

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs

Inquiry into the Relationship Between Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence and Suicide

Submitted by:

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Acknowledgement of Country

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Australia and pays respect to Elders past and present. We recognise the enduring connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to land, culture, community and kinship.

We honour the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who continue to advocate for the safety, wellbeing and rights of their communities.

About NATSIWA

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) is the national peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across Australia. NATSIWA provides a collective national voice to ensure that the leadership, lived experience and policy priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are centred in government decision-making.

NATSIWA is funded through the Australian Government's Gender Equality Strategy under the Office for Women and works to strengthen the participation, safety, wellbeing and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls. As a national alliance, NATSIWA engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across urban, regional, rural and remote communities to elevate community perspectives in national policy and reform processes.

NATSIWA works across policy reform, systemic advocacy and community engagement to address structural barriers faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in areas including safety, health, housing, employment, education and justice. Our work is grounded in the principles of self-determination, cultural authority and community-led solutions.

Through engagement with community leaders, service providers, researchers and government stakeholders, NATSIWA contributes to national policy development across a range of portfolios including gender equality, domestic and family violence, social and emotional wellbeing, economic participation and Closing the Gap.

NATSIWA also plays an important role in strengthening national dialogue on the experiences and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, ensuring that policy responses are informed by culturally grounded knowledge, lived experience and community priorities.

Introduction

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs inquiry into the relationship between domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) and suicide.

The Committee has identified two key issues:

- understanding the relationship between DFSV victimisation and suicide
- improving national data and understanding of DFSV-related deaths

NATSIWA's submission focuses on systemic issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and communities and draws on research evidence and lived experience shared through community engagement.

Executive Summary

Domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) and suicide are interconnected public health and social challenges in Australia. Experiences of violence can have severe impacts on physical safety, social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and long-term life outcomes.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, these impacts occur within the broader context of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, systemic racism and structural inequality.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience disproportionately high rates of domestic and family violence and are significantly over-represented in family violence hospitalisations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are approximately 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence than non-Indigenous women¹.

At the same time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience suicide at approximately twice the rate of non-Indigenous Australians², with suicide remaining one of the leading causes of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

These intersecting challenges demonstrate the need for integrated national responses that recognise violence prevention as a critical component of suicide prevention.

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The Relationship Between Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence and Suicide

Research demonstrates a significant relationship between experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence and increased risk of suicide, self-harm and psychological distress.

Exposure to violence can lead to trauma, depression, anxiety and social isolation. These impacts are often cumulative, particularly where violence occurs alongside other pressures including poverty, housing insecurity and barriers to accessing services³.

Victim-survivors of domestic violence frequently experience financial hardship, housing instability and disconnection from social supports. Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women in Australia³, and homelessness itself is associated with significant mental health risks.

International Research has consistently demonstrated links between intimate partner violence and suicide attempts. A large systematic review found that women exposed to intimate partner violence have significantly higher risks of suicide attempts compared with women who have not experienced violence⁴.

Australian research is increasingly identifying similar patterns. Reviews conducted by the Coroners Court of Victoria have identified experiences of family violence in a substantial proportion of suicide deaths examined⁵.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, these risks are compounded by structural inequalities and barriers to support. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience significantly higher rates of domestic and family violence and are over-represented in hospitalisations due to family violence-related assault¹.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in regional and remote communities, the ability to leave a violent relationship is further constrained by geographic isolation, limited service availability and housing shortages. Access to specialist domestic and family violence services, crisis accommodation and legal support can be extremely limited in remote communities, with services sometimes located hundreds of kilometres away. Transport barriers, cost of travel and limited childcare can further restrict women's ability to seek support.

Housing availability is one of the most significant barriers to leaving violent relationships. In communities where housing is already overcrowded or limited, women may have few safe alternatives. Leaving a violent partner may require women to leave their community, cultural networks and connection to Country, which can create additional risks and hardship.

These structural barriers can contribute to ongoing and cumulative trauma. When women are unable to safely leave violent environments or access support services, violence can become prolonged and intensify the impacts of trauma. Experiences of entrapment, isolation and sustained psychological distress can increase vulnerability to mental health deterioration, self-harm and suicide.

Evidence also demonstrates the significant contribution of violence to suicide risk among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The Australian Burden of Disease Study found that intimate partner violence contributes to approximately 32 per cent of the burden of suicide and self-inflicted injuries among Indigenous women⁸.

More broadly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience high or very high levels of psychological distress at more than twice the rate of non-Indigenous Australians². These patterns reflect the cumulative impacts of violence, trauma and structural disadvantage.

Understanding the relationship between domestic violence and suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women therefore requires recognition of both immediate experiences of violence and the broader context of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and systemic inequality.

Alignment with National Policy Frameworks

Addressing the relationship between domestic violence and suicide requires stronger alignment between national policy frameworks.

The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 recognises gender-based violence as a major social and public health issue⁶.

At the same time, the National Suicide Prevention Strategy emphasises the importance of addressing social determinants of mental health.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, suicide prevention must also align with Our Ways Strong Ways – the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy⁷, which emphasises:

- connection to culture and Country
- community leadership
- trauma-informed healing
- culturally safe services

Improving National Data

Australia currently lacks comprehensive national data capturing the relationship between domestic violence and suicide.

Many suicide deaths occur within contexts where violence is present but not formally recorded in national reporting systems.

Improving national data requires:

- consistent recording of DFSV in coronial systems
- better integration between health, policing and domestic violence services
- disaggregated data identifying priority populations
- alignment with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles

Without improved data, governments cannot accurately understand or respond to DFSV-related suicide risk.

Recommendations

NATSIWA recommends the following actions:

1. Recognise domestic and family violence as a key contributor to suicide risk in national suicide prevention strategies.
2. Improve national data systems to identify domestic violence-related suicide deaths.
3. Establish consistent national recording practices across coronial jurisdictions.
4. Strengthen integration of data across health, justice, housing and domestic violence systems.
5. Increase long-term investment in Aboriginal community-controlled organisations delivering violence prevention and healing programs.
6. Expand culturally safe mental health and crisis wraparound support services.
7. Address structural drivers including housing insecurity, poverty and systemic inequality.
8. Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as a priority population in national strategies addressing the relationship between violence and suicide.

Conclusion

Domestic, family and sexual violence and suicide are deeply interconnected issues requiring coordinated national responses.

Addressing these challenges requires prevention strategies that recognise the role of violence, trauma and structural inequality in shaping suicide risk.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally grounded healing approaches and community leadership are essential.

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's leadership in policy development and service design will strengthen national responses and improve outcomes for women, families and communities.

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