

Family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) women experience both far higher rates and more severe forms of family violence compared to non ATSI women. ¹

The complex violence that ATSI people experience is linked to the intergenerational and ongoing trauma of European settlement and disposition of land, language and culture.

“From an Aboriginal perspective, the experience of family violence must be understood in the historical context of white settlement and colonisation and their resulting (and continuing) impacts: cultural dispossession, breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law, systemic racism and vilification, social and economic exclusion, entrenched poverty, problematic substance use, inherited grief and trauma, and loss of traditional roles and status (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria 2008).” ¹

Family violence is worse in Aboriginal communities

Family violence is a serious problem for many ATSI communities around the nation. Available statistics show that:

- ATSI people are between two and five times more likely than other Australians to experience violence as victims or offenders²
- ATSI women are five times as likely to experience physical violence, and three times as likely to experience sexual violence, than other Australian women in the previous year²
- ATSI women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence related assaults than other Australian women²
- According to the Australian Productivity Commission, ATSI women are twice as likely to die as an outcome of family violence compared to other Australian women²
- Family violence is a major contributor to children being removed from their families. ATSI children are over nine times as likely to be on care and protection orders and ten times more likely to be in out of home care than non-ATSI children²
- Without intervention, the cost of violence perpetrated against ATSI women, is estimated to be \$2.2 billion in 2021-22, including costs associated with pain, suffering, premature death and health costs²
- Family violence is a greatly under-reported crime.² ATSI women have lower reporting rates than non-ATSI women and are known to face specific and additional barriers to reporting
- ATSI women are five times more likely to be victims of homicide than other Australian women. More than half (55%) of these homicides are related to family violence²

Possible consequences of family violence

Family violence can cause physical and psychological harm, particularly to women and children. It can pass from one generation to the next – some children experience family violence and become violent adolescents due to learned behaviour and a feeling that their world needs controlling.

Family violence can affect physical and mental health, and lead to social and community issues, including homelessness.

Some of the physical effects for victims of family violence include: ²

- Physical injuries
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Pregnancy complications, miscarriage and maternity-related depression

The mental health effects are also significant, and include:

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Self-harm
- Substance misuse
- Suicidal tendencies

Some victims of family violence also die.

Family violence weakens family and community structures. Victims of family violence may find it difficult to go to school or get a job, or they may turn to crime. Most ATSI women in prison have experienced some form of family violence.

Family violence has many causes

Family violence is worse in ATSI communities than other Australian communities for many reasons. European contact destroyed many Aboriginal communities, and the effects of this trauma are still being experienced.

Frustration and stress can lead to violence in any community, but Aboriginal communities face particular stressors, such as:

- loss of land and traditional culture (some cultural practices lessened interpersonal violence)
- breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law
- lack of respect within families, and from younger generations towards Elders
- loss of identity
- racism

A range of other issues may also contribute to family violence:

- high rates of imprisonment
- poverty and financial problems
- unemployment
- poor health
- lack of education
- single-parent families and early parenting
- substance and drug abuse
- poor or inadequate housing
- social isolation
- lack of access to services

Specialist services are available

Many ATSI people do not report family violence because they fear discrimination, racism and lack of understanding from support services. It is important to get the help and support you need.

Some ATSI communities have safe houses, which provide short-term accommodation for women and children escaping violence. While at the safe house, women are free to decide whether they want to report incidents of domestic violence.

There are support services especially designed for Aboriginal women experiencing family violence, such as the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria (FVPLS Victoria) [<http://www.fvpls.org/>] Tel. 1800 105 303.

Remember...

- Family violence is a serious problem among ATSI communities around Australia
- Family violence (also called Domestic Violence) takes many forms: it can be physical, sexual, psychological, economic, spiritual, or legal abuse
- All forms of family violence are illegal and unacceptable
- Anyone may be abusive, including your partner, siblings, grandparents, step-parents, cousins, nieces and nephews, and carers

Where to get help

Call 000 if you are worried about yours or someone else's safety

Sexual Assault Crisis Line: 1800 806 292

Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria (FVPLS Victoria)

Provides assistance to victims of family violence and sexual assault, and works with families and communities affected by violence.

Phone: 1800 105 303 Web: www.fvpls.org

Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria Web: www.dvrcv.org.au/support-services/national-services

1800 RESPECT (National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line)

Phone. 1800 737 732 (24 hour information and support) Web: www.1800RESPECT.org.au

Lifeline Phone: 13 11 14 Web: www.lifeline.org.au

MensLine Phone: 1300 78 99 78 Web: www.mensline.org.au

References

1. VicHealth. (2011). Violence against women in Australia: Research summary. Retrieved January 31, 2017, from https://www.ourwatch.org.au/MediaLibraries/OurWatch/Images/ourwatch_reporting_on_a-ts_family_violence_aa_v1.pdf
2. Our Watch. (2014). Reporting on Family Violence in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Communities. Retrieved January 31, 2017, from https://www.ourwatch.org.au/MediaLibraries/OurWatch/Images/ourwatch_reporting_on_a-ts_family_violence_aa_v1.pdf