



**Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention  
& Legal Service Victoria**  
**Standing Firm Against Family Violence**

**The Long Walk Women's Luncheon – keynote address**

**Flemington Racecourse**

**16<sup>th</sup> October 2015**

**Antoinette Braybrook**

I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri and Bunnerong people of the Kulin Nations, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. Thank you Aunty Di and Aunty Nellie for your beautiful welcome to country.

I must also acknowledge Michael Long – you are an inspiration – all of the Long Walkers, and of course Leslie. Thank you for hosting this wonderful event every year to showcase women in our communities, and for giving us a space to raise awareness of the most important issues impacting our lives.

I also acknowledge Leanne Brook, the Long Walk Chairperson; Natalie Hutchins, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs; Xavier Campbell, CEO of the Essendon Football Club; Warren Snowden MP, who has been a long-time advocate for our people in Parliament; James van Smirdijke, PWC; and Andrew Jackomos, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.

I have been the CEO of the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria for 13 years. I was born here in Victoria on Wurundjerri Country. My grandfather and mother's line is through Kuku Yalanji in Far North Queensland.

Our organisation works with the victim/survivors of family violence. We are a frontline, holistic, culturally-safe legal service. We are not gender exclusive but 93% of our clients are Aboriginal women.

It is important for me to say that the women we work with are hurt by men from many different cultures and backgrounds. So when I talk about violence against our women, please understand that this is not about pointing the finger at Aboriginal men or trying to demonise other brothers. In fact I want to take this opportunity to thank and applaud all of the men who stand up and say 'no' to violence against all women.

We strongly believe attitudes towards all women must change. We witness the structural disadvantage that exists for Aboriginal women because of their gender and Aboriginality, and we see how it contributes to the high levels of violence they experience.

Preparing this presentation was not easy because today we are celebrating women's leadership and achievements, and while there are thousands of strong, vibrant and wonderful women leading and achieving so much, we cannot forget the fear, trauma and devastation that family violence is causing in our communities.

I am still personally shocked when I present the data on family violence and I do this a lot. It is not getting any better; it is getting worse. When two women die at the hands of a partner or former partner every week, when Aboriginal women remain the most marginalised and legally disadvantaged group in Australia, something more has to be done. And the time for that something is now – in fact it is long overdue.

Nationally, the data tells us that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised because of family violence, and 11 times more likely to die from violent assault, than their non-Aboriginal sisters.

And when the data tells us that family violence is the primary driver in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities, and that Aboriginal children now account for almost 35% of children in care, there can be no question that this is a national crisis. And this national crisis requires national leadership.

We need to rise above party politics and invest in long-term solutions, invest in our communities and their organisations, and invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

The data tells one story, but the personal stories that our sisters share with us are more powerful and heart wrenching. These are stories of pain, fear, isolation and death. Just about every woman has her own story; we just need to listen.

It is a sad truth that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to be silenced by families, communities and systems. It is a sad truth that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their cultural needs continue to be invisible to policy and lawmakers. It is a sad truth that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women get poor responses from the very system that is meant to protect them. It is a sad truth that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women choose violence over homelessness. It is a sad truth that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women believe that the only way to feel safe for a while is by going to prison. And the fact that Aboriginal women are the fastest growing prison population in the country is another sad truth. These sad truths must be addressed.

Look at the photos of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on the screen. These women are elders. They are mothers, daughters, aunts, and they are sisters. They are connected to many different communities throughout Victoria. They are our leaders, our nurturers. They speak a truth about survival, a truth about resilience, and a truth about courage. They are standing strong, together, to break the cycle of violence. They are standing strong, together, to let other women know that it is okay to speak up, and it is okay to get help.

Our organisation is Aboriginal community controlled and we work at the coalface. Women who come to us do so after living in violent situations for many years. The women trust us and they know that they will not be judged. They know that we will fight hard for them and their kids. And they know that we will use their experiences, without compromising their confidentiality, to call for systemic change.

But like many frontline services working in family violence, our resources do not meet the growing demand. Despite family violence being underreported to police, reports by victims in our communities have tripled in the past few years. In some of the areas where we work, reported

family violence incidents against Aboriginal victims have increased by as much as 360% in just a few years.

We welcome the Prime Minister's Women's Safety Package and \$100 million investment. It was refreshing to hear the Prime Minister's declaration that violence against women is a national disgrace, and to hear him acknowledge the gendered nature of family violence. But it is disappointing that there was no investment in the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services. Instead, all of the dollars for legal assistance went to mainstream centres. As I have said, we work exclusively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of family violence, and this was a missed opportunity.

It is also disappointing that there was no investment for Aboriginal women's safety in urban areas. The government cannot on the one hand call this a national disgrace, a national crisis, and only focus efforts on rural and remote areas. I am certainly not saying that the need is not great in those areas; what I am saying is that the need for safety is great for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, regardless of their geographical location. All Aboriginal women's lives should matter.

In Victoria, women in our communities are eagerly waiting for the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, and are hopeful that a greater investment will be made into frontline services, early intervention prevention programs and organisations that work exclusively with victims of family violence.

I would to take this opportunity to acknowledge the recent commitment by the Victorian government to enable our organisation to conduct two more Sisters' Day Outs and the additional funding which will enable us to employ more frontline legal staff.

This is a national crisis and we need the support of all Australians to address this crisis. Can I ask everyone in the room to please stand. If stand you will be demonstrating your commitment to ending violence against women. When you are standing please pause for a moment of reflection on lives lost and pain unnecessarily endured.

Thank you for joining me in that reflection. Now that we have all taken a stand and made a public commitment, we must turn that commitment into action. Sisters, make sure you take action to support other sisters to break their silence. Brothers, make sure you take action to support all women – your sisters, your mothers and your daughters. Politicians, public servants and decision-makers, I urge you to take action to ensure our sisters are not silenced, or rendered invisible, by bad policies.

Finally, I invite all of you to follow us on social media, Twitter and Facebook, and to join us in our campaign to #savesistersdayout. We have a gofundme page that you can visit.

Thank you to The Long Walk for inviting me to speak here today. It is indeed a greater honour to be a voice for the Aboriginal women that we work for. Aboriginal women do deserve better, and Aboriginal women's lives do matter. It is their courage, strength and resilience, despite overwhelming odds, that is more than inspirational.

Thank you.