

“ABORIGINAL WOMEN’S VOICES: THERE’S POWER IN THAT” – FINDINGS FROM THE MUDGIN-GAL YARNS

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With Alana, Debbie, Donna Y1, Donna Y3, Jamie-Lee, Jess, Joan, Kowana, Kylie*, Lucy, Mary-May*, Melissa, Mona*, Stacey, Tahlia*, Tanay and Tracy*



Mudgin-Gal Yarns – October 2025

Report on the findings from four yarning circles held with Aboriginal women at Mudgin-Gal in Redfern about domestic and family violence and the response of the service delivery system



Our voices need to be amplified

Donna Y1

Cover image:

'Women's Journey' by Vicky Golding

Artist's statement:

This artwork reflects the deep cultural, spiritual and ancestral connections of Aboriginal women. Each symbol and pattern tells a story – of healing, resilience, strength and journey.

At its heart is the women – a sacred space of gathering, sharing, and passing down knowledge across generations. From this Centre flows the healing energy of women, shaped by Country, culture, and community.

The lines and pathways represent the journey of women – their life paths, challenges, ceremonies, and transformations. Dotted throughout the motifs of strength, grounded in land spirit, and kinship ties.

More than just visual expression, this artwork is a living story – a celebration of women's roles as nurturers, leaders' knowledge-holders, and protectors of culture.

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*** Pseudonyms have been used for the women who indicated that they did not want to use their real names. Y1 and Y3 is used where two women with the same name participated in different yarning circles, to indicate that they are different women speaking.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The yarning circles were held at Mudgin-Gal (Women's Place) on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation in Redfern. The work to analyse the yarning circles and write this report was also conducted on the land of the Gadigal people, with work also completed on the land of the Darkinjung people. We pay our respects to Gadigal and Darkinjung Elders past and present. These lands have never been ceded. This is vitally important to acknowledge given the ongoing effects that colonisation has had on Aboriginal peoples; it is not possible to understand and address domestic and family violence without understanding this context and impact.

In making this acknowledgment we pay tribute to the many Aboriginal women who have worked tirelessly over many years to address domestic and family violence, and the many Aboriginal women who have spoken about their experiences of violence and racism in the service delivery system. In their extensive work they have not necessarily been heard and we hope that this report assists in amplifying the voices of Aboriginal women and services like Mudgin-Gal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Jane and Ashlee thank the 17 women who participated in the yarning circles and spoke so generously about their experiences and ideas for change. Your expertise shines through this report. In particular, Jane (the non-Indigenous researcher) thanks the women who participated for trusting her with their stories and teaching her so much. The report and other outcomes from this project would simply have not been possible without the participation of these women.

Jane and Ashlee thank the Mudgin-Gal Board and Associate Professor Marcelle Burns for supporting this work. Your encouragement, interest and support was greatly appreciated. We also thank the Law Faculty and Impact Studios UTS for the continuing development of this work to ensure that it reaches a wider audience and indeed 'amplifies' Aboriginal women's voices!

Due to various events the project has taken longer to complete than anticipated. However, it is important to acknowledge that 'good' work, particularly with Aboriginal communities and small organisations, often requires more time. It is also important to acknowledge that people working in the domestic and family violence sector, in whatever capacity, are often constantly responding to events, inquiries and other requests that impact on the ability to plan and conduct work in a neat timeline. This was true for Ashlee at Mudgin-Gal, and Jane at UTS.

Taking time also generates significant benefits that should not be underestimated. It provides deeper thinking time, ideas can percolate, deeper listening can take place. We hope that this is reflected in this report and other outcomes from the project.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from four yarning circles conducted with Aboriginal women at Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Women's Centre in Redfern, Sydney, NSW in 2023-2024. The focus of the yarning circles was to explore urban Aboriginal women's experiences of domestic and family violence¹ and the service delivery system. It was intentionally a project focused on providing women with a space to voice their experiences, to suggest ideas, and to describe visions for 'what would have made a difference'. Its aim was to assist Mudgin-Gal to document important information about the needs and experiences of the women it assists, and in this way to assist Mudgin-Gal by providing an evidence base to support future funding applications and involvement in policy and law reform processes.

Mudgin-Gal ('Women's Place') is a community-based Aboriginal service that is managed and staffed by Aboriginal women, located in Redfern. It is a leader in domestic and family violence prevention and promotes an anti-violence message in all its work. Mudgin-Gal commenced operation in 1992 and 'aims to build the capability of Aboriginal women and families through the delivery of skills-based programs, whilst also providing a safe space for vulnerable women'.² The services provided are multiple. Mudgin-Gal provides a drop-in centre where women can simply drop in to access and use its facilities (eg laundry, telephone, shower, clothing, fresh food delivered by Oz Harvest, internet etc) and provides a wide variety of programs including parenting programs, playgroups, and art classes. While domestic and family violence forms a core component of the work of Mudgin-Gal, it had not, until 2024, received any dedicated funding from any government to do this work.³ This is despite the fact that Mudgin-Gal has won awards for its work (it's 'Black Out' campaign won the Violence Against Women Prevention Award in 2004) and been recognised as a 'best practice model for addressing violence in urban Aboriginal communities' by the then Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.⁴

It is well established in research, government reports, official statistics that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are significantly overrepresented as victims of domestic and family violence, and experience more serious and chronic levels of violence including homicide.⁵ Numerous studies have been undertaken about Aboriginal women's experiences of family violence. However, few studies have specifically focused on urban Aboriginal women's experiences of domestic and

¹ We use the phrase 'domestic and family violence' in this report. While there is some discussion in the literature that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities prefer the term family violence, with some also having a preference for domestic violence for its focus on women, it became clear in the first yarn that the women participating tended to use domestic violence when talking about an intimate partner, and family violence when the violence involved broader family members.

² <https://www.mudgin-gal.org.au/about/our-story> (accessed 6 October 2025).

³ See Tahnee Jash, 'This community organisation is helping women spot hidden signs of an abusive relationship: Here's how you can too' (ABC News, 24 October 2024) <https://amp-abc-net-au.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.abc.net.au/article/104513906> (accessed 6 October 2025).

⁴ Bronwyn Penrith, 'Seeding Hope', presentation (no date). Copy on file with authors.

⁵ In relation to domestic violence assault see BOCSAR (<https://bocsar.nsw.gov.au/topic-areas/domestic-violence.html>). In relation to homicide data see Senate, Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, *Missing and Murdered First Nations Women and Children* (Australian Government, 2024) [2.27-2.28], NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team, *Report 2021-2023* (DVDRT, 2024) xix, xxvii-xxix. See also data collated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/population-groups/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people> (webpages accessed 6 October 2025).

family violence and the service delivery system, and how this might be different to those who reside in regional or rural areas, or indeed in different urban areas.⁶

It is well established that we need to understand Aboriginal women's experiences of domestic and family violence and the service delivery system within the context of colonisation and its ongoing impacts. However, what that means in practice remains wanting – as is documented in this report, Aboriginal women continue to report and complain about the racism that they experience when seeking help, the additional hurdles that they are made to comply with, the inconsistencies in service responses and the need for culturally appropriate services. Aboriginal women have continuously voiced these concerns with researchers, government bodies and inquiries over decades with little changing. In the yarning circles, women challenged Ashlee and Jane about what we were going to do with their stories, what was hoped to be the outcome, given this general lack of change or follow-through. While the outcome of a small project such as this is necessarily also small, we do hope that it has provided an avenue through which to facilitate voice, and, critically, to focus attention on the need to listen to women speaking in their own voices and to insist on change. It also provides evidence for Mudgin-Gal to continue its important work.

Background to the project

In 2021 Ashlee Donohue and Jane Wangmann participated in a webinar (organised by the Criminal Law Cluster, UTS Faculty of Law) in which they were discussing different issues around criminalising coercive control in NSW. Following that webinar Ashlee indicated that she was interested in working with researchers in the Law Faculty at UTS.⁷ Ashlee and Jane met in December 2021 and talked about what Ashlee and Mudgin-Gal were interested in researching. It was in this meeting that Ashlee spoke about the need to build more evidence about the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in Redfern and surrounding areas in terms of domestic and family violence and the service delivery system. Key for Ashlee was the need to be able to build up data and evidence that can be used by Mudgin-Gal in future submissions and grants. The topic of the research and its methodology (yarning circles) were proposed by Ashlee.

UTS Social Impact Grant

The project was successful in obtaining a UTS Social Impact Grant in 2022, with matched funding from the Faculty of Law, UTS.

⁶ For important exceptions see Shawana Andrews, 'Cloaked in strength – how possum skin cloaking can support Aboriginal women's voice in family violence research' (2020) 16(2) *AlterNative* 108-116; Inge Kowanka et al, 'An Aboriginal family and community healing program in metropolitan Adelaide: Description and evaluation' (2009) 9(4) *Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin* 1; Melissa Lucashenko & Odette Best, 'Women bashing: An urban Aboriginal perspective' (1995) 14(1) *Social Alternatives* 19; Margot Rawsthorne, 'Helping ourselves, helping each other': Lessons from the Aboriginal women against violence project' (2014) 16(1) *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* 7. More generally see Larissa Behrendt, 'Aboriginal urban identity: Preserving the spirit, protecting the traditional in non-traditional settings' (1995) 4 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 55. Making a similar point in Canada see, Sharon Goulet, Lisa Lorenzetti, Christine Walsh, Lana Wells & Caroline Claussen, 'Understanding the environment: Domestic violence and prevention in urban Aboriginal communities' (2016) 11(1) *First Peoples Child & Family Review* 9.

⁷ It is worth noting here that the UTS Law Faculty has an established relationship with Mudgin-Gal with Aunty Bronwyn Penrith being an instrumental member of Waran Gi-Pyalla (the Indigenous Graduate Attributes Working Party). Mudgin-Gal has hosted several yarning circles with UTS Law Faculty staff to promote cultural awareness and to inform their teaching.

The purpose of the project was described in the grant application as:

The project is a collaborative one; working with Mudgin-Gal in order to build an evidence base about Aboriginal women and children's experiences of family violence and engagement with services in an urban setting (here the particular locale of Mudgin-Gal – based in Redfern but with clients coming from across Sydney). The overarching purpose of undertaking this work is to enhance Mudgin-Gal's capacity to respond to government submissions and grant processes drawing on the unique position of Mudgin-Gal as 'the only women's centre run by and for Aboriginal women' in NSW. Mudgin-Gal's strength lies in the way in which it has 'evolved naturally in direct response to the real needs of real people from within its own community'. Various programs and initiatives undertaken by Mudgin-Gal have attracted awards and citations. Despite this success Mudgin-Gal's 'future remains uncertain' as a result of inadequate and short-term funding. This means that Mudgin-Gal is reliant on a small number of permanent staff and volunteers to do much of its important work. This project will assist in building Mudgin-Gal's capacity to respond to various government inquiries and funding opportunities by drawing together and building readily accessible evidence base and templates/ tools to assist in participating in these processes. This project aims to ensure that Mudgin-Gal is able to effectively engage with government policy and law reform processes in a sustainable way and a way in which the unique experiences of Aboriginal women experiencing family violence in the urban context is conveyed.

The yarning circles

Four yarning circles were held at Mudgin-Gal across 2023-2024, facilitated by Ashlee and Jane. Yarning circles are an accepted method for conducting research with Indigenous communities - it is a culturally appropriate and safe method for building relationships and sharing information.⁸

The first three yarns were with different groups of women. The final (fourth) yarning circle was a feedback yarn where the women who participated in the first three yarns were invited back to discuss the main themes that had emerged in the earlier yarns and to discuss what they wanted to do with the information gathered. All the yarns commenced with a light lunch, enabling those who attended to circulate, eat, and generally chat to warm the space and welcome people. This was also a time when Ashlee and Jane could talk with participants and answer any questions they might have about the project. After eating, participants were invited to sit down for the yarning circle. Yarning circles by their very nature are designed to be flexible and free-flowing with little structured questioning; however, these were also yarning circles with a 'purpose'⁹ designed to open discussion about urban Aboriginal women's experiences of domestic and family violence and engagement with services. To facilitate these yarns 'with a purpose', Ashlee and Jane had a series of prompts to guide discussion (for a copy of these see Appendix A).

⁸ Petah Atkinson, Marilyn Baird & Karen Adams, 'Are you really using yarning research? Mapping social and family yarning to strengthen yarning research quality' (2021) 17(2) *AlterNative* 191; Thalia Anthony, Gemma Sentance & Larissa Behrendt, "'We're not being treated like mothers': Listening to the stories of First Nations mothers in prison' (2021) 10 *Laws* 74; Dawn Bessarab & Bridget Ng'andu, 'Yarning about yarning as a legitimate method in Indigenous research' (2010) 3(1) *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 37; Lynore Geia, Barbara Hayes & Kim Usher, 'Yarning/Aboriginal storytelling: Towards an understanding of an Indigenous perspective and its implications for research practice' (2013) 46(1) *Contemporary Nurse* 13.

⁹ Bessarab & Ng'andu (above n 8) 40.

The project adopted a place-based approach,¹⁰ focused on Aboriginal women living in Redfern and surrounds who had experienced domestic and family violence and/or who assisted women experiencing domestic and family violence. The project centred Mudgin-Gal and the place-based work that Mudgin-Gal is engaged in on a daily and long-term basis. The critical importance of this approach and the need to listen deeply is emphasised extensively in work on Indigenous methodologies.¹¹

The yarning circles went for approximately 90 minutes each. All yarning circles were recorded with the permission of the participants. Most participants were happy to use their own name, however a small number wished to remain anonymous (these women have been given a pseudonym in this report).¹² The resulting yarns were transcribed and analysed thematically by Jane in consultation with Ashlee. These initial themes were then discussed with returning participants in the final yarn. A total of 17 women participated in these yarning circles, with six returning for the feedback yarn. Most of the women who participated had lived experience of domestic and family violence and/or had family members and friends who experienced domestic and family violence. Several of the women also worked in domestic and family violence and related support services. This meant that they frequently spoke from both personal and professional experience. The women who participated in the yarns ranged in age from 20-65, and the yarning circles were mixed in terms of age groups enabling important intergenerational yarning that not only provided support, but expressions of shared (sometimes unchanging) experiences, and the considerations of the impact of family and domestic violence over time and across generations.

Approval for this project was granted by UTS Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC): ETH22-7389. A key component of this work was a research agreement Jane signed with the Mudgin-Gal Board that recognised data sovereignty.

What is particularly significant about this project and the methodology adopted in it was its ability to facilitate and support Aboriginal women who might otherwise not be heard in various law reform and policy contexts to tell their stories and speak about their own recommendations for change in their own voice. As much as possible this report, and the associated podcasts,¹³ have sought to prioritise women's own voices and accounts – to enable each unique voice to come through.

¹⁰ See Mirium Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman, et al, 'Dadirri: An Indigenous place-based research methodology' (2022) 18(1) *AlterNative* 94; Australian Human Rights Commission, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* (2020) 97 where 'place-based' approaches are identified as one of the principles to guide reform. For general discussion of place-based approaches see Victorian Government, *Place-based approaches: A guide for the Victorian public service*, (no date).

¹¹ See Ungunmerr-Bauman (above n 10).

¹² Five women have a pseudonym in this report. Three women selected their own pseudonym at the time of the yarn, and one woman was allocated one. One woman did not indicate whether she was happy to use her own name or not, we have therefore provided her with a pseudonym. In the final yarn, two women were happy to use their own name, however, this report reflects their position at the time of each yarn when they provided their consent to participate.

¹³ Ashlee Donohue and Jane Wangmann have worked with UTS Impact Studios to turn the yarning circles into a series of podcasts as an important outcome from this project. The possibility of a podcast was raised in the final yarning circle and the women who participate were very enthusiastic about this output.

YARN 1	Yarning circle 1 was held on 27 October 2023. Seven women participated in this yarn (in addition to Ashlee and Jane) with two women indicating that they wanted to remain anonymous.
YARN 2	Yarning circle 2 was held on 24 November 2023. Two women participated in this yarn (in addition to Ashlee and Jane) with one woman indicating that she wanted to remain anonymous.
YARN 3	Yarning circle 3 was held on 16 February 2024. Eight women participated in this yarn (in addition to Ashlee and Jane) with one woman indicating that she wanted to remain anonymous, and another not indicating either way on her consent form, as a result her responses have been anonymised in this report.
YARN 4	Yarning circle 4 was the feedback yarn. Six women returned to Mudgin-Gal for the feedback yarn. All women who participated in this yarn were happy to be identified by their name. This group brought together some women who had been in the same previous yarning circle, as well as women who had participated in different yarning circles. This yarn was structured around the themes that had been identified through the initial three yarns to see whether women agreed or disagreed with those themes, and whether there was anything they wanted to add, explain or change. Also discussed in this final yarn was what outputs women wanted to see from this project in addition to this report.

FINDINGS FROM THE YARNING CIRCLES

In this section of the report, we detail the findings from the yarning circles across five thematic areas:

1. Talking about family violence
2. The importance of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations like Mudgin-Gal
3. The current service delivery system
4. What made a difference?
5. Looking forward: recommendations for change

As much as possible we have sought to prioritise the women's own voices in discussing these themes.

In many ways the issues that women raised in the yarning circles are not 'new' (for example around inadequate and harmful responses from the police, child protection and housing) but that, in itself, is significant. The extent to which the problems discussed are longstanding issues – the extent to which they are well known but have not been addressed – is critical to recognise if we want change in this area.

When reading this report then, it is important not to focus on whether this information is 'new', but rather as a reader to ask and reflect on why these issues and complaints have not been addressed and what that means for whether and how the violence Aboriginal women face in their daily lives is prioritised in our society.

Clearly the repetition of these complaints over time and across generations points to the need to emphasise accountability of government and other services.

Talking about domestic and family violence

The yarning circles were focused how women experienced the service delivery system, what made a difference at the time, and what suggestions they had for change in the future. Although not the central focus, there was also necessarily some discussion about the nature of domestic and family violence, and how women's experiences of it impacted on women and their lives and relationships. Also integrated into this discussion were differences for the Aboriginal community generally and in a community like Redfern, and an important discussion about the experiences of children.

The nature of domestic and family violence: talking about coercive control

Women described relationships that involved a **broad spectrum of physical and non-physical abusive and violent behaviours**. They described relationships that were characterised by power and control, or coercive control. Women detailed physical and sexual violence, financial and economic abuse, verbal abuse, social isolation, and technology-facilitated abuse. Two described how this behaviour became

normalised and it wasn't until after they had left the relationship and got older that 'you can see, you realise the difference, you could see what yourself is ... you know what you're worth and that stuff is not...normal' [Tanay].

Donna and Stacey in the final yarnning circle spoke about financial abuse, psychological abuse and control that they did not appreciate at the time was being used to control them. For Stacey it was only when she saw a domestic violence counsellor that she gained an understanding about her experience:

Yes, so just things like that, or, oh, what are you wearing that for? Why are you going to get your nails done? Who are you rooting? Things like that, yes. ... Until you grow up and go to a DV counsellor, or something like that. That's when you sit down and you realise and you're thinking, 'wow, I didn't see that'. You know, I was sharing a bank account with my partner, and he was taking the money out every week, and I was saying, 'I'm going to the police this week, I'm going to the police next week'. You know, but never did.

Stacey

It's just a look... Or just a something. I knew one fella that every time he knew he was going to get into his woman, he took his watch off. And you think, 'oh, Jesus, here we go. What am I going to do?' It's little things like that that... If they want to talk coercive control, it's little things like that. It's not all the berating and the abusing. That's all part of it but it's just little subtle things like taking your watch off.

Ashlee

Especially with that coercive control and they've just got to give them that look. ...

I've just recently actually had some flashbacks. Because all this domestic violence... And I didn't even address this until now, but the coercive control. So I bought a car when I was 30, brand new car, first car, just got me licence. And then I met this man. Within three months my new car was gone. He sold it. I didn't even have my keycard

Donna Y3

He just never gave me any money. Yes, I could shop once a month or something like that, but he'd handle everything. Everything was second hand.

Mona

Mum started seeing the signs. He would always turn me towards him when he was talking or when I was talking, he wouldn't let me face mum. He wouldn't let me... He'd try and sever the relationship a lot more between me and mum and stuff like that, keep me away from her. There were a lot of signs that mum picked up on and kind of like started saying to me. And, so, at first, I was, kind of like, 'you're being ridiculous'. I thought it was a normal type of thing, like, I was totally in love, like, he could do no wrong in my eyes. Yeah, and then it wasn't until he knocked out my front teeth and stuff like that that I started realising, 'oh, I am in a DV trap thing'. Yes, but I had to have a lot of other people, like, it took me until I left him, when, after he raped me, it took me six years before that, to leave him altogether. And, like by that time, I don't have most of my friends and everything, I lost them.

...

To save myself getting in trouble all the time [from him] ...I went off FaceBook, I went off like all social media. I didn't speak to friends, I didn't message friends or anything like that, because I didn't want to risk him getting the wrong idea or taking it out on me. So like, yeah, you're cut off from the world, you've got no one. The only person I had was my mum by the end of it. And that's what they like to do, because then you've got no choice, but to either stay or...

Jess

Impacts of experiencing domestic and family violence

The impacts of experiencing domestic and family violence were extensive.

Kowana described the **profound impacts** of violence on oneself and relationships with other people, emphasising the isolation that is frequently part of the experience:

And a part of the violence is the isolation, that restoring, like you're saying, restoring relationships that were damaged by the DV. And being isolated, that's really important, too. And like you were saying too [referring to something Jamie-Lee said about trauma and its impact], from trauma, our brain's fucked. You're lucky to function.

Women described feeling **shame** and how this prevented them from telling anyone: 'it's the shame', 'because I was so young and I didn't know that then ... [I knew of some services like Mudgin-Gal] ...but I was embarrassed more than anything' [Tanay]. Others noted that it also depends on 'where you are in your journey' where you might not 'ring anyone. You're just going to cop it and ride it out' whereas at a different point in time you might be happy to talk about it and seek help. Stacey and Ashlee also described how they later became **angry with themselves** for putting up with it.

Ashlee: And you get angry with yourself because you think... For allowing someone to treat you so badly.

Stacey: I think that now. I see my ex and I think, how the fuck can... How could I sit there and let him do that to me? And degrade me like that.

Many of the women in the yarning circles were indeed at a point in their journey where they were happy to speak about their experiences, not just in the yarning circle, but more widely in the community. This **speaking out can be important for other Aboriginal women**, especially younger women, to know that they are not alone. For example, Stacey is very open about her experiences and her mother Debbie described how young women seek Stacey out to talk to her: 'I'm telling you, there's a lot of females in Waterloo and Redfern that come and talk to her, because she's been there, done that. And she's verbal about it. ... So they come to her, they know, yes. It's unreal'.

Experiencing violence and abuse from an intimate partner also has **consequences for relationships with other people**. For example, Mona described the profound impact violence had on her and how that impacted on her trust in people:

I used to give people the benefit of the doubt, but now they don't get three goes they only get two, and then, you know, that's it. And I think that's just a bit of a protective thing, because violence, it's not only domestic violence but you get, cop all sorts of violence, you know. You even inadvertently cop it off your kids and things like that, or people you might know that are having a dig and that. ...Yes, I guess I just learnt over the years, no. And people who I think don't understand me, white people, whatever, I just leave them with it now, because like Ashlee said before, 'that's your problem'.

Experiencing violence also led some women to **engage in harmful behaviours**, like gambling and drug use. For example, Mona described that after her violent relationship ended, she started gambling:

Like I sort of hit rock bottom...Well, it was the first time I'd ever stepped into a pub [to play the pokies] and that, you know...That's it, you're hooked. It's the worst [gambling], I don't know, It's got to be up there with drug addiction, I think. Yes, it's a bad habit...

But I know that that's when it started, and I often when I reflect back on it, that it started like that, yeah. So, yeah, I think having those services too is good, because it's a ripple effect from DV, you know.

Grief and life-long impacts – loss of the relationship, family, friends and community

Many described the **impact of domestic and family violence as one of grief** that was multidimensional and permeated many aspects of life.

Grief linked to the emphasis the women placed on recognising that domestic and family violence has a life-long impact. That it is not something that is timebound, or something that ends when the relationship ends, rather it is something that is lived with, and reflected on, over their lifetime even if they are not directly experiencing violence or abuse. As Donna Y1 said succinctly: '[it] doesn't have an expiry date'. The continuing nature of the impact of domestic and family violence was often contrasted by the women with the approach of some mainstream services who would 'close your file' once they had provided some safety measure such as changing locks or providing CCTV failing to recognise how domestic violence is ongoing. Ashlee explained:

...that guilt [about staying] gets carried along your whole life. And you think that you've healed and you're over things, but it's little things like that that trigger you. And people don't talk about that enough. I say it all the time. People think, 'okay, well, if they're in jail you're safe', or, 'if you've left them, you're safe' and 'everything's okay'. It's not okay. The healing is lifelong.... It doesn't just happen. And that guilt, especially when you get older and you start reflecting on your life...

Mona, an older woman, spoke movingly about how the violence she had experienced from her former partner had come back to haunt her: 'like I have these nightmares sometimes, and dreams. Because of what he used to do'.

Mary-May explained that Mudgin-Gal assists a lot of elderly women who have experienced long term domestic violence and now that their partner is deceased, they do not know what to do: 'So it's sort of like she's accepted being bashed all that time and not getting help. Feared that he's going to probably do worse. But he's gone now. So it's you know, trying to get an elderly lady feeling good within herself.'

I think grief with Aboriginal women and families is something I... I spoke about healing, holistic healing centres and stuff. I think that is a huge issue within itself is our people don't know how to heal. There might be The Healing Foundation and Link-Up and stuff, but that's focused on the Stolen Generations. But what about domestic violence or family violence?

Jamie-Lee

Because there's grief in there. You lose a relationship or leave a relationship, that is a form of grief. And yourself, you know, so there are elements in that ...

Kowana

Black women will always live with grief. Their whole life. We just have to have tools to work out how to...

Navigate it.

Donna Y1

Yes. There will never be a day where we live without grief.

Jamie-Lee

Consequences of reporting violence: negative responses from family and community and fear of Black deaths in custody

Women described the lack of support and abuse that they might receive from other family members and the wider Indigenous community when they report their partner to the police if he was also Indigenous. This included family members and other members of the community making excuses for the perpetrator, siding with the perpetrator, and blaming the woman for what happened.

The **negative responses from family and community** means that when an Aboriginal woman reports violence she risks losing the community supports that she thought she could rely on. This was another aspect of grief and loss, as Donna explained:

When you try to leave. Like, you might be good friends with his sister, and you build up a friendship with relatives or the mother-in-law, you might get really close. And then you want to leave or he starts up and they're sticking up for him. And if you want to ring the police, you know, they're dirty on you. But it's that community... How community responds. I used to get comments like, 'oh, but he's a good father'. 'Oh, he was crying the other day'. 'He misses you'. He might be a good father but look what he done to me, sort of thing. So, that community pressure, I guess, sometimes. And that's just, not everyone but sometimes that's an issue where you feel like you should get back for the sake of the kids. Or, you know, because everyone else wants you to be together.

Mona, Donna Y3 and Ashlee all described incidents where other people (friends, family or members of the community) had witnessed the assault perpetrated against them but **did not intervene** or help. Donna's (Y3) sister-in-law witnessed her brother assaulting her

and his sister walked back and said, 'you might fucking do as you're told now'. And I was like, 'I better just do as I'm told because I've got no backups'. I thought the sisters would help me or protect me or have a go at him and say, 'don't do that, what'd you do that for?' But they were sticking up [for him]... Like, he had every right to do what he did because I wasn't co-operating.

Mona similarly described an incident that was witnessed by some relatives who:

were just standing there like it was some sort of freak show... Just watching ...Yes, it was like it was entertainment. When I look back on it, it was just so wrong, yes. One of them could have just called the police. But they didn't, yeah.

Because the reality is that if you call the police, especially if you've got an Aboriginal partner, you can go home, and then you will be then subjected to violence from their family. And then, that's what then turns into the family violence. And then, if they go to jail, things can be said like, 'if anything happens to him, you're going to get it'. So there's that threat of violence, even whilst they're away, on you from the family.

Or 'how could she do that'?

Donna Y1

Yes. And then, you get called a dog and that becomes another level of violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women from, you know, Aboriginal people, really, if your partner's Aboriginal.

Ashlee

Fear about Black deaths in custody remains a continuing and powerful factor that women weigh when deciding to report the violence that they are experiencing:

Kowana: And even as Black women, we've got... For Black men, deaths in custody is real. You ring them, God forbid something like that happens. You're going to be blamed and you're going to carry that

Tanay: It's either our safety or their safety in custody. How to do we balance that? We can't.

Children's experiences of domestic and family violence

And I think children being seen as individuals, not as an extension. I think 'cause then if their support... And then they're supported appropriately, an expectation that the mother knows what to do or what is best for them. Yes, I think, most of the time, but understanding that's another burden for the mum as well. But we get... And for Aboriginal woman, it needs to be culturally safe.

Kowana

Many of the women discussed in detail the **impact that domestic and family violence has on children**. Kowana explained the importance of shifting our understanding from children witnessing violence to the realisation that children experience it:

People think 'oh the kids are just witnessing it', but they're actually experiencing it. That's not just they're seeing it, they're experiencing it as well. ...They walk on eggshells just like the woman does. They can sense when it's coming into a bash-up. They know, they see, so it's actually their bodies are also going through those emotions just like the women. So, it's not that they're witnessing it, they're actually experiencing it too.

A small number of women spoke about the guilt that they felt for having stayed with the father of their children or having encouraged their children to have an ongoing relationship with their father despite the violence. Mona explained how she had thought it was important for children to have a relationship with their father. This had been ingrained in her and was also shaped by the dislocation from family and community driven by colonisation and the removal of children. Similarly, Jess (who was in the same yarning circle with Mona) said:

The things I remember. I think, 'oh, jeez, what was I doing, what was I thinking?' Because there's nobody there to guide you. My thing was I didn't know my father, so my kids were going to know their father, right or wrong. You know. And the same with you [talking to Mona], your mum had it in your head you've got keep your kids linked to their father. And we have that, and sometimes it's to our detriment without us even knowing.

Ashlee explained this feeling of guilt in more detail:

We don't talk about enough, is the guilt, the aftermath of guilt. Because I still suffer guilt because the father of my kids got into heavy drugs, and at the time I didn't think, because he wasn't doing it in front of the kids. You think in your mind that they're immune to it. But then the ramifications happened afterwards, and like my son now, he's getting into drugs. And so, the guilt, because you think, well, if I wouldn't have stayed or would have left before any of that. And I always think, if I'd left before this, and so that guilt gets carried along your whole life.

Jess explained how one of her children has started replicating her former partner's violent behaviour and the guilt that she feels about that:

Because I know that [my child] wouldn't have the behaviour [they have, they] wouldn't behave in that way if [they] hadn't been around [their] father, if it hadn't been like taught to [them] to be like that.

The women discussed how women and children can have different needs and this needs to be recognised with different supports provided. For example, Kowana described how:

For me, my coping mechanism was disassociation. So, if I'm disassociating, I'm not going to pick up that my daughter's anxious at this time or just before he comes home. We're not going to have the tools to be able to identify those things. So, that's why children need to be supported. And like I said, for Black kids, it needs to be culturally safe, first and foremost. We're coming here, getting the support, so there's no need for DCJ involvement or any of that bullshit or fears of you know mandatory reporting.

Many of the women described and emphasised the need to try to ensure that children remain supported and cared for in families and communities as much as possible. These can be small things like caring for children while the woman gives a statement to the police (rather than the children having to accompany her to the station), as Tanay explained:

And years ago, when I did ring the police, they're like, 'do you want to come to the police station and make a statement?' I said, 'no, I can't, I've got my kids here'. And I wasn't going to take my kids... Even though as much as I want to make the statement, I just didn't want to take my kids to the police station. It was late at night and cold outside, you know. We should have a safe spot for the kids to, and for myself to sit.

Kowana emphasised the need to focus on prevention with children:

We need to really start doing the prevention space. That's why it's important to have those. We need support for our kids, because if we're going to raise kids to not endure violence, which I think every parent wants, then we need to have those prevention strategies in place. And money to be generated to where it needs to be.

Kowana continued and asked: 'That's what I'm saying, that early intervention. How long are you going to take intervening? Start preventing'.

The critical importance of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations such as Mudgin-Gal

Throughout the yarning circles women spoke about the importance of being able to access Aboriginal community-controlled organisations like Mudgin-Gal. At the same time, some women acknowledged that sometimes they need (and prefer) to access a mainstream service due to confidentiality/privacy, potential conflicts of interest, and availability in the context of underfunding of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

Benefits of being able to access Aboriginal community-controlled organisations

The benefits and importance of being able to access an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation were multiple and included cultural safety, not having to 'explain yourself so much', being understood, and that this meant that 'you feel comfortable' (Mona).

Negative experiences with mainstream services have long-lasting impacts in terms of help seeking, as Mona explained:

And like the experiences I've had, I don't even want to deal with white people anymore, unfortunately, yeah. I don't think they're all bad. But as far as in the business context and that, I don't even want to go there, because you just understand each other.

In relation to Mudgin-Gal several benefits were mentioned, including 'doing work differently' around domestic and family violence which can be important in assisting women to talk about the issue in a non-confrontational way, such as:

- Being a 'drop in' centre: the ability to simply drop in and have a yarn 'it's breaking down the stigmas of when Aboriginal women walk into a place to get help' [Ashlee].
- Not having criteria that you needed to satisfy to access the service: 'We don't have ... criteria [at Mudgin-Gal]. It doesn't matter what you're going through. It doesn't matter who you are.' [Ashlee].

The wide variety of programs that Mudgin-Gal offers means that women and children access the service for parenting, playgroups or art classes. As Jess explained: 'that's why I love coming to the play group and art and everything because this is where I'm really connecting with other people and stuff like that ... I feel better when I come here... I feel welcome and wanted'. This feeling of support and feeling wanted and comfortable was in stark contrast to how Jess and others described their engagement with DCJ and other services. Donna Y3 also spoke incredibly highly about the arts programs offered at Mudgin-Gal: 'And having that, coming in for art or something else, because Mudgin-Gal is known for that, it's like that priceless sort of service'.

The flexible and non-judgmental way in which these programs are provided and the skilled staff employed at Mudgin-Gal means that:

they can then identify if one of the women are talking, so they'll hear then they might pull them aside and say, 'is there anything else we can help you with?' Well, not putting pressure, because our thing is we don't chase clients. We want people just to come in organically and use the centre, and that's what we're finding with these workshops, that that's helping us do that' [Ashlee].

Because if there's one Aboriginal woman in a refuge full of non-Aboriginal women it's not going to be easy, like, somewhere that you consider real safe. You'd stay there because you have to. But not even safe, like, culturally appropriate is better terminology. Don't you reckon?

Ashlee

Yes, 100%. Definitely, culturally appropriate. Because you do, you feel like you're being judged, you know. That incident with me with the police, you just felt like, 'ah, you're just a piece of trash', you know.

Mona

Mona explained how this might work during the art classes when someone might start talking about family violence and the person running the classes:

can say, 'oh, yeah, you can get that downstairs'. Because I've had a couple of women disclose things you know, and I've just passed it on. And it's just helpful. And people, you can tell, you can identify when they've got a lot of trauma and that, you know, being one myself. But they can probably see that with me too. But, yes, I can see it with the women too.

Mona confirmed how important this approach is to her as an older woman:

the stuff that they do here at Mudgin-Gal, like the groups and that. When you've been through the DV and that, and like I was saying, when mine passed away you're still dealing with it. So, being able to come to friendly places and still mixing and everything, it supports you. Yeah, it definitely supports you.

Given the benefits of Mudgin-Gal and the services provided Mona felt that it needs to be promoted more: 'needs to be out there a bit more, people need to know about it more, you know'.

Recognising the unique (and extended role) or Aboriginal women working in domestic and family violence services

Several of the women who participated in the services were themselves employed in domestic and family violence services or provided support of some kind through their employment. They reflected on how being a worker working in community is different for Aboriginal women – it extends outside regular business hours. This is very different to non-Indigenous workers, as Ashlee pointed out to Jane 'when you walk out of uni and go home you're probably not going to run into people'.

Many women employed in a domestic and family violence service may also be dealing with, or have dealt with, family violence in their own and extended families. This is an integral feature of many Aboriginal worker's lives:

But, generally, the stuff that I deal with here is happening in my family too. You know, like...With DCJ, I've had to look after my niece for a couple of weeks. There's just things like that that not everyone knows or I've made business of it, but this is the stuff you advocate for impacts your life too as an Aboriginal person. Even if you're rich it will still impact your life.

I'm sure Jessica Mauboy has got family that's going through all the stuff we're talking about too. You know like, it doesn't divert just if you've got money or anything. It still trickles down in families, hey. And that's the whole thing of colonisation and ...Intergenerational trauma. All those things, I call it a family heirloom that nobody wants but it's just given to us. [Ashlee]

You're that person that, because they know you and they trust you, they'll tell you. And you've got to figure out how to support them. Even though it's not your core business. You're the person that they're connected with, that service and you're the person that the know. ...People form those bonds and connections and that might not be your position or your expertise but they just...I get it at the pub.'

Donna Y3

That's why I stopped going out. I'd go in the toilet and I'd have this young... 'oh Aunty Ashlee....'

Ashlee

Some participants noted that if you are an Aboriginal woman working in a domestic violence service it can also make it difficult to report what is happening in your own personal life.

Consequences of the underfunding of Aboriginal services

Despite wanting to access Aboriginal services and noting the key benefits that such services provide to Aboriginal women seeking help for domestic and family violence, sometimes they are not available due to the lack of resourcing of these services. Kowana reflects on the consequences of this:

Mudgin-Gal [and another service] they're the places you actually feel safe to go to, but they're so under-resourced.... Aboriginal women services are so under-resourced, that women do come here, prefer to come to Aboriginal services that have to be referred to different services because of, they don't have the funding.

And at the end of the day, a Black woman's got to navigate white services when really she wants to just go to a Black service to have the whole wraparound service. I think that's where the government and funding bodies really get it wrong. Especially, Aboriginal women have the highest stats when it comes to... We're 30% more at risk of being hospitalised. But we can't even have a service.

Mainstream services remain important to be able to access

At the same time, participants also recognised that there was a place for non-Aboriginal or mainstream services to assist Aboriginal women experiencing domestic and family violence. The reasons for this included the need for privacy and confidentiality and to avoid conflict of interests:

Some people don't want to talk to Aboriginal people because it's like they are in my business. [Tahlia]

Some Aboriginal people don't want to talk to another Aboriginal person because of fear of word gets around... in some cases, having a non-Aboriginal person is better. [Donna Y3]

Women explained that sometimes they are unable to access an Aboriginal service because they have a relative who works there and that would create a conflict of interest. This was particularly an issue with the Aboriginal Legal Service and other dedicated Aboriginal legal services.

In this context there was discussion about how Redfern is a tight-knit community which means that 'everyone just knows what everyone's doing. You can't get away with anything' [Ashlee] and that there are connections everywhere which 'is a part of being Aboriginal' [Mona]. This has both positive and negative implications for women experiencing domestic and family violence. Some women like Jess spoke about the way this meant that you couldn't necessarily speak to someone or access an Aboriginal service because the person might know who you are talking about or be related to them:

I find that if you talk about someone, they're related to someone or they're someone's friend or someone's cousin. You can't really talk about anyone around these areas without someone knowing who you're talking about. So, even if you're seeking help it's quite worrisome to seek that help or advice of someone, because you don't know...

A small number of women also spoke about how they had had been assisted by mainstream services, and particular individual non-Aboriginal workers for many years and through that time had formed longstanding, trustful and respectful relationships. For example, Tahlia had first started relying on a mainstream service when she was a teenager and had continued to do so when she became an adult because of the relationship she had built with a worker and that service more generally.

The important message here is the difference between mainstream services and workers who work well with Aboriginal people in a culturally-informed way, and those that do not.

The current service delivery system

Unsurprisingly a considerable amount of discussion in the yarns focused on problems with, and complaints about, the current service system designed to respond to domestic and family violence. Almost all the women complained about the police, and this intersected with complaints about housing, and child protection.¹⁴

All the women spoke about experiences of racism from professionals working within the current service delivery system. This racism was frequently explicit and was experienced from almost all services – police, housing, child protection, family law and some mainstream support services. In other ways racism was implicit and structural in the ways in which those services operated that failed to take account of Indigenous people, experiences of domestic and family violence and the community more generally. Stacey explained the attitude and approach of many services:

so like when Indigenous people come to the front counter ...it was a different attitude [compared to how service providers interacted with non-Indigenous people] ... They didn't know how to speak to [Indigenous] people properly. You know, it's horrible.

Women spoke about various racist assumptions that impacted on their engagement with a variety of systems and services. These included assumptions that relationships involving Aboriginal people are always violent – as Donna Y3 explained 'Police just think that's how our relationships are' – and assumptions that Aboriginal people use drugs and alcohol. For example, both Mona and Donna Y1 described engaging with state and federal systems regarding children. Mona was described in DCJ files as an 'alcoholic' even though she does not drink, and the family consultant in Donna's (Y1) matter tried to order her to have hair follicle testing because she appeared 'nervous and jittery', a response that would otherwise be seen as a normal reaction to a legal proceeding which had immense importance to her. Donna Y1 said 'They judged something fierce'.

While many services (police, child protection, housing and others) have Aboriginal identified positions, these were viewed by many of the women participating in the yarning circles as 'tokenistic' (Mary-May). Position holders did not appear to

¹⁴ In the yarning circles women often described the various government services – housing, child protection and police – by previous names such as DOCS (Department of Community Services), Housing, both of these government services are now sections/units within the Department of Communities and Justice. In this report these services are left in the language that the women used to describe them, and in fact the longstanding usage of these terms as descriptions of those agencies is itself important.

advocate for community and did not speak up about the issues and racism experienced by the community when engaging with these services. As Debbie said,

They should be fighting for us, them workers'. Instead, people employed in these roles take on the position of the service provider and appeared to be scared to speak out because their job's on the line. They talk too loud, they're gone. They're shown the door.

The response from the police

A considerable amount of discussion in the yarning circles centred on the inadequate, and sometimes harmful, response that they received from the police when seeking help around domestic and family violence. Women spoke about the discrimination they faced, assumptions that were made about their relationships, the lack of assistance provided to them, and that ultimately going to the police did not make them safer. As Mariann said in the final yarn 'it seems like there's more support for the perpetrator than the victims'.

I believe it's underlying racism [the police] either don't take it serious or they just think that's how our relationships are

Donna Y3

I don't feel safe or anything with them'; 'I'm actually terrified to call them for help

Tahlia

You feel like you're not worthy of being helped

Tanay

I won't even call the police. I will just not. Like they, years ago they refused to take my statement...they just treated me like I was the problem.

Lucy

Almost all the participants **characterised their experiences with the police in terms of racism**. Donna described it as 'underlying racism, systemic racism', Tanay said she felt discriminated against when she sought help, many described that they felt 'judged' by the police, and Tahlia said that she felt like she was the 'suspect' rather than the victim. Stacey described how she had reported a domestic violence incident she witnessed to the police and the police took almost three hours to arrive. She felt that the police reaction as 'oh well, it's just another Black Gin'. Tahlia went on to describe how she felt let down by the police, that they did not understand violence and had low levels of cultural awareness.

Some women described a **constancy of police involvement** in their lives. For example, Tahlia described how at one stage the police would regularly attend their house for a range of matters including domestic violence, banging the door down and frightening the children. It is not just the constancy of involvement but also its scale. Stacey described how 'the other day at Waterloo [I saw the police] arresting a kid, and the whole station was there, you know, just to arrest a kid. It's pathetic.'

Donna Y3 and Mona spoke about experiences with the police when seeking help around domestic and family violence that had occurred a long time ago. What was striking about their stories was how vivid they remained, and how those experiences continued to shape and frame how they viewed the police. A significant thing to emerge out of Donna Y3 and Mona sharing their past experiences was that they were echoed by the younger women in the room who said 'It hasn't really changed that much' [Tahlia]. This **lack of change or improvement in police responses** to Aboriginal

women seeking assistance for domestic and family violence requires urgent attention, and needs to be recognised by the service delivery system as a long standing and entrenched problem that requires cultural and systemic change.

A couple of women described in detail **the work that they had to do** – gathering evidence, finding out information, including making a complaint about inaction or poor treatment – **just to get the police to do what they are required to do**. Mona, for example, gave a detailed account of how she tried to get the police to assist a relative:

I went around to see her [my relative], she was laying down in the room on her own on this old mattress. And, so, I got her up, and I said, 'look, come on, I'll take you down', and I went down the police station. And it was out [western Sydney].. ...when I took her to the police station there was a white female officer, and she was standing there, like, this girl was puffed up and um she was tapping the pen when we was trying to get the help. And it was like she was totally not interested. And I had to ask her, I said, 'look, would you mind, stop doing that [tapping the pen]? Because this girl has just experienced such and such'. And they didn't want to help. And I found it ironic because they had a big DV sign plastered across the front of the station...

So, they didn't want to help, and then, as I was walking out – I knew that you could contact the Attorney General's with regard to police – and so, I said, 'well, that's all right, I'll contact the Attorney General'. And then, when I said that the sergeant, the desk sergeant made them go after us and took a statement off her and had the bloke arrested in half an hour. Yeah, so, it was really bad.

Kowana similarly described how she had to chase the police to find out when her ex-partner was being released from gaol and where he was going to be housed on release. She ended up finding out that he was going to be housed 100m from her house even though she had an ADVO that prevented him from being near her and the children. Stacey recounted a similar experience in the third yarn when housing was going to locate her ex partner next door to where she was living. Kowana reflected:

Yes, you have to [do all the work], because they're [the police] useless. And I'm a Black woman with Black children. At the end of the day, the police don't care. That's reality. And that's the reality we live with.

In response Tracy said 'And that's the saddest thing is that most Aboriginal women would feel like that. And that's scary'. And Tanay noted that while many Aboriginal share this feeling and experience 'most Aboriginal women don't have the courage to do that [the work to get the police to do their job]'.

The issue of perpetrators of violence being released on bail or from corrective services to live in the same area as the woman and her children was raised by several women. They noted that women were not informed that the person was about to be released, nor where he was going to reside, and no safety plans were put in place to assist the women and children. Tanay wryly observed 'luckily by community I was told'.

The **risk of facing criminal charges for unrelated matters** or being **misidentified as the offender** were also issues that shaped Aboriginal women's decisions whether to report to the police. As Ashlee explained:

Or they're scared they might have a little fine or something. 'I'm too scared to go to the police, just in case, you know, they might arrest me.' Because Aboriginal women get arrested for the smallest of things as opposed to any other nationality in this country. So, if you're facing DV and the choice is, 'oh, I might get arrested or he's going to get arrested', you don't take that choice, especially for the kids. It's not safe for Aboriginal women here, really anywhere...

Lucy had been misidentified as an offender and was trying to obtain legal advice and representation to defend the AVO application made against her. She felt that she was misidentified because the perpetrator had managed to convince the police that she was the aggressive person, and the lease was in his name. Jamie-Lee explained:

And I think it kind of goes back to the justice system and how the police look at things. How trauma can come out in reactions, can be misconstrued where someone could be verbally and mentally abusing you, and because you might throw something out of reaction to try and get away, you become the person that is actually the victim becomes the perpetrator.

In the context of the new coercive control offence¹⁵ Ashlee explained the concerns of Indigenous women about misidentification:

That's something with that coercive control, that's not going to work for Aboriginal women, because the majority of Aboriginal women, you get that little bit of courage when the police are there and you start saying whatever it is you want to say just to get it off your chest. Even if you are covered in blood, you'll still say it. And then if they've got a checklist and it says, who was verbally abusive, and they say, the female, who was threatening violence, the female. Who's going to get charged? The female.

Two women also spoke about the way that they **received less or no protection because their current/former partner had been a police informant** [Jess and Donna Y1], or that they were 'used' by police to obtain information about their current/former partner on offences unrelated to family violence [Ashlee]. As Jess explained:

I just said the perpetrator's name. They just closed the book and they wouldn't even ask any more questions. They were writing everything down until I said his name...once they realised who he was, basically he was known to them, he helps them out. He's a dog, basically...Yes, informant. So because of that they had no interest in pursuing any kind of AVO or anything for me and my kids.

Donna Y1 described how she tried to report a breach of her ADVO to the police but once she mentioned the offender's name the police response changed, 'they were looking after him, but not my safety'.

When the police did take action in response to the violence reported to them, some women highlighted how they were **not provided with referrals** and had **not been kept informed about the progress of their matter or provided with support to engage with the criminal legal system**. Tahlia spoke about how when she was due to go to court police would come banging on her door asking whether she was coming to give evidence, issuing a subpoena for her to attend, threatening to report her to DCJ – in summary she felt like the police treated her like she was the perpetrator:

¹⁵ Crimes Act 1900 (NSW) s 54D.

[No one came when I was at court] to say 'are you okay? How are you feeling? You're going to court soon'. Do you know what I mean? [they don't talk to you] in a proper way, just 'you've got a subpoena, here. Hurry up, you've got to go to court tomorrow'. Do you know what I mean? They don't have any these, be like, 'oh, you've got to prepare yourself for a month or so'. They don't have anything like that either, to make you feel comfortable to be around them [the police].

Stacey echoed this:

They chuck you in this little fucking DV room ... And then waiting for that court case report to be mentioned. That anxiety gets to you. Because you think, 'oh, I just want to go. I just want to go. I don't know what's going to happen'. You know.

Tahlia described how she has left court on several occasions because of this lack of support, only to have the police contact her threatening to report her to DOCS. She noted that the police will be calling her 20 or more times to find out why she has left court yet 'when I'm sitting in the court ... When I'm sitting in the Downing Centre, they don't even come and reassure me if I'm okay.'

Poor experiences with the police have longstanding and immediate impacts. Tahlia spoke about '*hating*' the police and despite trying to encourage her children to be positive they fear the police because they have seen how the police treated her. Donna Y1, whose partner was a police informant and the police failed to take action on her report of domestic violence concluded: 'We're already, you know, antipolice, but that just blew me away'. Kowana evocatively captures what this negative experience with the police means: 'I'd get flogged 20 times before I'd ring the police again.... That's what I think police officers don't understand. Actually, it takes a lot to get to that point [to call them]'

Interactions between the Police and DCJ (child protection)

Engagement with the police inevitably means engagement with child protection, and 'fear [about] mandatory reporting'.

The interactions between these systems means that the possibility that police will notify DCJ 'weighs heavily on your shoulders to make that decision [to report to the police]' [Tanay]. Tanay went further explaining the irony as a mother being worried about reporting to the police when they are not the person using violence:

I think when you report to police as a Black woman, well for me, anyway, DCJ is always at the back of your mind. So, that's two racist systems that you've got to try and navigate if you do go and report as a Black woman.

Kowana

And you're too scared to even call the police. Be like, no, they want to get them involved when it's not even us that's doing the, you know, the violence or anything. But we're still the ones that have to look out for the DCJ.

And we're scared that our kids are going to be removed, because somebody else wants to be violent, which is ridiculous. And while the police are at your door, they're mentioning DCJ. Can you just help me before you even say any of that crap? Help me and my children feel safe.

In a similar way Tahlia described her interactions with child protection that even though she was the victim of violence and abuse she felt like DCJ 'treated me like I deliberately put my kids through this shit'. Tanay summed this up as 'an extension of the violence'.

How might the police response be improved?

Given these poor responses from the police, some women made suggestions about things that might improve the police response to Aboriginal women reporting domestic and family violence, including that **police should provide more referrals**.

- **There should be an Aboriginal worker located at every police station 24/7 who is trained in domestic and family violence**

I think at the police station there should be Aboriginal worker 24/7 for women, for Aboriginal women and children, so they could sit in the room with them and you know express how they're feeling, without being judged or feeling judged. There's someone there waiting for you with [an] open hand ... Someone should be in the station waiting for you, Aboriginal worker. So, they go and they're seeing all white faces and feeling judged just walking in. Without speaking to anyone, you're already judged.

I think if you're going to have someone there, trained or specialist in DV, because you know it's all good to have an Aboriginal worker there. But are they going to be able to respond to a woman who's fleeing violence and children?

Kowana

Because you go to the police station and there's just all white people there. I'd go there at one-o'clock in the morning for help, and it's all white people. And you're just sitting there waiting for help you know. But if you have someone there 24/7, Black fella, go sit in a room, make a cup of tea and that...some sort of safety.

Tanay

- **The provision of alternative care arrangements for children when women report to the police**

like if [a woman without supports] calls the police, who's going to sit with her while she's writing that report, because aunty [name] is going to have them babies? Because your not going to want them, you know. That's where it's really important, I think, the police have a round-the-clock worker that, you know, is a safe person for women that don't have all the support or only the one support. And if you've got children, if you've got one support, as a protective mum, that support goes to your babies, first and foremost.

Kowana

- **Deep cultural awareness training needed for the police**

there should be more cultural awareness of being in our communities. Not just coming to our community and just think that they know

Tahlia

The response from child protection

The approach of DCJ, responsible for child protection,¹⁶ was also the subject of considerable discussion, with women explaining that there was often daily contact from DCJ but **very little practical support** that accompanied that contact, and that DCJ **focuses on the mothers rather than the fathers (despite the fact it is the father who is using violence)**:

DCJ is a huge problem, especially in the DV department... because it's, you know, the women that are made to jump through the hoops and have to do all the things that you're doing. And the men just go off and they can just say, well, we want visitation, and they get their visitation. But you don't see any fathers, being-a-better-father courses, is it? ... It's all about for the mothers to do parenting courses. And, so, that's a huge issue. [Ashlee]

Many of the women reported that some or all their children, or children of a family member, had been removed from their care at some stage. Two of the women had children removed at the time of the yarn. These women were in the process of trying to have their children returned; a process that was often **inconsistent, inexplicable and experienced as racist**. Debbie felt that 'they set the mummies up to fail every chance'.

Several women described how they did not trust DCJ because of the ways that they have '**misconstrued**' things that have been told to them, and that this impacts on the extent to which they feel they can talk with DCJ in future interactions.

The **lack of positive feedback** from DCJ about what women have achieved and the progress that they are making was seen as problematic; as Jess described there was always something else she had to do:

I tick all the boxes and they go 'no, you've got three more boxes to tick'... because that's one thing, DCJ, they don't do that. They don't just sit down and say, 'you know what, you're doing a great job'. They say, 'yes, you're doing good, but this, this, this'. They can't just give you that little win.

The role of DCJ in child protection and removals, and the implications of mandatory reporting, can cause Aboriginal women to **not trust anyone when seeking help** as they are worried that they will be reported to DCJ. Jess explained how this had the effect of making you 'not trust people' as you feel you might not be able to have an open discussion about what is happening to you. Similarly, Stacey described how the prospect that your records at a service might be subpoenaed by DCJ has an impact on whether a woman will open up to the service:

[Women] are really scared to open up and say anything because a lot of shit can be subpoenaed. So, a lot of people sit back and think, 'oh, I'm not going to go to that service because they're going to subpoena my evidence'.

This negatively impacts on whether Aboriginal women feel safe to seek assistance around the domestic and family violence; who they can tell and how much.

¹⁶ While child protection is handled by a section of the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), it is interesting to note the extent to which several of the women in the yarnning circles continued to call child protection 'DOCS' [Department of Children's Services]. This was reflective of both the time period they were describing (younger women were less likely to use DOCS) but also the longevity of this acronym to described child protection.

The **way in which money is allocated in the DCJ system**, including to carers of Aboriginal children was discussed in contrast to the fact that **very little money goes towards supporting children to stay with their mothers**, or to supporting family members to care for children. Ashlee explained the irony that many children are removed because of poverty, and instead of providing money to help keep the children with their mothers 'they pay strangers'.

The way that Aboriginal women and families are **subject to interventions and surveillance in comparison to non-Aboriginal women** who are generally not subject to the same surveillance emerged in the yarns. Jess described in detail problems that her children had with head lice and the subsequent actions by DCJ. This led Jane, the non-Indigenous researcher, to reflect on how as a middle-class, educated white woman whose children always got head lice, and on one occasion very badly, was left untouched and unseen by any system intervention.

In the final yarning circle there was considerable discussion about what DCJ thinks amounts to cultural connections when children are removed and being cared for by someone else. As Debbie explained:

cultural is not just the Knockout and Aboriginal Week [or NAIDOC week] ... It's family. That's where you learn your culture. It's family, it's what your family give you. ... [Debbie explained the cultural information and protocols she gave her granddaughter when she went on a school excursion to Uluru] Yes, and I said to my lawyer, 'if these white people don't realise what's going on here', I said, 'they need Aboriginal awareness programmes going. I said, big time. Because they're not getting it'.

While problems with racism and lack of cultural understanding was also noted within the **family law system**, women commented on how this was a **better system compared to child protection** to ensure children stay with family and to enable ongoing connection with parents. The **Indigenous list** that is operating in the family law system was spoken about positively [Donna and Stacey].

The **siloed nature of services** – or the way some services respond to challenges faced by individual women as separate, discrete issues rather than as connected and related – was highlighted. Two women spoke about how services focused on concerns about their mental health or drug use, and instead of seeing them as manifestations of trauma or the impact of removal of children, focused on them as unrelated issues. This meant that services failed to address the issues that were central to the woman's experience, and ignored the way that addressing trauma might assist in the longer term.

How might the child protection response be improved?

Given the extent of contact with child protection either with their own children, or within their wider families, or for the women they assist in their work several women offered suggestions or recommendations that they think could assist.

- **Support groups should be established for women who have had their children removed so that they can share experiences and provide each other with support**

There needs to be more support around especially Aboriginal mothers dealing with DCJ and stuff like that. I think we need more support groups and stuff like that, because I believe if there was support for something like that, I would go through it. ... I'd love it if there was a support group or something where women could come and you just support each other and everything going through it... I'd like to look at starting up a group for women, because I felt like I've been very alone. I want to help our young girls that get put in my position. So, that's why I want to try and start a support group for like women dealing with DCJ or any Aboriginal mothers and stuff like that. To try and create more of a community around it. Because I think there'd be a lot less incidents of, probably, kids even going into care if we supported each other a lot more. Like. And, yeah, if we didn't feel so alone, like, a lot of us feel alone when DCJ step in and stuff like that. (Jess)

- **The need for people with lived experience to be employed by services was a general recommendation, and raised specifically in the context of DCJ**

And I think one of the biggest issues when it comes to DV, or anything really, is that when you're seeking help there's a big difference between seeking help from someone that's had any experience themselves than from someone that's learnt through textbooks. For instance, even with my DCJ worker. She's like 30, no kids... She's obviously from a very good, white upbringing and everything like that, upper class and whatever, and everything shocks her. Like everything like that. So, I thought, how can you judge my parenting or judge what I've been through when you've never been through it yourself?

Jess

- **Need for cultural understanding and appreciation of context**

Mary-May explained how Mudgin-Gal was assisting a young mum who lived in Sydney and whose child had been removed and was being cared for in far west NSW. DCJ failed to understand the cultural and financial context of requiring the mother to travel to see her child, rather than the other way around:

but they want the access visit [out west]. And then I said, 'how is that mother who's you got the access off her pay period, ... She got no money, and she can't provide for her child' because our people would want to buy... Take them shopping, buy them ice cream, whatever. And then you wonder why they're late if they get to that access. They've got no car. They're catching public transport. They might have three or four other kids with them. So you're not being culturally appropriate. So when we were doing our access, that's why we were doing it, because we [Mudgin-Gal] were culturally appropriate.

The response from housing

The availability of secure and affordable housing is recognised as an essential component of assisting women and children to be safe from violence. Despite this, women in the yarning circles spoke about how their safety had been compromised by failures in communication between housing, police and/or corrective services that meant that the perpetrator was housed close to the woman and her children despite clear risks to her safety. This often meant that the woman and her children were moved and rehoused, rather than the perpetrator of the violence. For some this meant being moved further away from their community and supports. Stacey summed up the difficulties with housing: 'Housing's just like the police'.

Kowana and Stacey both spoke about their ex-partner being relocated very close to where they were living. As was discussed earlier, Kowana described how she had to ring the police to find out when her ex-partner was going to be released from gaol, and it was only then that she found out that they were going to house him 100 metres away from her despite having an AVO to protect her from him. Stacey described how housing 'moved the ex-partner right next-door to me' despite the fact she has 'a five-year AVO on him'. In the end this meant that Stacey had to move again (not her ex-partner) and she was moved away from supports: 'I've left my mum, left my family, you know'. When Stacey complained to housing 'they said, "well, we haven't got a system that picks up AVOs" and Stacey replied 'well maybe you should'. Other women also spoke about the failure of housing to provide safety measures such as screens or to see certain safety measures as sufficient to close their files [Stacey].

The difficulty in accessing safe and affordable housing also meant that many Aboriginal women had experienced homelessness. Lucy explained how she was currently living in her car, and Jess spoke about how she had been homeless with her three children for a year. Mary-May reflected: 'Most of the women I know, their option is to live in their car with their kids [when they leave]'.

How might the housing system be improved?

Assistance with navigating systems to obtain secure, longer-term housing	Lucy who was currently homeless explained how it would be useful to have a service who could support her to navigate the various systems to obtain secure housing.
Communication between systems (that should be 'talking' to each other)	Stacey and Kowana who both spoke about how their violent ex-partner was re-housed near them recommended that ' <i>there should be a system</i> ' of communication or notification between housing, police and corrections before an offender is released and housed so that victims can remain safe.

The response from mainstream domestic and family violence services

Almost all the women who needed help around domestic and family violence had, at some time, contacted mainstream services for assistance. As has been noted

above, women recognised the **important role for mainstream services in assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women** particularly in cases where they were concerned about confidentiality and privacy within Aboriginal organisations or in small, tight knit communities. It was also recognised that the higher level of resourcing of mainstream services often meant that they could assist when an under resourced Indigenous organisation may not be able to do so.

However, there were also several **structural and institutional features of mainstream organisations that women pointed to as problematic**. These included:

- Mainstream services tend to address **singular and defined issues** rather than a **more holistic or longer-term approach**.

They do nothing for you. They just got you somewhere [safe accommodation] and then they just leave you there [without any supports or follow-up]' [Tahlia]

'So I get a phone call last week [from the service] and says, "oh hi Stacey. Your security cameras are installed. I'll close your case". Like what? It's just crazy. Like domestic violence...domestic violence doesn't just stop straight away. ... So they've closed my case because they've installed the security cameras'.... DV is there forever, it's not just something that disappears.' [Stacey]

And the other thing, too, at that time of the crisis, of you going to them, they'll help you for that short time. And then they won't do any follow up or see how you're going. Maybe down the track kind of thing, a week later or? So, we feel like, why did we even go there in the first place? They're not going to give us that support continually. [Joan]

- Mainstream services refer women to other services when they **reach capacity**, or have inflexible rules around who they can assist, but Aboriginal services will assist as much as they can.

They'll ring [the mainstream service] and want to refer to us [the Aboriginal specific service]. And then, the reason is they're 'to capacity'. But we don't look at capacity, we just deal with the crisis. And then, when we go to refer to them, they're still at capacity. So, it's just like a tick-a-box. They want to get that statistic that they... That's their liaison with our services. [Mary-May]

There was also some discussion about how competitive tendering has worked against collaboration in the sector. Related to this was the way that some larger mainstream services are more successful in obtaining tenders but then want smaller Aboriginal services to provide support and information without any financial payment. As Donna Y3 said 'They get the big bucks and then they come and want to take your knowledge.'

Women noted that it is important for mainstream services to consult about their recruitment strategies and processes to employ Aboriginal workers. And noted that some women will not go to a mainstream service if no Aboriginal workers are employed there.

The ties that some mainstream services have with the police and DCJ were also seen as problematic, with some services 'always encouraging you to report to the police if you do go to services. So it's like you go there only to be told to go to the police' [Kowana]. Donna Y1 agreed noting that some women are fearful to use some services

because service will report to DCJ: 'If you go to them [other services], you're scared to tell them too much, because as soon as you walk out, they're on the phone...'.

What/who made a difference at the time you were experiencing domestic and family violence?

Given the extent of criticism about the current service delivery system, we also asked women in the yarning circles whether there was any service, worker, or response that made a positive difference to them. This is important as it can assist in identifying ways to improve services. The benefits of, and the desire to, access Aboriginal community-controlled organisations for assistance has been discussed above. In this section we outline other things women nominated as having made a difference to them and their help seeking around domestic and family violence.

Continuity of care

Tahlia has relied on the same service (a mainstream service) since she was a young person. This means that this service knows her incredibly well, and in turn she trusts and respects them. Not only does she continue to gain support from this service, but so do her children. The continuity of care and the trust and rapport built over time mean that this will always be the service she turns to first. 'I've used it all my life...They've been there for the whole time and helped me...'

While few people may be able to enjoy this longevity of care and support, the ability to see the same worker and not have to constantly repeat their story was highly valued. As Joan explained:

You go to the place to get that [ongoing] support for yourself, but then there's a different worker there or ... Then you got to go back, repeat your whole story to someone new who's just a Johnny-come-lately, and then ... Where's the old worker that you were comfortable with and who you opened up to? The next person, next person. And it's like forever telling someone that same story, and trying to have that stable support or follow-up, you know, from someone you're going to for that help.

Finding a community organisation that 'fits' with you

Closely connected to continuity of care, was finding a community organisation that 'fits' with the individual and that they could trust. As Stacey explained,

It's just finding that community organisation that fits with you. I've gone to a lot of services and ...it's really hard to find...It's really hard to find those trusted people, you know that you can just sit down and talk to.

This was frequently an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation for the cultural connections and understanding that such services provide.

Arts programs and other initiatives and events that provide opportunities for 'accidental counselling', therapy and healing

Several women spoke of the benefit of participating in programs, like art classes, which provided opportunities for 'accidental counselling'.

Art programs were seen as particularly beneficial in terms of cultural support. Donna explained 'art is a form of healing and therapy, so people are relaxed and then stuff comes out and they're able to talk about it. You know, when they feel trust in the room or with whoever they're with.' Donna Y3 described how in her work:

We used to go out to Picton [many years ago] and just doing art programmes. Like you're not necessarily talking. You're just painting or you're drawing. And people just start talking. 'Oh this reminds me of when I was at nan's place', or they would talk about a traumatic incident that happened. But you're not looking at each other because you're doing something.

In the same way Mona explained the benefits of arts-based programs:

Yes, they talk about it [domestic violence during the art classes]. It's really good, because you create, well, I know when I do mine, I try to create that Koori atmosphere where they can chill out. Because for me, I think that talking to one another and talking about other women and whatever else, I just think that that's a cultural practise, because the women used to sit and talk. That's how they knew who was with who and whose kids....

Arts programs were described as being 'like a [yarning] circle...so that's good. That's a good thing'. Mary-May added that it helps 'women feel comfortable with another...to know they are safe here...And it only takes one woman to open up, and then it's a chain reaction'.

Other things that women identified helped them when they were experiencing domestic and family violence:

- Refuges [Mona]
- Practical measures like the mobile phone program and cab vouchers to get home for the police station or other services [Jess, Tanay and Ashlee].
- Informal support networks:

'I think with Aboriginal women, we have a lot of informal care and safety. You know, like I was saying, we have those certain aunties that will be here or we've got those certain sister girls um that we go to first and foremost.' [Kowana]

Looking forward: 'What would you like to see happen? What would have made a difference to you?'

We also asked women what would have made a difference to them, and what changes or innovations they would like to see in the service delivery system. Some of these suggestions have been mentioned above in direct response to problems identified with particular services or agencies. Unsurprisingly women offered multiple innovative and deeply considered proposals that would have made a difference.

Providing a **holistic response** that didn't just focus on legal and policing responses, but also **prioritises emotional and psychological supports**

Lucy

One-stop shop – flexible accommodation and service delivery

In some of the yarning circles Ashlee described her dream of having a 'Maid' (a Netflix series) style refuge accommodation that had 'hotel/motel' style rooms in which there were beds, lounge area and small kitchen for each individual woman and family. At the centre of the accommodation is a service – like Mudgin-Gal – able to connect women with the various things that they might need (counselling, financial, parenting etc). It was crucial that such a service would allow teenage boys who have traditionally been excluded from women's refuge accommodation. It would be entirely flexible allowing short stays ('just spend the night while he sobers up') to longer stays. Many of the women were attracted to this idea.

Yeah, having a safe place, like a refuge or not like a... But, yes, a place that you could come anytime or that like was there that you could just... Yes, when you're in them states. Because the mental health stuff as well. Where it's safe and you can get support and linked in with all them supports. having a place [like that], that would be a dream. That's something that I'd love to see is these places, safe spaces for women to come to Safe places where people can heal and get helped.

Lucy

...all under one roof, Everything that I want, with the help

Debbie

Alternative accommodation and care networks

Tracy and Jamie-Lee suggested other safe accommodation alternatives – people with spare rooms etc:

But even like people who... if I had a spare room, like I'd have a list. I'd be one of those people that if there was a family experiencing domestic violence, there was no refuges to take them on, I've got a spare room, yep, bring them to our house.

Tracy

And 24 hours, not just nine-to-five, having that contact or a register of people for safe housing that isn't a refuge.

Jamie-Lee

Empowering family to help

I would love for there to be, and not all family's going to have this, but I'm trying to think of how we empower our families to rebuild relationships, so you can empower them to help when we need help. For example, where am I going with this?... We've got to stop relying on people who are not Indigenous or aren't our family to help us when healing comes from within, but also our families. ... And it's that isolation stuff. So, not isolating yourself but making it more comfortable to share the truth, so you're not [holding it]. That's where I think a lot of good could come from empowering family to be able to have more role... Well, to talk to the police, because if you're in that state where you can't articulate yourself, because you're dealing with trauma, empowering someone like an aunty, your mother, your sister, whoever it might be. Somehow, I think that's where we miss or putting that responsibility onto strangers.

Jamie-Lee

Ensuring the accessibility of services across multiple domains – need to move away from the 9-5 model 5 days a week

In this context considerable discussion focused on the lack of fit between the 9-5 model of service delivery and the reality of domestic violence.

But I think in practical terms, if something happens at midnight and you've got nowhere to go, you know, a lot of these services are nine to five

Donna Y3

And the other thing is, it's not a nine-to-five thing. That's the scary part. Like, women's getting bashed on the weekend, where is she going to go? Who is she going to call?

Donna Y1

That's a good [idea]... It's the nine-to-five services that don't work for violence. You're exactly right. It's 24 hours. And the same with staffing and resources at police stations as well. One female experienced worker is not going to be enough for a small, rural town. Even though it's a great idea, it's proven that the rates are too high, for one...

Jamie-Lee

Hotline for Aboriginal women

We'd have our own hotline where we've got Aboriginal counsellors, Aboriginal lawyers, Aboriginal people. For that straight talk that we sometimes need.

Ashlee

Safe spaces to speak and open up without fear of being reported to DCJ or having records subpoenaed

In my own personal experience, just knowing that a lot of information that you share isn't going to be passed around, or isn't going to be used against you in court, you know, stuff like that. So finding that safe space to talk about stuff like that, you know, that's good for us women, you know... I went to a DV [counselling service] ...and my records were subpoenaed [by DCJ]. So then they used that evidence in the court when I went to [try to get my child returned to my care]

Stacey

Having a support person that really advocates for and supports the woman

To sit in your corner. Make sure they've got your back

Debbie

Ensuring people with lived experience are employed across the service delivery system

You can't be talking to someone that hasn't lived, doesn't know what you've been through. They have to at least been through the experience of domestic violence and study it as well, at least around Aboriginal people, you know because the white people, they get off too easy. The Black fellas, we have to beg for help, more or less. So like, go on and sit there, experienced and qualified and just all of that, yes.

You've got to have lived experience ... To understand the feeling and that, yeah.

Tanay

I think anyone working in these spaces needs to know what it's like to have gone through domestic violence. Because otherwise they're just guessing.

Because it's easy for someone who hasn't been through it to tell you what to do. You know. And deep down we all know what we need to do, but, again, there's this overwhelming factor that... Look, if I knew what it was, I could [unclear]. That's why I call it addictive. Like it's like an addiction. You know you don't want to do it, but you can't help yourself. Until you make the firm thing to just let go. Stop smoking, stop drink, stop whatever, you know. Same same, I reckon.

Ashlee

The need for dedicated healing retreats/spaces

Healing retreats spaces...But it's just focused on holistic, like a retreat that families can heal together, but also have that time to be separate. Long-term together healing, but also needing that time out, to get your head, because mental health is such a huge issue. But people need to have that time to rest and digest what's going on.

But then, also having that time to repair those damaged relationships with family if there's been family violence or... All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have been impacted by violence at some point whether it's transgenerational trauma, domestic violence, family violence. Um yeah, there's not enough places focused on healing, it's drugs and rehab, which is great.

But what about the impacts of violence? Not all people have drug and alcohol [issues]...

Jamie-Lee

The system really um keeps families apart ... we might have a women's centre here, but we have a lot of women who have got partners and want to live as a family, but the setup of services are where they're treating the family as separate. Men over here, women over here. The only way they can get a house. ... There's no really family services or safe place.

Joan

The need to recognise that cultural connection is critical to prevention

I think communities, we need to understand that being culturally connected. And that could be just by accessing women, like Aunty Ash, is actually a form of prevention. Like, if we're culturally connected and we've got each other, that's a form of prevention, because that's sense of belonging and identity is strong. So, really investing in that is important.

And that's Aunty June Oscar in her, Wiyi Yani U Thangani, she talks about healing informed practices and she talks about rebalancing power. And I think those are really important when it comes to supporting First Nations women's gender justice.

Kowana

The importance of prevention work for children

We make prevention instead of early intervention. Like we need to really start doing the prevention space. That's why it's important to have those. We need support for our kids, because if we're going to raise kids to not endure violence, which I think every parent wants, then we need to have those prevention strategies in place. And money to be generated to where it needs to be....that early intervention. How long are you going to take intervening. Start preventing.

Kowana

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In several areas the issues that the women raised in the yarning circles were not 'new' – but that, in itself, is significant. The extent to which the problems discussed are longstanding issues – the extent to which they are well known but have not been addressed – is critical to recognise if we want change in this area. Readers need to reflect on why these issues and complaints have not been addressed and what that means for whether and how the violence Aboriginal women face in their daily lives is prioritised in our society. Clearly the repetition of these complaints over time and across generations points to the need to emphasise accountability of government and other services.

In this section of the report, we briefly canvas some of those past reports and recommendations in order to emphasise the extent to which Aboriginal women have been speaking about the problems and challenges they encounter when reporting domestic and family violence to the service delivery sector (matters raised in this report) and the extent to which they have not been listened to in a meaningful way.

Past reports and recommendations

1981

The very first Task Force report published in NSW on domestic violence in 1981¹⁷ made multiple recommendations that sought to address the needs and experiences of Aboriginal women. These included: the need for Aboriginal refuges to be staffed by Aboriginal women,¹⁸ and the need for training for police around the needs of Aboriginal people,¹⁹ noting that 'the police response in the case of Aboriginal women [reporting domestic violence] is particularly inadequate'.²⁰ In making the first recommendation about the need for refuges staffed by Aboriginal women the Task Force noted that not only may Aboriginal women face 'prejudice' in a mainstream service, but that 'an Aboriginal woman has greater understanding of another Aboriginal woman's problems and communication is much easier. There is a "basic lack of trust or faith in non-Aboriginal organisations"'.²¹

The 1981 Taskforce 'was concerned that the needs of Aboriginal women in relation to domestic violence should be appropriately considered' and as a result engaged Pat O'Shane to prepare a dedicated report for the Taskforce,²² in addition dedicated consultations were held with Aboriginal women.²³ O'Shane's report documented many of the issues that were raised in the yarning circles held at Mudgin-Gal, including normalisation of domestic and family violence both by those experiencing it and by

¹⁷ Report of the NSW Task Force on Domestic Violence to Honourable NK Wran QC MP, Premier of NSW (1981)

¹⁸ Ibid, recommendation 128. At the time that the Task Force reported there was only one Aboriginal women's refuge staffed by Aboriginal staff [11.2]. This was Cawarra located in outer western Sydney.

¹⁹ Ibid, recommendation 147.

²⁰ Ibid [11.5].

²¹ Ibid [11.2] quoting Pat O'Shane's report in Appendix 2.

²² This report is published as an Appendix to the Task Force report: Appendix 2.

²³ Ibid, [11.1].

service providers; the lack of assistance provided by the police and 'welfare'; and the failure of mainstream services to understand.

2012

In 2012 the Standing Committee on Social Issues (NSW Legislative Council) in its report on domestic violence trends and issues made a recommendation about the need for a specific NSW Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy developed in consultation with Aboriginal people that addressed a range of matters including: the need for 'systemic improvements in respect of policing and other parts of the criminal justice system'; 'ways to improve access to legal support and advocacy'; and the provision of 'culturally specific education programs' to support Aboriginal children.²⁴

2024

Jumping forward to 2024 there were two key inquiries and reports that again revealed similar problems and made similar recommendations. For example, the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee inquiry and report on *Missing and Murdered First Nations Women and Children* (2024) recommended the need for:

A sustainable funding mechanism to provide ongoing support services for First Nations people, including women and children, experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. This funding must prioritise service and program delivery by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

Emphasis was placed on the delivery of primary prevention initiatives.²⁵

Also in 2024, the Expert Panel appointed to complete a rapid review of evidence-based approaches to prevent gender-based violence²⁶ made recommendations emphasising the need for culturally appropriate and place based and the need to prioritise the experiences of Aboriginal people with lived experience and other marginalised groups. Notably and controversially this expert panel did not include the appointment of any Aboriginal women.²⁷ The expert panel recommended:

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments to strongly embed and build on culturally-informed and place-based domestic, family and sexual violence responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, families and communities, noting the significant work under way to develop a First Nations National Plan. This should include genuine and ongoing consideration of the evidence provided to the Senate Inquiry into Missing and Murdered First Nations women and children, and the commitments under Target 13 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. (rec 2)

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments to prioritise the experiences of communities that are marginalised especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ... in implementing all of the recommendations in this report. Addressing

²⁴ 2012, Rec 28

²⁵ Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee inquiry and report on *Missing and Murdered First Nations Women and Children* (2024), Recommendation 6.

²⁶ Elena Campbell, Todd Fernando, Leigh Gassner, Jess Hill, Zac Seidler and Anne Summers (the expert panel), *Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence – Report of the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches* (2024). Available here: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/unlocking-the-prevention-potential-4.pdf> (accessed 6 October 2025).

²⁷ Lauren Smith and Stephanie Boltje, 'Domestic violence advisory panel formation accused of ignoring First Nations women's leadership', ABC News (Friday 7 June 2024). <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-07/furious-first-nations-advocates-demand-seat-at-panel-on-dv/103952780> (accessed 6 October 2025).

gender-based violence for communities experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation lays the foundation for population-wide success. Where applicable, implementation should involve a genuine and sustained co-design approach to ensure that affected communities are identifying priorities of greatest urgency and value to them. (rec 3)

This is work that Mudgin-Gal actively demonstrates and practices in its daily work.

Wiyi Yani U Thangani

Distinctive amongst these various reports is the work of June Oscar AO and the Australian Human Rights Commission, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani*,²⁸ which was an Indigenous led, and Indigenous specific, consultation process with a broader focus than violence against women. Its recommendations echo those raised by the women in these yarning circles and include: the 'implementation of mechanisms to keep women and children safe and families together', 'investment in diversionary pathways away from the criminal justice system and child protection', the need for 'a culturally safe and responsive service system', 'fundamental reform to the way services are delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' (including emphasis on First Nations controlled organisations as 'preferred service providers'), 'prioritisation of safety for women and children', and the need for 'holistic wrap-around services'.²⁹

Refocusing for the future

In the context of these past reports and the lack of action, these Mudgin-Gal yarning circles refocus us to ask questions of governments and systems about the failure to listen to Aboriginal women and enact changes that respond to the concerns that they have expressed on multiple occasions. The longstanding nature of these complaints, and their repetition, has serious implications for future interactions. Several women spoke not only about how negative interactions with the police might mean that they avoid contacting the police in the future, but also described the intergenerational impact that those poor policing responses had on their children.

Because women hearing other women's voices and hearing other women say, 'this has happened to me'. Like real women, Aboriginal women, like us. I feel like...

Donna

There's power in that.

Yes, and that's getting it out there.

That's what I could call it, 'Aboriginal Women's Voices. There's power in that'. ... I love that there's power in our voices, let's use them for good. There's something about voices and... Because our voices are powerful. ...And if other women that feel disempowered hear them, then they can...

Ashlee

But just to let them know that they're not on this journey on their own. Yeah.

Stacey

It could be an educational tool for our younger ones.

Joan

²⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report* (2020).

²⁹ Ibid, 101-110.

Tracy, Donna Y1, Tanay, Jamie-Lee, Kowana, Mona, Jess, Lucy, Stacey, Donna Y3, Debbie, Joan, Mary-May, Tahlia, Alana, Melissa, Kylie and Ashlee spoke with such power and resilience, articulating strength and ideas that 'would make a difference'.

In the words of Donna Y1 'our voices do need to be amplified' AND listened to.

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- Mudgin-Gal. <https://www.mudgin-gal.org.au/about/our-story>

APPENDIX ONE: YARNING PROMPTS

Preamble

See the verbal consent script.

Nature of a yarning circle

As noted in the full ethics applications, yarning circles are by their very nature free-flowing and flexible with little formal structure. Here we provide some thematic prompts as we are engaging in a yarning circle 'with a purpose' (Bessarab & Ngandu 2010: 40)

Thematic prompts

The yarn will really be guided by the women with discussion focusing on experiences and services contacted or involved to assist with family violence

What have been your **experiences** of family violence?

When you **first spoke** about family violence – who was that to? What did you want to happen then?

When did you **realise** you were experiencing family violence?

What **services did you contact for help**? Which ones were **helpful** to you, why? Why did you find others **unhelpful**? What made the difference?

The **police** are one of the main responders to family violence – have you had contact with the police around family violence? What was that like?

Do you think someone other than the police **should respond first**?

If you've **lived outside Sydney** – and also had experiences of family violence – was it any different? If so how

What **do you think you need** in the city to assist with family violence?

How do you think it might be **different here in Redfern** compared to other places (transient population, large community, possible lack of connection to country, availability of Aboriginal specific services, police presence)?

Wrap up

Would you like to be involved in a feedback yarn – form to complete.

How else would you like to be involved in telling your story beyond this yarn – we could do a range of things with what we find out – posters, art work, assisting with public speaking...

Let us know if you would like a list of support services – would you like Ashlee or Jane to check in on you in a few days?

APPENDIX TWO: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION BROCHURE

Double-sided folding brochure

 What will happen to the things I say in the yarn? If you participate in the yarning circle you agree <u>to</u> Jane & Ashlee collecting the information you talk about. The yarn will be recorded and typed up. If you <u>do not</u> want anyone to be able to <u>identify</u> you we will give you a made-up name and will use that made-up name in anything we write about the yarn. During the research the information from the yarn will be stored on a password protected computer at UTS or in a locked filing cabinet. No one will be able to access it except the research team, or as required by law. After the research is finished the data will be stored by <u>Mudgin-Gal</u>. The yarning circles will be written up in a report for <u>Mudgin-Gal</u>. The findings will also be used by <u>Mudgin-Gal</u> in their future work on family violence. There may also be other publications. We will also talk to you about how else you might like to be involved in presenting your story.	You do not have to be involved if you don't want to - You don't have to come along to the yarn if you don't want to - You can leave the yarn at any time - You can tell Jane and Ashlee you don't want to be involved anymore We will not include anything you have said in the yarn if you pull out before it is typed up and we have removed your identifying information. But if you pull out after <u>this</u> we will not be able to do so. If you have any questions or concerns you can contact us: <table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="616 808 735 958"> Ashlee Donohue <u>Mudgin-Gal</u> 9498 1173 CEO@mudgin-gal.org.au  </td> <td data-bbox="743 808 866 958"> Jane Wangmann UTS 9514 3224 Jane.Wangmann@uts.edu.au  </td> </tr> </table> This study has been approved by UTS Human Research Ethics Committee. If participants have any concerns or complaints about the research that you want to raise independently of the research team, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au, and quote ETH22-7389.	Ashlee Donohue <u>Mudgin-Gal</u> 9498 1173 CEO@mudgin-gal.org.au 	Jane Wangmann UTS 9514 3224 Jane.Wangmann@uts.edu.au 	  You're invited to yarn about family violence
Ashlee Donohue <u>Mudgin-Gal</u> 9498 1173 CEO@mudgin-gal.org.au 	Jane Wangmann UTS 9514 3224 Jane.Wangmann@uts.edu.au 			
 What is the yarning circle about? Ashlee Donohue (<u>Mudgin-Gal</u>) and Jane Wangmann (UTS) are holding a yarning circle to talk about family violence and who you contact for help. The money for the yarning circle comes from UTS Why have I been invited? We've invited you because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander woman living in the city. You may have experienced family <u>violence</u>, or might know someone who has. You may have tried to get help about family violence, or you might have helped a friend or relative do so. You may also have contacted <u>Mudgin-Gal</u> for assistance about family violence. 	What does it involve? The yarning circle will be held at <u>Mudgin-Gal</u>. It will go for about 90 minutes, with extra time for lunch beforehand and a chat afterwards. If you agree, we will record the yarning circle and type it up afterwards. If you <u>do not</u> want to be <u>identified</u> we will give you a made-up name and remove anything else that might be identifying. At the end we will ask you if you want to be involved in a feedback yarn, and how else you might like to find out what we have learnt. You will be given a gift card to thank you for your time and sharing your experiences with us. A gift card will also be provided for participation in the feedback yarn. <i>Family violence is an important issue for Aboriginal women. We want to hear from you and learn from you about what would help in the city.</i>	 What else do I need to know? If you come along to the yarn you need to know that it will take up a bit of your time (90 minutes to yarn, 30 minutes, lunch and any extra time you want to chat afterwards). It can also be <u>upsetting</u> talking about family violence. You can take a break whenever you need to. Jane and Ashlee will check on you and we will have a list of support services if you need them. You will also need to take care talking about family violence. A lot of family violence involves criminal offences and other harms against you or other people, like your kids. We ask that you <u>do not</u> name people or say anything identifying when you tell us about your experiences.		