Advocacy for safety and empowerment

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(in association with Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council Family and Domestic Violence Service, the ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service, and the Alice Springs Women’s Shelter)

For nearly 25 years debates have persisted about the universalising claims made by non-Aboriginal feminists and responses to domestic violence against Aboriginal women. Underpinning debates were deeper arguments about history, knowledge, representation, racism and white privilege. These lend deep influence to our approach to the research and with our research partners.

Our current research focuses on the “DV sector” – a broad landscape of social, legal and community services that has been washed by the same debates. We ask what the arguments have meant to services, what has been learned over those intervening years and how that learning has been applied in practice, involving both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women as they face family and domestic violence; a landscape subject to considerable change, debate and activity.

Our partners, three women’s specialist services - Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council Family and Domestic Violence Service, the ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service, and the Alice Springs Women’s Shelter – have worked in this service landscape for 30 years of so, providing crisis intervention and to varying degrees, court and legal support and advice. Central to all three services has been a commitment to a victim-centred approach that gives primacy to safety and involves both outreach and advocacy. Our research provides an opportunity to document and map how services have responded in their approach and practice to the influence of Aboriginal women – as workers, Board members, volunteers, clients and as community members. In keeping with the sector’s commitment to reflection and learning, the project also seeks to identify how services have and can continue to assess how well they are meeting their own goals and those of their clients, most notably Aboriginal women.

Our paper discusses our research approach as a continuation of that ongoing learning and interaction. We focus on one component of the project. An iterative participatory process helped identify what Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women (as clients) value in their involvement with the three services, their ideas for how these might be used in evaluation, and what was learned. We touch on the implications of this approach for services, their ongoing interactions with Aboriginal women and questions of service alignment, integrity and performance management.