

Acknowledgments

This project emerged in response to issues raised by Aboriginal women in rural towns of New South Wales, who contributed to focus group consultations in which individual and professional users of the New South Wales Chamber Magistrate and other Local Courts' services described their experience of using those services. Ms Roslyn Barker, Aboriginal Court Liaison Officer, then based at Dubbo Local Court, assisted that review and, in response to the concerns raised about the experience of using the Local Court to seek protection from family violence, proposed further consultations on that issue. Peter Ryan, Assistant Director of Local Courts, supported the project, and encouraged support from Local Courts personnel Kerrieanne Howarth, Sev Hill and Paul Bayliss.

Seed grant funding through Charles Sturt University made it possible to make a return visit. Managers, staff and advisors connected with the New South Wales Attorney-General's Department provided endorsement, assistance and seed funds to support aspects of the project. Marcia Ella-Duncan, Executive Officer and Winsome Mathews, Chair of the NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council endorsed the proposal for further visits. Chris Shipway and Gaby Marcus, Managers of the Violence Against Women Unit (VAW) agreed to meet costs of transcribing focus group discussions. Rochelle Braaf and Jane Wangman offered ideas, and Karen McLean, Joan Dixon and Gargi Ganguly, Regional Violence Prevention Specialists of the Violence Against Women Unit organised local consultations. Practitioners in the non-government Domestic Violence Court Assistance Programme (DVCAP) who contributed to local consultations included Daphne Munro, Kerry O'Sullivan, Doreen Gray, Nerida Robinson, Dale Duke, Chris Foreman and Barb Gordon, Domestic Violence Counsellor.

As project funding was limited to travel and transcription costs, the practitioner contributions were essential to the conduct of the project, and were greatly appreciated. Most significant was the contribution of women who had experienced family violence and who were prepared to talk about their experience of seeking legal protection. Some were in crisis, having recently left a violent relationship. Others were still living in a volatile relationship, and participated despite the likelihood of their partner's disapproval. The pain, strength and wisdom of women survivors of family violence, and of the legal response that is often also experienced as victimising, was evident in the mutual support that marked their participation in the groups, and in their words. Practitioners who supported the project and contributed to discussions also showed a commitment to having the voices of women survivors heard by telling their personal experience and supporting other women to do so.

This report, in contextualising and summarising participant contributions, could never do full justice to the strong spirit of co-operation and support that marked the information gathering process. Thus, every effort has been made to accurately reflect participants' comments and ideas on the discussion themes.

While non-Indigenous policy makers might want the report to recommend specific actions, that is beyond the original scope of the project, which was to document the

concerns and ideas of Aboriginal women in inland rural New South Wales. It is for others, particularly Aboriginal women at the local and policy levels, to consider how these ideas can inform the policy process. To this end, the findings were submitted to the Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council to assist its discussion paper process on a New South Wales Aboriginal Justice Plan (2002) and to the New South Wales Law Reform Commission's review of the Apprehended Violence Order Scheme (2002).

Having expressed appreciation for the contributions of others, I must finally accept full responsibility for this work, its strengths and limitations. The lack of funds to cover the research time needed to conduct the project has meant that the process of bringing it to publication has been too long. During that time the issue of violence against women in Indigenous communities has received considerable public attention from within Indigenous communities, State and Territory governments, researchers and the media. This report joins a substantial body of material documenting the problems and proposing solutions. In this context this project's unique contribution lies in its capturing the words of Aboriginal women in inland rural towns of New South Wales. The responsibility of the project has weighed heavily, and the work has been driven by a strong commitment to social justice and reconciliation.

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December 2002