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# Chapter 4: Understanding contemporary violence in its historical context

'The answers were there before white man  
come in'

Stories of strength and resilience for responding to violence In Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander communities

# CHAPTER 4

## UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY VIOLENCE IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This chapter presents information on the historical context of family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Towards the end of the chapter, we present an overview of executive functioning as it relates to historical trauma.

### Laws and justice systems

Prior to 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations and communities had (what we now call) legal and justice systems. Since 1788, supplanting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander laws and justice processes has occurred through the imposition of Australian State, Territory and Commonwealth laws. The story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and justice in relation to family and community violence is more nuanced than this. One participant explained:

*The government needs to learn straight forward is that Aboriginal people have their own culture, we had communities before the whites came ... we lived on the land, we lived by the land, we lived by the rules ... One of the main things is they took away our decision-making. They rendered our cultural protocols and our way of life null and void by replacing it with l-a-w. They also took our lands. There's grief and all people hurt associated with that.*

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous societies (Nations) develop standards and rules (laws) that govern behaviour. When these laws are infringed, systems are in place to assess the extent of rule breaches. Punishment or control measures are then applied to bring about justice (justice systems). Across all societies, rules and justice systems have evolved over time, in line with shifts in community expectations and standards. The shift to abolish capital punishment in Australia is an example, where punishment (justice) changed in response to changes in community standards.

In understanding contemporary violence, it is necessary to recognise that post-colonial regimes differentially impacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In some, Aboriginal or Islander laws were entirely interrupted and are no longer in place; in others, Aboriginal law continues to influence the way the community operates. One participant described how response options offered through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and culture were at odds with non-Indigenous justice and child protection-related responses:

*... we had kids that were constantly stealing cars and smashing windows, and what not, and then the Elders of their groups said they would take them out to the bush Country to their traditional land and they would teach them ... they'd go out there and they had to live off the land and whatnot. Well, the Department of Juvenile Justice said, 'No, that was inhumane they couldn't do that.'*

Some participants expressed the desire for the old systems to return, that is, to assert and reinforce the fundamental structures, values and practices within law and culture:

*So, it's a different system to what white society are governed under. And in all of this stuff, there is no mention of what culture, and how important culture is in the make-up of families, and you can't just bloody throw your DNA out ... and expect to actually live the way white people live. It's not ... It can, but it's not ... you're not following your free spirit and you're not actually living the life that you were chosen to live. So, I think that in legislation they take the white component of legislation to be the be-all and end-all when in actual fact it's fact ... And it's imposed on our mob to act like white society when in fact, if we were to go back to the old ways, a lot of this stuff would stop.*

We do not deny that pre-colonial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations experienced family and community violence. There is evidence that violence (in the form of trauma from fighting) did occur in pre-colonial times.<sup>(24)</sup> For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, there have always been social rule systems (laws) and controls (justice) across most groups that apply to anyone who breaches those rules (punishment). Law and justice systems in pre-colonial times were administered by senior men and women who set standards of behaviour, defined what constituted a breach of rules and determined how people were

punished or rehabilitated. This is often referred to as customary law. In some parts of Australia, these systems still operate to varying degrees and may continue to have a significant influence on the lives of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.(25)

These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of law and justice differ from non-Indigenous understandings and practices of social norms, sometimes leading to tensions and misunderstandings. In some parts of Australia, the situation, however, is evolving, as evidenced by post-colonial justice systems being modified to accommodate Indigenous cultural contexts. Examples include Circle Sentencing in New South Wales, where Community Elders, the magistrate, the person who has committed the crime – and, on occasion, the victim and support people for the offender and/or victim – sit in a circle to discuss the circumstances and impact of the offence, to determine a sentence tailored to the offender.(26)

## Competing justice systems

It was common for community members to describe the discordance between the processes of Australia's legal/justice systems and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural laws. They expressed a belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-colonial laws are not represented or respected in Australia's current legal systems. One participant from a remote area said:

*The law is written for the white people.*

Another said:

*... white fellas. It's not written for us. It's there to protect them.*

One participant made the following comment about young people:

*They've got no respect for the law.*

Another said of the court process:

*But looking at a white judge and he's telling you what to do ... Like, you're not my father, you're not my mother, and I'm not your pet, you know what I mean?*

Participants also expressed a belief that the legal systems were unfair and not designed to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The ubiquity and danger of imprisonment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was commonly raised:

*All the answers [are] ... gaol, gaol, gaol right down to our youth ... right up to the oldies.*

Community and service provider participants described the ways in which they act to work around the legal system – not reporting family violence to police. In a few instances, service providers who are local community members discussed avoiding direct interaction with the legal system. The following examples illustrate where service providers made decisions about process in the best interests of their clients:

*So, they didn't see me as the employer of that organisation but as an aunty in the community, kind of thing. Even for me, that was a conflict kind of thing, what I was doing, but I always tried to think, 'Well, what's the safest thing for the woman and her kids, what was going on' even though officially it wasn't my thing, and I think sometimes that's what happens a lot of the time. It's not in the legal ... whoever the process should be, it's who people feel comfortable with ... It's happened to me a couple of times in different positions.*

*Well, it just opened my eyes up, like, just talking about it here, because if I see somebody struggling, like, you know, maybe I should say, 'Oh, [Supervisor], I seen so and so out on Saturday night, and just what she was saying to me, maybe you just ... can you make contact with her,' and not necessarily tell you what she's done, or you know what I mean, like if it's nothing serious. It's like, 'Do you think you could make contact with her and get her involved in something?'*

## Sources of contemporary violence

Community members overwhelmingly described family and community violence as arising from a historical context and following a path to the impacts observed today. Participants identified the overarching contributor to current family and community violence as intergenerational trauma and related impacts, resulting from violence enacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

For some individuals, families and communities, there was a sense that the impacts of historical violence were being passed down through generations and that the ongoing impacts of colonisation, including racism, added to the experience of transgenerational trauma. Community members and service providers

described the detrimental impacts of colonial violence, including massacres, quarantining, separating families, institutionalisation and segregation; trauma, including transgenerational trauma; breaking of family, kinship and support structures; and transgenerational cycles and normalisation of violence, further described below.

## Colonial violence

When asked where violence came from, participants identified that *all societies* have some forms of violence and that this is not restricted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Participants alluded to a dominant theme described by participants was of how historic relationships between colonial authority and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affect contemporary manifestations and understandings of family violence. The colonial period was very physically violent against many Nations. Early accounts of frontier behaviour include:

*Those simply shot were fortunate. Many were cruelly tortured, maimed, blinded, burnt and castrated ... They were shot for dog meat ... Women were chained to the huts of white settlers, used by the men, then tortured to death, some being forced to wear the heads of their murdered husbands ... Worst of all to the Aborigines was the perpetual theft of their children for sexual purposes, or if they were lucky, to be domestic servants.(27 p. 89)*

Harsh social control measures of separation and segregation were enforced on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These measures were almost universal and, therefore, affected a very high proportion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The separation policies (e.g. young children being raised in domestic or industrial 'homes' by the State)(28) had substantial negative and transgenerational impacts. These systems denied positive role modelling, such as exposure parenting and social bonding, to youth.(28) Contemporary family and community violence is a result of this history – which, for many, is still within living memory. Separation and removal policies were still occurring into the 1970s; it is critical to remember this when trying to understand the context of contemporary family and community violence.

Colonialism as a structure continues into contemporary times and provides the foundations on which society's systems have been built, and which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may experience as systemically discriminatory. An Elder in The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-Harm & Youth Suicide describes it:

*Our people are living on the crossroads and the walk is a rough, rugged, cloudy journey to reach what the Government wants us to do. It's not our system, I'll tell you that. Some of us are lucky to learn that. Where do we go after that? We are still a separate people. You are there. We are over here. You don't want to know our way and we are given no choice but to go your way.(29 p. 52)*

Accordingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples assert that their experiences with family and community violence occur within a distinct historical and cultural context, compared with that of non-Indigenous people. They identify the traumatic impacts colonial violence has had on community, family and cultural structures over successive generations.(9,30-32)

The impacts of colonial violence were held to be largely responsible for contemporary violence within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Colonial violence included displacing existing social and cultural controls with another system, which imposed laws and social control measures, defined according to a different social and cultural code. One participant explained:

*What they [Aboriginal people] had was a relationship model, pre-traumatised relationship model that every one of us had a skin name and we were connected. Forty thousand years our mob developed this idea.*

Post 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and cultural codes were displaced through various processes, resulting in the forced grouping together into unfamiliar geographic locations of vast cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who had no kinship associations. They were systematically controlled by the State, often through State-sanctioned violence. One focus group participant described it this way:

*... through colonisation ... the fact is they all put Aboriginal people into missions, you know, and that's when all the act of violence happened, you know, the fact that we was all in one place.*

## Stolen Generations

Justification for the forcible removal of children often came from the appalling conditions in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were living following colonisation. There was also a paternalistic belief that it was necessary to blend Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the white populations, to assimilate them.(33) Peter Read introduced the term 'Stolen Generations' in 1982, to refer to this policy.(34) The National

Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their homes found that many forcibly removed children had 'lost their languages, their heritage and their lands, as well as their families and communities.'(35, p.20):

*Indigenous children have been forcibly removed from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia. In that time, not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects. Most families have been affected in one or more generations by the removal of one or more children. Nationally, the Inquiry [the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families] concludes that between one in three and one in ten children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970.(35, p.4)*

Following this separation from their families, children could be institutionalised, fostered and/or adopted. Moves between types of setting were common. As part of the so called 'assimilation' policy, children and their families were discouraged or prevented from contacting each other. Excessive physical abuse was common, and sexual abuse was reported by one in five children who were fostered and one in ten people who were institutionalised.(35) 'Psychological reverberations' from such painful events as these have an intergenerational impact.(33, p.31)

### Systematic removal of children from families

It was recognised that kinship systems – important for providing care for children when their parents could not (including because of experiencing trauma) – have also been heavily impacted by family violence. Participants discussed trauma experienced through family separations, including the removal of children. These contemporary experiences were often linked to historical patterns of trauma, as a service provider explained:

*Even the Elders are saying with the kids getting taken off them ... 'It's another Stolen Generation.' So, there's a high percent ... of Aboriginal kids getting taken off parents, not only because of domestic violence but it's all ... everything put together, drugs-related and all that sort of stuff and past generations.*

The decades-long systematic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities underlies a continuing cycle of trauma. Participants repeatedly explained how this was linked to alcohol and other drug use and family violence. One participant explained their despair this way:

*When our kids got taken, there was a lot of anger and resentment and everything flying around. A lot of drug use because you've got no way of turning those emotions off, and it just makes it a hell of a lot worse.*

### Transgenerational trauma

How colonial violence and genocide resulted in transgenerational trauma is well documented.(36) The literature provides examples where generations of grief, loss and oppression have led to lateral violence, where displaced violence is directed between Indigenous people.(11) Andrews and colleagues have identified the inherent loss and trauma experienced by Aboriginal men. They cite a participant who described Aboriginal men as 'vulnerable, highly distressed and traumatised'(37, p.7), concluding that transgenerational trauma is the result of colonisation. Experts have developed responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and community violence, and highlighted the need for actions to address the ongoing impacts of the links between colonial violence and transgenerational trauma.(38,39)

The colonial process was described by participants as having various ongoing impacts in contemporary society, including the negative impact on relationships and racism. Overwhelmingly, they described trauma as deeply affecting people's ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships. Many described how trauma, including its impacts across generations, contributed to poor personal, parental, familial and community relationships. Trauma was described as impacting many areas of people's lives: it overlapped, and was intertwined with, mental health problems and behaviours such as alcohol and other drug use. Other contributing factors discussed were culture as a social control and the negative impacts resulting from the absence of cultural processes:

*It affects every generation until it's stopped. I mean, domestic violence in my case, I know, goes back to the eighteenth century when the original mob that my great-great grandfather come from were massacred, okay? I know. You come to think after many years of that intergenerational trauma, you think it's normal, you normalise it, you justify it, you make excuses for it and it wasn't him, if he wasn't drinking. Well, you know, even if he wasn't drinking, he's going to smash your head into there, okay, because you've woke him up when he didn't want to be or ... and, you know, don't do that because, you know, don't charge, don't charge them because they're family, we must keep the family together at the cost of losing our lives. We need to rewrite the story.*

## Breakdown of family, kinship and support structures

Historical trauma was explained as being passed down in some (but not all) families and communities. This was identified as a significant contributor to the breakdown of family and kinship structures, including through the disruption of roles and separation and isolation of family members.

### Disruption of roles within families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander familial structures have historically been more encompassing, including non-biological kinship beyond the nuclear family, where the large extended family and community is involved in rearing children. Two key roles within kinship care were identified by study participants: caring for the health and wellbeing of a child generally; and the role of cultural teachers in supporting appropriate behaviour and cultural continuity. Traditionally, these roles supported parents to rear children to be strong in body, mind, spirit, culture and identity. They also supported parents with behaviour regulation:

*Yeah. And the reason I think [name] raised it is that, that's happened in our family where we've had uncles pull nephews up and say, 'Hey, that's not the right thing to do.' So, there is a level of support, say from some of the Elders.*

The literature details the critical role of kinship care in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family safety. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are interdependent and require holistic responses which draw on family and community members to support families.(40,41) The Secretariat of the National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) describes how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family structures and childrearing practices influence the way responses to family and child safety concerns should be shaped and implemented to ensure continuity of cultural connection.(42)

Participants talked about these structures now being compromised because of trauma:

*Our structure's been taken away with the uncle normally and the aunts or the whole family is supposed to have a crack at shaping these children.*

There was discussion of the roles family members play in contributing to social order, explained by one participant:

*In the past, this is going back, grandfathers, great grandfathers, they didn't have this problem, because there was none of the stuff that we're using now in this generation. They never had that, you know. Everybody had a job to do.*

Roles within kinship systems were a recurring theme, particularly gender roles and structures:

*That talk is you have to go back to family. Only a man can turn a boy into a man, and a woman turn a girl into a woman. The first thing is to know your roles and responsibility as a woman and a man, and then how [people] operate in the family structure.*

Historically, Elders were responsible for governing community life. Participants described how this has changed:

*To me, how we were structured back then was the Elders held the standard and the protocols, the principles, the values ... They're the owners and the keepers of that knowledge and they still practise it today. They tell us 'It's not supposed to be like that. This is the way it's supposed to be up here. You guys are still doing it wrong, get it together, do it right.' And our mothers and fathers are saying it to us so we're constantly going back to them and presenting the issue, or the case and they give their take on it.*

*... in the old days we used to have our Elders, or our parents, talk to us about what to do and what is right, and what is wrong, but now I think we're all caught up in ... we don't have these talk with our children now anymore and they just do what they want to do, and then it gets harder for us to try and when they get older trying to tell them, 'Now, stop. Don't do this, don't do that,' but it's too late. If we had sort of stopped that in the first place then you wouldn't be sort of having these problems.*

These participants, like many, saw a lack of respect, particularly respect for Elders, as the starting point for family and community violence:

*... lost communication to family and mob ... young people don't listen to the leaders ... yeah, the young people.*

*It's respect ... they don't respect the Elders.*

*I suppose, just in my own family ... but you always have someone to control your family. I've still got my mum around, but she's old. But if we always have an argument, because my father wasn't around, but we always had our mother there to pull us back or anything, because I fight with my*

*brothers and sisters. I suppose, even in my family now, there's not any of that around anymore, we've got an older brother now. But I suppose that's the difference within families now, you don't have that person to pull it all back together, like go in and say, 'Oh, look, no, what are you arguing over? You're making the brothers and sisters jump.' I done it a lot over there, when I was living in the town, I used to do it with my nieces and stuff, because I've got a daughter the same age as her. Because I hate the fact my daughters fight with my brother's girl and then we've got to go and have an argument over it.*

*You're just finding that the family dynamics, it's just not ... back in the old days, if we mucked up, you'd get lifted by your grandmother or something, and then you'd pull your head in. These fellas, they swear at you now, ay.*

Participants stressed the importance of men's and women's place and roles in building safe families and communities. They noted that men seem to have 'lost' their place in families and their cultural roles and responsibilities:

*Like, you know, to a black man, you know, you're the provider, you're the protector of the family, and because of colonisation this has taken that away from our black men.*

*It's pride. Yeah, disempowered, it's the pride what they've taken away from these men.*

Participants suggested that colonisation has adversely impacted on the opportunities that existed in traditional societies for men to spend time with each other, as men. They emphasised the need for safe places for men to go to, to talk to someone they can trust and to share their feelings, issues and worries.

Data from the 2017 NCAS reflect the changing nature of male roles in families and its part in leading to violence against women and girls. That study included 342 people who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants: 180 women, 160 men, and two people with unspecified gender. Three-quarters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents believed that men losing their role within the family was a contributor to violence, with 26% saying that this contributed 'a lot of the time' and 50% 'some of the time'.<sup>(43)</sup> Other research has examined how colonisation resulted in a loss of men's identity and role within the community – leading to an 'anger contextualised within cumulative, unresolved trauma.'<sup>(37, p. 53)</sup>

In contrast, participants in our study noted that women have largely retained their caregiving roles and place within families and communities:

*Whereas us women still do the same thing, we still raise our kids, we still feed our families, we still take on, you know, people off the street ... And, you know, the women still have just as much power within the family they've always had but men don't get to be the enforcers, the discipliners, because that's seen as abuse.*

In the structure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, both women and men have a strong place in many communities. We draw attention to the place of women because of the dominant discourse regarding gender inequality as a key driver of family violence. While women's roles and responsibilities can be different from those of men, they are nevertheless equally important culturally and within families and the community.<sup>(30)</sup> In many Aboriginal cultures, women have specific law, Country and special places, Dreaming, songs, stories and ceremony.<sup>(44)</sup>

Built into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and culture, therefore, is a form of gender equality. However, experiences with colonisation have undermined these important traditional cultural structures in some communities. Some participants outlined how males perceived that their role within families had changed or was changing. One male participant described this:

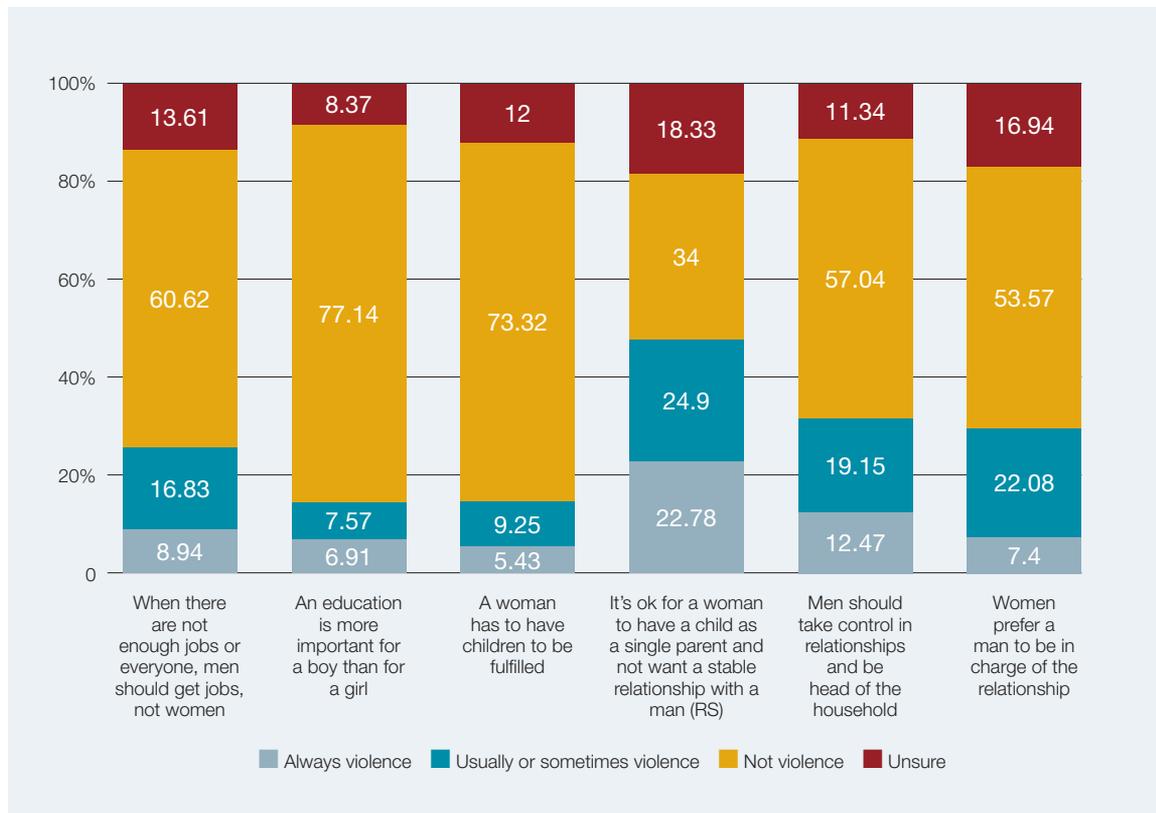
*Aboriginal women have certain roles and responsibilities around family, the men is the land. But now what we're seeing is a traumatised response to that thinking. But even now, even how much we're talking about men's spaces, we're talking about women's spaces because that's forty thousand years in our brains. We're not saying we're better than women, we're respecting women and we want them to be complementary and that's the message we have to get out to our mob. We're not in competition. We actually come together to make our families but because of trauma, we see it in our families.*

One regional participant explained that dominant western gender norms do not align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gender norms:

*But I think the important part about all of this is really that the standards by what white people go by and what Aboriginal society has been brought up with over sixty thousand years. Going back then there was a hierarchy where women were in the control and they used to be able to absolutely stop, and our normal cultural practices stop men from beating women, because the women would take up their arms and beat them, one off, right? They'd come together.*

In the CMS, participants were asked to rate the extent of their agreement (or disagreement) with a set of statements reflecting views about gender equality. Across the six items, the majority (34–77%) of CMS participants' responses were supportive of gender equality (Figure 3: Table 6). Responses were used to generate a gender equality score for each participant, with higher scores reflecting views consistent with gender equality. High gender-equality scores were about half as common among remote participants, compared with urban participants (18% versus 33%; PR=0.54, 95%CI:0.39,0.76) and were significantly more common among females than males (34% versus 21%; PR=1.68, 95%CI:1.34,20.9) (Table 6).

The use of violence (feeling violent and conviction in relation to violence) was significantly less common among participants classified as having a moderate or high gender equity score. We also found that participants with high gender equity scores were less likely to have experienced violence than those with low scores (17% versus 23%; PR=0.67; 95%CI:0.48,0.93). This provides some evidence that having views supportive of gender equity was protective against the experience and use of violence.



**Figure 3: Gender-role attitudes among CMS participants, overall<sup>28</sup>**

These findings are consistent with the literature about the impact of colonisation on gender roles(39) and the links between gender attitudes and attitudes towards violence.(43) The results also reflect traditional cultural structures which were based on gender equity principles; for example, where Aboriginal ancestors are noted as giving both women and men their own Law/Lore, Dreaming, Country, special places, ceremony and so on.(44) Sharing power and responsibilities in this way ensured that everyone was valued and had a place in families and communities. Drawing on the findings described throughout this chapter, one possible interpretation of these results is that those with lower gender equity scores may have been disconnected from their culture and identity. Consequently, they have not been taught to observe important and respectful

28. The item 'It's okay for a woman to have a child as a single parent and not want a stable relationship with a man' is reverse scored (RS) before being incorporated into the total score; it is presented in the figure in its original form before reverse coding.

relationships and are more likely to have grown up in environments in which they have experienced, witnessed or used violence. Further in-depth research is required to explore this and other potential explanations of these findings.

### Separation and isolation from partners or caregivers

Participants described the cycle of trauma that breaks kinship structures as having a typical pattern – trauma feeding into violence, which leads to incarceration or other separation, which results in further familial breakdown. They also described gendered patterns within that cycle, with men more likely to commit violence and more likely to be separated from family, and women more likely to be the victims of violence and to suffer isolation from family in the aftermath of violence. Separating a violent man from his female victim can result in a loss of support for her, because she is isolated from his kinship system. One participant explained:

*Nine times out of ten, people that have domestic violence have either got a shit load of trauma in their past, or there's drugs there. And then it just looks at it and goes, this isn't working, they need to be separated, this woman needs to have her man taken away from her which means no support with raising those kids at all. And half of his side of the family aren't allowed around anymore either, so she's got no support network.*

This breakdown of roles within family and kinship structures can lead to children being raised without their father.

Positive relationships have been found to enhance resilience and also to have a positive impact on community and friendships for youth at high risk and who have experienced family violence.<sup>(45)</sup> Therefore, removing youth (including young men) and separating them from their support structures may reduce resilience and coping within families.

### Transgenerational cycles and normalisation of violence

Violence was often said to pass from one generation to the next, because of historical, current and ongoing trauma. The perpetuation of violence over generations resulted from ongoing violent experiences and the obstruction of respectful relationships and expectations of safety in families and communities. Participants described the impact of this as 'normalisation' or a 'cycle of violence' – a concept shared across levels of remoteness. One participant described it this way:

*... you get taught that, yeah, it's okay to smack your fucking missus, give her a hiding because she wasn't doing the right thing. And that was inherited in the kids, you know, because they got that from their father and their father got it from their father. So, that was everything that was handed down, and the same thing's been handed down in our community as well. And this is where they're trying to get them to sit there and break the cycle.*

Women described how family violence is normalised in relationships:

*Yeah, it's a normal thing. My dad did it, he started it. I find a lot of it is that as well.*

*I was sort of thinking just that if girls see their mum being flogged ... yeah, they think it's okay to be flogged. Yeah, like it's not that big of a deal.*

*I think following on from that, though, what they're seeing at home they're obviously seeing that that's the way to go and deal with things and that's the only way to have that resolved, especially in that safe space. If home's meant to be ... and that's the behaviour that's being put on in front of you then you think that that's what you're meant to obviously do.*

Some participants described violence as accepted or normal, despite their discomfort about this normalisation:

*Violence has become normalised with some people and so there is sometimes an acceptable that violent behaviour is normal – even though people might not like it they just accept that that's the way things are.*

*System is failing our children; we allow children to see and do things they shouldn't have seen.*

Some participants explained that jealousy-related violence, stemming from the breakdown of relationships and lack of modelling of healthy intimate relationships, was sometimes perceived as 'normal':

*Jealousy can cause violence and young girls think it's okay if their boyfriend is abusive because they sometimes think that is what love is.*

Although the majority of the 342 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents in the NCAS said that it was *not appropriate* for men to use violence in response to their jealousy, 26% of men and 14% of women reported that they thought it *was appropriate*.(43)

Senior et al. identified the fact that violence was expected in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's relationships, across both urban and remote areas. They reported that normalisation of violence caused tensions in relationships for young people, including how they managed jealousy. Male physical violence was described as resulting from sexual jealousy; it was considered accepted, and even expected, for a man to use physical violence to 'protect his girl' or to punish her for certain behaviours, such as laziness or infidelity. They found that women were more accepting of some forms of violence, in order to hold on to their relationships. This tension extended to reports of young women expressing difficulty in negotiating consent for sex with partners.(46)

## Witnessing violence

Many participants recognised that seeing and/or experiencing violence as a child contributed to high levels of trauma and the ongoing normalisation of violence. They also recognised that, without dealing with that trauma, they were likely to see other impacts. One participant described it:

*Well, there's definitely trauma. We know that kids, well youth and adolescents, that see violence, whether it be physical violence, verbal abuse, there's automatic trauma that goes with that so the impact on the child definitely depends on whether they have support or they don't have support.*

Participants stated that seeing and/or experiencing violence had the potential to lead to a cycle of violence: those who had experienced violence as a child were considered more likely to perpetuate it as an adult:

*... at that early age and it's not only violence, but I suppose you learn all the values or whether you want to call them values or what you learn lifestyles, I suppose, you know, as a young child, what you see your parents sort of do or go through. Not only parents – could be your uncles, aunties, any relatives, any families. You know, like family friends, so, and I guess that transcends into later in life, it's kind of a cycle, I guess.*

Witnessing violence can also have negative impacts on childhood development.(47) Studies have shown that witnessing violence in the home and community can contribute to the normalisation of violence and create a perception that violence is part of culture.(43) Several studies identify witnessing high levels of violence in the community as a factor that increases violence against women and girls.(43,48) Work done with Men's Programs has shown that emphasising the impact on children who witness violence is a powerful way of engaging men and encouraging them to reduce their use of violence.(37)

Family violence is often perceived and experienced at the community level, because it can occur in public spaces where the wider family may be involved. One participant stated:

*It's become so normal ... We see a lot of it happen in the streets and how many times do we report it? How many times turn a blind eye and you just drive down the street, you drive past, people fighting again, you know? That's two people fighting but that's family violence [in the community] there itself.*

The CMS data provide strong evidence for a link between intergenerational trauma and violence and support the cyclical nature of violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Experiences of trauma were very common in the sample. Almost one-third of participants reported that their family had been forcibly removed from Country or Island; almost one-quarter reported that a child was removed from a close family member within the last year; 20–40% reported early childhood adversities (as a child, lived with someone who was mentally unwell, had issues with alcohol or other drug use, or was in contact with the justice system); and 20% frequently witnessed violence within the community (Table 7).

Participants with lower exposure to trauma were less likely to have been involved in violence, both experiencing and/or using violence. The experience and use of violence was significantly less common among participants whose families were not disrupted or disconnected, either through forced removal from Country or Island, or forced removal of children. The prevalence of conviction relating to violence was halved among participants whose families were not removed from their Country or Island (13% versus 28%, PR=0.55,95%CI:0.42,0.71; Table 8), and the prevalence of experiencing violence in the lifetime or in the past year was 25–30% lower (Table 7). The prevalence of experiencing violence in the past year and of using violence was halved among those whose family did not have a child taken away, compared with those who had. This may be partly attributable to the fact that children were often taken because of violence within the family.

Further, violence was also significantly less common among participants who had not experienced adverse childhood experiences. The prevalence of all violence outcomes was 30–50% lower among participants who had not (versus had) experienced each of the individual early childhood adversities (Table 7). The qualitative and quantitative data align with evidence indicating that childhood trauma significantly affects parenting behaviours and that trauma impacts parents' ability to reach their own ideal parenting behaviour as adults.(49)

Discrimination, an ongoing impact of colonisation, was a common experience for participants. Over one-third experienced a high level of discrimination in their everyday life. Experiencing discrimination was tightly tied to experience and use of violence. Experiencing violence in the past year was one-third as common among CMS participants who experienced low, compared with high, levels of discrimination (11% versus 32%; PR=0.35; 95%CI:0.25,0.48). Use of violence was one-quarter as common among CMS participants who experienced low, compared with high, levels of discrimination (felt violent: 12% versus 49%; PR=0.26, 95%CI:0.19,0.35; arrested or convicted in relation to violence: 7% versus 30%; PR=0.27, 95%CI:0.18,0.41) (Table 7).

The link between trauma and violence was consistent across each of these measures of trauma. These findings suggest that these forms of trauma may have long-lasting impacts and implications for both later experience of, and perpetration of, violence. Another consistent finding was that exposure to violence was linked to experience and use of violence.

Limited witnessing of violence, either in the household or the community, was linked to a significantly lower prevalence of experiencing violence and perpetrating violence. Further, use of violence was more common among those who had personally experienced violence than among those who had never experienced violence. The prevalence of perpetrating violence (both feeling violent and being convicted) was more than three-fold among those who had experienced violence themselves (25% compared to 6%; PR=3.45, 95%CI:2.39,4.97). Among all people who had ever felt violent, 84% reported having experienced violence themselves. Among all people who had ever been convicted in relation to violence, 87% reported having experienced violence themselves (Table 7; Table 8).

Being afraid of a partner was linked to violence. We found that participants who had ever been scared of their partner were significantly more likely to have experienced violence, both in their lifetime (95% versus 51%; PR=0.51, 95%CI:0.48,0.55) and within the past year (36% versus 15%; PR=0.37; 95%CI:0.30,0.46). Participants who reported never being scared of a partner were significantly less likely to have ever felt violent themselves (26% versus 44%; PR=0.51, 95%CI:0.43,0.60) or to have been convicted in relation to violence (15% versus 27%; PR=0.37, 95%CI:0.30,0.46) (Table 7).

## Executive functioning

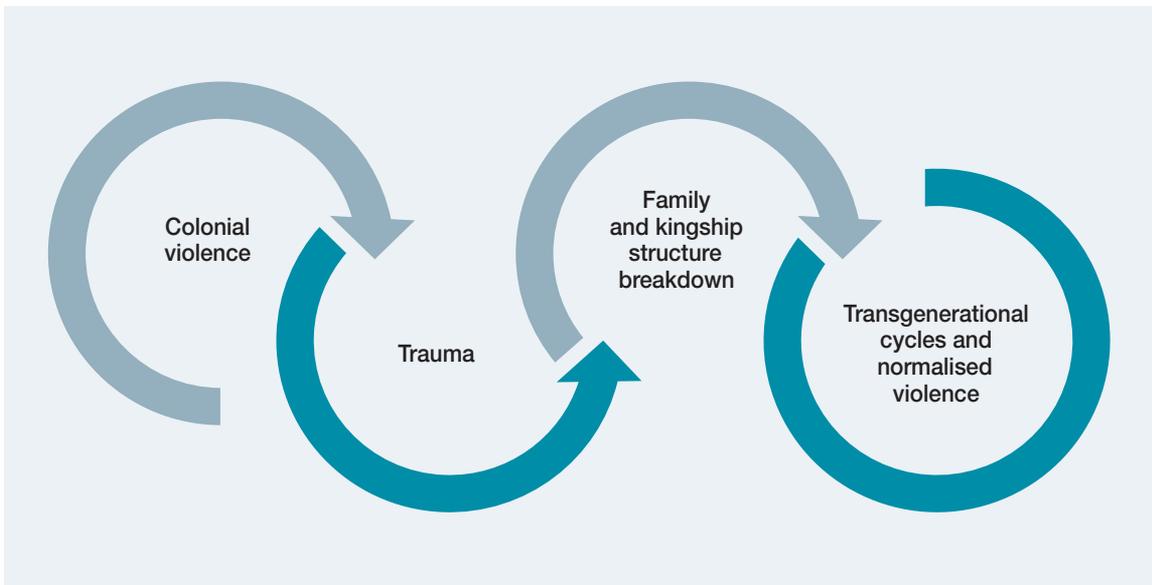
The breakdown of kinship structures, due to colonisation, and the historical, transgenerational and ongoing contemporary trauma described by many participants are consistent with the concept of complex trauma. Evidence shows that experience of cumulative trauma over the lifetime (i.e. complex trauma) can have negative impacts on executive functioning.(50)

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health defines executive functioning as higher-level cognitive functions that operate in the frontal lobes of the brain. These include decision-making, abstract thinking, planning and carrying out plans, mental flexibility and deciding which behaviours are appropriate under what circumstances. These functions support complex, goal directed behaviours.(51)

Executive dysfunction impacts people's potential for educational attainment, sustained employment, mental health and wellbeing, all of which are protective against interactions with the justice system.(52) Much of the research about executive dysfunction and related impacts has focused on people with mental health conditions (53-57) or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.(58) However, the research has not focused on people who have experienced trauma and who may have executive dysfunction and its related negative impacts on functioning and relationships.

## Key considerations

The story of violence, its history and its manifestations within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities is complex. However, there is a consistent story within and across communities about what has contributed to violence, what has resulted, and how violence has been transmitted across and down the generations. Individuals and communities have experienced severe and widespread trauma across generations, with limited capacity to address it. In some instances, this trauma has been left unresolved. This has resulted in damaged family structures, impeding the establishment and maintenance of healthy relationships and, in turn, perpetuating the use and experience of violence. Trauma was described as both contributing to, and resulting from, the perpetration and experience of violence. The contributors to trauma and violence are intertwined and affect many areas of people's lives (Figure 4: The sources of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and community violence).



*Figure 4: The sources of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and community violence*

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