 2003).

Indigenous family violence must also be seen within the broader context of violence committed at a systemic level, the obvious physical violence that reaches wide attention being only the merest tip of the iceberg of such ignored, routinised, structural violence (Simpson 1993).

Definitions of violence need to incorporate not only physical dimensions, but also emotional, social, economic, spiritual and institutional dimensions. This is vital when considering the effects of exposure to such violence on a child. A broader concept of family violence allows for a more appropriate response to the difference in experiences of violence faced by indigenous women and children. Understanding that an indigenous woman may be unable or unwilling to report violence or fragment her identity by leaving her community, family or partner as a solution to the violence clarifies the need for indigenous-specific services (Bennett 1997).

The Robertson report<sup>2</sup> into violence in Queensland communities had a range of findings.

- Dispossession, cultural fragmentation and marginalisation have contributed to the current [family violence] crisis in which many indigenous people find themselves.

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2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Taskforce on Violence Report, headed up by Bonnie Robertson and initiated by the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy in 1999

- A more rigorous understanding of the impact of high unemployment, poor health, low educational attainment and poverty on the incidence of family violence is warranted.
- Family violence in indigenous communities has been a critical issue for many years, and is continually recognised by indigenous communities as being a problem.
- At times, government representatives appeared to regard violence as a normal aspect of indigenous life, therefore interventions were dismissed as politically and culturally intrusive in the newly acquired autonomy of indigenous communities.
- Violence in all its forms, whatever its locale and in any circumstances, is unacceptable, and both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples must work together to help in its eradication.
- While governments have made funding available to address the issues pertinent to violence in the lives of indigenous peoples, only minimal intervention has occurred to date.
- Violence in indigenous communities must be stopped through proactive intervention as opposed to prevention alone.
- A whole-of-government approach to tackling violence is required, along with indigenous people taking responsibility to repair the broken lives as a result of violence.

These issues not only have to be given careful consideration, but need to be actively addressed in order to achieve improved outcomes in the prevention of indigenous family violence and the protection of our children.

The devastating impact of family violence has been acknowledged by all levels of government in recent years, with a number of significant inquiries and initiatives undertaken or commenced at the federal, state and territory level to address its impact, demonstrating a genuine commitment from governments to address family violence issues. The following sections will focus on initiatives in the national arena, states and territories.

## GOVERNMENT COOPERATION

In June 2004, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia comprising the Prime Minister and all state and territory premiers, agreed to work cooperatively to address these issues under a National Framework for Preventing Child Abuse and Family Violence in Indigenous Communities. Aspects of this framework include the following.

- Jurisdictions are working cooperatively to improve how they engage with each other and with indigenous communities to prevent family violence and child abuse in indigenous families and have agreed to formalise their arrangements between the Australian and the state and territory governments.

- The Australian Government is negotiating bilateral agreements on indigenous affairs, two of which have been signed with the Northern Territory and Queensland. Both have agreed priority areas, including promoting safer communities, including tackling family violence. Negotiations in this area are continuing.
- The Framework also builds on the early progress of the whole-of-government trials of new ways of working with indigenous communities COAG commenced in partnership with local indigenous communities in eight sites across Australia following its April 2002 meeting. The trials provide an important opportunity to identify what works, what does not work, and to make those lessons available more broadly.
- The theme for the Tasmanian trial site is family violence and community safety. Members of the local community are encouraged to participate in the trial so that they are genuinely engaged and share the ownership of the outcomes of the trial. This work has led to the signing of two “shared responsibility agreements” on Cape Barren Island (detailed below).

### AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

The Australian Government’s response commenced with the Prime Minister’s family violence roundtable in July 2003 and subsequent commitment of \$20 million as a “down payment” to address family violence issues.<sup>3</sup> The Australian Government is currently spending about \$76 million over the period 2004–2008 on major programmes specifically aimed at addressing indigenous family violence.

- The Family Violence Partnership Programme (\$37.3 million over four years) enables the Australian Government to pursue agreements with state and territory governments to fund family violence, sexual assault and child protection initiatives in indigenous communities.
- Initiatives agreed with the Northern Territory included:
  - the establishment of community patrols to build community vigilance and support for the members of indigenous families who may experience violence at home
  - using the Stop it Before it Starts Kit (designed for teachers and community workers to use with 12–15-year-olds) to ensure that young indigenous people know that family violence and sexual assault are unacceptable and to help them develop strategies to reject violent relationships

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3 Following the roundtable, a working group was established to advise the Prime Minister on ways of advancing strategies to address family violence in indigenous communities. Former ATSIC Commissioner Alison Anderson, Lowitjia O’Donoghue, Jackie Huggins and Ian Anderson were selected from the national roundtable to form this working group to draft a family violence strategy with the aid of government representatives. When forming the working group, it was envisioned that the draft family violence strategy would inform the public about the violence crisis, and would be discussed and supported by COAG .

- increasing funding for the Safe Families Project, which provides Family and Kids' Houses (short-term accommodation for families made homeless as a result of family violence or for children until they can be placed with an appropriate carer, and funding for family workers to support these families and children), announced in late December 2005
- Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (expanded by \$22.7 million over four years), which provides legal assistance, court support, counselling and advocacy services for victims or those at immediate risk of family violence and sexual assault (including specialist services, particularly for women and children, responding to local needs, providing culturally appropriate responses to family violence and heightening awareness of family violence issues in communities)
- Family Violence Regional Activities (\$15.2 million over four years), which provides funding for local non-legal solutions to family and domestic violence. Examples include night patrols, safe houses and support groups.

In addition, the Australian Government is providing support to indigenous Australians through broader family violence and family support initiatives, such as the Women's Safety Agenda. The 2005/2006 Budget committed \$75.7 million over four years to address domestic violence and sexual assault. The Community Development Grants initiative is part of this agenda and funds various research projects at all levels of the Australian community, to inform policy development on domestic violence and sexual assault.

Family violence in indigenous communities is also being addressed by the Australian Government through the Indigenous Women's Development Programme. It has three broad components:

- Indigenous Women's Leadership, which targets women already making a contribution in their communities and provides leadership training and opportunities to launch them in to leadership positions more widely
- the Men and Family Relationships component, which provides a forum for indigenous men to discuss issues facing their families and communities, and to develop strategies for reconnecting men with their responsibilities
- the Networking Indigenous Women element, which promotes a network of mutual support and fosters links among women.

Substance use and misuse is recognised as a contributing factor to incidents of child abuse and personal violence in indigenous communities. The Australian Government has identified and sought to develop good practice in reducing substance misuse. An example of this is the multi-lateral strategy to address petrol sniffing in Central Australian desert indigenous communities announced by the Australian Government last year. This strategy builds on effective methods of supply reduction, prevention and rehabilitation measures. The government is also working to reduce the effects of substance misuse on indigenous communities through mainstream programmes.

It includes a zero-tolerance approach to petrol trafficking in the central desert region. Police from South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory have set up a Substance Abuse Intelligence Desk (SAID or drug desk) in Alice Springs to collect intelligence on trafficking in petrol, alcohol and illicit substances and then target police operations at known traffickers. The Australian Government has contributed \$500,000 to the drug desk, which commenced operation on 19 January 2006.

The Australian Government is also working directly with communities through Shared Responsibility Agreements, outlined in more detail below.

### NEW ARRANGEMENTS IN INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

As well as strengthening commonwealth–state arrangements, over the past 18 months the Australian Government has implemented new arrangements for the administration of indigenous affairs, designed to focus effort on providing a better deal for indigenous Australians.

This involves the Australian Government’s indigenous programmes being administered by mainstream agencies or departments, but under a new “whole-of-government” approach. This means that mainstream departments are required to accept responsibility for the indigenous services (as well as the mainstream services) they deliver, and they will be held accountable for outcomes.

#### National Indigenous Council (NIC)

The National Indigenous Council (NIC), which I chair, is an advisory body to Government, appointed on merit, experience and expertise in particular areas, such as health, education, employment and law. Members do not represent a particular region, community or organisation, and are not intended to be a representative body. The NIC’s agreed terms of reference require it to:

- provide expert advice to Government on how to improve outcomes for indigenous people, including improving programme performance and service delivery in a whole-of-government environment
- advise on the appropriateness and effectiveness within the indigenous community of programmes across government
- promote constructive dialogue and engagement between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations
- advise on national priorities and alert government to current and emerging policy, programme and service delivery issues and not be involved in specific funding proposals or specific planning or programme matters related to individual communities or regions (National Indigenous Council 2005).



In our inaugural year, the NIC provided advice to Government in several key areas, including sharpening the Government's key priorities for indigenous affairs (discussed below) and providing advice on indigenous justice matters to the Minister for Justice and Customs and contributing to the development of a National Indigenous Law and Justice Strategy. In 2006, some of our main priorities for consideration will be family violence, child abuse, mental health (including youth suicide) and early childhood intervention, which are also priorities for the Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs.

### Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs

The Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs (MTF), comprising nine Ministers (all but one of whom are in the Cabinet) with indigenous portfolio responsibilities, was also established as part of the new arrangements. The MTF is important because, as far as I understand, it is the first time that all Ministers with a responsibility for indigenous affairs have sat down together regularly and talked things through and worked out where money is best spent. The MTF meets at least four times each year, including two meetings with the NIC (which has had three meetings with Ministers already).

### Ministerial Taskforce Charter

The key question we need to think about is: where do we as indigenous people want to be in 20–30 years time? As an NIC member I am pleased that the Government has recognised that developing a vision is important for our future. This is evident in the Charter for the Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs, which outlines the Australian Government's 20–30-year vision for indigenous Australians:

[That] indigenous Australians, wherever they live, have the same opportunities as other Australians to make informed choices about their lives, to realise their full potential in whatever they choose to do and to take responsibility for managing their own affairs.

This is important for us as citizens of Australia, but it is also important for us as communities and individuals to have this long-term view, so that our kids, grandkids and great-grandkids can have safe, healthy and successful futures.

The Charter identified three urgent priorities in 2005 for immediate attention, which continue today. The NIC agreed to these, and also had the opportunity with the Ministers to sharpen them and make them even more focused. Taking account of the NIC's input, the Taskforce will focus on three key areas of intervention for the development of coherent, cross-agency approaches:

- early childhood intervention, a key focus of which will be improved mental and physical health, and in particular primary health and early educational outcomes

- safer communities, which includes issues of authority, law and order, but necessarily also focuses on dealing with issues of governance to ensure that communities are functional and effective
- building indigenous wealth, employment and entrepreneurial culture, as these are integral to boosting economic development and reducing poverty and dependence on passive welfare.

The focus on children and safer communities and the recognition of the need for a future vision is an important step in addressing the problem head-on of protecting and nurturing our children's futures.

### SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AGREEMENTS

All parties – governments, individuals and communities – need to take responsibility. It is the only way to get some traction and to start to get results. Shared responsibility is a fundamental element of the Government's new arrangements for indigenous affairs and Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) are a means for government to engage with communities. The emphasis on shared responsibility recognises that:

- governments alone cannot bring about all the changes necessary to overcome indigenous disadvantage
- indigenous people and communities must be involved in planning and building their future.

SRAs are agreements that spell out what all partners – communities, governments and others – will contribute to bring about long-term changes to achieve better outcomes for indigenous communities. SRAs can be developed in remote communities, regional areas or discrete parts of urban areas if indigenous people locally decide they want to make changes in this way. At present, 144 SRAs have been signed in communities around Australia.

For example, some SRAs with remote communities include a "no school, no pool" arrangement, whereby the community only allows access to the government-funded swimming pool to children who attend school. Other agreements involve government assistance in the establishment of a community store stocking healthy food, on the basis that proceeds go into community projects, including nutrition education and children's and young people's sport and other activities.

Early SRAs have been mainly based on single issues with very modest mutual obligations, but as Government and communities continue to work together and gain trust, they should evolve into more comprehensive arrangements that focus on sustainability and ongoing community benefit.

## SRAs Addressing Family Violence

To address family violence, action needs to be based on local community priorities, which (in some cases) are being expressed through SRAs. Some SRAs are responding directly to the issue of family violence. Other more general SRAs are also implementing strategies that will help families to prosper. These SRAs demonstrate the ways communities can work together and in partnership with governments to get the support they need to respond to and prevent family violence. Agreements negotiated by three communities – Cape Barren Island in Tasmania, Derby in Western Australia and Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory – provide useful examples.

The community of 70 people on Cape Barren Island, in Bass Strait, North Eastern Tasmania, has engaged with the Australian and Tasmanian governments to enhance community cohesion and wellbeing. Two closely related projects are now part of SRAs signed in June 2005. The Australian Government will provide funds for a Community Wellbeing Centre and provide training, and the Australian and Tasmanian Governments will work together with the community to provide a range of regular, community-determined activities to promote good family relationships and community harmony. The community will contribute to the cost, amenities and building of the centre, and will develop, deliver, participate in and support the programmes, including a meals programme, a children's programme and men's and women's groups. The Tasmanian Government will also work with people on the island to establish guidelines around community safety.

Derby is a regional town in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia, with a population of approximately 5,000, half of whom are indigenous. The two SRAs signed in May 2005 by the Jayida Burru Forum, representing the community organisations of Derby, focus on family safety and reconnecting men to their family responsibilities, and aim to assist men with their family duties and help children affected by family violence.

Under the first SRA, the Australian Government will provide money for a coordinator to work with local men to rebuild a sense of identity and responsibility and to regain respect in their community, and also to improve relations between local men and government service providers, police and courts. The men in the community, in turn, have committed to use the services provided at the community men's centre, observing its code of behaviour, respecting property and taking part in counselling sessions.

The second SRA in Derby focuses on family and community safety and provides for awareness sessions on violence, practical workshops through TAFE (Technical And Further Education) and a campaign on local indigenous radio designed to encourage

people to speak out about child abuse and family violence in their homes and community. The teaching curriculum *Talk Up For You* will be re-launched, and a coordinator employed to bring these activities together. The community has agreed to work with the men's, women's and youth centres to come up with new ideas for building family and community safety in a culturally appropriate way. Families and individuals in the community have agreed to participate in activities to raise understanding of these issues and attend counselling services where appropriate.

Tennant Creek is a regional town in the Northern Territory with a population of approximately 3,500, half of whom are indigenous. The focus of its SRA is governance and community safety. Elders keen to restore respect for their people and country will work with non-indigenous people to improve safety and justice in the town. Governments will jointly fund the establishment of an Elders Council and associated activities such as planning, community consultation and media promotion. Council members will work with indigenous and non-indigenous community members and help with policing, the justice system, education, and other activities that will contribute to community harmony and safety.

The SRAs developed in these three communities demonstrate how communities and governments can work together to get the needed support to address the community's concerns.

## STATE AND TERRITORY INITIATIVES

A number of states and territories have raised public awareness of the issue in recent years and have conducted various inquiries into child abuse, which have led to new or enhanced programmes in response to child abuse and the broader framework of family violence for both indigenous and non-indigenous people.

### Western Australia

I have seen the devastating effects of child abuse and family violence in my role as Chairperson of the Western Australian Government's Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities, often known as the "Gordon Inquiry".

The Gordon Inquiry was established following the coronial inquiry into the death of 15-year-old Susan Taylor (while it is generally accepted that the deceased person's name is not spoken, the family expressly asked during the Inquiry that we refer to her by her name so that people will remember her), a young girl who was a petrol sniffer and hung herself after reporting sexual abuse. It looked at the causes, prevalence and effects of violence and examined how each government department responds to

family violence and child abuse in indigenous communities. The focus of the Inquiry was on sexual abuse of children and young adolescents, and on government agencies' responses to this abuse.

The Inquiry reported on 31 July 2002, making 197 recommendations and providing best practice models and a community-focused systematic response. Recommendations specific to sexual assault included: the expansion of sexual assault services in metropolitan, rural and remote areas; better data collection; and mandatory reporting of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in children under 13 years.

The Inquiry did not attempt to provide one correct definition of family violence or child abuse, and rejected a gendered analysis of family violence. Instead, it explored a multiplicity of factors that contribute to the violence and focused in particular on "resource systems" in order to "assess the needs of men, women and young people in domestic violence".

Several important steps have been taken in the implementation of the recommendations from the Inquiry in Western Australia, which are the first steps toward ensuring the safety of our children and communities. In December 2002 the Western Australian government tabled in Parliament *Putting People First*, the Government's implementation plan in response to the findings of the Gordon Inquiry. In June 2003 the Western Australian government released its first progress report on the implementation of *Putting People First*. The report identified a range of specific priority initiatives designed to strengthen responses to child abuse and family violence; responses to vulnerable children and adults at risk; the safety of communities; and the governance, confidence, economic capacity and sustainability of communities.

The Western Australian government has committed \$75 million to implementing initiatives to address family violence. Examples of the specific priority initiatives include:

- establishing an independent Child Death Review Committee
- employing 25 additional child protection workers
- developing culturally appropriate counselling services
- funding community-based initiatives to strengthen families and communities
- providing remote policing services and multi-function facilities
- recruiting domestic violence liaison officers within the police service
- expanding Victim Support and Child Witness Services
- extending community-based offender programmes
- expanding Sexual Assault Resource Centre services
- developing the Community Futures Foundation to provide financial assistance to support creative initiatives to develop Aboriginal leadership.

In addition, the Government contributed \$26,000 towards the development of a brochure which uses Aboriginal artwork to highlight the issue of family violence, and an educational video aimed at sending the message “babies break if you shake them” to indigenous parents, launched in September 2003.

### Northern Territory

Indigenous Australians make up 28.8% (ABS 2005) of the Northern Territory population. The Northern Territory Government implemented an Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy in early 2003, following extensive consultations with Aboriginal Territorians which establishes a coordinated, comprehensive and collaborative framework to prevent family violence, improve community safety, protect victims, develop capacity and encourage local solutions.

Strong Family, Strong Community, Strong Future was developed under the Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy after more than 18 months of talking with Aboriginal people in communities. The project is based upon case (family) and place (location of the community) management principles. Initially each family decides on problems that are to be addressed by that family and the order in which they will tackle the problems. Once the problems are identified, families agree on an action plan to deal with each of these issues. A Family Violence Team in the Department of the Chief Minister is available to work with these families in four communities in the Northern Territory.

As mentioned previously, the Northern Territory and the Australian Government have signed a bilateral agreement and are negotiating a schedule that sets out how both governments can work to build safer communities.

### New South Wales

The New South Wales Government has committed \$1.4 million per annum to implement the Aboriginal Family Health Strategy, which aims to engage and empower families, communities and relevant agencies to work together to reduce family violence, sexual assault and child abuse. This strategy allows government to work with indigenous people to alleviate the factors leading to violence, the suffering occurring daily as a consequence of that violence, and the long-term effects of family violence on the wellbeing of indigenous communities. The strategy acknowledges that the success of any proposed solutions to family violence hinges on Aboriginal community control of responses to family violence.

The New South Wales Government has established an Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce to develop a comprehensive plan of action to address sexual assault in indigenous communities. The issues to be examined by the taskforce include:

- the capacity of state government agencies to address the issue of sexual violence in indigenous communities and the barriers faced
- key areas for government attention
- what the practical solutions for addressing the incidence of sexual abuse in indigenous communities are and how they can be progressed.

### Queensland

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence (the Robertson report) in December 1999 made 123 recommendations regarding actions required by the Government to address family violence in indigenous communities (Robertson 1999). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (ATSIAB), formed in 1999 to advise the Queensland Government on indigenous matters, was responsible for monitoring Queensland Government responses to the Robertson report. Part of the response was to include an audit of what the Queensland Government is currently doing to address issues associated with family violence.

Family violence was identified as one of eight key priority areas under the Queensland government's Ten-Year Partnership with indigenous peoples, which aims to reduce the incidence of family violence in indigenous communities over the next decade (also a significant focus of the Cape York Justice Study into alcohol and violence in Cape York).

In April 2002 the Queensland Government introduced a new whole-of-government policy called Meeting Challenges, Making Choices (MCMC), designed to address the alcohol and violence issues in indigenous communities, such as those highlighted in the Cape York Justice Study. MCMC focuses on the key areas of alcohol intervention, economic development, healthier people, education and training and land and sustainable natural resource management.

### South Australia

The state vision for domestic and family violence prevention is set out in the State Collaborative Approach for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. Preventing domestic and indigenous family violence has been identified as an area of core business in the Justice portfolio planning documents, and a key result area for the Crime Prevention Unit in its strategic plan.

The Violence Intervention Project (VIP) is a collaborative venture between the Adelaide Magistrates Court, the Department for Correctional Services, the Department of Human Services, the Salvation Army and the South Australia Police, initiated in 1997. Its programme offers specialist services to men, women and children, and is tailored to meet the needs of each of the client groups. These services include domestic violence counselling for both men and women, groups for men addressing their violent and abusive behaviour, support for women and children, information and referral, advocacy and liaison, and assistance to access other services.

The Domestic Violence Prevention Fund Grant programme was established in 2000 to support early intervention and crime prevention projects for children or young people under 18 years, including one focused on prevention work with indigenous young people.

### Victoria

An Indigenous Family Violence Task Force was appointed in 2002 to lead the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Strategy, which aims to resource and support an indigenous-led approach to prevent, reduce and respond to violence in Victorian indigenous communities. Components of the strategy include:

- establishment and resourcing of nine indigenous family Violence Action Groups
- employment of a state coordinator and nine family violence support officers
- establishment of an Indigenous Family Violence Community Initiative Fund.

As an NIC member, I have raised with Ministers the vital question of these programmes' effectiveness: if the programmes do not work or are not being implemented effectively, we will not meet our future vision.

### Tasmania

Safe at Home is a whole-of-government criminal justice response to family violence. It was allocated \$17.4 million over four years from 2004 to establish new or refocused services to protect and support victims of family violence, including young people and children, while making offenders responsible for their behaviour. These include:

- individual support and counselling for victims of all ages, as well as child protection and special needs responses
- a 24-hour family violence contact line and victim safety response teams
- legal aid, court support and liaison service, child witness and support service and offender intervention programmes.



## CONCLUSIONS

My view is that child abuse is not part of our culture and is not acceptable in any form. I continually challenge people to think about this, as changing this misconception is vital to our future and the future of our children. Earlier this year, when I was invited to speak on this issue to a small group of Aboriginal women from both urban and traditional backgrounds in Perth, they confirmed that they do not accept that child abuse is part of our culture, and as mothers and grandmothers they too want this misconception changed.

Our children are the future of our communities. We owe it to them to protect their futures. However, we still need more indigenous men to stand up to say that child abuse, especially child sexual abuse, is not part of our culture – this is not just the domain of indigenous women. To do this we need to drive policy and programmes that acknowledge and incorporate indigenous concepts of child abuse in order to achieve real results on the ground. Indigenous experiences of child abuse and violence are caught up within a broader framework of complex historical and present factors of oppression and disadvantage that affect the ways in which family violence is played out, reported and responded to.

There are good news stories, too, that show that communities and governments are treating the future of our children as a priority. We need to build on these strengths, develop these initiatives and share positive experiences – to continually challenge with positive examples. Governments at both state and commonwealth levels, as well as indigenous people themselves, have recognised the importance of protecting children and providing for them a safe and healthy environment. We need to encourage community-level initiatives that focus on giving our children and grandchildren a good start in life, that strengthen our families and communities, and that create better ways of working with each other.

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