Literature review

A review of First Nations led approaches to addressing Domestic Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV)

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CONTEXT

AMSANT is working with Deakin University to develop an advocacy package based on evidence of the effectiveness of First Nations led approaches to addressing Domestic Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV). This package aims to better educate stakeholders about culturally safe approaches to family violence and challenge assumptions about the factors associated with violence against women, and the solutions, being fundamentally the same in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. This literature review comprises the first part of the advocacy package, synthesising key research in Australia (and internationally, where relevant) that identifies the particularities of DFSV in First Nations communities compared to mainstream experiences, framed within the context of (de)colonisation. It will be followed by the development of a policy brief and key messaging that articulates how DFSV for First Nations people is different - to help counter views that family violence in First Nations communities stems primarily from gender inequality and patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Addressing DFSV is an urgent national priority in Australia particularly within First Nations communities where such violence is shaped and compounded by the economic and social injustices of colonisation and racism. Over decades there have been attempts to address DFSV in First Nations communities and there have been lessons learned about the injustices, inadequacies, and inappropriateness of applying mainstream (i.e., colonial) logic to addressing DFSV within First Nations contexts. In more recent times, there has been growing recognition of the key elements that must characterise policies and initiatives in this space if they are to be effective.

This narrative review draws on key policy and research that explicates what these elements are and why they are crucial in effectively addressing DFSV in First Nations communities. It highlights repeated messaging arising in the literature, including that DFSV presents differently in First Nations families and communities to how it presents in non-Indigenous families and communities and that this difference stems primarily from the severe and lasting impacts of colonisation and racism. Thus approaches to addressing DFSV in First Nations communities must be: 1) culturally safe and trauma informed; 2) holistic with a focus on healing that embeds culture, country, and community, and enhances the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations people, 3) empowering for First Nations people (especially Aboriginal women who are most impacted by DFSV) to determine and lead their own solutions to DFSV in their communities; 4) inclusive of men, acknowledging their trauma from colonisation and need for support on their healing journey, and 5) accompanied by significant transformation across government and mainstream organisations to enable First Nations people to lead in addressing DFSV in their communities.

Given the significance of broader national and territory policy and politics in shaping how approaches to DFSV within Indigenous communities play out, we begin with an account of the national and Northern Territory policy and political contexts.

NATIONAL AND NORTHERN TERRITORY POLICY CONTEXTS

The national context

Ending violence against women and children is an urgent national priority in Australia. Violence against First Nations women must be understood within Australia's historical context of colonisation and racism where Indigenous peoples have suffered severe and ongoing economic, social, and cultural injustices. These injustices are key contributors to the violence experienced within First Nations communities. Therefore, a holistic approach that addresses the broad drivers of violence - social and economic disadvantage and their impacts on the health and wellbeing of First Nations communities - is essential in addressing violence against women and children (Central Australian Aboriginal Congress submission 2020; Healing Foundation, 2017).

The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children* (Australian Government 2022) serves as a comprehensive policy framework designed to guide actions over the next decade. It articulates Australia's commitment to a future free from gender-based violence, emphasising the fundamental human right of all individuals to live without fear and violence. This commitment extends to ending violence against First Nations women and children, recognising the compounding impact of colonisation, racism, and cultural dislocation on their experiences of family violence, sexual assault, and abuse.

First Nations women experience disproportionately higher rates of violence than non-Indigenous women. They are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to violence compared to non-Indigenous women (Our Watch 2018). Structural and social inequalities, including past government practices and mistrust of mainstream services, hinder reporting and seeking assistance. This has led to the misidentification of victims as perpetrators and a lack of effective responses from legal and justice systems (Australian Government 2022).

[1] DFSV – we use the term DFSV (domestic, family and sexual violence) throughout this review but acknowledge that many First Nations peoples prefer the term family violence because it describe 'the range of violence that takes place in Indigenous communities including the physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that may be perpetrated within a family. The term also recognises the broader impacts of violence; on extended families, kinship networks and community relationships (Cripps and Davis 2012, p. 2).

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Closing the Gap 2020) aims to address the broader drivers of DFSV in its focus on 17 targets that impact on the life outcomes of First Nations people including physical health and safety, education and employment, housing, incarceration and child protection, social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing and self-determination. Progress in these areas is central to addressing DFSV in First Nations communities (Closing the Gap 2020). Along these lines, McGlade (2024) points to the broader conditions of poverty that both increase the risk of violence against women within Indigenous communities and their capacities to escape: 'too many women are trapped in homes with violence due to poverty and lack of finances. Aboriginal women are disproportionately affected by poverty and violence and need … help to escape'.

Importantly, *The National Agreement* seeks to transform and decolonise the way governments work with First Nations peoples towards achieving these targets. It highlights the significance of culturally appropriate, community-led initiatives and truth-telling in overcoming historical injustices and achieving meaningful outcomes for First Nations communities. *The National Plan to End Violence against Women* (Australian Government 2022) similarly advocates for culturally safe and responsive services and centring First Nations perspectives (see also Blagg 2022).

The development of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023-2025* (Australian Government 2023), led by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council, aims to collaborate with community leaders, Elders, and organisations to establish effective pathways and responses for both victims and perpetrators of violence. It targets a reduction in all forms of family violence and abuse against First Nations women and children by at least 50% by 2031 (Australian Government 2023). The Action Plan prioritises voice, self-determination and agency, shared decision making and community-led solutions, therapeutic healing, and culturally safe and kinship-centred approaches. It seeks to address intergenerational trauma by prioritising health and well-being and promoting cultural knowledge and practices developed by and for First Nations peoples.

As with the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, the *Action Plan* seeks to reform institutions towards eliminating the systemic biases and structural racism embedded in mainstream service provision. It also emphasises the importance of evidence and data informed approaches to DFSV – but advocates for locally informed data managed by Indigenous peoples themselves to ensure a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges confronting First Nations communities, leading to more targeted and effective interventions (Australian Government 2023; Spencer et al. 2022).

The Northern Territory context

DFSV rates in the Northern Territory far exceed those in other Australian jurisdictions. In 2021 alone, assault rates related to domestic and family violence (DFV) were three times higher than the national average, while DFV-related homicide rates were seven times higher. The sexual assault rate was 1.2 times higher than the national average.

First Nations women in the NT are most impacted by DFSV. In 2021, they comprised 88% of all DFV-related assaults and 100% of all DFV-related homicides (Northern Territory 2023). In the Northern Territory, First Nations women are killed by family members (other than a partner) at six times the rate of non-Indigenous women (Brown & Leung 2023). The majority of people committing DFSV in the Territory are men (Northern Territory Government 2023).

It is important to note that this reported data is likely to under-estimate prevalence rates and that the rates and numbers of DFSV in the NT are increasing year on year – for example, 'the DFV-related assault rate in the NT increased by 27% between 2019 and 2020 and 12% between 2020 and 2021' (Northern Territory Government, 2023, p.19). It is also important to note the significant differences to reported accounts of DFSV across the NT's regions with extremely high rates of DFSV in regional communities (Northern Territory Government 2023).

Such statistics are clear evidence that DFSV presents differently in First Nations communities than it does in non-Indigenous communities. Thus, there is an urgent need for First Nations (rather than mainstream) responses that centre upon the experiences, knowledge and expertise within these communities towards addressing DFSV. The gravity of these statistics highlights the urgency of greater resourcing and tailored support for these communities as population groups that bear the brunt of DFSV (Northern Territory Government 2023).

Over decades, governments have introduced a range of campaigns and policies designed to address DFSV that focus on both the broader drivers of violence and more specifically on DFSV. A particularly damaging and controversial policy implemented in 2007 was the Northern Territory Emergency Response, colloquially known as 'The Intervention'. The Intervention was a Commonwealth government initiative that was prompted by the *Little Children Are Sacred* report which concluded that child neglect in First Nations communities had reached crisis levels (NT Government 2008). The aims of the Intervention were to prevent child sexual abuse within First Nations communities, reduce family violence and promote child welfare.

It included, among other measures, restrictions or bans on alcohol consumption and pornography, punitive adjustments to welfare benefits and greater policing (NT Government 2008). The intervention constructed Aboriginality in media and government reports as dysfunctional, violent, and in need of external mainstream and assimilatory control – completely ignoring the role of colonisation, racism, and intergenerational trauma in creating this situation (Macoun 2011; Vukovic, 2021). The harmful impacts of the intervention on First Nations communities included disempowerment and feeling a loss of autonomy and control, stigma, shame and negative impacts on self-esteem, exacerbation of trauma and negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing, anger and frustration and mistrust in government and institutions. For non-Indigenous communities, the harmful impacts of the intervention were the reinforcement of racist stereotypes and negative attitudes towards First Nations people and the perpetuation of a lack of cultural understanding and respect for First Nations peoples. Given these negative impacts, it is unsurprising that the intervention had little impact on addressing violence and disadvantage within Indigenous communities. Indeed, it worsened violence and disadvantage. Since the intervention, there have been increases in the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care; the number of Indigenous children in juvenile detention centres; the number of Indigenous adults in prison (Gibson 2017; Vukovic 2021) and the number of family violence cases (which may be an effect of both extra policing and mandatory reporting) (Gray et al. 2020).

Addressing violence against women and children in Indigenous communities requires a holistic approach that tackles broader social and economic disadvantage as outlined in the 17 Closing the

Gap targets. The NT Government, in collaboration with Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT and the Local Government Association of the NT, has crafted a second Closing the Gap NT Implementation Plan (NT Gov no date). This plan incorporates actions to address the 17 socio-economic Closing the Gap outcome areas outlined in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap.* Key priority reforms include enhancing structures to facilitate the meaningful involvement of First Nations peoples in decision-making processes, establishing a formal community-controlled services sector to deliver targeted programs, ensuring systemic transformation across mainstream government agencies to improve accountability and responsiveness, and enabling First Nations people's access to locally relevant data for monitoring and driving local priorities.

In relation to initiatives and policies designed to address DFSV in more specific ways, the NT government introduced the *NT 2018-2028 Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework* (NT Gov, 2018). This framework builds on previous policy (Safety is Everyone's Right) and represents a ten-year plan to reduce DFSV. This policy positions women's and children's safety at the centre of DFSV initiatives and underscores the crucial role of First Nations women in informing strategic policies and actions to combat violence. Their primary aspiration is for violence to cease entirely, enabling full participation in family, community and cultural life (NT Gov 2018).

The NT government also allocated $1.8 million to the NO MORE campaign (2019-20 to 2023-24) to combat DFSV by enhancing awareness and fostering local initiatives for societal transformation; established an Aboriginal Advisory Board on DFSV led by Minister Kate Worden to provide expert advice to the Minister on policies, funding and governance related to DFSV matters (Maxwell 2024); and established a Domestic Violence Death Review Board to enhance data collection, disaggregation, and reporting, and conducting a national perpetration study on DFSV, particularly in remote areas (Brown & Leung 2023).

A recent report that maps current investment and activity to prevent and respond to DFSV in the NT makes several important points (Northern Territory Government 2023). It finds that funding is:

> currently heavily weighted to meeting the needs of DFSV victim survivors when they are in crisis … while prevention, early intervention and accountability, and systemic enablers and reform receive more limited funding, and there are very few initiatives targeted exclusively to people who are using violence (Northern Territory Government 2023, p. 32)

Reducing the social and economic costs of DFSV within NT communities require, the report argues, greater and more secure resourcing and investment in 'early intervention and accountability, and primary prevention'. This must occur 'without compromising the need to maintain sufficient resourcing to meet demand for crisis responses (Northern Territory Government 2023, p. 33; see also, NT 2018) – for example, insecure funding tied to government cycles has greatly compromised the effective delivery of crisis services to keep Indigenous women and children safe (McGlade 2024).

Early intervention is crucial in preventing DFSV before it occurs through identifying and effectively supporting people at risk of experiencing this violence, and ensuring that people who use violence are connected early to responses that can change their behaviours and reduce violence, and through ensuring that 'legislation, policy and funding models enable responsive, high quality and accountable DFSV service[s]' (NT 2018, p. 6).

KEY ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSING DFSV IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

Given DFSV presents differently in First Nations communities than it does in non-Indigenous communities, there is an urgent need for responses that centre upon First Nations experiences, knowledge, practices, and expertise. Below we discuss in more detail the five interrelated elements that are repeatedly identified across the literature as essential to effective First Nations-led approaches to addressing DFSV.

1. Culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches

> Cultural safety is when you are with people you trust; you have empathy; they understand where you have come from; [you are] not in a threatening environment; [there are] no fixed attitudes or values, [people] don't apply their standards on you; [it is] where they can relate - Research participant (State Government of Victoria 2019, p.18)

Cultural safety is a right for First Nations people, necessitating culturally responsive policies, strategies, and service delivery that utilises strengths-based approaches. A strength-based approach recognizes that Nations communities are not just vulnerable or disadvantaged, but also strong, resilient, and capable of driving their own positive change. This is an empowering approach that focuses on building on the strengths, resilience, and cultural heritage of Nations individuals, families, and communities. This approach recognizes the historical trauma and ongoing challenges faced by First Nations people, but rather than focusing on deficits or problems, it prioritises cultural pride and identity, community ownership and leadership, traditional knowledge and practices, family and kinship ties, and individual and collective resilience. By emphasising strengths and capacities, this approach promotes self-determination and empowerment, fosters hope and optimism, supports community-led initiatives and solutions, addresses systemic inequalities and barriers and celebrates and preserves cultural heritage (Fogerty et al. 2018; Guthrie et al. 2020; Hewlett et al. 2023).

The violence of colonisation has inflicted profound and enduring trauma upon First Nations communities, spanning generations and permeating familial and cultural structures. From the time of invasion to the present day, deliberate acts of violence have left deep scars on First Nations peoples, disrupting family ties, cultural practices, and social norms. Forced child removal, institutionalisation, dispossession from land, and policies of assimilation have all contributed to a collective trauma characterised by loss, disempowerment, and cultural erosion (Our Watch 2018, Healing Foundation 2017; Atkinson 2002). Mainstream approaches to DFSV that centre gender inequality as the key driver of DFSV do not acknowledge the gravity of these harms and are thus inadequate in addressing DFSV within First Nations communities. Mainstream approaches to DFSV tend to conceptualise gender equality and justice differently to how they are conceptualised within First Nations communities where there is a rejection of visions of gender equality that focus on individual rights and access to resources within current hierarchical and exclusionary gendered, racialized, classed and ableist structures (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Gender justice for Aboriginal women is about challenging and transforming these structures through valuing and practising relationality, connection, respect and inclusion (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021). The goal here to create the economic, social and political conditions where all women, men and gender diverse peoples are recognised and respected and are able to 'embrace and

unleash [their] potential' (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021, p.8)

Intergenerational trauma, compounded by subsequent injustices and systemic inequalities, serves as a foundational driver of violence against First Nations people, particularly within their own communities. The legacy of historical injustices, coupled with ongoing experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, has created a cycle of trauma and violence that reverberates through successive generations. Such trauma manifests in various forms, including high rates of mortality, illness, incarceration, and substance abuse, perpetuating a cycle of suffering and despair (Our Watch 2018, Atkinson 2002; Day et al 2012).

The complex impacts of cumulative trauma extend beyond individual experiences, shaping societal norms and behaviours. Violence becomes both a symptom and a perpetuator of trauma, with men often externalising their pain through acts of violence. It is crucial to recognise that many perpetrators themselves are victims of intergenerational trauma, having endured past experiences of violence and institutionalisation. As Hill and Salter (2024) argue, 'traumatised boys are disproportionately at risk of becoming perpetrators of gender-based violence, and other forms of criminal behaviour'. The leading work of Aboriginal advocates in this space have enabled consideration of the victim-to-perpetrator pathway for Indigenous men who offend, including how trauma can amplify men's perpetration of family violence (see Centre for Innovative Justice 2016; Hill & Salter 2024). Interrupting this pathway requires culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches that focus on prevention and recovery from intergenerational trauma. We know that punitive responses to violence such as imprisonment tend to exacerbate underlying issues of hurt, alienation and pain, perpetuating a cycle of harm and further trauma. Addressing violence within First Nations communities must acknowledges the deep-rooted trauma of colonisation (Our Watch 2018; Australian Government 2023). This does not mean that people who use violence should not be held to account for this violence – however such accountability needs to be culturally safe and situated within a healing framework, within which greater accountability can be recognised and built.

Culturally safe approaches of healing and accountability are crucial to reduce the feelings of dismissal, defeat, shame, and vulnerability that Indigenous people experience in culturally unsafe environments (State Government of Victoria 2019; Australian Government 2023; Hewlett et al. 2023). Culturally safe approaches must also be physically safe for women escaping violence (Blagg et al. 2018). For example, strategies and programs must recognise the immense concern First Nations women have about the potential removal of children, which distances them from accessing mainstream DFSV support services and reporting abuse (Blagg et al. 2018). Accessible and culturally safe family-focused programs are essential components of a comprehensive approach to healing and safety for First Nations people, promoting cultural strength, understanding and well-being across all family members (State Government of Victoria 2019; Australian Government 2023; Hewlett et al. 2023).

Also essential to a comprehensive approach to cultural safety and healing is considering factors of intersectionality and their impacts on DFSV within Indigenous communities. First Nations lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual plus (LGBTIQA+) people - are part of extended kinship networks, families, and communities and can also experience family violence, including being assaulted, threatened, excluded, rejected, or disowned (Soldatic et al. 2023). Studies into the experiences of family violence among First Nations LGBTIQA+ people are limited, however available literature suggests that societal norms and assumptions about gender and sexual roles within First Nations communities (especially rural and remote communities) can be particularly challenging and discriminatory towards LGBTIQA+ people, including sistergirls and brotherboys, resulting in poor social and emotional wellbeing and barriers to service provision and support (Soldatic et al. 2023; Blagg et al. 2018; Carlson et al. 2024). Elders, workers, and community leaders play pivotal roles in ensuring community safety, rejecting violence and recognising the unique safety considerations for women, LGBTIQA+ people, and children.

2. Holistic healing that embeds culture, Country, and community and enhances SEWB

> Something as small as a smoking ceremony can have a huge impact for people who have not grown up in culture - it brings the men and women together; everyone wrapping their arms around each other, supporting each other and getting back to country – Research participant (State Government of Victoria 2020, p.19)

Connection to First Nations culture, Country and community are central to the wellbeing of First Nations people and are particularly important in addressing issues like DFSV. Culture, Country and community serve as foundations for holistic healing encompassing spirituality, stories, values, cultural practices and customs (Healing Foundation 2017; Blignault et al. 2014; Blagg et al. 2018; Bulman & Hayes 2011; Hewlett et al. 2023). A holistic approach will centre on enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of First Nations people. SEWB encompasses multiple domains including connection to spirit, spirituality and ancestors; connection to body and behaviours; connection to mind and emotions; connection to family and kinship; connection to community; connection to culture; and connection to country and land. These domains are centred around an Indigenous concept of self which is connected and related to these domains through diverse expressions and experiences across time and place reflecting the diversity of cultures and histories among Aboriginal people and communities (Gee et al. 2014).

Connection to Country is crucial for effective healing – strengthening this connection promotes overall wellness (Atkinson 2002; Blignault et al. 2014; Healing Foundation 2017). Healing processes should acknowledge the importance of traditional lands and incorporate community knowledge and wisdom particularly from Elders and respected community members to offer culturally appropriate approaches. Holistic healing methods that integrate First Nations culture, Country and community contribute to building resilience and strength in individuals, families, and communities. This involves linking people to their cultural heritage, languages, and experiences, as well as combining therapeutic practices with cultural traditions like art, music and dance and facilitating returns to Country.

First Nations holistic healing approaches to family violence must also acknowledge and seek to address other social and cultural determinants of DFSV which include the ease of access to violent pornography, gambling, and the misuse of alcohol and other substances. These determinants are not causal factors, but they can exacerbate DFSV (Hill & Salter 2024; Northern Territory Government 2023). A recent study examining the impacts of alcohol supply reduction measures on police-recorded adult domestic and family violence in the Northern Territory, for example, found that restrictions and surveillance of alcohol supply were associated

with some reductions in domestic and family violence (Clifford et al. 2024).

Both survivors and people who use violence need their stories to be heard and validated to begin or continue their healing journeys. Efforts to address trauma should leverage the strengths of First Nations families and communities, integrating concepts of social, emotional, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing. Cultural knowledge, identity and strengths are essential components in addressing healing needs and fostering resilience at individual and family levels (Atkinson 2002; Cabillo 2021; Guthrie 2020). A comprehensive approach to restoring social and emotional wellbeing should empower individuals and families by strengthening connections to spirit, land, culture, family, kinship, mind, emotions, and body (Atkinson 2002; Cabillo 2021; State Government of Victoria 2019).

Trauma-informed care is often poorly defined in Australia's healthcare field and is even less well defined when working with First Nations people (AMSANT 2021). Key components of trauma-informed care include supporting relationship building, understanding trauma and its effects, acknowledging privilege and power dynamics, creating safe and empowering environments and integrating care to meet holistic social and economic needs. It is important to recognise that trauma occurs in relationship and must be addressed within relationships (AMSANT 2021).

A focus on healing from intergenerational trauma experienced within First Nations communities is central to effective DFSV programs and services. The impacts of colonisation vary across regions and communities, necessitating localised responses tailored to address trauma in specific contexts. A deep understanding of local truths and circumstances is imperative to 'quality healing' (Healing Foundation 2017; Our Watch 2018). Quality healing, as defined by The Healing Foundation, involves strategies developed locally, driven by community leadership, and grounded in an understanding of the effects of colonisation and intergenerational trauma.

3. Self-determination and cultural governance

Community ownership, control and self-determination are key to successful DFSV initiatives in First Nations communities. Dudgeon et al. (2014 p. 424) point to the cultural principles within traditional First Nations communities where:

> governance [is] a shared process with the aim of having a balanced, harmonious and respectful community life. Empowerment is an important part of this process to enable individuals and communities to speak up on issues or in consultations without fear of reprisal, and for true consensus to be reached.

The goal is to work with First Nations peoples, acknowledging their expertise and leadership while elevating their goals and objectives. Respect for, and prioritisation of, First Nations worldviews, cultural values, and needs are essential, requiring practitioners with cross-cultural skills and expertise in two-way collaboration. Building strong relationships, alliances and trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous entities is crucial for effective engagement and meaningful impact (Our Watch 2018; Cripps & Adams 2014; Spencer et al. 2022). It is imperative to learn from and support the innovative approaches that First Nations women are already implementing to prevent and respond to family violence, for example, women-led night patrols on remote communities have been effective in preventing alcohol related violence (Blagg et al. 2018). Other women-led approaches such as the women's law camp in remote Western Australia have sought to address violence and sexual abuse against women and children in their community through building awareness and respect for Aboriginal women's law which is based around living the "right way" according to respectful relationships with land, kin and self (de Ishtar, 2007). The Camp is focused on developing the younger generation's strong sense of pride in their Aboriginality and calling on Indigenous men to honour their traditional supportive responsibilities towards women (de Ishtar, 2007). These sorts of approaches, importantly, move away from conceptualising First Nations women only as victims to valuing their knowledge and practice in this space. Such valuing is central to preventing DFSV – First Nations women within the context of colonisation, racism and patriarchy have been silenced for too long – as McGlade (2024, see also Blagg et al. 2018) argues:

> Indigenous women are the most impacted by violence but are still fighting to be heard. For decades [they] have fought for systemic reform and for governments to address racism and bias in the institutional responses to violence.

Prevention efforts, informed and driven by local governance are more likely to succeed. Ideally, programs for First Nations peoples should be delivered by First Nations organisations fostering culturally safe services and locally designed solutions with community support (Healing Foundation, 2017; Our Watch 2018; Cripps & Adams 2014; Cripps & Davis 2012; Spencer et al. 2022; Dudgeon & McPhee 2019). In addition to community-driven prevention practices, there is a need for greater involvement of First Nations people and organisations in policy development.

In relation to cultural governance, traditional remote cultural settings, and to some extent in non-traditional urban environments, intricate kinship obligations and relationships play a defining role in governing appropriate interactions among individuals. These relationships extend to partners, siblings, close and extended family members, as well as community members more broadly and can be strengthened and harnessed to combat DFSV. Fostering respected cultural governance involves elevating the voices of resilient men and women who challenge the normalisation of violence as a response by men and boys trapped in cycles of intergenerational trauma (Healing Foundation 2017).

4. Inclusive engagement with First Nations men and boys

Focusing on only one gender goes against the First Nations cultural principles and worldviews (Blagg et al. 2018). First Nations men and boys hold a pivotal role in fostering positive and respectful relationships within intimate partnerships and family settings. They contribute significantly to the overall health and wellbeing of women, children, families, and communities (Blagg et al. 2018). Contrary to conventional or mainstream interventions, which often prioritise gender dynamics, a distinctly First Nations approach to DFSV emphasises the need to address the consequences of colonisation for First Nations men and boys. While addressing gender and coercion in violence against First Nations women, this approach recognises the compounding factors of colonisation and racism contributing to men's and boys' violence (Healing Foundation 2015; Healing Foundation 2017; Bulman & Hayes 2011; Day et al. 2012; Keddie et al. 2021).

To effectively address DFSV in First Nations communities, it is crucial to avoid generalizations and stereotypes, acknowledging that most First Nations men and boys do not engage in violence. Targeted resources should focus on programs for men who are most at risk, emphasising prevention strategies (Hill & Salter 2024). It is important to recognise the complexities of violence

within Indigenous communities: violence against First Nations women can come from non-Indigenous partners or extended family members, not just from within the community. Moving beyond the narrative of male power in understanding DFSV allows for learning from other Indigenous crisis responses like suicide prevention and addressing intergenerational trauma (Blagg et al. 2018). It is essential not to overestimate the effectiveness of the mainstream legal system in deterring or reforming First Nations men. DFSV services should move beyond viewing men as perpetrators and women as victims; instead, communities should be supported to adopt comprehensive prevention efforts that address a spectrum of aggressive behaviours and promote healthy, harmonious family dynamics (Blagg et al. 2018).

Successful male-specific programs tailored for First Nations men are therapeutic, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive. Creating safe spaces for men and boys is essential for preventing violence particularly as many First Nations men do not access mainstream services because they are culturally unsafe (Healing Foundation 2017; Shepherdson 2014). In responding to trauma, it is important to balance the need to challenge men's use of violence while not shaming them in the process. Safe and trusting spaces are key to supporting men to critically reflect on how, when and why they use violence towards strengthening the personal, relational and community resources that can prevent this violence (Dardi Munwurro no date; Andrews et al. 2021). Safe spaces can range from fishing trips, barbecues and outdoor activities to cultural activities led by culturally competent workers. Like the Our Men Healing project in the Northern Territory and Dardi Munwurro in Victoria, these spaces provide opportunities for men to engage, share experiences and discuss sensitive issues such as grief, loss and abuse in culturally considered and healing-focused ways – i.e., in ways that support connections to culture, community and country and improve social and emotional wellbeing. This is the basis towards empowering young men to build their own solutions to DFSV – restoring their roles as nurturers, providers and protectors of their families (The Healing Foundation 2017). Leadership by First Nations men who have progressed in their own healing journey including ending their use of violence against themselves and others is identified as a common element of programs that foster safety for men (Dardi Munwurro no date).

A safe place is particularly crucial for Elders and older men to pass down cultural knowledge to younger men and boys, including education about cultural responsibilities and respect for women (Healing Foundation 2017, p. 33). Cultural connection and feelings of belonging and acceptance are important in preventing violence, with effective programs focusing on returning to Country, reintroducing cultural practices, and strengthening cultural identity (Adams 2006; Day et al. 2012). Country-centric programs allow men to reintroduce lore and culture, including reconnecting to gender-specific obligations such as respect for women … [such programs can support men] to channel anger into positive action rather than violence, suggesting that engagement in culturally based and arts-based activities can offer a means of reframing experience and expressing affect (Healing Foundation 2017, p. 28).

Reintroducing cultural practices and strengthening cultural identity not only facilitates healing from trauma but also empowers men to take on leadership roles within their communities that contribute to increased safety and well-being for families (Healing Foundation 2017; Day et al. 2012). Projects like Mibbinbah Men's Health and the Men's Healing Project in Wurrumiyanga highlight the positive outcomes of reconnecting men with culture through traditional activities (such as ceremony) that help men to understand their 'own story - and identity and how trauma has impacted them and their families in the context of Country and community' (Healing Foundation 2017). Such positive outcomes include decreased family violence and enhanced perceptions of the First Nations values of respect for identity and kinship, accountability and safety. Here culture is a critical lens through which DFSV is understood and addressed. These initiatives provide therapeutic support, empower men to take on cultural leadership roles, and contribute to their overall empowerment and wellbeing (Healing Foundation 2017).

Case study: a healing and behavioural change program for young Indigenous men

The 'S4 program' (reported in Keddie et al. 2021)

The S4 program is one of several programs offered by a First Nations organisation whose overarching goal is to build stronger First Nations families and communities. The organisation offers a range of healing and behavioural change programs that seek to address family violence and break the cycle of inter-generational trauma. S4 supports young First Nations men aged 10–17 years.

The young men were described by facilitators as 'traumatised by racism, poverty and disenfranchisement' and as coming to the program with 'low self-esteem and feelings of shame and anger'. One facilitator explained that the young men often held 'a view of themselves' as deserving of these things happening to them – such feelings were normalised amongst the young men. This facilitator referred to the 'structures of [white] society 'as "stigmatising" these young men' as 'less than human' which had 'traumatised and shamed them, isolated them from their culture' and 'crushed their spiritual identity'. These are colonising and racist processes that are highly destructive in their impact on the role, identity and wellbeing of Indigenous men.

In this program facilitators expressed a deep understanding of the legacies and ongoing impacts of colonisation on the young male participants and a self-reflective and participant-oriented way of working. Their approach focused on connecting and building relations of respect and reciprocity with the young men and their families to create safe relations and spaces conducive to healing the trauma of the young men. Such connections and healing were seen to be requisite to begin addressing gender-based and other forms of violence within Indigenous communities.

… this approach took the form of facilitators working with the young men's families by taking the time to connect with and understand their situation through listening without shame or belittling. Connections with the young men focused on cultivating deep, trusting and emotionally connected relationships through facilitator curiosity, deep listening, empathy, and compassion. These relationships were crucial in creating a safe space where the young men felt comfortable to share their pain. Storytelling within the program was an organic healing process through which facilitators supported the young men to learn more about themselves and their relations with others. It supported the young men to think more deeply about their personal values and more flexibly about issues and enactments of violence, conflict and respect. These learnings provided a strong basis to introduce and explore racial and gender oppression with reference to the high levels of respect accorded to First Nations women within the young men's culture. Such healing is not possible without building the men as country. This is a spiritual and mindful process of building emotional connectedness to the earth and its bountiful living energies.

5. Transformation across government and mainstream organisations

> Government engagement with First Nations organisations and individuals is often tokenistic, conducted merely to fulfil obligations without meaningful community input or transparency about how input shapes policy decisions (Productivity Commission 2024a).

Transforming government organisations to work effectively with First Nations communities will involve deep and enduring changes to culture, systems, and processes (Closing the Gap 2020). This includes identifying and eliminating racism, practicing cultural safety, delivering services in partnership with First Nations organisations and increasing accountability (see also AMSANT 2021; Healing Foundation 2017).

Blagg et al. (2018) describe how First Nations knowledge of, and approaches to addressing family violence, differs from 'mainstream' knowledge and approaches. While First Nations knowledge and approaches are holistic and community-centred, non-Indigenous or mainstream approaches tend to prioritise gender considerations and view violence against women through the lens of gender inequalities and patriarchal power dynamics. While acknowledging the role of gender and coercion in much violence against First Nations women, Blagg et al. (2018) argue for an Indigenous-specific approach to family violence that delves into causal factors rooted in the First Nations experience of colonisation and its aftermath.

Developing effective policies, initiatives, and services for addressing DFSV within First Nations communities necessitates systemic transformation across mainstream government agencies. Acknowledging the historical tensions and lack of trust between governments and First Nations communities is crucial for establishing effective partnerships. Additionally, service delivery must be tailored to First Nations values, cultures and knowledges, which often do not align with government administrative structures (Healing Foundation 2015; Spencer et al. 2022). It is imperative that mainstream governments and organisations empower First Nations communities with access to locally relevant and timely data and information so they can make informed decisions about issues that affect them (Productivity Commission 2024a). More broadly, governments must critique the production of these data. Mainstream research methodologies need to be more attuned to First Nations ways of knowing, doing, and being (Bowrey et al. 2022; Sharmil et al. 2021).

Non-Indigenous organisations and workers engaging in DFSV prevention efforts within First Nations communities must prioritise cultural safety and respect. This is not an easy task – as Cripps and Adams (2014) argue, while governments embrace terms like 'community development' and 'capacity building', their efforts to implement inclusive, community approaches to addressing violence have not been effective given the siloed ways in which service provision/government agencies work. First Nations organisations have expressed frustration about the cultural mismatches between First Nations and mainstream processes, rules, and risk profiles. When First Nations organisations have proposed culturally appropriate decision-making models, government departments have often rejected them, citing these mismatches. This has led to First Nations organisations feeling forced to conform to government standards, hindering genuine partnerships. Many organisations have also highlighted that inflexible funding stipulations have limited their ability to tailor services to community needs (Productivity Commission 2024b). A further issue hindering genuine partnerships and undermining the effectiveness of First Nations led programs in this space is the lack of short- and longer-term government funding (Valentine & Gray 2006; Blagg et al. 2020; Vulovic 2023).

Given that First Nations people are over-represented in DFV-related assaults and homicides, their views, experiences, and suggested solutions must heavily inform the direction and delivery of DFSV initiatives delivered by government and mainstream organisations. First Nations people, families, communities, and organisations (not governments and mainstream agencies) are most deeply affected by DFSV and are best placed to identify the solutions that are most effective for them. In addition to providing ample funding and technical support where required to First Nations-led initiatives, governments and mainstream organisations should not underestimate the positive impact that can arise from a shift in organisational culture. As indicated in this review, transformation at all levels can be cultivated by practicing deep listening to First Nations people, continually undertaking self-reflection about what 'evidence' is being privileged (i.e., from Western-centric or First Nations knowledges) to inform DFSV approaches, striving to obtain First Nations voices, and enacting the solutions they propose to address DFSV. This is at the heart of the deep transformation required by government and mainstream organisations to work effectively with First Nations communities – starting in the first instance by recognising that the factors associated with violence against women, and the solutions, are not fundamentally the same in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

CONCLUSION

Addressing Domestic Family and Sexual Violence in First Nations communities is an urgent national priority. Drawing on important policy and research in this space, this literature review has highlighted the injustices, inadequacies, and inappropriateness of applying mainstream (i.e., colonial) logic to addressing DFSV within First Nations communities as undermining and devaluing First Nations agency, voice, knowledge, and culture, and as paternalistic, controlling and re-traumatising. The review reiterates the messages within key First Nations informed policy and research in this space in presenting five areas that are central to better understanding and addressing DFSV within First Nations communities, namely, culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches; holistic healing that embeds culture, country, and community and enhances the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations people; self-determination and cultural governance that positions women and children's safety central and values the voices and knowledge of Indigenous women; inclusive engagement with First Nations men and boys; and transformation across government and mainstream organisations to enable and First Nations people to lead in addressing DFSV in their communities.

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