



DRIVING CHANGE:

Djirra CEO Antoinette Braybrook says the justice and legal systems render Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women invisible.

WHEN SISTERS GET TOGETHER, THEY FIND ANSWERS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women victims and survivors of family violence are often silenced by systemic barriers. Leading advocate Antoinette Braybrook explains the importance of culturally safe and holistic support.

The Victorian Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service marked its 15th birthday earlier this year with a change of name. The new name—Djirra—is the Woiwurrung word for the reed used by Wurundjeri women for basket weaving. Traditionally, when women gathered to weave, important talks took place and problems were solved.

“When sisters get together, we find answers,” Djirra CEO Antoinette Braybrook says.

“Aboriginal women are strong and resilient, and we have the solutions to the problems affecting our lives.”

Djirra provides culturally safe and holistic assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially women and children, experiencing family violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of family violence-related assault than non-Indigenous women, and 10 times more likely to die from assault.

A constant challenge in this line of work is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women victims and survivors of family violence are silenced by systemic barriers, Braybrook says. She became aware of this problem when she first started working in the justice field in the late 1990s.

“When I was working there [at the Victorian Department of Justice], I noticed that any time someone was talking about the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system, everyone kept referring to Aboriginal men, and I was even doing that,” she says.

“And I know this is a massive issue for all of our people regardless of gender, but it was very clear to me early on that Aboriginal women were so invisible when it comes to these areas ... And that has really shaped where we’ve landed today as an organisation.”

“Aboriginal women are strong and resilient and we have the solutions to the problems affecting our lives,” Braybrook says

In July, Djirra launched the Hidden Figures campaign to raise awareness of the ways the justice and legal systems render Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women invisible. The story of Lynette Daley is one high-profile example of the ways the criminal justice system presents barriers that prevent or make it difficult for Indigenous women to access justice. No charges were laid for five years after the death of the 33-year-old mother of seven at a beach north of Iluka on the NSW North Coast in 2011. The NSW Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) twice declined to prosecute two long-time suspects, but the men were eventually charged and convicted after an investigation by the ABC *Four Corners* program in 2016 prompted a review of the DPP's decision.

“I’m sure everyone’s mind goes straight to those high-profile faces ... but what I need to say up front is those experiences are not unique. That system failure is experienced by just about every woman we work with,” Braybrook says.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face unique barriers to obtaining assistance. The report acknowledged the “understandable apprehension and reluctance many Aboriginal people have in seeking assistance from government agencies (particularly child protection) and the racism and lack of understanding some people experience when doing so”. Braybrook says many Aboriginal women fear their children will be removed if they seek help from a mainstream service, and find it easier to trust Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

“We know that the legal system has historically been used as a tool of oppression against our people. And I

think about how that plays out for our women today—they have fear and they distrust the system that is supposed to protect them,” she says.

“We’ve worked with so many women whose children have been removed because they’ve been pushed out on the street and made homeless, because they’ve got nowhere else to go ... Instead of supporting those women to get housing, safe housing, the first thing they do is to remove the child.”

Djirra’s approach is designed by Aboriginal women, for Aboriginal women. It is informed by the belief that every woman has a story to tell—and by listening to these stories, Djirra can identify systemic barriers and find the solutions to create change. Djirra’s signature early intervention and prevention programs—Sisters Day Out (a one-day workshop) and Dilly Bag (a three-day intensive residential program)—grew from the knowledge that Aboriginal women “won’t just walk through our door ... that we had to go to the women,” Braybrook says. The workshops are conducted in communities around Victoria, giving Aboriginal women the opportunity to access information and engage with lawyers, counsellors and social workers, in their own communities and in a culturally appropriate manner. Since 2008, Djirra has run workshops for more than 10,000 Aboriginal women across Victoria.

Djirra also works to drive systemic change that will improve Aboriginal women’s access to justice, safety and equality. Their policy and advocacy work includes running highly successful campaigns, maintaining a regular presence in decision-making forums and committees, and contributing expertise to important government initiatives and inquiries. Braybrook gave

evidence to the Royal Commission into Family Violence and was pleased to see, in stark contrast to previous key reports in the justice area, that the Royal Commission’s report put Aboriginal women’s voices and experiences “front and centre”. Braybrook is also the convenor of the National Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services Forum, and through this role ensures that voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across the country are heard at the national level.

Perhaps most importantly, Djirra’s work is about celebrating the strength, resilience and courage of Aboriginal women. “Aboriginal women are more than just what these numbers represent,” the Hidden Figures campaign explains, in reference to the vastly disproportionate impact of family violence on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Despite these statistics, Aboriginal women have continued to nurture, lead and stand strong together to overcome barriers—to create life, family, community, joy, laughter and fun. Djirra’s Koori Women’s Place, in Melbourne, is a place where Aboriginal women can come to celebrate being Aboriginal women.

“It’s a space where we can celebrate our culture, and we can share our knowledge as Aboriginal women,” Braybrook says.

Being able to come together to design solutions can make a difference, she believes. And that’s why she can envision a time in the future when “family violence will not be a core part of our business”.

Whatever lies ahead, Braybrook knows one thing for sure: change can be achieved only when sisters get together to find answers.