

## Section 4

### Seeking safety – inhibitors, services and supports

*What help is there for women in this community to stop the violence?*

*What help is there from services?*

*What might influence women to not seek help?*

There is considerable evidence in Australia and elsewhere showing that, despite policy and legal reforms aimed at improving legal protection and prosecuting physical and sexual violence against women, many women do not seek any form of help, either non-legal or legal.

This Section describes some findings from research into help seeking by Australian and rural women with experience of domestic violence. Within the context of these findings it summarises two issues that emerged in focus group discussions about the help available to women in these Aboriginal communities who might want to seek protection from family violence. One issue concerns the factors that are perceived to inhibit Aboriginal women from seeking help, and the other concerns the sources of help that are available, their perceived helpfulness and limitations. It concludes with an overview of participants' ideas about strengthening services and supports, both informal and formal, which can assist women in these communities to seek safety from family violence.

#### 4.1 Help seeking research - Australian and rural women

As yet no research has sought to quantify the extent of under reporting of domestic or family violence. However, two qualitative studies have identified some of the factors that inhibit women who experience family violence from initiating action.

An Australia-wide study, which sought to identify the needs of women who do not use domestic violence or crisis services, identified factors described as “inhibiting disclosure, help-seeking and action taking”, and identified the following factors:

- i) Fear; ii) Denial and disbelief; iii) Emotional bonds to partner; iv) Commitment to marriage;
  - v) Hoping for change; vi) Staying for the sake of the children; vii) Shame and embarrassment;
  - viii) The normalisation of domestic violence; ix) Isolation; x) Depression and stress; xi) Fear of judgmental response; xii) Perceived inability of services to help; xiii) Self reliance and independence.
- (Keys Young 1998:23-24)

In another study of two rural towns in New South Wales social service practitioners were asked to identify barriers to reporting domestic violence (Alston 1997).

In common with other Australian women, Aboriginal women who participated in this study identified as inhibitors to reporting: fear of the perpetrator and of future isolation from extended family and community; shame and public embarrassment; commitment to the relationship with their partner and that of their children with their father; fear of being negatively judged by family, friends, community or practitioners; and, lack of confidence in the ability of formal support services to provide help.

Alston (1997) observed that rural community attitudes about the role of women in society continue to be marked by conservative subservience, an attitude that can leave unchallenged the misuse of power and violence against women. In rural communities, perceptions about what constitutes domestic violence can lag behind definitions of domestic and family violence adopted by policy makers and practitioners, with "...more covert forms of violence (being) overlooked" (Alston 1997:16).

In common with rural women in Alston's study, participants here identified inhibitors to reporting family violence as including: community tolerance of violence against women; differing conceptions of what constitutes family violence; lack of confidentiality, public scrutiny of family life and social stigma connected with disclosure; and lack of support and alternatives.

Practitioners who provide social services to Aboriginal women in these communities experience differences in the definitions used by policy makers and practitioners, public conceptions, and legal definitions. In contrast to the broader practitioner definitions, many members of these Aboriginal communities reportedly define family violence more narrowly, including only physical assault of an intimate partner that results in visible physical injury. There is a perception that this narrow view is reinforced in the media and the police response to family violence. Thus, those affected by non-physical violence might not appreciate that such abusive behaviours are socially unacceptable and can justify a court application for legal protection. Some quotations of women participants extend our understanding of definitional differences that might inhibit help seeking:

Well, the women are downplaying the violence so much. Unless they've got a black eye or cut or stabbed to pieces, they're not seeing any of these other forms of abuse as - being a victim of domestic violence. (Dubbo participant P1613-1617)

... the long term perpetrators. ... I'm quite convinced, just from talking to them, that they've got no idea what domestic violence is, for starters. They know to hit is domestic violence, but they've got no idea about the social isolation, the name-calling, the swearing and all of that, and the accusations and the jealousy, and they need to know that all of that is DV as well. (Bourke participant I1853-1861)

Lack of privacy is a particularly strong inhibitor to help seeking in rural towns, where small populations afford increased visibility of personal and family life. The more widely adopted practice of keeping secret the location of a women's refuge can be impossible to implement. The typically central location of social services and of law and justice agencies exposes service users to public scrutiny.

...the fear of having to go to the courthouse, and knowing that everyone else in the town knows what your business is -- (Bourke participant I614-615)

For Aboriginal people, this lack of privacy is further exacerbated by the ease with which information flows through the extended family networks that are integral to modern Indigenous cultures. Thus, Aboriginal women in rural areas who experience family violence, or who seek help, are at great risk of public shame and embarrassment.

In addition to the factors that inhibit rural women in general from seeking help to stop family violence, Aboriginal women described barriers that, while not culturally unique, are perhaps more extreme within their communities. They cited tolerance of violence within Aboriginal communities, mistrust of authorities in formal support services and fear of outcomes of justice intervention as all having negative impacts on decisions about seeking help.

#### **4.2 Community tolerance, blame and fear**

The apparent rural ‘complacency’ about violence toward women is compounded for Indigenous women who confront a higher level of tolerance of violence within their own community. Memmott et. al. (2001:20) provides disturbing evidence that violence has increasingly come to be regarded as a normal social and cultural aspect of many Australian Indigenous communities.

Participants in this study regarded inaction by people in the community who witnessed family violence as tacit acceptance:

They seem to see that it's accepted, in the Aboriginal community, because no one steps in. If the partners are fighting, like it's their problem, - which I don't see as right, because there's a lot of women out there who need support ... (Red P52-57)

They also described psychological techniques used by extended family members or others within the Aboriginal communities to actively dissuade women from initiating action to stop family violence. Approaches include minimising or normalising the violence, promising improved help from informal social supports in the future, and threatening women with reprisal if they disclosed the violence to practitioners of social service agencies, police or courts.

Normalising sometimes occurs with reference to ‘blackfella love’, where violence by a man against a woman partner is explained as a traditional sign of love.

There's this thing in Aboriginal – especially in New South Wales - they call "blackfella love", That's a tragedy but we laugh and joke about it.  
"You ain't been loved until you've been knocked out by your man." That's just one of them.  
But that's tragic. I mean, that's all this cultural - - - (Wagga Wagga participant P651-658)

Memmott’s discussion of “customary violence and the problem of abnormal enculturation of violence” (2001:23-25) cites anthropological studies that provide evidence of physical and verbal violence being part of traditional institutionalised conflict resolution frameworks. They argue that violence in modern Indigenous societies cannot be justified with reference to traditional societies because it occurs outside the framework of social controls that limited its escalation in traditional societies.

Women in these communities also share with other women the fear of negative judgments being made by family, friends, members of the community, or practitioners in service providing agencies. Despite improved criminal justice responses to violence against women, participants reported that many Aboriginal women who report family violence still experience negative judgments from within their community or racist views from without.

... It's being condoned... a lot by the women. It's the attitude of women saying, "Well, she had a drink with him. She went home with him," so it's more or less an acceptance.  
... "She deserved it" – and there's a lot of that attitude. .. in one community the women are told they are sluts. So this is embedded in their brains and they're thinking, "Well, we deserve it. " (Dubbo participant P70-82)

The high level of tolerance of violence is compounded by the fear of reprisals against community observers who initiate police intervention.

If a family reports ...I don't think the families should be named because then (it) comes back on the family. ...If that person who did it thinks they rang the police, they'll go and stand in front of the house; they'll call you everything but a person. So people say, "Oh, we can't do that. We can't get involved." (Wagga Wagga participant I215-225)

Where I live ... where women are being bashed by their de factos or husbands, everyone just shuts their blinds, turn their lights off and they don't say a thing. I walked out and I said, "No, I've had enough of this." I rang the police straightaway and said, "And I don't care. (Other members of the Aboriginal community) can come over and take my name." I said, "I'm not going to put up with this." Everyone just turned a blind eye. (Wagga Wagga participant I235-242)

### **4.3 Accessing services and social supports**

Help seeking by victims of family violence is also inhibited by: the context in which it occurs being the private spheres of the household and intimate relations; its damaging impact on victims' self esteem and confidence; and victims' isolation and lack of access to supports and services. Those experiencing or at risk of family violence need access to services and social supports that can assist them to initiate protective action. Access to mainstream and specialised services can provide the physical and material resources needed to leave a violent situation, both in crisis and when seeking to establish a safe long-term living arrangement. A victim's informal social supports, including extended family, friends, neighbours or other community contacts, are often well placed to provide information or emotional and material support needed to encourage and assist them to initiate action. Formal social supports and services can provide specialised information about protective options and assistance to victims in choosing and pursuing their course of action.

#### **i) Services**

Access to mainstream services of telephones, transport and alternative housing is essential to initiating action to stop violence. Many people living in rural towns lack access to transport and telephones, as the cost of private motor vehicles and telephones can be prohibitive for low-income people, and access to public services is limited.

In Wagga Wagga, where winter temperatures drop to minus four degrees Centigrade at night, a mother described her experience of taking her children and fleeing violence in these words:

I had to wait in the park one night and it was in the middle of winter. I had this big leather coat. I put it on my little son and I sat there and I prayed because I didn't know where to go - up in that park and it was freezing. I just didn't know where to go, and I had to sit in the park. (I had) no money and the phone wasn't working and it was 2, maybe close to 3 o'clock, in the night. I can't go knocking on people's doors at that time. I was too scared to move. We just

sat in a tiny little spot and we hid. I didn't even want to light up a smoke because I thought he'd see the smoke. (Wagga Wagga participant I268-291)

### *Telephones*

In many high risk areas in rural towns public telephones are not available or operational:

- where does she go?  
And how does she get there?  
There should be a phone.  
And taxis ... don't go over there now. (Dubbo participant P1566-1606)

What I experienced when I ... tried to look for help. I had to run to three different houses to look for help. I thought, "Why can't they have more telephones around? I had to walk all the way up the road in the dark.  
Even an emergency phone. (Wagga Wagga participant I252-260)

### *Crisis accommodation*

Many women lack the information or means to access safe crisis accommodation. The logistics of fleeing a violent domestic situation with children may seem impossible, and can lead to circumstances that might equally compromise their safety.

Women's refuges that can be accessed at any time of day or night can provide safe crisis accommodation. Safety is usually afforded by their undisclosed locations, 24-hour staffing and effective collaboration with police. They can also provide support to women by giving them information about services and legal interventions through which they can improve their future safety. However, not all refuges provide safe and supportive crisis accommodation. This may be due to funding shortfalls, the spread of information about their location, and the lack of effective collaboration with police and other relevant social services. At the time of focus group consultations insufficient staffing and resulting management failures had compromised the management of the Bourke women's refuge:

(a woman who was staying there with) her husband laying back in the bed at the woman's refuge. . .she was (staying there while waiting to) get a home. - they let her stay at the refuge, and they were giving her husband a bed as well. (Bourke participant I915-928)

There needs to be more support work within the woman's refuge and the staffing there. I'm looking at that issue - no staffing at night and - - (Bourke participant P1443-1456)

### *Long term housing*

Women who leave the family home to seek safety from family violence face the prospect of being unable to return because of the violent partner's refusal to leave. The prospect of losing their housing can act as a disincentive for ending the violent relationship. Many women who lack an affordable alternative return to the family home and the violence.

Women seeking private rental accommodation often report that they face discrimination as single mothers. When Indigenous women experience racism, they face double jeopardy:

I lived in Adelaide and I searched - I even walked through a sand storm to go looking for houses, and you know what they said to me? "No, sorry, you're a single mother." They refused to let me have a house. (Wagga Wagga participant I1706-1703)

Landlords of rental accommodation could hold the woman responsible for debts that arose from damage to the property during the violence or unpaid rent since her departure. For women in the private rental market, this makes their chances of finding alternative accommodation more difficult because it is unlikely that they will be offered a new tenancy until the debt is cleared and they have a good tenant reference. Women in public housing face the prospect of taking their place at the end of a long queue of applicants, and of being denied any assistance until the debt is cleared. This is evident in the case study below:

#### Case study - housing

I had a very nasty experience (when) I moved here (and) went down to apply for a house. (The Department of Housing employee) ... said, "Oh, you owe such-and-such amount," and I almost fainted. I thought, "No, that couldn't be right. You got the wrong person," and I found a flat. I wanted to move into that flat and I asked them - I said, "I've got half of the money for the bonds. Can you help me out?" The (Department of Housing employee) goes, "No, we're not going to help you," and I looked at her - I just ran out the door and I ran across the road. I didn't care if I was going to be knocked that day; I did not care. ... I bolted out the door. I couldn't believe it. I was that upset, I went around to St Vinnies and I sat there and I cried, and (the worker) tried to ring up and he goes, "Sorry, because you owe the bill." I said, "That's not my bill." (Wagga Wagga participant I1351-1392)

Going back ... when I was assaulted by my children's father, I had to pack up and leave, and I was in so much debt and I'm still in that debt. Now, I'm living with a man because I'm in so much debt. Now he's doing the same thing to me. I don't know where to go because I can't apply for a house because I've got to pay my debt, but I believe I shouldn't pay it because that was made by the previous person that I was with.

So you can't get a rental reference?

It's still following me around and I can't go and live here and there. I've got to live with this man just to put a roof over my kids' heads, and he's been so cruel and nasty, - how many times have I left? (Wagga Wagga participant I1252-1268)

That's what I mean by the man should be moved from the house and not the woman, so that way then the woman - if the man is removed the woman's got a roof over her head and she's not left with nothing; not left with a debt. (Wagga Wagga participant I 1276-1338)

In Victoria, the difficulty experienced by women seeking safety from family violence has recently been recognized in the Women's Safety Strategy, to which the government has allocated:

... \$1.8 million over three years to provide a Private Rental Brokerage Program for women who have experienced family violence. .... The government expects that more than 1,000 women and children who have been subjected to family violence will be helped into new homes under the program. (Victorian Minister for Women's Affairs, 2/7/02)

### *Financial support*

Women who leave a violent situation cannot be assured of having access to financial assistance during the crisis.

Centrelink policy allows for emergency financial assistance to women seeking safety from family violence on the day that they apply for an ADVO. However, participants reported increasing difficulty in accessing that provision, and that Centrelink staff report that this is a result of the provision having on occasions been abused. In New South Wales charity organizations receive government funds to assist their work in providing financial, food and material assistance to people in crisis. There can also be disincentives to accessing these funds:

Now, this woman's got to fend for her family. She's got no money, no food. How is she going to feed these kids? And she doesn't want to be a burden on anyone else. So is there some way that women can get help, like with vouchers or something? Something to feed those kids because the man, he always seems to take the money. (Wagga Wagga participant I538-545)

I don't know if it's a discriminatory thing or anything with other charity organisations like the Salvos or St Vinnies or something.  
(Their financial support is) very hard to access.  
A lot of women don't want to go there because they ask so many questions. (Wagga Wagga participant I550-555)

#### ii) Informal social supports

Focus group participants at Dubbo and Wagga Wagga were asked to rank a list of fifteen informal and formal social supports, from 1 'most helpful' to 15 'least helpful'<sup>1</sup>. There was wide variation in respondents' rankings of informal supports that included family members, friends, neighbours and other community contacts. A majority of respondents ranked specialised formal support services as most helpful, including women's agencies that provide crisis accommodation and other services, and Aboriginal agencies. Rankings of police reflected that a majority of respondents regarded them as helpful, though less helpful than specialised formal supports. Government departments and ministers of religion were ranked by most respondents as the least helpful formal supports.

International research studies have found that informal supports are the most frequently accessed source of help for women experiencing abuse:

Surveys in five countries conclude that family and friends – as 'informal supporters' – are the source of support most frequently accessed by women who experience abuse. Disclosures of abuse are also made earlier to family and friends than they are to external community or government agencies. As yet, little is known about the content of these transactions. (Holder 2001:5)

Participants in this study noted the strategic importance of informal supports, due to their proximity and access to information about family members and intimate relationships. The extreme variation in the helpfulness rankings of informal supports

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<sup>1</sup> The content and order of the list of potential social supports included friend or neighbour, family member, community contact, minister of religion, police, chamber magistrate, Court Assistance Scheme, Legal Aid, Aboriginal Legal Service, refuge, non refuge accommodation, Aboriginal agency, women's service agency, government department, other.

might be explained by the previously discussed high level of tolerance for violence against women in rural and Aboriginal communities. Informal support people might also lack access to information and services essential to assisting women in need of protection.

Most arguments start over money. That's what I mean, there are a lot of women out there that try and get away and they haven't got any money. You see, some women don't go to refuges. They can't get help. ... They've got to go to family, and that family can't keep them because they're only battling themselves.  
They get support but it's really stressful with money, a place to be, and the fear that he's going to find her. (Wagga Wagga participant 1560-569)

Neighbours are sometimes a source of help for women in crisis. One woman participant with repeated experience of seeking police help reported that she has frequently relied on neighbours to telephone the police. Over many years she had experienced repeated incidents of violence, often criminal in nature, by her male partner and father of their children. Prior to her participation in the focus group discussions no criminal charges had been laid against her partner, and she had not applied for an ADVO. This woman's participation in focus group discussions took place with the encouragement and support of an extended family member who was also a practitioner, and she subsequently made a successful application for an ADVO.

In one neighbourhood, a woman who offered her home as a safe house, providing information and support, earned the confidence of women in crisis as well as the respect of police and women's refuge practitioners.

... one woman over there ... had a house that most of the women ran to. ... she did call the police and ... had really good responses from police attending her home when a woman had run there. Then if women were transferred to emergency accommodation, apparently she had good responses from there, so she's seeing her house as being very positive.  
So we were talking about ..... putting a phone in her home because there isn't a phone (in that neighbourhood) They've all been broken, but then we have to make sure that we're not putting her at risk. (Dubbo participant P344-361)

Access to an informal support person who validates the intolerable nature of the abusive situation and impartially provides essential information, can facilitate a woman's access to formal supports.

They'll go to a relative, a friend or a neighbour and ask ... "Do you know about this program? You know who works it, how it runs and that?" So they'll find out the best knowledge they can.  
There's very little resistance to the (Aboriginal) Medical and Dental because people seem to trust them.  
Before they go they talk to a family friend to see if they're doing the right thing.  
(They'll say) "I know So-and-so at - - -"  
Sort of, "Look, I'll do it for you. I'll ring up and I'll get the appointment for you."  
See, that way too they're also getting a bit of support. They're not just sort of hanging there out on a limb. They usually bring someone with them.  
Yes, and that's when all the work starts with the victim, whether they're male or female, and you get them to a stage where, okay, we've got this service. (Wagga Wagga participant P349-399)

iii) Formal supports – social services

Formal supports referred to here are government and non-government agencies that are funded to deliver social services, including health, education, welfare, housing, law enforcement and justice. Participants were not confident that generic service providers have the knowledge and experience needed to provide accurate information and appropriate assistance to women seeking safety from family violence. Formal support agencies and practitioners with responsibility, knowledge and expertise specific to domestic and family violence are considered the most helpful sources of support. However, there was evidence that women can be apprehensive in utilising even these services due to a fear that practitioners might impede their freedom to initiate protective action on their own terms. Some practitioners have been perceived to misuse their expertise and authority by attempting to compel women toward a particular course of action.

... in most cases – people still want to live with that partner, they just want ...to stop them from bashing them. (Bourke participant I1063-1073)

Perceptions of compulsion are said to arise when a practitioner makes service provision conditional on a woman's decision to permanently separate from her male partner, when the practitioner attempts to dissuade her from taking a course of action that might upset other family or community members, or when they report her situation to police or child protection authorities without prior discussion or consent.

Rural towns generally lack the diversity of specialised support services that are found in metropolitan areas, and social services in general are not accessible to many women due to distance, lack of transport or restricted hours of service. Services are sometimes restricted when government funding formulas based on administrative regions or population data do not take account of indicators of service needs or geographically dispersed service users. Limitations in access to key services and supports thus make police the only accessible service for many rural women.

#### iv) Formal supports – statutory and justice agencies

In its discussion paper that proposes a new response to Aboriginal family violence, AJAC observes:

It is understood that the under reporting of Aboriginal family violence to criminal justice agencies occurs for a range of reasons, including poor relations with police, lack of confidence and trust in the justice system, a lack of faith that their needs will be met, and a general concern about over representation and Aboriginal deaths in custody. This is further compounded by the belief that the victim and their family may not be supported by their local Aboriginal community, as well as fear of re-victimisation in the criminal process.

(AJAC undated: 8)

Similarly, Aboriginal women who contributed to focus group discussions identified an inherent dilemma in accessing formal justice services and proceedings, either criminal or civil, to resolve family violence. On the one hand, access to a legal response can validate women's experience and perceptions, provide legal protection and challenge community tolerance of family violence. However, the formal justice system is also the mechanism through which Aboriginal people have experienced dispossession, removal of children from families, imprisonment and deaths in custody. There is an understandable fear within these Aboriginal communities of

intervention by legally mandated social service personnel and police and of justice processes and outcomes.

In their study of Australian women's experience of domestic violence Keys Young noted that women's fear of negative judgments includes the fear of their children being removed from their care:

He used to say 'I'll tell them you're a bad mother' and he used to threaten they'd take the kids away and I believed him. I can't believe that I did that. It was just those put-downs. They have you so hoodwinked. They have you believing them. Don't believe everything that comes out of their mouth all the time. It's just amazing what you believe.

(Keys Young 2001:32)

The threat of children being removed from their care is likely to be even more believable for Aboriginal women in these communities. Dubbed 'resettlement' towns, the Aboriginal population includes people with direct experience of being removed from their family as children. They may also regard current child welfare and juvenile justice interventions as a continuation of those policies. The following focus group comment reflects the fear of children being removed:

... they're frightened of the outcome; like if someone did take (the kids) away, who's the family going to blame? Then the whole community is up and at you. So a lot of them won't say boo even though they know what's going on there -- (Wagga Wagga participant P250-255)

The main program of the New South Wales Department of Community Services is widely promoted as child protection. The word 'protection' can serve as an unfortunate reminder of the welfare activities of the Aborigines Protection Board, the body responsible for removing Aboriginal children from their families. The techniques used by the staff of these bodies reportedly included enticements, lies and deceit (see Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). The following provides evidence of the fear of government welfare providers that still exists within Aboriginal communities:

... we've got this service (that) used to work real closely with DOCS (NSW Department of Community Services) when they had an advisory committee and people would come in, especially the health workers and doctors ... We'd get (the families) to a stage where they were going to court ... (then they would) just get up and leave. (They would say) it never happened and then not want to talk about it any more.

...And again the big issue is trust. (Wagga Wagga participant P397-413)

Another justified fear that underlies the reticence of Aboriginal women to use the justice system to resolve family violence is the risk of the perpetrator being arrested or imprisoned, and the consequential risk of their death in custody. The negative impacts of the criminal justice system on Indigenous communities are well known.

I think it's the repercussions of doing anything about it that often stop women - the repercussions within the family - you know, "If I go up and charge him, take an AVO out or get the police involved and he's charged, what's going to happen? Eventually he's going to go to gaol, and what does that solve? That solves nothing. He comes out of gaol and I've got to put up with his family abusing me while he's away," (Bourke participant P275-285)

A widely known grave and pervasive threat to modern Indigenous communities is the overrepresentation of their people in officially recorded statistics of law and justice processes and imprisonment.

Australia's prison population has increased to more than 21,700 ... on the latest figures. Indigenous people comprise 19 percent of Australia's prisoner population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b)

It is also widely known that neither the high rates of incarceration or the high incidence of deaths of Indigenous people in custody have been reversed, despite government commitments of substantial resources to public inquiries and to reforms to policies, programs and practices of justice and corrections agencies.

...Aboriginal women ... don't want their men to go to gaol, and they have an understanding that the men will, and - let's face it - statistics show that Aboriginal men end up in gaol, - - - Sometimes they don't come out. Yes. So they've got all that to cope with, too. . (Dubbo participant P1356-1365)

#### **4.4 Strengthening social services and supports**

In talking openly about the nature and extent of family violence participants were motivated to challenge the high level of tolerance of violence they perceived to exist within their communities. They were also strongly committed to increasing the protections that could be offered from within the Aboriginal community and the town.

Two areas of need were identified for women experiencing family violence. One was increased support of extended family, neighbours and friends in efforts to seek protection in crisis. Another was access to resources that can enable women to seek protection without having to consider permanently leaving their home, their town and their positive social networks. These motives are reflected in the participant case study summarised at Appendix 4 and in the following quotation:

And again the more women that come out and survive it and tell it that are positive role models - - saying, "Okay, I don't want to put up with that kind of crap any more" and - - - That's right; they don't have to put up with it. Yeah, and that's the thing. We have women who have been in relationships, you know, got out of those relationships and grown and are there, but what we need as well is some women who have been in those relationships and seen the man change to show that - whereas at the moment this has been the only thing that's happening, women - - - Well, I'm one of them. (Bourke participant P1758-1800)

Discussions about possible solutions focused on public education and access to formal support services. The aim of public education was identified as increasing understanding within the Aboriginal communities about the kinds of behaviours that are harmful to the health and well being of family members, and to harness support from informal networks. Such support could help women to confront male perpetrators and seek protection for themselves and their children in crisis and the longer term, without being forced to leave town.

Strategies for strengthening access to informal support for people experiencing family violence within the Aboriginal communities were canvassed. Public education was identified as important in disseminating information about the nature of family

violence; the harm it causes to individuals, families and the community; available protective measures and services; and the community and legal responses to perpetrators of family violence. Suggestions for effective public education included harnessing the support of community leaders and positive role models who are representative of all sectors of the community including men, elders, family groupings and social groups such as in sport, cultural activities, lands councils, employment programs and commerce. Healing groups for men, women and families were also suggested as having the potential to provide opportunities for greater insight into the damage caused by family violence to individuals, families, communities and culture. Healing groups could also strengthen community leadership and increase the pool of positive role models and mentors for adolescents and children. These ideas were based in the notion that central to any approach is a whole of community focus that operates within an Aboriginal cultural framework, issues that are discussed more fully in Section Six.

Parallel with efforts to strengthen informal support from within the Aboriginal community through community education and development, efforts are needed to improve access of victims to formal supports, the resources and services that provide help to women seeking safety in crisis and the longer term. Service gaps identified in these rural towns included those needed in crisis situations, including telephones, transport, financial assistance and safe crisis accommodation, and those needed to ensure ongoing safety, including housing, income support and emotional support and counselling. Improvements are also reportedly needed in disseminating information about the service network and how they can be accessed. Access to services and information about the services needs to be provided through culturally appropriate ways. Identified strategies for increasing Aboriginal access to services include the recruitment of Aboriginal personnel or volunteers and the adoption of outreach models of service delivery.

It's easier coming from an Aboriginal person. It makes it a lot easier because if you send a white person in, bang, the barriers go up straightaway. (Wagga Wagga participant P265-288)

Home visits by cultural specialists in services such as family support were identified as an effective and underutilised form of outreach.

... family health workers who come out and actually sit down with you, let them get to know the family ... without going in too deep too quick, and just let us as an agency, and the other agency that comes in, work together with the family and build trust. There has to be an element of trust built up between them - community groups and Aboriginal people. (Wagga Wagga participant P241-249).

Outreach was also identified as an underutilised strategy for disseminating information about services. It has been used by the Chamber Magistrate of Taree Local Court to provide information about the service to the local Biripi Aboriginal community (Moore 1999:10). The Northern Rivers Aboriginal Legal Service at Kempsey has also used outreach to provide information about legal protection from family violence.

Publicity through print, radio or other media typically accessed by members of the Aboriginal community is also important, as is publicizing the fact that services are provided by cultural specialists:

We (plan) to do a media release on the (Domestic Violence Liaison Committee) to the local newspaper - there's going to be a photo of all the members ... their names and the contacts, ... so they know who it is, and we're on call 24 hours a day if they need (someone to be there when they) come to the police, ... (Bourke participant P574-591)

#### **4.5 Summary**

Inhibitors for rural Aboriginal women in seeking safety from family violence are based in rural town and Aboriginal community cultures that tolerate family violence; the high risk of public exposure, shame and exclusion from the community or town that arises when using formal supports for protection; limited availability of mainstream and specialist services needed to consider options and take effective action; limited information about, and access to, formal social and justice support services; and mistrust and fear of formal support services, particularly government and non-Aboriginal agencies and practitioners.

Strengthening both informal supports from within the Aboriginal community and the availability of, and access to formal services and supports is essential in efforts to reduce family violence in these Aboriginal communities. Community education and development approaches are needed to harness broad support within the Aboriginal community to assist those affected by family violence to seek safety within their community and to confront and sanction perpetrators in culturally meaningful ways.

Identification of gaps in the availability of and access to formal supports, including resources and services, is also needed. Rural towns lack the communications and transport infrastructure needed to seek safety in crisis and to access the material support and housing that may be needed in crisis and the longer term. The high visibility and socio-cultural divisions that form the context of service delivery in rural towns presents particular challenges for promoting access of Aboriginal people to formal supports. Specialist women's and Aboriginal services are perceived as most helpful. For these and other services, there is a need to implement culturally appropriate measures for publicizing and delivering services. These measures are needed to redress the apprehension, fear and mistrust held by many Aboriginal people about accessing formal social supports.

The focus in this Section has been informal and formal supports needed by women and children experiencing family violence who want to initiate some action to stop the conflict and harm. Section Five focuses specifically on their access to and experience of justice agencies in seeking legal protection from family violence.

