

# Silent Drivers | Driving Silence – Aboriginal Women’s Voices on Domestic Violence

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*In 1972, the peak of Australia’s second wave feminist movement, a group of Aboriginal women travelled to Canberra and met with white feminists including Germaine Greer. The Aboriginal women’s delegation discussed their participation in an era when racism, health care, incarceration, education and the call for self-determination were the pressing issues. Signing up to the feminist allegiance, they believed, meant conforming to an agenda that would subsume their cultural identity and solidarity with Aboriginal men. Standing as a people was more important. We’re not against our men is a cantata that Aboriginal women have adhered to strongly. This paper considers the concept of influence in Aboriginal women’s negotiation through layers of hegemonic structures, kinship systems and our own geopolitical contexts to assert self-agency in personal settings, and the cost that has since been borne for the cause. Aboriginal women’s standpoint is imperative to carrying our voice on the pressing and damaging issue of domestic violence.*

‘The difference is only that the first voice knows of no others, while the second has silenced them’ - Angela Harris (2000: 262)

## Introduction

At what point does silence enter the frame in abusive relationships and the shocking violence against Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> women we witness today? Aboriginal women have long been vocal in the collective call for social justice, yet it seems our communities have undergone a tectonic shift that has disempowered and silenced those voices to such an extent that we now tolerate a rate of violence in our homes and communities that is not only intolerable, it is drastically out of proportion with every other section of Australian society. Hospitalisations from intimate partner violence for Aboriginal women is 38 times as high as for non-Aboriginal women, death from assault is 10 times (AIHW 2006) and head injury hospitalisations due to assault is 69 times the rate for non-Aboriginal women (Jamieson et al. 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Harris’s penetrating comment speaks of dominant voice and of those that claim to speak. Indigenous and black women have written that the ongoing dominant discourse for women’s social justice centres the white middle class feminist speaker position (O’Shane 1976; Behrendt 1993; Lucashenko 1996; Harris 2000a; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Smallacombe 2004) and is maintained on the issue of domestic violence (Crenshaw 1991a; Best and Lucashenko 1995, Lucashenko 1996). I argue that not only is this speaker position maintained in the discourse

on domestic violence, it corresponds with an Aboriginal social justice speaker position that is configured around the ‘Indigenous men’s experience’ (Lucashenko 1996: 379, Moreton-Robinson 2014: 339). Together, they feed a confluence of race, gender and social position that consciously and unconsciously cancels out Aboriginal women’s voices that do not find favour within each of these paradigms.

The power asymmetry formed by Aboriginal male-positioned socio-political influence, tied with privileged white feminist ‘capacity to contract’ (Moreton-Robinson 2014: 335), shares a proximity to heteropatriarchal post-colonialist structural power through its mutual gender/whiteness identification that Aboriginal women do not. This confluence presents as the explicit authority in the representations of feminist and Aboriginal knowledges in Australian society. As Crenshaw (1991b: 11) writes,

The problem is not simply that both discourses fail women of colour by not acknowledging the additional burden of patriarchy or of racism, but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism.

To consider this I look at the concept of *influence* in the silencing dynamic threaded through the elite discourse (Van Dijk 1993) to the grassroots and dyadic exchanges in our communities and homes. *Influence* emphasises the significance of Aboriginal women’s voice in these locations.

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## The Link Between Personal and Social Consequences of Domestic Violence on Social Justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

*Influence* is a key element to a woman's ability to assert voice within interpersonal relationships. Influence impacts on women's capacity to be safe from psychological and social harm, physical injury and, in far too many cases, death in domestic and family violence conflicts. For Aboriginal women this includes our kinship systems and geo-political contexts as well as the layers of hegemonic structures.

The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on *Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences* makes clear the repercussive link between violence against women and capacity to influence social justice outcomes:

An often-overlooked impact of violence against women is the role it plays in obstructing the realization of women's citizenship rights. Violence against women fundamentally undermines the State's capacity to guarantee the right to development and it significantly limits their capacity to participate meaningfully in the development of their communities (Manjoo 2014: 4).

The Council of Australian Government (COAG) National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children 2010-2022 appears to have recognised this link under its 'National Outcome 3 – Indigenous communities are strengthened' (COAG 2011: 20). Highlighting a focus on 'local solutions' that *'includes encouraging Indigenous women to have a stronger voice as community leaders and supporting Indigenous men to reject violence'* (COAG 2011: 20), the Plan invokes the 'Close the Gap' policy in its strategies.

The Plan appears to acknowledge the inherent complexities in realising its 'Indigenous communities are strengthened' goal (COAG 2011: 21), which prompts the question: *How will this be achieved?* Centring Aboriginal women's experiences in any analysis of the issues that affect them is fundamental. As Almeida and Lockard (2005: 318) point out, 'White middle class feminism as a mainstay advocacy forum for battered women is conceptually flawed and unsafe for women on the margin'. The predominant characteristic of mainstream women's business to casually accommodate Aboriginal women's voices (Fredericks 2010) is accompanied by an inability to adequately appreciate what it means for Aboriginal women to speak up about violence. The Plan's cause to 'foster the leadership of Indigenous women within communities and broader Australian society' (COAG 2011: 21) calls on the drivers that silence Aboriginal women's voices to be exhumed and examined.

The second wave feminist movement in the 1970s brought 'the social issue of domestic violence out of the suburban shadows and into the activist and policy spotlight' (Hunter 2006: 733). Australia-wide attention to the issue resurged in 2015 when Rosie Batty, whose ex-partner murdered their 11 year old son at a junior cricket match, was made Australian of the Year. The very public violence significantly impacted on the media and opened an ongoing national conversation on the brutal private reality of domestic violence.

Yet there has been no such amplification in this national conversation of the abuse Aboriginal women and their children are suffering at disturbingly high proportions and ferocity. The muted discourse at the elite level on violence against Aboriginal women exposes the fraught nature of the issue for the feminist-social justice-confluence speaker position.

Whereas the feminist speaker position is inadequate to this task, similarly, Aboriginal social justice struggles to account the distinctive experiences of Aboriginal women as 'Indigenous sovereign female subjects' (Moreton-Robinson 2014: 332). Yet this standpoint is vital to Aboriginal women's lives. As critical race theorist Crenshaw (1991b: 19) puts it: 'the struggle over incorporating these differences is not a petty or superficial conflict about who gets to sit at the head of the table. In the context of violence, it is sometimes a deadly serious matter of who will survive – and who will not'.

### ***Influence in the Spousal Relationship: Dyadic Discourse***

The subject of domestic violence starkly draws out the significance of influence within and beyond the spousal dyad.<sup>3</sup> It is about the deconstruction of the impact of accepting influence between couples. Gottman (2011; 2015) proposes that a critical step in the sequential progression to abuse at the micro-interactional level is the failure of men to accept influence from their partner. Accepting influence is a key relationship skill, which is a crucial finding of Gottman's and others' substantive research in isolating relationship power dynamics (Coan et al. 1997; Gottman and Silver 1999; Gottman 2011). The research with thousands of couples across cultural groups including Native American, backs the feminist hypothesis of gendered power in violence against women and suggests that 'the struggle for influence may be a factor in distressed and violent marriages' (Coan et al. 1997: 377).

In her study of domestic abuse, Levinson (in Hamby 2000: 657, 655) cited a comprehensive cross-cultural study of 17 Native American communities that found 'male household decision-making power was one of the most important predictors of rates of violence' and 'Societies that lacked family violence were generally characterized by shared decision making'. Coan et al.

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(1997: 377) found 'wife abuse as being nearly three times more likely to happen in relationships where the husband dominates the decision-making process than when the wife dominates'. Consistently across these studies are findings that higher rates of male control over decision making are associated with men's violence towards women.

Power in the dyadic relationship is distinguished not only in the context of the male partner actively dominating decisions, it also includes passive behaviours such as withholding information, secrecy and deception by omission, and evasion or dishonesty that affect the woman's ability to participate in decision-making. This deceptive messaging raises perspectives on the 'right to information' (Bok 2011: 15). It is at that point when a woman raises an issue in the relationship that the significance of influence becomes apparent (Gottman and Silver 1999; Gottman 2011).

Influence is a marker across typologies. In analyses of perpetrator typologies, Jacobson and Gottman (1998: 82) found that to reject influence men would 'either ignore their partners' requests or become abusive'. Typology research is a growing area in clinical studies for delivering effective interventions in the complex area of domestic violence. As well as perpetrator typologies across three subtypes of abusers (Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart 1994), this continuing expanded work distinguishes different contexts where violence occurs. These include: characterological violence, violent resistance, situational violence, and separation-instigated violence (Friend et al. 2011; Wangmann 2011). Each of these typologies differ in the degree to which men reject influence. Perpetrator typologies are significant in showing that the choice to accept or reject influence is made by men who seek to dominate in the relationship well before any physical injury is inflicted.

However, the domestic violence injury and death rates of Aboriginal women cannot be attributed entirely to the diagnosis of all Aboriginal men in these incidents as characterological perpetrators. The tectonic shift named at the outset perceives an insistent and intended use of abuse against Aboriginal women who speak up. Australian researchers Braithwaite and Daly (1994: 222) state, 'When called to account for exploitative conduct, men's responses may be rage rather than guilt, or an amplification of non-caring'. It is these limiting, binary *gotos* for dealing with conflict that I call on in this analysis of silencing of Aboriginal women.

Situational violence may explain abuse that happens in those infrequent but persistently occurring conflict settings where life stressors impact. In *Critical Race Theory*, Delgado and Stefancic (2012: 61) sketch such tensions for politicised peoples in intimate situations 'When movements for racial justice prioritize broad concerns over those of particular subgroups, many

needs, such as those of our hypothetical black woman, may end up going unaddressed'.

Refusal to accept influence means that voicing a need within the relationship is met with escalating aggression and therefore plays a crucial role in the build up to verbal or physical abuse by setting the agenda for potential conflict. Some Aboriginal women familiar with these tactics recognise its onset in the words *don't start*. When a *don't start* sequence is triggered, it begins a cascade where the opportunity for her influence is gradually and significantly diminished. *Don't start* opposes women's voice in the relationship and presents the threat of silence or peril. Where these instances do escalate to verbal abuse or physical violence, it refreshes the silencing that serves to exculpate his choice to increase aggression in the interaction.

In their analysis of men's narratives of their behaviour Cavanagh et al. (2001: 696) state that men who cross this line 'attempt to rationalise their violence and use a range of tactics to minimise, deny and blame others, particularly their partner, in order to mitigate their own culpability'. Aboriginal women's influence in the dyadic relationship is vital for its relevance in both partners' ability to safely raise issues, build trust, deal with internal and external stressors, assert mutual autonomy and progress the relationship in a healthy and open way. It is these issues that are at the foundation of the dyadic interaction exclusive of pervasive complicating factors.

Of relevance to viewing domestic violence within the health framework, Gottman and others (Gottman et al. 1995; Gottman and Silver 1999; Denton et al. 2001) produced evidence that perpetual relationship conflicts have measurable detrimental health outcomes, especially for males, who were 'much more likely to die' and have 'chronically higher blood pressure' (Gottman 2015: 165). Persistent relationship distress leads to higher rates of cardiovascular conditions and lowered immune systems, leading to higher susceptibility to colds and respiratory infection. This research provides compelling indicators that the chronic illnesses that contribute to the Aboriginal health and life expectancy gap may be attributed to chronic relationship stress in couples and families compounded by external socio-cultural and economic conditions. This forms a well-founded basis for violence prevention that legal redress, cradled in post-incident criminal justice and defence jostling, simply cannot do.

As the politicisation of domestic violence begins to slowly shift policy attention from legitimacy of the victim to accountability of the perpetrator (COAG 2011; Australian Government 2015), these drivers and the machinations that hide them will begin to be brought into focus for Aboriginal social justice. In negotiating the daily course of their lives, human rights for Aboriginal people is as

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true a principle for women as it is for men.

### **Kinship and Community Influence: The Grassroots Discourse**

It is at the kinship and community level where silencing is most devastating, inducing an environment that effectively extinguishes the woman's voice and enmeshes silencing within the social justice discourse.

Centring Aboriginal women's experiences of domestic violence is fraught with power and control dynamics when the discussion of abuse moves out from the dyadic interaction. Minimisation – an intentional act to deny or downplay abuse – is a common abuser tactic to reject influence and discount the woman's ability to describe her experience. When minimisation is employed at the grassroots level, it sets the foundation for a compound effect: her voice is not only silenced, it is crowded out by the dissertation of the collective socio economic disadvantage that affixes the system as the abuser.

The ready insertion of the social justice exposition into the void created by silencing has a uniquely destructive effect on Aboriginal women. Dispossessed of her experience she is substituted in the victim/survivor role and her voice is eradicated by invective of her identity as an *Aboriginal person*. This is a silencing dynamic that white women victims do not endure.

Minimisation as a tactic for silencing discussion and deterring reporting abuse is well known in the literature (Anderson and Umberson 2001; Cavanagh et al. 2001; Cripps and Adams 2014; Special Taskforce on Domestic Violence in Queensland 2015). Minimisation is an especially powerful controlling tool in the emotional confines of a relationship: it not only defies a shared definition of abuse, it also defies an *opportunity* to create this shared meaning.

*Definition* of violence for Aboriginal women is a critical development (Russon 2014), and is cited under the UN's directives to 'develop an Indigenous woman's standpoint for understanding and combating violence' (IIFW 2006: 53). The resistance to this is plain when 'violent men strongly resist defining their behaviour as *violent*' and seek to 'impose their definitions of violence upon the women they abuse' (Cavanagh et al. 2001: 697). Minimisation seeds doubt in the veracity of the woman's viewpoint – beginning with the victim herself – to represent her lived experiences and subverts her voice in the grassroots discourse.

From their review of the literature, Cavanagh et al. (2001: 696) expressed that 'men's accounts are riven with evidence of the ways in which they deny, minimise and blame others for their own use of violence'. Minimisation reframes men's violence as 'a rational response to extreme provocation, a loss of control, or a minor

incident that was blown out of proportion' (Anderson and Umberson 2001: 362). Atkinson (1991: 6) noted that in Aboriginal accounts '... perpetrators of domestic violence blame others, generally the victim, for their behaviour and deny that there is a problem ... Abusive partners expect others to understand the reasons for their violence and to comply ...'. Cripps and Adams (2014: 400) describe this strenuous denial in the Aboriginal community: 'Victims and their families often use a language of minimisation when describing instances of violent behaviour as some everyday, innocuous happening ... just as violence has become a normal and ordinary part of life, so too has the language'.

The phenomenon of minimisation and its consequences is critical to the carriage of social justice that UN Rapporteur Manjoo speaks of. Anderson and Umberson (2001: 362) note that in addition to committing and minimising abuse, offenders also 'presented themselves as rational, competent, masculine actors'. One researcher remarked: 'the extent of a batterer's denial, minimisation, projection and splitting, his capacity for self-deception, is quite something to see in an otherwise healthy man' (Jukes in Cavanagh et al. 2001:696). This cognitive dissonance completely recasts perpetrators' self-concept. In an environment of normalised violence, it reconceptualises perpetrators as exemplary characters of cultural integrity and sanctions Aboriginal male authority as the usher of social transformation or spiritual healing. From this juncture forward, controlling context in the discourse is paramount. Hence, the dismissal of Aboriginal women's survival of targeted violence is vehemently reactive. The *universal* victim meta-narrative is highly valuable for its function to obfuscate and relocate the agents of power and domination in Aboriginal domestic violence contexts. Hence, the annihilation of women's voice is a necessary prerequisite.

There is no denying colonisation's violence, nor its ongoing impact on Aboriginal people. There is, however, a need to compassionately distinguish Aboriginal women's 'embodied lived experience' (Moreton-Robinson 2014: 339) in its thrall. The reason to make this distinction is that for an Aboriginal woman victim of domestic violence, what greater minimisation is there than the historical reality and collective experience of the dispossession and oppression of all Aboriginal people?

### **Systemic and Political Administrative Influence: The Elite Discourse**

Given such dedication to evading definition, perpetrator accountability (where any is possible) effectively evaporates at the kinship and community level and reverts to formalised systems and institutions. In her discussion on speaking positions on Indigenous violence, Aboriginal woman Sonia Smallacombe (2004: 47) identified that 'Bureaucratic administration has usurped the community

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authority of women and, as a result, women often feel they are not getting the support they require to tackle the issue of violence in their communities’.

Leveraging social power through access to platforms is accomplished via structural facilitations (Van Dijk 1983). On the principles of discourse analysis, Van Dijk (1993: 254) argues that ‘special access to various genres, forms or contexts of discourse and communication is also an important power resource’. Agenda setting of the priority issues for Aboriginal Australia in the political landscape is influenced by those deemed by structural power as Aboriginal leaders, many of whom are Aboriginal men who have risen through the bureaucracy. The agenda reflects those issues that leaders choose to ignore as much as those they cite.

The Australian Human Rights Commission’s report on the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women Australian Study Tour asserted that specifically for Aboriginal communities ‘There is a need for the male community leaders to play a public role in addressing domestic and family violence, work with male perpetrators and lead by example.’ (Broderick and Durbach 2012: 38). How does this influence function equitably for Aboriginal social justice when men with practised abusive behaviours rise into positions of power and privilege through bureaucracy and community authority, shepherded and shielded by perpetuating silence?

In the 2009 deliberations for the new representative body that would replace the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), foundational Chair, Lowitja O’Donoghue, broke the silence on the abuse of power by Aboriginal men holding office:

Aboriginal leaders have a major problem with drinking, smoking and using illicit drugs. The other big problem with indigenous men is they womanise too much – they don’t know how to curb their womanising behaviour. It is something they enjoy, and it affects their decision-making as leaders (The Australian 12 March 2009).

O’Donoghue was reportedly backed by human rights lawyer, Hannah McGlade. Adding that her words were intended ‘only for the ears of my people’ (The Australian 12 March 2009), O’Donoghue revealed the hazard implicit in speaking from an Aboriginal woman’s standpoint. Indeed, O’Donoghue stated that she was required to have round the clock security protection.

In 2015, the public disclosures of allegations of domestic violence against North Queensland Aboriginal man and Labor Party politician, Billy Gordon, by two of his former partners provided another critical opportunity

to articulate the issue as a social justice priority when domestic violence was high on the national agenda. The two Aboriginal women received an airing on commercial media. Noel Pearson, a renowned Aboriginal figure regarded as ‘the most influential indigenous person in Australian history’ (The Australian 4 August 2007), also from North Queensland, countered on Australian Broadcasting Commission that Gordon was ‘thrown under a very brutal bus’ by his party leadership (Lateline 14 March 2015). As an opportunity to influence the empowerment of women that is imperative to changing social norms and breaking the culture of silence, the Gordon episode did not elucidate further discussion. Consequently, Aboriginal leaders did not elevate the issue of domestic violence against Aboriginal women as an agenda priority in the way that had occurred in the mainstream throughout 2015. The matter died off whilst under police investigation, which subsequently found that Gordon had no case to answer.

Much of Rosie Batty’s influence on the mainstream agenda can be credited to her individual courage to make previously unheard public statements on the issue, labelling domestic violence an ‘epidemic’ and ‘akin to terrorism’ (News Corp Australia 3 June 2015). Australian Human Rights Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, declared violence against women and their children as ‘the gravest human rights abuse happening in Australia today’ (ABC News 2 September 2015). There has been much political will, major policy overhaul and renewed funding commitment to address inter-familial violence. But the most consistent efforts to bring attention to domestic abuse on Aboriginal women have been made through community legal sector platforms. Predominantly, this is in the form of revisiting statistics and calling for more funding for legal representation. However, these voices have not led to increased focus on the drivers of violence, nor has it led to the allocation of much needed resources.

Viewed through a health prevention lens, a constant annual reduction of 6.67% or *two and half times* the general population rate of hospitalisations would be required to close the gap between Aboriginal women and the rest of Australia – which is itself at crisis point (see Table 1). This reduction is unlikely within the legal definition of prevention, which requires a victim before prevention measures can be enacted.

## Conclusion

Forty years on from the freedom fights of the 1970s and in a year unprecedented for public attention to the issue, the social justice discourse has had little traction on the domestic violence that reaches far into Aboriginal women’s lives. While the COAG National Plan indicates some capacity within the feminist paradigm to confront

the issues, social justice discourses continue to wrestle with the imbricating effect of silencing. On behalf of Aboriginal people, the concerns have been prioritised as constitutional recognition, economic reform, Native Title property rights and justice reinvestment. The value of these issues is not in question. Each and every one

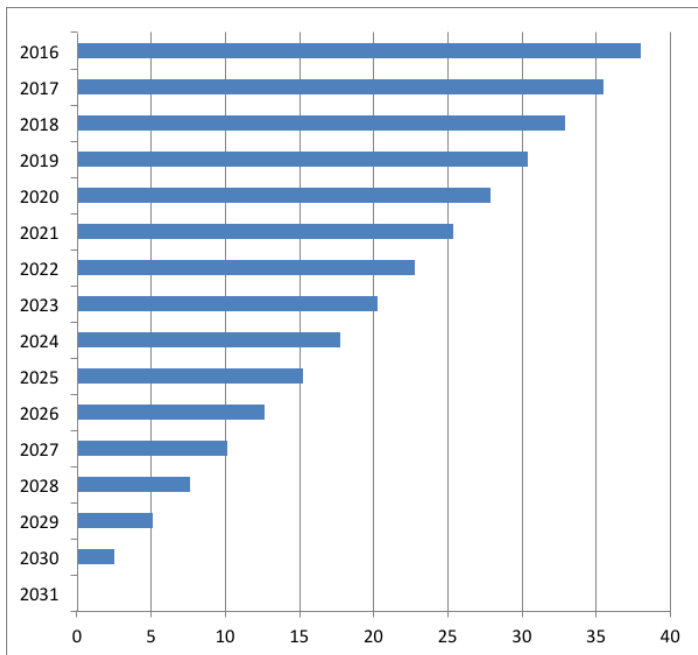


Table 1: Annual Reduction of Hospitalisation rates of spouse/ domestic partner assault against Aboriginal women required to Close the Gap. Data source: AIHW 2006: 54-55

affects Aboriginal women. The alarmingly increasing rates of incarceration of Aboriginal women has begun to garner attention. However, the consequence of agenda setting by twinned feminist and pan-Aboriginal confluence is deleterious to Aboriginal women's voice. Aboriginal movement solidarity ideology and populist counter reforms proffer an unassailable alibi on calling accountability on men's abusive behaviours in our homes – including those who represent us or extend significant socio-political and cultural influence.

In their personal lives, Aboriginal women assert authentic self-agency through an indefatigable strength of will and determined sense of collective purpose, moored by the strength of influence inherited from women before us. Indigenous women's standpoint means having influence as principal participants involved in our own affairs as fully-fledged speakers from a distinct perspective, not solidarity stewardesses serving a sophisticated silencing agenda. Abuse of Aboriginal women is an exhausting and profound disloyalty to our collective effort to decolonise and to be self-determining. Healthy functioning in dyadic relationships within Aboriginal families is an ample foundation block on which to build sustainable energies necessary to move to a more just society.

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Suzanne's article in this edition of *Social Alternatives* is dedicated to her two granddaughters: 'to my granddaughters, Emeekah and Nalani. May you never be denied your rightful place in the world as Wiradjuri women'.

## End Notes

1. Throughout this document, the term *Aboriginal* includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This choice reflects current discussions to prefer *Aboriginal* over *Indigenous* in the context of where the author is located. The term *Indigenous* is used where it refers to international discourses. Australian policy refers to *Indigenous*.
2. These statistics present numbers for combined male and female perpetrators of assault upon Aboriginal women.
3. The author recognises the limitations of heterosexual relations as a/the? normative value, however, this is an analysis of male on female domestic violence.