Housing and Aboriginal Family Violence: the missing link

Kyllie Cripps & Daphne Habibis

UNSW Sydney & UTAS
Background

- 1 of 3 research projects funded under a broader AHURI Inquiry: Integrated housing support for vulnerable families
- Focus of this research was on ‘How can housing and other service responses to family and domestic violence be improved to meet the needs of Aboriginal individuals and families?’
Method

- Multi-method research design, compromising:
  - Rapid evidence and policy review;
  - Interviews with Indigenous women who have experienced DFV; and
  - Interviews with policy and service delivery stakeholders
- Two research sites: NSW and the NT
Research Findings
BARRIERS TO PATHWAYS TO SAFETY …

HER FAMILY
"You just have to put up with it." 
"You can’t split the family."
"You made your bed, now you have to lie in it." 
"If I don’t turn up to court, they’ll get the children from me."

KIDS
"I hate you – it’s all your fault." 
"You’re sending me to jail."
"You said you’d always love me."
"I’m not going to school in the morning, so you can’t take me." 
"You can’t stay here."

HIS FAMILY
"You’re making it hard for all of us, cops hanging around." 
"He wouldn’t hit ya, if ya didn’t deserve it." 
"We’ve got no choice but to leave the kids with the police." 

PERPETRATOR
"I’m sorry, it was an accident, it won’t happen again."
"You can’t leave me, I’ll kill myself." 
"You have, you’re not taking my kids." 

FRIENDS/NEXT DOOR
"You can have the couch."
"You will have to go if there is any trouble." 
"We don’t want the police here." 
"You can stay but it will be trouble with housing – too many people here:" 

COMMUNITY
"You’re splitting up the family – what about the kids – they need their father." 
"You sent him to jail – you’ll kill him, you know what happens then:" 
"You’re cheating the community.” 
"It’s all just weather’s fault, she’s making her do it:" 

ELDER
"This isn’t normal, this violence isn’t ok." 
"You can leave my kids here, we will look after them." 
"You can’t stay here, we don’t want trouble:" 

POLICE
"If you’re not going to do anything about it, we will."
"We will apply for an AVO." 
"We’re harbouring a criminal, we’ll lock you both up." 
"We don’t stop the violence, we just control it:" 

CHILD PROTECTION
"You have to leave them, we will take the kids." 
"Your violence is hurting the kids." 
"You need to do a family violence course, a parenting course, prove to us you don’t drink alcohol in front of the kids." 
"You took the kids with you, we’ve assessed her and they can’t stay there:" 
"We will be preventing you:" 

DISABLED
"Sorry we can’t help you."
"We don’t have the hands or the skills to work with you."
"You should try some other service:" 

HOUSING
"Sorry we don’t have anything right now." 
"We might have something in a year, the wait list is long:" 
"You have an outstanding debt, when you can demonstrate you’re paying it off, then we can get you on the wait list:" 
"It’s all we have, take it or go to the bottom of the list:" 

REFUGEE WORKER
"You can do something you know, you can learn, or get an AVO, I can help you:" 
"You know if you stay here your father can’t:" 
"Sorry we are full up right now you can’t stay here:" 
"There are beds at the shelter we have more than four beds, I can’t take you anywhere:" 

SILENT SUPPORTORS
There are many in our community, men and women, who want to help, who can see the violence and the fault, but they are scared to speak. They stay silent:" 

FINDING A SAFE PLACE
"Where can I go that the police won’t find me:" 
"Where can I go that my family won’t find me:" 

20 Ask a Holistic Response to Violence (AHURI)
Housing

• Indigenous women and children have very limited housing pathways to choose from in the aftermath of DFV;
• Acute shortages exist in crisis, transitional and long-term housing particularly in regional and remote areas;
• Indigenous women are trapped in a revolving door cycling between crisis services, shelter with family and friends, and returning to an unsafe home.
Housing

• Long delays in placement on priority housing lists;
• The burden of housing debt (for arrears in rent, damage to property) was largely borne by Indigenous women as head lease holder and impacted their placement on priority housing lists;
• When women were finally offered housing, often after extensive waits, they often felt they were set up to fail.
Service Integration

- Law and policy reform in respect of DFV has improved service integration generally, but often fails to meet the needs of Indigenous women given its ‘one size fits all approach’.
- Indigenous women were often being judged as to whether they were ‘worthy victims’ deserving of support;
- Instead of supporting and improving Indigenous women’s circumstances service integration had the potential to compound their disadvantage and to further disempower them.
Service Integration

- Violence experienced by Indigenous women was normalised;
- Some service responses also normalised the violence experienced by Indigenous women and this effected the services offered or rather not offered;
- An undertone of racism was also prevalent.
Child Protection

• Children’s exposure to DFV is understood as damaging, consequently all jurisdictions prescribe mandatory reporting to Child Protection by individuals and/or professions;

• Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to child protection involvement;

• Indigenous women face a situation of triple victimisation: through family violence, removal of children, and homelessness that has long lasting consequences.
Policy Disconnect

• Most profound at the intersection of housing and child protection:
  • Prioritisation and timeliness of being offered housing acceptable to child protection;
  • Location and condition of housing consistent with child protection policies relating to risk; and
  • Financial implications whilst women wait for departmental decisions.
• Unintended consequence children removed may not be reunified because of things outside of Aboriginal women’s control.
Policy and Practice Implications
Policy

• Investment in housing stock to improve bottlenecks in crisis, transitional and long-term housing;
• Managing DFV related housing debt to ensure that it no longer acts as a barrier to safety by delaying access to priority wait lists;
• Addressing the high rate of tenancy failure amongst Indigenous women by providing targeted tenancy and related support;
Policy

- Extending ‘Safe at home’ funding to retro fit homes with increased safety measures;
- Addressing the high rate of tenancy failure amongst Indigenous women by providing targeted tenancy and related support;
- Review of housing policy to enable home upgrades for informal helpers routinely providing respite to victims of violence;
- Supporting in a sustainable way Indigenous local place based initiatives designed to respond to DFV and that empowers Indigenous women.
Practice

• Service coordination between housing and child protection to ensure that decisions of either agency do not unduly disadvantage Indigenous women and children;

• Provision of crisis accommodation for Indigenous women with 1) complex needs and/or 2) male children aged over 12yrs;

• Employment of housing liaison officers by shelters and refuges;

• Streamlining safety upgrades of women’s homes to improve speediness and to reduce costs
Practice

• Service coordination between Centrelink, housing and other organisations to improve the sharing of information to verify identity and to enable women’s financial independence quickly;

• Training and support for workers recognising difficult environments they work in but also addressing areas where their good work can be undermined;

• Supporting initiatives that build and strengthen Indigenous women’s empowerment.
Concluding Thoughts

• This research demonstrated the extent to which housing is implicated in the difficulties Indigenous women face in finding safety in the aftermath of DFV.

• It also demonstrated that given the nature of Indigenous women’s intersectionality it is encumberment upon the state to do better in its delivery services.
Concluding Thoughts

• Doing better requires: genuinely hearing Indigenous women’s voices, their experiences and accepting that they are the ‘experts of their own lives’;
• Honouring Indigenous women’s strength, resilience and resourcefulness; and
• Supporting their desire to be self empowered and self determining.