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NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN'S ALLIANCE

POLICY REPORT

National Best Practice Family and Domestic Violence Risk Assessment Framework

A national overview and analysis of implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and communities — December 2025

1. Executive Summary

Australia does not yet have a single national family and domestic violence risk assessment tool. Instead, a set of National Risk Assessment Principles, first published by ANROWS in 2018, sit above a patchwork of state and territory frameworks and tools, including Victoria's Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) framework, New South Wales' Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT), Queensland's Common Risk and Safety Framework (CRASF), Western Australia's Common Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework (CRARMF), and the ACT Domestic and Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Framework. Each was built for a different service system and operates with different thresholds, tools and governance, but all now converge on a similar model: combining evidence-based risk factors, the victim-survivor's own perception of danger, and structured professional judgement.

This convergence is being tested and updated. Following National Cabinet's commitment in September 2024 to pursue nationally consistent risk assessment, made in response to the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches (Unlocking the Prevention Potential), the Department of Social Services contracted ANROWS to refresh the National Risk Assessment Principles and risk factors over 2025–2026. That review is explicitly seeking the views of communities disproportionately affected by family and domestic violence, named first among them Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

That focus is warranted by the scale of the problem. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are hospitalised for family violence-related assault at 24 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, and two in three First Nations people who experienced physical harm in the past year identified the perpetrator as an intimate partner or family member. Yet the frameworks reviewed in this report still treat culturally safe, community-led risk assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women largely as a single guiding principle rather than as a fully resourced, community-controlled practice model. Only one jurisdiction, Western Australia, has committed funding to build a dedicated Aboriginal-specific risk assessment tool, and that work is still in development.

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This report sets out the national principles and the major state and territory frameworks, identifies the practices that are converging into national best practice, and examines what genuine cultural safety and self-determination would require of the current national review. It closes with a set of opportunities for NATSIWA's policy and advocacy work as the 2025–2026 review proceeds.

2. Background and Policy Context

Risk assessment sits at the centre of Australia's family and domestic violence response system. It is the process by which police, courts, health services, child protection agencies and specialist family violence services decide how dangerous a situation is, how urgently to act, and what support or intervention should follow. Done well, it can identify who is most likely to be seriously harmed or killed and connect them to protection before that happens. Done poorly, or inconsistently between agencies and jurisdictions, it can miss escalating danger, misidentify victims as the person using violence, or fail people who move between service systems and state borders seeking safety.

Australia's current approach has developed in layers. ANROWS published the first National Risk Assessment Principles for domestic and family violence in 2018, under a commitment in the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022. Rather than replacing state and territory tools, the principles were designed as a shared evidence base that jurisdictions could draw on when building or revising their own frameworks. States and territories continued to run their own systems: Victoria's MARAM, legislated after the 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence; New South Wales' DVSAT, embedded in the Safer Pathway system; Queensland's CRASF; Western Australia's CRARMF; and the ACT's Domestic and Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Framework.

The current National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, and its First Action Plan 2023–2027, list strengthening risk assessment and information sharing as a named priority. That work gained urgency through 2024, as a sustained rise in intimate partner homicides led National Cabinet, in September 2024, to commit to developing nationally consistent risk assessment frameworks. That commitment followed the report of the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches to End Gender-Based Violence, Unlocking the Prevention Potential, which recommended the Commonwealth and states and territories collaborate to strengthen multi-agency risk assessment and management across systems. The Department of Social Services subsequently commissioned ANROWS to update the National Risk Assessment Principles and risk factors, with the review running through 2025 and 2026.

3. The National Risk Assessment Principles (2018)

The National Risk Assessment Principles for domestic and family violence were developed by ANROWS to give Australian jurisdictions a shared, evidence-based understanding of risk, built

primarily from the strongest available evidence base: heterosexual intimate partner violence. The principles use gender-neutral language to support broad application, while explicitly recognising that family and domestic violence is fundamentally gendered. They were never intended to replace state and territory tools; rather, they set the foundation those tools should be built on and measured against.

3.1 The nine core principles

- Principle 1: Survivors' safety is the core priority of all risk assessment frameworks, alongside holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.
- Principle 2: Assessment must focus on a perpetrator's current and past actions and behaviours, not solely on a survivor's own protective strategies.
- Principle 3: A survivor's own knowledge of their risk is central to any assessment, used alongside actuarial tools and professional judgement.
- Principle 4: Assessment must account for heightened vulnerability among diverse cohorts, recognising how disability, culture, disadvantage and other factors intersect and compound.
- Principle 5: For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, approaches must be community-led and culturally safe, with a trauma-informed focus on healing rather than a one-size-fits-all model.
- Principle 6: Risk assessment and management require an integrated, systemic response, with all relevant agencies collaborating rather than working in isolation.
- Principle 7: Risk assessment operates within a continuum of service delivery that evolves as a survivor's circumstances and the level of danger change over time.
- Principle 8: Intimate partner sexual violence must be specifically and explicitly considered in every risk process, supported by mandatory practitioner training.
- Principle 9: Tools must be built from evidence-based risk factors, capturing both vulnerability conditions and protective characteristics.

3.2 High-risk factors associated with lethality

The principles identify a specific cluster of factors most strongly associated with a victim being seriously injured or killed. These are intended to trigger urgent, coordinated action wherever they are identified:

- A history of family and domestic violence
- Separation, actual or pending
- Intimate partner sexual violence
- Non-fatal strangulation
- Stalking behaviours

- Threats to kill
- Access to, or use of, weapons
- Escalating frequency or severity of violence
- Coercive control patterns
- Pregnancy and the period following a new birth

3.3 Other significant risk factors

Alongside the lethality indicators, the principles list a broader set of factors that inform an overall risk picture:

- The victim's own perception of their risk
- Suicide threats or attempts, by the victim or the perpetrator
- Active court orders and parenting proceedings
- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Isolation and barriers to help-seeking
- Abuse or threatened abuse of pets and animals

4. The 2025–2026 National Review and Update

The 2018 principles are now being refreshed to ensure they remain relevant, appropriate and reflective of current evidence and practice, under a project ANROWS is running through 2025 and 2026 on commission from the Department of Social Services. The review's methodology combines a literature review of evidence generated since 2018, a review of every national, state and territory risk assessment policy and tool developed or revised since then, and stakeholder surveys and targeted consultations spanning practitioners, policymakers, peak bodies, researchers and people with lived experience.

Significantly, the review states an explicit intention to prioritise the views of communities disproportionately affected by family and domestic violence, and names Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples first among them, alongside LGBTQ+ communities, migrants and refugees, people with disability, and children and young people. This is a meaningful commitment on paper. Section 7 of this report considers what would need to be true in practice for that commitment to translate into a framework that is genuinely community-led, rather than one that continues to treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's safety as a single add-on principle within a framework designed around the mainstream, majority-population evidence base.

5. State and Territory Risk Assessment Frameworks

The National Risk Assessment Principles are given effect through separate state and territory frameworks, each built for the particular service systems, legislation and history of its jurisdiction. Five of the most developed and well-documented frameworks are set out below. South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory operate their own risk screening and assessment arrangements within their family violence and child protection systems, but were not able to be documented to the same level of public detail for this report and are a gap worth closing in any future national comparison.

Jurisdiction / Tool	Legislative or policy basis	Method	Distinguishing features
Victoria — MARAM (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework)	Legislated under the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic); replaced the earlier Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF) after the 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence.	Tiered responsibility model across more than 6,000 prescribed organisations; specialist practitioners gather information directly from victim-survivors, assess harm to adults and children, and build risk management and safety plans.	Broadest legislated coverage of any state; mandatory training tied to each organisation's assigned responsibility level; perpetrator-focused practice guides, including predominant-aggressor identification tools, are kept restricted to prevent misuse.
New South Wales — DVSAT (Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool)	Operated by NSW Police and government and non-government service providers; feeds into the Safer Pathway / It Stops Here service model.	A 25-question checklist (Part A) across five categories — violence toward the victim, the perpetrator–victim relationship, perpetrator background, children, and sexual assault — combined with a structured professional judgement assessment (Part B).	Clear numeric threshold: one or more “yes” answers indicates threat; twelve or more indicates serious threat requiring referral to a Safety Action Meeting through a Local Coordination Point.
Queensland — CRASF (Common Risk and Safety Framework)	Queensland Government domestic and family violence reform program.	Three-tier tool: Level 1 routine screening for adults and children, Level 2 risk assessment and safety planning, and Level 3 multi-agency risk	Version 2 (2021) expanded coverage of coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse and introduced “improved cultural considerations”, though detailed Aboriginal- and

Jurisdiction / Tool	Legislative or policy basis	Method	Distinguishing features
		assessment and safety management.	Torres Strait Islander-specific tools are not yet separately published.
Western Australia — CRARMF (Common Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework)	Western Australian Government policy framework, second edition 2016; a revised edition was funded from July 2024.	Nine fact sheets and a shared set of screening and risk assessment instruments, multi-agency case management guidance, consent documentation and safety planning templates used across service sectors.	The only jurisdiction to have funded, as part of its 2024 revision, the development of a dedicated risk assessment tool specifically for use with Aboriginal families, alongside tailored approaches for CALD, LGBTQI+, elderly and disability cohorts.
Australian Capital Territory — DFV Risk Assessment and Management Framework	ACT Government whole-of-system framework spanning generalist, statutory and specialist services.	A three-part structured professional judgement model: fourteen evidence-based ACT Key Risk Factors (drawn from research and death reviews), the victim's own risk perception, and practitioner judgement.	Explicitly structured around six components — shared understanding, screening, risk assessment, risk management, children and young people, and working with perpetrators — with a standard risk assessment proforma.

The variation between these tools is not simply cosmetic. Different thresholds, question sets and referral pathways mean a woman assessed as facing serious danger in one jurisdiction could receive a different risk rating, or trigger a different response, if the same circumstances were assessed under another jurisdiction's tool. This matters directly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who may travel between communities and jurisdictions for cultural, family or safety reasons, including to escape violence, and whose risk history may not transfer cleanly between systems that use different tools and information-sharing rules.

6. Cross-Jurisdictional Themes and Persistent Gaps

Despite their differences, the frameworks reviewed for this report are converging on a common structure, and share common gaps.

6.1 Converging on structured professional judgement

Every framework now combines three elements: an evidence-based, actuarial-style set of risk factors; the victim-survivor's own assessment of their danger; and a trained practitioner's

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professional judgement. This structured professional judgement model has effectively become the national default, replacing earlier approaches that relied on a single checklist score in isolation.

6.2 A widening lens on what counts as high risk

Coercive control, technology-facilitated abuse and non-fatal strangulation have moved from being peripheral considerations to being treated, across every recent revision examined in this report, as core lethality indicators requiring urgent response. First Nations adults report technology-facilitated abuse at markedly higher rates than the general population — 70 per cent lifetime experience compared with 51 per cent across all Australians — making this shift particularly consequential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

6.3 Information sharing versus fragmentation

MARAM's legislated information-sharing schemes and DVSAT's Safer Pathway model both aim to let risk information move between police, courts, health and specialist services without a victim-survivor having to repeat their story at every door. Where these schemes are absent or inconsistent between jurisdictions, women can fall through gaps precisely at the point of moving, disclosing, or seeking help from a new service.

6.4 The risk of misidentifying the person using violence

Structured professional judgement depends on practitioners correctly identifying who is the predominant aggressor in a relationship. Research and practice experience in Victoria and elsewhere has shown this is a persistent point of failure, and one with particular consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who are misidentified as the person using violence at disproportionate rates when they act defensively, or when police and services read culturally shaped responses to trauma, distress or distrust of authority as aggression.

7. Implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women and Communities

The case for treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's safety as a distinct, resourced priority within Australia's risk assessment system, not only a guiding principle, rests on the scale of the harm they experience and the well-documented ways mainstream systems continue to fail them.

7.1 The scale of the problem

- Two in three (67 per cent) First Nations people aged 15 and over who experienced physical harm in the past 12 months identified the perpetrator as an intimate partner or family member.
- Around two in three (68 per cent) hospitalisations of First Nations people for assault-related injury are due to family violence, at a rate 24 times higher than for non-

Indigenous Australians; First Nations women are hospitalised for family violence at nearly four times the rate of First Nations men.

- First Nations women experience intimate partner violence–related disease burden at 6.1 times the rate of non-Indigenous women, contributing to depression, anxiety and early pregnancy loss.
- First Nations adults report lifetime experience of technology-facilitated abuse at 70 per cent, compared with 51 per cent of all Australians.
- Family violence is the primary reason for assistance for 29 per cent of First Nations clients of specialist homelessness services, and 57,800 First Nations children were engaged with the child protection system in 2023–24.

7.2 What Principle 5 commits to, and what remains undone

Principle 5 of the National Risk Assessment Principles states that approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be community-led and culturally safe, must recognise intergenerational trauma, must work with extended families and communities rather than individuals in isolation, and must treat cultural healing as protective. It explicitly rejects a one-size-fits-all approach. In the seven years since the principles were published, however, only Western Australia has committed dedicated funding, from July 2024, to build an actual risk assessment tool designed with and for Aboriginal families, and that work remains in development. Every other jurisdiction's framework applies its single mainstream tool to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, with cultural considerations layered on as guidance rather than built into a distinct, community-designed instrument.

7.3 Why mainstream tools and services fall short

ANROWS research into family violence legal and support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples identifies three specific barriers that keep women from engaging with mainstream risk assessment and safety systems at all: fear that disclosure will trigger the removal of their children, fear that seeking help will lead to homelessness, and fear of isolation from family and community networks that are themselves sources of safety and support. The same research found current mainstream services do not meet the standard of being available, acceptable and accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on any of those three measures, and pointed to the Koori Court as a promising alternative justice model worth extending across family violence matters.

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani First Nations Women's Safety Policy Forum, convened by the Australian Human Rights Commission in November 2022, went further, framing the disproportionate rates of violence against First Nations women and children as a national crisis rooted in structural inequities since colonisation, and calling for transformational rather than incremental change. It emphasised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women already lead safety and healing work in their communities through holistic, culturally grounded

organisations, a contribution the forum found remains under-recognised and under-resourced by government risk assessment and service systems built around mainstream models.

7.4 What genuine community-led design would require

- Dedicated, resourced development of Aboriginal- and Torres Strait Islander-specific risk assessment tools in every jurisdiction, not only Western Australia, co-designed with community-controlled organisations from the outset rather than reviewed by them once drafted.
- Risk assessment and safety planning that engages extended family and community structures, consistent with Principle 5, rather than the individual-victim, individual-perpetrator model that underpins most mainstream tools.
- Practitioner training that addresses the specific dynamics behind misidentification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as predominant aggressors, and the fear of child removal that suppresses disclosure.
- Funding directed to community-controlled organisations to deliver risk assessment and case management themselves, rather than only to train mainstream agencies to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.
- Indigenous data sovereignty built into any new national information-sharing scheme, so that risk information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and families is governed according to their own decision-making authority.

8. What National Best Practice Looks Like: A Synthesis

Drawing together the National Risk Assessment Principles and the state and territory frameworks reviewed in this report, a small number of elements recur wherever practice is strongest:

- Structured professional judgement that combines evidence-based risk factors, the victim-survivor's own perception of danger, and trained practitioner judgement, rather than relying on any single element alone.
- Explicit, named attention to the factors most associated with lethality: strangulation, threats to kill, weapon access, escalating severity, coercive control, sexual violence, and pregnancy or a recent birth.
- Multi-agency information sharing, underpinned by legislation, so a victim-survivor's risk history moves with them across police, courts, health and specialist services.
- Mandatory, role-specific training before any practitioner uses a risk assessment tool, with additional depth of training tied to higher levels of responsibility.
- The victim-survivor's own voice and safety centred as the core priority, alongside consistent focus on holding the person using violence accountable.

- Cultural safety and community-led design treated as a foundational, resourced requirement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, not an optional adaptation of a mainstream tool.

9. Opportunities for NATSIWA's Policy and Advocacy Work

The 2025–2026 ANROWS review of the National Risk Assessment Principles is a live, time-limited opportunity to close the gap between Principle 5's commitments and what is actually built and funded. Several opportunities for NATSIWA follow directly from the findings in this report.

- Press for the 2025–2026 review to produce a specific, funded commitment to co-designed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander risk assessment tools in every jurisdiction, using Western Australia's in-development tool as a starting reference rather than an end point.
- Seek a genuine decision-making role, not only a consultative one, in the review's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement process, consistent with NATSIWA's position — reinforced through its Women Deliver 2026 engagement — that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are rights-holders in decisions that affect them, not stakeholders to be consulted after the fact.
- Advocate for funding to flow to community-controlled organisations to deliver risk assessment and case management directly, building on the Koori Court model and NATSIWA's own network of members working in health, community services and the not-for-profit sector.
- Raise the specific harm caused by predominant-aggressor misidentification and fear of child removal as priority issues for the review, drawing on ANROWS's existing findings on barriers to help-seeking.
- Call for Indigenous data sovereignty principles to be built into any new national information-sharing scheme from the outset, rather than added after a scheme is already designed.
- Track and report on the Western Australian Aboriginal-specific tool as it is finalised, so its lessons — positive and negative — can inform advocacy in every other jurisdiction.

10. Conclusion

Australia's family and domestic violence risk assessment system has matured considerably since 2018, converging around a shared model of structured professional judgement and a widening recognition of coercive control, strangulation and technology-facilitated abuse as markers of lethal danger. That progress has not yet extended to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the way Principle 5 promised. The 2025–2026 national review is the clearest opportunity in years to change that, but only if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and community-controlled organisations hold real authority over what the updated framework

contains, and only if that authority is matched with funding to build and deliver the tools it calls for.

11. Sources

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