

From the national stage

Notes from the Opening Address: Dr Jackie Huggins (Jackie)

Jackie began her presentation by stating she wished to frame her talk about the future of addressing domestic and family violence for Indigenous peoples through the lens of the National Congress. Acknowledging present, past and future Elders in the room she spoke about the importance of the Forum in networking, discussing best practice, and having the opportunity to share the joys and sorrows with other workers in the field.

Jackie then spoke about approaches to address domestic and family violence historically, noting that the Commonwealth Government's focus on reducing domestic and family violence began in 1986 with the National Agenda for consultations, a three year public education campaign called 'The National Domestic Violence Education Program' and a survey to discover how the general community viewed violence against women. The National Community Attitudes Survey was first run at this time, in 1987, and has since gone on to be the longest running survey on the topic in the world. Some of the other milestones during this period included the first Women's Safety Survey in 1996, which was then used as the basis for the development of the Personal Safety Survey in 2005.

Jackie went on to speak about how the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children represented another important milestone in addressing the issue, touching upon the four three year action plans and the establishment of the Australian National Research Organisation for Women's safety (ANROWS). Jackie emphasised that although there had been several gains made, there was still a long way to go, stating that many focussed inquiries and reports sit in the houses of parliament and were not actioned.

Jackie stated that there were many theories advanced to identify the causes of violence in Indigenous communities, and that she felt many of these did not recognise the distinction between lore and post colonial violence. Jackie also stated that similarly, police responses often failed to take context and history into account. She said that these, as well as a number of other factors including difficulty in gathering data and widespread instances of non-disclosure due to fear of jail or having children removed, meant that rates of violence in Indigenous communities continued to be higher than in non-Indigenous communities.

Despite these sobering statistics, Jackie said there was much good work being done in the field, including community programs and early intervention, and that she was interested in learning more about different models being used in communities across Queensland. Jackie stated she believed Elders must be at the centre of interventions, that men must be included and that restorative justice would be part of the solution. Jackie cited the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Taskforce on Violence report which included a finding that restorative justice was a viable alternative, especially when Indigenous people were over represented in correctional systems. Jackie acknowledged the debates around alternative justice practices, including concerns about potential gender power imbalances in cases of domestic and family violence restorative justice forums; and stated that a central feature of restorative justice practices must be recognition of the victim as central to the process.

Therefore, she believed that victims must be provided with appropriate support to challenge the control exercised within domestic and family violence relationships.

Jackie closed her address by reiterating that the high rates of violence in Indigenous communities are due to multiple factors including systemic racism and sexism, past injustices and trauma flowing from colonisation. She stated there must be an investment made in specialist Aboriginal services, as there were many well documented barriers to accessing mainstream services. Jackie concluded by stating we must invest in Aboriginal women as the solution.