

FVPLS Victoria's Solutions to addressing Family Violence

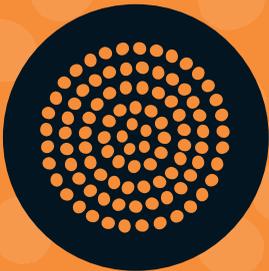




Amplifying our voices and leadership



Promoting healthy relationships



Strong culture, strong identity



Investing in our services



Breaking down barriers: Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations



Addressing systemic failures through policy and advocacy



Increasing cultural awareness in the mainstream sector



Avoiding child removal: strengthening our families

No more silencing the violence

We have entered an unprecedented time in the struggle to eliminate family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The findings of the *Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence* were explicitly clear on the consequences of our societal problem with violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – women and children in particular. The Royal Commission stated that:

“This is unacceptable. It is also preventable...Clearly we are failing these women and children”.¹

Family violence is a national epidemic and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are at the centre of this crisis. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised because of family violence² and 10 times more likely to be killed as a result of violent assault.³

Beyond the social cost of family violence, shouldered disproportionately by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children, is evidence of a profound economic impact. KPMG estimates that, unless we take action, family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women will cost the Australian economy \$2.2 billion by 2021.⁴

Family violence does not happen in a vacuum. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience discrimination through racism, poverty and gender inequality. It is the combination of this disadvantage that makes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women vastly more likely to experience family violence in comparison with non-Aboriginal women.

We must support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to break the cycle of disadvantage. The disproportionate and devastating flow on effects of family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can no longer be silenced. It is time to act. There are opportunities now to implement truly effective changes that will transform the landscape of family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their communities.

FVPLS Victoria's solutions to addressing family violence

Tackling the issue of family violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can seem overwhelming, particularly given the intersectional nature and vastness of the issue.

Solutions to prevent violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women exist. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their communities are the key to creating change. FVPLS Victoria is not a gender specific service, however more than 93% of our clients are women and children. FVPLS Victoria has worked alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women for 14 years and we are respected for expertise and cultural safety. We operate across Victoria, in both metropolitan and regional settings.

Our relationships with the community means that Aboriginal women trust us. We have worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors for a long period of time. We have developed our solutions to addressing family violence based on the extensive feedback about what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women want.

At FVPLS Victoria we have direct contact with and trust of the community. Government should work in partnership with us to address this national epidemic. We listen to the victims' voices and are in a position to advocate for what works. We need everyone to stand with us to be part of the solutions. We all have the responsibility for a future without violence.

FVPLS Victoria stands firm with our communities to end violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Our communities have the solutions to prevent family violence and their voices must be heard:

1. Amplifying our voices and leadership;
2. Promoting healthy relationships;
3. Strong culture, strong identity;
4. Investing in our services;
5. Breaking down barriers: Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations;
6. Addressing systemic failures through policy and advocacy;
7. Increasing cultural awareness in the mainstream sector; and
8. Avoiding child removal: strengthening our families.



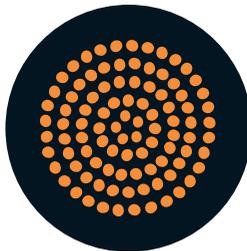
1. Amplifying our Voices and leadership

The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are too often absent from public debate. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's voices must be heard within decision-making processes across all levels of Government. FVPLS Victoria plays a vital role in elevating Aboriginal women's voices and encouraging leadership. Listening to those with lived experience of family violence provides important insights about how family violence operates and what victims/survivors need to make it stop. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women leaders can play a vital role as conduits for the stories of those with lived experience who may not feel safe to speak out themselves. Our leadership through participation in Government forums to promote real solutions will help break the silence on family violence.



2. Promoting Healthy Relationships

Promoting respectful and healthy relationships among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is crucial to preventing family violence. FVPLS Victoria's program '*Young Luv*' is a prime example of a program that is designed by and for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to promote healthy relationships through cultural strength. This program engages young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in a culturally safe space where they can talk about, reflect on and better understand important issues including how to recognise and deal with inappropriate or unsafe behaviour. Ongoing funding for programs such as *Young Luv* is a key component of preventing family violence in future generations and stopping the intergenerational transmission of trauma.



3. Strong culture, strong identity

Dislocation from culture has had a profound impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Community Legal Education and Early Intervention and Prevention programs that strengthen connection to culture and identity are key to reducing vulnerability to violence. Community Legal Education enables Aboriginal women to know their legal rights, empowering victims/survivors to access justice.

FVPLS Victoria's early intervention and prevention program *Sisters Day Out*®, designed by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, is a ground breaking and unique program that builds on women's strength, culture and resilience to reduce social isolation and vulnerability to violence. Over nine years, *Sisters Day Out* has touched the lives of over 8,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women which equates to one third of Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls.



4. Investing in our services

FVPLS Victoria is the only service in Victoria exclusively dedicated to assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence. Demand is high and growing, yet every year we are forced to divert precious resources to fight for funding. We need secure, long-term and increased funding to meet existing demand and reach more women and children in need. Our programs need ongoing funding to continue their innovative work, promoting culture as protection and strength.

Access to culturally safe legal assistance helps keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women safe by applying for Intervention Orders and take up other legal avenues to protect themselves and their children. Without culturally safe legal assistance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women cannot access justice and overcome the impact of family violence on their lives.



5. Breaking down barriers: Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations provide culturally safe environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel supported and understood. We have the frontline expertise to work most effectively with the community. Interaction with our lawyers and paralegal support workers typically identifies a range of other legal and social issues which can be addressed and which might otherwise have gone ignored, increasing the risk factors for escalating the frequency and severity of violence.

Our holistic service links Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to other essential services such as counselling, housing, drug and alcohol support and financial services. FVPLS Victoria's Koori Women's Hub is an innovative example of how to deliver a holistic and accessible service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The hub provides a culturally safe space for women to reduce social isolation, build resilience and break down barriers to access support.



6. Addressing systemic failures through policy and advocacy

In order to affect real change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, advocacy to policy makers is critical to stopping the long term cycle of

disadvantage. Our policy team works closely with our legal team and the Early Intervention and Prevention team to take our work with our clients to a strategic level and look at the problem through a broad, macro lens. Effective policy development, grounded in our extensive experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities creates a platform to drive Government policy development and legislative reform.

Our policy and advocacy work aims to highlight systemic issues such as the impact child protection interaction has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children. An example of the effectiveness of FVPLS Victoria's policy work was our submission to the *Royal Commission into Family Violence* which led to the report addressing the disproportionate nature of family violence experienced by Aboriginal women. Through our advocacy work, we act as a conduit for what the community needs and seek to affect change in the way Government addresses the issue of disproportionate child removal. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations with on the ground experience, like FVPLS Victoria, are best placed to highlight the critical issues facing our communities and take strategic action to reform system failures.



7. Increasing cultural awareness in the mainstream sector

Mainstream services often have limited understanding of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face numerous and significant barriers when attempting to access these services. FVPLS Victoria hears stories from our clients about police minimising, disbelieving or blaming and excusing the violence against them.⁵

It is crucial that every mainstream organisation, including Police, Courts and Government departments undertake cultural awareness and family violence sensitivity training to better understand the transgenerational trauma that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience.

The complexities of family violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women need to be understood and this can only occur in consultation with Aboriginal organisations. Genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are more likely to provide culturally appropriate and effective responses by mainstream organisations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence.



8. Avoiding child removal: strengthening our families

FVPLS Victoria plays a critical role in supporting and advocating on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children. In Victoria, family violence is the single biggest cause of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection involvement.⁶ This reality makes many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reluctant to report family violence – terrified that if they do, their children will be taken away. For many women, the cycle of intergenerational trauma leads to child protection involvement and criminalisation; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are now the fastest growing prison population and 80% of them are mothers.⁷

Engaging FVPLS Victoria lawyers early on in child protection cases leads to better outcomes and more support for related issues such as finding suitable housing and addressing family violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women should not be punished for experiencing violence and need to be supported to care for their children in safety.

About FVPLS Victoria

Established in 2002, the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria (FVPLS Victoria) is the only service in Victoria exclusively dedicated to assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence and sexual assault. There are three key components to our service:

1. FVPLS Victoria provides culturally safe and holistic, frontline legal assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence and sexual assault.
2. FVPLS Victoria also provides early intervention/prevention and community legal education to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, the legal, and domestic violence sector.
3. In addition, with support from philanthropic sources, FVPLS Victoria undertakes policy and law reform work to identify systemic issues in need of reform and advocate for strengthened law and justice outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors.

FVPLS Victoria is not gender specific, however at last count 93% of our clients were women. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, FVPLS Victoria is directed by an Aboriginal Board and has a range of systems and policies in place to ensure we provide culturally safe services in direct response to community need.

1 Royal Commission into Family Violence, Volume V, Report and Recommendations, March 2016, pg. 48 and pg. 51. Available at: <http://www.rcfv.com.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/Final/RCFV-Vol-V.pdf>

2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family Violence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 2006, page 66 available at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publicationdetail/?id=6442467912>

3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family Violence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (2006) 66 available at: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=6442467912a>

4 KPMG, 'Cost of violence against women and their children', the Department of Families, Housing, Community Service and Indigenous Affairs, 2009 pp 9, available at <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/women/publications-articles/reducing-violence/national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children/economic-cost-of-violence-against-women-and-their-children?HTML>

5 FVPLS Submission "Access to Justice" review, February 2016, pg. 10 Available at: <http://www.fvpls.org/images/files/FVPLS%20Victoria%20Submission%20%20Access%20to%20Justice%202016.pdf>

6 See above, reference 5. Commission for Children and Young People Annual Report 2014–15.

7 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Unfinished business: Koori women and the justice system, 2013, p. 10

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

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**Aboriginal Family
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**Standing Firm Against
Family Violence**