

## Systems-level change is urgently needed

*Findings from the 2021 NCAS for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents*

The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) is a periodic and representative survey of the Australian population, conducted every 4 years. The 2021 NCAS *Findings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Respondents* report focuses on findings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in the survey.

The report includes findings about respondents' perceptions of how fair and trustworthy community and system responses to violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are, their understanding and attitudes about violence against women and their attitudes towards gender inequality.

### KEY INSIGHTS

#### Systemic racism requires systemic solutions

THE CHALLENGE	THE WAY FORWARD
<p>The attitudes and understandings measured by the NCAS point towards systemic issues. Systemic racism is embedded in and perpetrated through the attitudes, norms and practices of non-Indigenous people, services and systems. This causes inequality for, and harm to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.</p>	<p>The NCAS findings provide insights for initiatives to prevent violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Systems-level change is needed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● identify and eradicate systemic racism to <b>create fair, accessible and trustworthy systems</b> and services that are culturally safe, <u>trauma aware and healing informed</u></li> <li>● <b>work in true partnership</b> with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to prevent violence against women. ACCOs put self-determination into action by delivering essential, culturally safe services and advocating for communities' needs. This includes partnerships with mainstream services and systems. Work with ACCOs could include:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>conducting research</b> into why there are gaps in the understanding of the gendered nature of domestic violence and what factors shape attitudes towards violence against women</li> <li>● <b>delivering education</b> to increase understanding of the high prevalence and negative impacts of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, including education for non-Indigenous people, mainstream media, the police and criminal justice system, and other essential services</li> <li>● <b>prioritising strengthening capability</b> among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to recognise and report violence and to challenge attitudes that condone or normalise it</li> <li>● providing and <b>increasing access to culturally responsive services</b> for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to facilitate reporting and access to justice and healing.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

# Violence against women and children is linked to colonisation

**Colonisation is the process through which British colonisers dispossessed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of their lands to establish British colonies in Australia.**

These colonisers imposed European ideals, perspectives, structures and systems and intentionally disrupted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, cultures, and family and community relationships.

**Colonisation is violent, and its processes and impacts continue today.**

In Australia, it has involved dispossession, regulation and control, relocation, physical violence, sexual violence, enslavement, exploitation, forced child removal and assimilation, forced labour, murder and massacre. This violence has been carried out by individuals, governments, organisations and religious groups.

**Colonisation results in systemic racism, violence, discrimination and oppression.**

Racism is widespread in the attitudes, social norms and practices of non-Indigenous people, systems and services in Australia. This leads to systems consistently failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For example, racism can directly impact police responses. Police have distrusted and shown apathy towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims and survivors of violence. These biases can result in inaction, the inappropriate use of responses against victims and survivors themselves, and the deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

**Systemic racism and discrimination have led to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feeling betrayed by and mistrustful of some non-Indigenous institutions and individuals.**

For some, this takes the form of intergenerational trauma, passed on within families and communities. For example, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people fear that engaging with services will lead to child removal due to past and ongoing government child removal practices and the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care today. This is one reason why violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is under-reported.

**Racist narratives may label violence against women as “just a part of” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. This is not true.**

This discriminatory and defeatist attitude can also stop mainstream services and systems from partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to support safety and wellbeing. It overlooks the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Further, it ignores the reality that non-Indigenous men use violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

**Gender inequality is a key driver of violence against women, but it is not the only one.**

Attitudes towards and understandings and experiences of violence against women are driven and influenced by many intersecting factors including gender, race, sexuality, disability and age. The long-lasting effects of colonisation influence violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children and community attitudes about this violence.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents and approaches to reporting

There were

**442**

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents**

**405** identified as Aboriginal (92%)

**20** identified as Torres Strait Islander (5%)

**17** identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (4%)

**56%** were women

**55%** were employed as their main activity  
*(as opposed to, for example, being a student, retired or volunteering)*

**23%** had a university education

*\*Percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.*

**We do not compare results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents with non-Indigenous respondents.**

Such comparisons risk ignoring the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and overlooking the impacts of colonisation and systemic racism on attitudes and understandings. This decision was made with guidance from the 2021 NCAS Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group of experts.

**When talking about the NCAS results, we refer to the attitudes and understandings held by respondents, not by “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”.**

This is because the group of respondents who participated was small. This small group is unlikely to represent the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences, cultures, traditions and language groups. We therefore cannot assume their attitudes and understandings are the same as those held by all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### FINDING

## Violence against women is a serious national and local problem

**Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents recognised that violence against women was a problem in both Australia and their local area.**

**93%** Almost all “agreed” that violence against women was a problem in Australia.

**67%** More than two thirds recognised that violence against women was a problem in their local area.

Most also believed that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women was taken seriously by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the suburb or town where they live (60%).

**FINDING**

## Trust in services and systems is limited

**Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents did not trust government, police, courts and other services they interact with.**

Fewer than half “agreed” that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is

**44%**

taken seriously by the police

**36%**

taken seriously by the government

More than a quarter did not expect confidential or fair treatment by police, courts and other services (26–53%).



**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents had higher trust in services than in police and courts.**

More than half “agreed” that services would maintain confidentiality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reporting violence and men accused of violence (59–66%).



However, fewer “agreed” that fair treatment would be provided to these women and men by the police and courts (40–55%).



**Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents felt that the fairness and confidentiality that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could expect from systems and services would depend on their gender.**

More “agreed” confidential treatment by services would be provided to

**66%**

women reporting family violence

**59%**

compared to men accused of family violence

More “agreed” that women reporting family violence could expect fair treatment by police and courts (49–55%)



compared to accused men (40–45%).



**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents’ sexual identity was also linked to their levels of trust.**

Respondents who identified as heterosexual were significantly more likely than those who identified as LGBTQ+ to agree that the police would respond appropriately to family violence matters.

44–58% of heterosexual respondents



14–22% of LGBTQ+ respondents



Questions about trust in systems and services were only asked of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents. These can help capture how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience systemic racism through system and service responses.

**FINDING**

## Attitudes towards gender equality are positive

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents consistently disagreed with attitudes that normalise sexism, reinforce rigid gender roles, undermine women's leadership, deny gender inequality, and condone limiting women's autonomy.

**FINDING**

## Attitudes show intolerance of violence against women

Most respondents "strongly disagreed" with:

- attitudes that minimise the seriousness of violence against women or shift blame onto the victim (51–91%)



- attitudes that objectify women and that disregard the need for consent (61–90%)



- most attitudes that mistrust women (54–83%)



However, some attitudes had room to improve. For example, a smaller percentage "strongly disagreed" that:

- women going through custody battles often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence (26%)
- women exaggerate the extent of men's violence against women (38%).

**FINDING**

## Increased awareness of the gendered nature of domestic violence is needed

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents believed that domestic violence is equally committed by men and women (70%) and that men and women are equally likely to suffer physical harm from domestic violence (54%).

These findings should be considered in the context that, while gender inequality is a driver of violence against women, other intersecting factors also influence violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

**FINDING**

## Physical violence is easier to recognise than non-physical violence

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents identified physical harm or threats of physical harm as "always" forms of domestic violence (79–86%).



There was less recognition that non-physical forms of domestic violence such as controlling behaviours are "always" violence (61–75%).



## FINDING

### Harmful attitudes towards domestic violence are rejected

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents “strongly disagreed” with many harmful attitudes towards domestic violence, including that:

- women should keep quiet about domestic violence to protect their families’ reputation (91%)
- it is a woman’s duty to stay in a violent relationship to keep the family together (88%)

Some harmful myths about domestic violence do persist.

**1 in 4** or more respondents “agreed” (strongly or somewhat) with these myths, including that:

- women going through custody battles often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence to improve their case (47%)
- a woman who does not leave her abusive partner is partly responsible for the abuse continuing (29%)

## FINDING

### Harmful attitudes towards sexual violence are rejected

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents “strongly disagreed” with harmful attitudes towards sexual violence, such as that:

- if a woman meets up with a man she met on a mobile dating app, she’s partly responsible if he forces sex on her (90%)
- if a woman doesn’t physically resist – even if protesting verbally – then it isn’t really rape (87%)
- women who are sexually harassed should deal with it themselves rather than report it (89%)
- a man is less responsible for rape if he is drunk or affected by drugs at the time (85%)

However, some respondents still “agreed” (strongly or somewhat) with attitudes that mistrust women or disregard consent including that:

- it is common for sexual assault accusations to be used as a way of getting back at men (47%)
- a lot of times, women who say they were raped had led the man on and then had regrets (28%)

## FINDING

### Technology-facilitated abuse behaviours are recognised, and harmful attitudes are rejected

**Around 2 in 3** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents recognised forms of technology-facilitated abuse as constituting violence (64–70%).

Most also rejected attitudes that condone technology-facilitated abuse.

For example, most “strongly disagreed” that a woman is partly responsible if a man she met on a dating app forces sex on her (90%) and recognise that it is a criminal offence to post or share a sexual picture of an ex-partner on social media without their consent (89%).

However, some concerning attitudes persist.

For instance, while most “strongly disagreed” that a woman is partly responsible if her partner shares a naked picture without her permission (68%), 1 in 5 still “agreed” with this statement (21%).



## FINDING

### Stalking is recognised as a form of violence

**Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents recognised that stalking is violence against women.**

They were more likely to recognise in-person stalking (81%) as “always” a form of violence compared to technology-facilitated stalking (68%).

## FINDING

### No single factor predicts attitudes towards violence against women

The NCAS also looks at what factors may be shaping or informing harmful attitudes towards violence against women. This can help to understand potential barriers and enablers for implementing initiatives such as violence prevention, education or attitude change programs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents' attitudes towards gender inequality were the strongest predictor of their attitudes towards violence against women. Respondents' understanding of violence against women as well as demographic factors such as gender were also identified as predictors, although not as strongly.

However, almost half of the variance in respondents' attitudes towards violence against women could still not be explained by these predictors. This indicates that there are more influential factors to be uncovered to inform our responses to prevent violence against women.

## SOURCE

Coumarelos, C., Weeks, N., Parker, B., & Gorman, E. (2024). *Attitudes matter: The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), Findings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents* (Research report, 09/2024). ANROWS.

## LEARN MORE

To learn more about the NCAS, including findings and implications for all Australians, visit [ncas.au](https://ncas.au)

## REFERENCES

Healing Foundation. (2016). *Restoring our spirits – Reshaping our futures: Creating a trauma aware, healing informed response to the impacts of institutional child sexual abuse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. The Healing Foundation. <https://cdn.healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2020/09/18121828/Restoring-our-spirits-reshaping-our-futures.pdf>

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2024). *Systems-level change is urgently needed* [Fact sheet]. ANROWS.