



Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Action Plan under The  
National Plan to Reduce Violence  
against Women and their Children  
March 2023



## Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 CONTEXT OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2 PRIMARY PREVENTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3 ENGAGING ABORIGINAL MEN AND BOYS TO WOMEN'S SAFETY .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>9</b>

## INTRODUCTION

White Ribbon Australia Submission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan under The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children March 2023.

This document represents a collective response to the submission into the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander action plan from White Ribbon Australia and our Community Partners.

White Ribbon Australia is Australia's largest social movement that aims to end men's violence against women by connecting men to women's safety. It was founded in 2003 and has since become one of the largest and most influential organisations in Australia dedicated to this cause. The organisation works to raise awareness about the issue of violence against women and to promote gender equality. White Ribbon Australia runs a range of programs and initiatives aimed at preventing violence against women. These include educational programs for schools and workplaces, community engagement campaigns, and advocacy work to influence policy and legislative change.

White Ribbon Australia notes the high level of complexity around men's violence towards women and children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but feels that this paper should only address the context of men's domestic violence and abuse by looking at the;

1. Context of men's violence and abuse towards women,
2. Primary prevention
3. Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys to women's safety.

Our research suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's behavioural change and primary prevention programmes in Australia must be founded on a number of fundamental tenets, including

- The socio-ecological model
- community ownership and engagement
- trauma-informed approach
- cultural safety principles

## 1 CONTEXT OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

White Ribbon Australia recognises that colonisation has had a profound impact on Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people and their communities in Australia, including contributing to high rates of domestic violence and abuse in Indigenous communities. The trauma of colonisation, including forced removal from traditional lands and cultural suppression, has resulted in intergenerational trauma and ongoing systemic inequality. The effects of colonisation are deeply intertwined with the issue of domestic violence and abuse. The breakdown of traditional family structures and cultural practices, loss of identity and connection to land, and ongoing experiences of discrimination and marginalisation contribute to social and economic disadvantage, which can increase the risk of domestic violence and abuse. Acknowledging the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the ongoing effect of systemic inequality is an important step towards addressing domestic violence and abuse in Indigenous communities. It is essential that we work towards healing and reconciliation, and support Indigenous-led initiatives to address domestic violence and abuse in culturally appropriate ways. This includes addressing the root causes of violence and the drivers of violence, such as trauma, poverty, and social exclusion, and providing resources and support to Indigenous communities to build capacity and promote healing.

Due to the complexity of several primary healthcare interventions, victims' severe underreporting of incidents to police, and the inconsistent collection of offenders' cultural origins in data sets, levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander domestic violence and abuse are likely underreported.

To date, strategies to reduce disproportionate levels of violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have predominately relied on the culturalisation of western violence prevention programs, where an Indigenous spin is put on a successful mainstream program or service<sup>i</sup>. This approach assumes that the factors associated with violence against women are fundamentally the same in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Many factors such as gender, age, substance misuse, unemployment, and childhood abuse and neglect are common risk factors for violence by both Australian males<sup>ii</sup>

This understanding is a crucial step towards negotiating support for a genuine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander violence prevention framework for men and boys. Any effective strategy to prevent and reduce domestic violence and abuse must recognise the historical context and acknowledge the effects of foundational violence, structural violence and ensuing cultural breakdown, as well as the impacts of alcohol and other drugs, mental health issues, poverty and overcrowded housing. The cumulative impact of dispossession, child removal, family breakdown, substance misuse and exposure to violence has given rise to a cycle of intergenerational trauma.

In 2017 White Ribbon Australia with the Healing Foundation commissioned a paper outlining the background, evidence and insights towards an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander violence prevention framework for men and boys<sup>iii</sup>. This has formed our response in addition to the Changing the Picture framework by [Our Watch](#).

Colonisation has had a significant impact on the perpetration of men's violence against women and children in Indigenous communities in Australia. Here are some ways in which colonisation has contributed to this issue:

- Disruption of traditional cultural practices.
- Trauma and intergenerational trauma.
- Economic disadvantage.
- Racism and discrimination<sup>iv</sup>.

## SOCIOECOLOGICAL MODEL

The socio-ecological model<sup>19</sup> can inform what is needed to address Aboriginal male violence towards women and children in Australia by highlighting the multiple levels of influence that contribute to violence. The model recognises that violence is not simply an individual behaviour, but is shaped by factors at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. By understanding these factors, prevention strategies can be developed that address the root causes of violence and promote positive change.

At the individual level, prevention efforts may focus on changing attitudes and behaviours through education and awareness-raising campaigns. This may involve partnering with Aboriginal men about best ways to expand notions of healthy relationships, gender equality, and non-violent conflict resolution skills.

At the relationship level, prevention efforts may focus on strengthening relationships between Aboriginal men and women, promoting respectful communication, and addressing power imbalances. This may involve promoting healthy communication skills, reducing substance abuse, and addressing mental health issues.

At the community level, prevention efforts may focus on creating safe and supportive environments that promote healthy relationships and prevent violence. This may involve promoting community ownership and participation in prevention efforts, addressing social determinants of health such as poverty and unemployment, and supporting community-led initiatives to prevent violence.

At the societal level, prevention efforts may focus on addressing broader social factors that contribute to violence, such as gender inequality, racism, and colonialism. This may involve advocacy and policy change to promote gender equality, social justice, and cultural safety for Aboriginal people.

Overall, prevention efforts that are informed by the socio-ecological model must take a holistic, multi-level approach that addresses the underlying causes of violence and promotes positive change at all levels of society.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. That men's violence against women and children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities be addressed through an action plan, with colonisation consequences as a primary driving and reinforcing component**

## 2 PRIMARY PREVENTION

*The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*, which included a specific focus on reducing violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children recognised the need for culturally appropriate and responsive services and programs, as well as the importance of working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This plan set a tone, but it lacked substance and practical steps to reinforce how primary prevention would be undertaken. The action plan requires further work to reinforce the importance of primary prevention such as structural changes, education and awareness-raising programs and how to strengthen the justice system to support perpetrators<sup>vi</sup>. White Ribbon Australia suggest that the action plan addresses:

- Structural changes that address the root causes of violence and abuse against Aboriginal women and children, including poverty, social exclusion, and racism need to be at the core of future frameworks. This includes improving access to education, employment, and housing for Aboriginal communities. For example, the Close the Gap campaign, which aims to address the health and social inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the high rates of violence and abuse. The campaign calls for action on a range of issues, including education, employment, and housing.vii/ We need to call out racist and sexist attitudes and social norms in future primary prevention programming.
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- A primary prevention plan to provide adequate funding for services, campaigns and programs that support Aboriginal men and boys to addressing the drivers of violence like; condoning of violence against women, rigid gender stereotypes, unequal relationships between women and men and boys and girls.
- The development of a national education and awareness-raising campaign that promotes respect for Aboriginal women and children by understanding the role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys.

An effective framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys to prevent and reduce domestic violence and abuse needs to include the following critical elements:

- the many strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men must be supported to lead work with men and boys, and reconnect men to their core cultural practices and protocols as a crucial factor to creating change
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women should be involved in the design and development, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the framework
- prevention strategies must be positioned within broader community strategies that address intergenerational trauma through individual, family and community healing approaches – drawing from both local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and western therapeutic practice
- all work should be developed in partnership with communities through a genuine co-design process that respects and supports local cultural governance and self-determination, and empowers communities to drive change
- a focus on collective wellbeing should be supported through referral pathways to trauma-informed holistic health and wellbeing services<sup>viii</sup>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

2. **An Australian wide primary prevention framework developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys to stop violence before it starts.**
3. **Primary prevention programs are placed-based and value local knowledge, culture and resources.**

### 3 ENGAGING ABORIGINAL MEN AND BOYS TO WOMEN'S SAFETY

Engaging men and boys in the prevention of domestic violence and abuse, including programs that address the role of cultural beliefs and attitudes in perpetuating violence<sup>x</sup>. There are a range of successful programs and initiatives that have been developed to support Aboriginal men in Australia to stop violence against women and children but what is needed is a nation-wide and culturally appropriate campaign in partnership with organisations like White Ribbon Australia.

Primary prevention of men's violence against women in Aboriginal communities across Australia involves a range of interventions that aim to address the root causes of this violence before it occurs. This includes strategies that promote gender equality, challenge harmful gender norms, and promote healthy relationships and respectful communication. It is important to have Aboriginal men be part of the solution-making process because they can provide cultural knowledge and understanding, as well as help to build trust and engage men who may be resistant to change. Additionally, involving men in prevention efforts can help to shift social norms and promote positive masculinity, which can ultimately reduce the prevalence of violence against women in Aboriginal communities.

Engaging Aboriginal men in violence prevention efforts can help to empower them as agents of change and build their capacity to promote gender equality and non-violent relationships. Work needs to focus on masculinity and developing positive adult male role models. Engaging men in prevention efforts can promote positive models of masculinity that are respectful, caring, and non-violent, which can ultimately reduce the prevalence of domestic violence and abuse<sup>x</sup>. Finally, Aboriginal men can provide cultural knowledge and understanding that is essential for developing effective and culturally appropriate prevention programs that meet the needs of their communities and any action plan needs to value this approach<sup>xi</sup>.

Examples of place-based primary prevention work connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to women's safety:

- The 'No More' campaign, developed by the Aboriginal Domestic violence and abuse Prevention and Legal Service (FVPLS) in the Northern Territory. This campaign involves a range of community-led initiatives and events to promote cultural change and encourage men to take responsibility for ending violence against women<sup>xii</sup>.
- The 'Living Respectfully' program, developed by the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre in Western Australia. This program involves a range of community-based workshops and events to promote respectful relationships and challenge gender-based violence<sup>xiii</sup>.
- The Men's Tjilirra Movement, The Men's Tjilirra Movement is a cultural revitalisation project that works with Aboriginal men in remote communities in Central Australia. The project aims to address the root causes of violence against women by promoting cultural practices and strengthening men's sense of identity and purpose. The project also provides training in anger management, communication, and conflict resolution.
- The 'Dadirri' program, developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. This program involves a range of cultural activities and mentoring relationships to support young Aboriginal men to develop positive relationships and address issues related to violence and trauma<sup>xiv</sup>.
- "Mums Can Dads Can" and "Girls Can Boys Can" primary prevention program through the Tangentyere Domestic violence and abuse Prevention Program. This program looks at the inter-generational change in attitudes and beliefs that allow gender inequality and violence towards women to continue. They engage in truth telling as a key part of the program<sup>xv</sup>.
- The 'Community Norms and Pathways' project, developed by the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress. This project involves a range of community-led initiatives to promote positive norms and values around gender, relationships, and violence<sup>xvi</sup>.

## ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Barriers to Aboriginal men engaging in attitudinal change when it comes to violence against women can include cultural and historical factors, as well as socio-economic factors. Some of the key barriers to attitudinal change among Aboriginal men include:

- Historical and intergenerational trauma: Aboriginal people have experienced significant trauma as a result of colonisation and forced removal from their land, which has had a lasting impact on their mental health and wellbeing.
- Cultural factors: Some Aboriginal men may hold beliefs or attitudes that perpetuate violence against women, such as traditional gender roles or beliefs that women are inferior to men.
- Socio-economic factors: Aboriginal people are more likely to experience poverty, unemployment, and social disadvantage, which can contribute to stress and frustration and increase the risk of violent behaviour <sup>xvii</sup>.

### **Recommendations**

- 4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys are actively involved in stopping violence before it starts.**
- 5. Primary prevention programs involving men and boys should be based on a long-term funding and be evidenced-based.**



## References

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<sup>i</sup> Weston 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Wundersitz 2010

<sup>iii</sup> [White Ribbon Australia - Towards an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander violence prevention framework](#)

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Domestic and Domestic violence and abuse Clearinghouse. (2017). Unpacking the Complexity of Domestic and Domestic violence and abuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. Sydney: University of New South Wales.

<sup>v</sup> [The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their children 2010-2022](#)

<sup>vii</sup> [Close the Gap Report 2020](#)

<sup>viii</sup> The Healing Foundation and White Ribbon Australia with Adams, M, Bani, G, Blagg, H, Bullman, J, Higgins, D, Hodges B, Hovane, V, Martin-Pederson, M, Porter, A, Sarra, G, Thorpe A and Wenitong M (2017). [Towards an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander violence prevention framework for men and boys.](#)

<sup>ix</sup> Goodmark, L. (2018). Decriminalising Domestic violence and abuse: A Balanced Policy Approach to Intimate Partner Violence. NYU Press.

<sup>x</sup> Patriarca, C., Sharman, L., & Siggers, S. (2018). Aboriginal men's violence and the cycle of trauma. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(4), 605-621

<sup>xi</sup> McFadden, M., Dyson, S., & Pearson, G. (2019). Abusive Men and Indigenous Domestic violence and abuse Programs in Australia: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 1-28

<sup>xii</sup> Munro, K. (2019). Engaging Indigenous men in preventing violence against women: A Northern Territory case study. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 52(1), 106-122.

<sup>xiii</sup> Blagg, H. (2017). The 'Living Respectfully' Program: Working with Aboriginal men to address domestic violence and abuse in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 61(12), 1332-1347

<sup>xiv</sup> Cripps, K., Martin, K., Williams, R., & Harris, M. (2019). 'Dadirri': Developing respectful relationships with young Aboriginal men. *Australian Social Work*, 72(4), 421-432

<sup>xv</sup> [Tangentyere Domestic violence and abuse Prevention Program's primary prevention projects](#)

<sup>xvi</sup> Pringle, K. G., & Fraser, J. A. (2019). Community Norms and Pathways project: An Indigenous-led community response to domestic violence and abuse in Central Australia. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 43(6), 564-570

<sup>xvii</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Retrieved from [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework](#)