

Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women



This fact sheet summarises the Ask LOIS webinar on this topic, presented by Donna Hensen on 3 October 2012. This webinar can be viewed for free at www.asklois.org.au/webinars/past-webinars.

**Please note, this webinar uses language referring mainly to Aboriginal women*

This factsheet covers:

- *Effect of history on Aboriginal clients*
- *Barriers and strengths of Aboriginal clients*
- *Helpful hints when working with Aboriginal clients*

Identification

- Aboriginal people identify with different 'country' or land areas. This can affect the different service areas that you can deliver
- The term 'Indigenous' covers Aboriginal **and** Torres Strait Islander people. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have distinct and separate cultures
- Aboriginal communities have a strong sense of family. The notion of family is based on kinship communities, not the nuclear model
- Family, kinship and community is central to an Aboriginal person's sense of belonging and identity
- **Community** refers to the actual, physical environment that these communities live in and to other Aboriginal people within Australia
- Aboriginal people have a strong relationship to the land and their 'country'.

Effect of History on Aboriginal People

- The loss of traditional language, land and culture and the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities and placement into Government care have had an enormous and ongoing impact upon Aboriginal communities
- Displacement of Aboriginal people from their land, family and communities has led to **trans-generational trauma** that continues to flow on to the next generation
- Many Aboriginal people are affected by **disenfranchised grief** because others do not acknowledge or accept their grief
- Historical events have affected Aboriginal people and their communities in different ways. In some instances, Aboriginal people were removed from their individual communities and placed into government missions where they were expected to live amongst other displaced Aboriginal people, as a cohesive group. No consideration was given to the historical, geographical and cultural differences that may have existed between them
- Aboriginal people continue to face discrimination. This affects their mental and emotional health and has come to define their socio-economic conditions
- The treatment of Aboriginal people since European settlement of Australia has taught many Aboriginal people to distrust the government and services eg, Police and FaCS
- **Remember:** the historical treatment of Aboriginal people was forced upon them. They have survived because of their determination, resilience and adaptability despite continued dispossession and disenfranchisement by successive government regimes

Barriers for Aboriginal Women

The tides of history have had a flow on effect to create some barriers for Aboriginal women. Most aboriginal women have experienced or witnessed:

- Domestic violence within their Community
- Child abuse / Childhood sexual assault
- Increased rates of imprisonment

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Quick Statistics

- Aboriginal women are 6 times more likely to experience domestic violence than non-Aboriginal women¹
- Aboriginal women living in rural or regional areas are 45 times more likely to experience domestic violence than non-Aboriginal women²
- Aboriginal women are 31 times more likely to be hospitalised for family violence assaults than other Australian women and men³
- Aboriginal women are 16 - 25 times more likely to experience sexual assault than non-Aboriginal women⁴
- In 2006-07, 48% of Indigenous homicide victims were female⁵
- These statistics reflect reported violence, not all victims report violence or seek assistance - the real figures are probably much higher

- These experiences can lead to the break down of the family unit, the abuse of drugs and/or alcohol and increased rates of sexual or family violence
- This can lead to further, cyclical barriers for Aboriginal women. For example:
 - For some women, sexual or family violence is perceived as 'normal'. This may be the case for some Aboriginal women as well
 - It may be difficult for them to find support within their community (especially when many other members of their community are experiencing the same problems)
 - They might feel disloyal if they report on member/s of their community

Other barriers some Aboriginal women face include:

- Shyness or not wanting to talk to people outside of the community
- Shame as a cultural issue where Aboriginal people do not want to draw attention to themselves
- Different communication styles
- Lower literacy levels
- Confidentiality issues
- Higher rate of health problems
- Lower life expectancy

Strengths of Aboriginal Women

When working with Aboriginal women, it is useful to keep in mind their strengths, they:

- May speak many languages. All speak a dialect of English that is Aboriginal-English but may speak other dialects as well
- May be open to discussing issues that are considered taboo, such as domestic violence
- Aboriginal women are intelligent. Be mindful that you treat them as such
- Aboriginal women are creative and artistic – it is helpful to think outside of the box when delivering a service i.e. holding meetings outside
- Aboriginal women have a strong sense of humour
- Aboriginal women are proud. The role of the service provider is to provide a holistic service that assists Aboriginal women in strengthening their support networks
- Be flexible in your approach to communication. Ask how Aboriginal women would like the information to be communicated to them and/or their 'group'

¹ NSW BOSCAR, "Trends and Patterns in domestic violence assaults: 2001 to 2010", May 2011,8.

² Gordon Inquiry Report 2001.

³ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, "Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2011", Productivity Commission, Canberra, 23.

⁴ Lievore D 2003, Non-reporting and Hidden Recording of Sexual Assault: An International Review, Report prepared by the Australian Institute of Criminology for the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

⁵ Productivity Commission 2009 Fact Sheet: Women, men and children, 2.

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Other tips for effective communication with Aboriginal clients

- With all clients, it's important that they comfortable and that you have established trust and a rapport with them. Your conduct, **body language and eye contact** depends on the individual person
- **Maintaining confidentiality** is of the upmost importance
- When communicating with clients, face-to-face communication is preferred. This is the same for Aboriginal clients
- Use plain English when communicating through written correspondence
- Aboriginal people tend to speak with a lot of **silences in the conversation**. This is seen as a sign of respect because it gives the other person time to think about their response
- Respect that Aboriginal women are intelligent
- Rather than asking the client "tell me if you don't understand what I'm saying?" be respectful and explain that you can word your question differently
- Be honest and open
- Sometimes it may be difficult to find your client. Ask your client to provide you with a **list of contacts** that you can use to help find them. If you have trouble locating your client, you could also use family connections and/or your Aboriginal staff
- If your client has had a bad experience with your service, ask for direction as to how it can be improved. Don't assume to know what they need or want

Legal referrals for Aboriginal clients

Women's Legal Services NSW – Indigenous Women's Legal Contact Line

Tollfree 1800 639 784 | Sydney 02 8745 6977

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, 10am–12:30pm

www.womenslegalnsw.asn.au/wlsnsw/

Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre

Tollfree 1800 686 587 | Sydney 02 5969 38 47

www.wirringabaiya.org.au

Aboriginal Legal Service

1800 765 767

www.alsnswact.org.au

For print out PDF illustrated mind maps of barriers and strengths when working with Aboriginal clients, please visit www.asklois.org.au/dv-services-nsw/indigenous-services