Sidebyside

We speak with the partners of ANROWS Research project Advocacy for safety and empowerment: Good practice and innovative approaches with Indigenous women experiencing family and domestic violence in remote and regional Australia.

How did the idea of this project develop?

**JP & RH** We have had previous relationships with the three partners and the three locations. Each of the women’s specialist services is community-based, long established in their respective communities, and influenced by progressive political values. We had seen them experiment with, implement and try to figure out a wide variety of different engagements alongside and with Indigenous women. That is, the services with Indigenous women have tried to carve out a social and political space for dialogue with each other.

We were keen to work with the partner services to further develop a special sort of ‘space for action’ where really challenging issues about violence and identity, and ways of doing self, family, community and future, are explored, contested, argued about and so on.

**DW** One of the core questions all organisations must ask themselves is “Is what we are doing working?” This has been difficult in central Australia as we have few services to benchmark against or to easily compare with our own. It is also tempting to look only at the differences, the otherness of violence against Aboriginal women, rather than looking at what, from a feminist framework of service, does work and is working. Most project evaluation is myopic, it looks purely at outputs rather than outcomes. This project was born from a need for big picture foundational research, from which we can launch more nuanced program evaluation.

**You have dedicated your career to responding to and preventing violence against women and their children. What brought you here?**

**MW** A commitment to and passion for social justice and equity, with recognition that the majority of those subjected to gender-based violence are women and children and that this has a significant impact on their access to social justice and equity. This was highlighted to me when working as a school teacher where I had the opportunity to see first-hand how challenging it was for children to achieve and develop as ‘whole’ individuals when they were living with and experiencing violence in the home.

The women, their mothers, struggled to meet the most basic of family needs with the constant threat of violence and actual violence that would at times uproot the family to seek emergency shelter and safety. I wanted to be able to work with the whole family so I found my way to the ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service.

**AM** I arrived in Alice Springs to work for Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women’s Council in July 2008. I was aware of the Council’s reputation in working to reduce the devastation of petrol sniffing in central Australia. For most of my career I worked in the South Australian and Australian Public Services delivering projects and initiatives aimed at strengthening Indigenous governance and leadership and access to employment.

Since commencing in NPY Women’s Council I have seen that domestic and family violence in the NPY region is a major corrosive element that is undermining all good gains and outcomes that are being achieved by the women of our region.

If we want to see lasting change, as a region, we must reduce this issue of domestic and family violence to such a point that other empowering services and initiatives can be embedded into, reconstruct and even transform our communities. Developing strategies and approaches to allow men to support other men in addressing their personal use of violence against women is also a key future strategy that requires a population wide approach.
As per the project outline, the project will focus on Indigenous women's perspectives of outreach, advocacy and safety planning in remote and regional women's organisations. How will your research approach these three key service challenges?

**JP** Part of the project will involve working with our partner services to consider how they have met these key service challenges. How have the services been influenced by Indigenous women as clients, staff, Board members and community members? What has helped and what hasn’t helped? How can knowledge be consolidated, improved upon and shared?

**RH** Another component of the project will ask what modes and types of ‘tool’ (or method) might be developed by and with Indigenous women in different contexts to self-assess, prioritise and provide feedback to service providers, and which might be replicable?

Furthermore, it will ask which features of women’s specialised services - within a wider struggle for Indigenous self-determination and rights - are important to Indigenous women, which are not; and why and how are they important.

**What are some of the vitally important culturally responsive aspects of researching/working with women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?**

**DW** The key to researching in Central Australia is to allow enough time and space to have meaningful conversations that are unhurried, and that conversations are allowed to take their own direction. We need to be mindful that we do not impose linear processes onto circular conversations.

**MW** Many Aboriginal women in the ACT have spoken of ‘research and consultation fatigue’ when research has been conducted with them. It is also important that there is a sense that the research will somehow make a difference and that any recommendations can be realistically implemented.

**RH** Yes, the services and researchers will be working with their existing networks, existing relationships, and with existing skills and capabilities to strengthen local knowledge. At the same time, the research will be a re-assessment of practices, of existing evaluation and feedback tools. It will ask: “Can these be developed further? Are there other ways in which Indigenous women can participate in shaping and leading the responses they want?”

Central to the project will be consideration of Indigenous women’s perspectives on what is successful support in response to family and domestic violence, for what circumstances and contexts; and how they have changed, or have remained constant, over time.

**AM** NPY Women’s Council was formed on the principle that women have something to say about caring for our children and families, about our aspirations to have good lives. This commitment to be honest and consistent in our conversations and advice are important aspects of the Council’s approach to leading and leadership.

**How do relationships and partnerships between researchers and service providers contribute to the evidence base on violence against women and their children?**

**DW** Research exposes the fundamental core of your service by asking, “does it do anything?” This is a risky process that requires an existing relationship and the ability to develop that relationship in an ongoing, safe, and secure way. However, it also provides knowledge sharing and the ability to get fresh eyes on services that have existed for a long while. Through that creative tension comes growth and learning.

**RH** For the services as well as the researchers, this project creates an opportunity to do the research in a different way – each location is different but the challenges are similar.

**JP** How are practices such as advocacy, outreach and safety planning working in these different environments and with the different interests and objectives raised by Indigenous women?

**AM** NPY Women’s Council seeks to improve the lives of families, which means that every member of a family requires consideration and support. In this regard we look forward to re-setting or re-framing our approach to further improve our service model as well as to empower men in our region to speak to other men (and young men) about reducing violence against women.

The ANROWS grant has provided a rare opportunity for these busy services to have a closer look at what is happening on the ground, at the core of their services, in a spirit of mutual enquiry and shared commitment.

Of primary interest to the services is the question of how well they serve Indigenous women, and the engagement of these services with Indigenous women as clients, colleagues and community members. How are practices such as advocacy, outreach and safety planning working in these different environments and with the different interests and objectives raised by Indigenous women?