TIP SHEET

Taking a primary prevention and strength-based approach to media reporting on violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

The media has a vital role to play in the prevention of gender-based violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, trans and gender diverse people.

> *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who suffer the most from men's violence deserve the same compassion, attention and response as other women. Try to imagine this was your sister, mother or daughter and ask yourself, how would you want it reported? Please learn how you can use your power and platform to shine a light on ending this crisis together.*
>
> *Regan Mitchell, Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy, Our Watch*



A strength-based approach doesn't downplay the seriousness of violence, or function as advocacy journalism.

Instead, it improves impartiality and supports prevention by reducing deficit-focused coverage that can perpetuate harm for audiences or lead to further violence.

There is a direct link between harmful attitudes and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, trans and gender diverse people.
Media reporting that relies on stereotypes and deficit framing can reinforce harmful attitudes that enable violence against communities and individuals.

When media reporting misrepresents violence or fails to report on it at all, it implies that the violence is not newsworthy, and the safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, trans and gender diverse people is not valued. This further reinforces harmful attitudes and beliefs.

OurWatch Preventing violence against women

By taking a primary prevention and strength-based approach to reporting[1], media can:

- reduce harm
- challenge indifference and racist community attitudes
- promote accountability for racist and gendered violence
- promote more nuanced, respectful, and accurate public discourse
- recognise the expertise, resilience and connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their communities, and
- reinforce messages that as a society we do not condone violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, trans and gender diverse people.

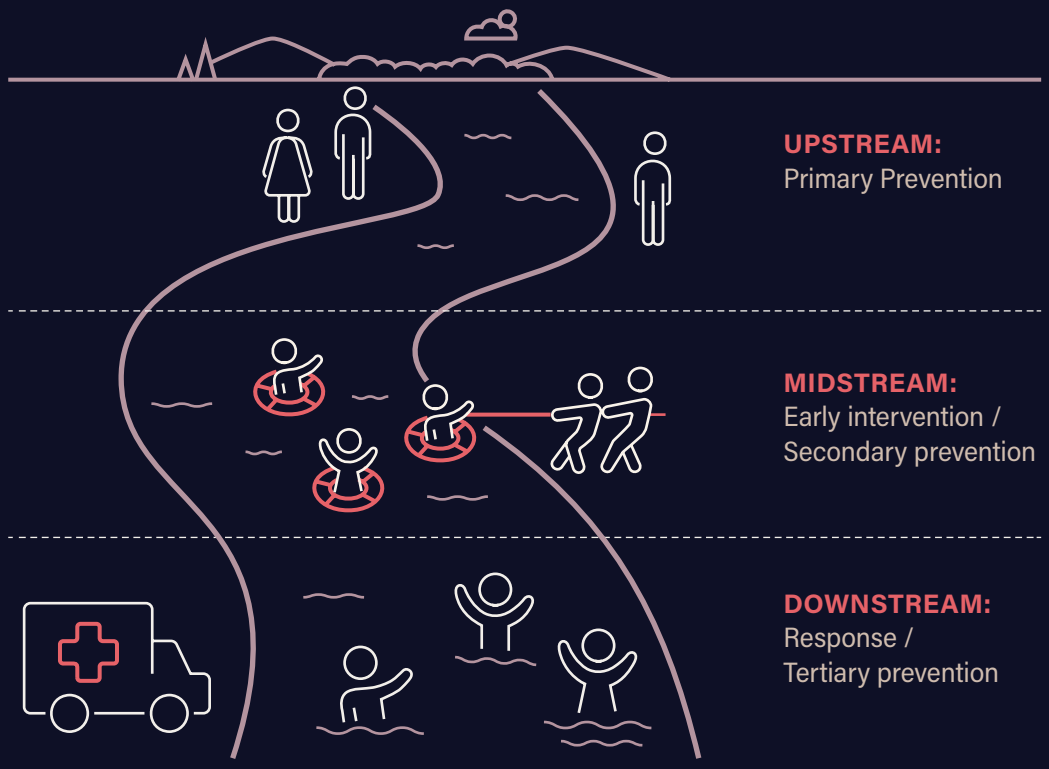
1 This approach is informed by *Deficit Discourse and Strengths-based Approaches; Changing the narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing* by the Lowitja Institute.

What is primary prevention?

Primary prevention works to prevent violence against women before it occurs, rather than responding only when families or individuals are already in crisis.

It seeks to shift not just harmful beliefs and behaviours of individuals, but also the social norms, structures, and practices of communities, organisations, and institutions.

Put simply, primary prevention addresses the underlying causes of the problem – not just its symptoms.





READ MORE:

Changing the picture: a national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children.



Journey of growth (2025) by Gamilaraay artist, Karla McGrady (she/her).

Principles of a primary prevention and strength-based approach to reporting on violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

1. Take time to reflect

Consider how your cultural, familial, political, and social background shapes your interactions with sources and our reporting practice, including your perspectives on impartiality and objectivity in journalism.

Ask yourself:

- Why is my story **newsworthy**?
- Is race or culture **relevant**?
- Would my story still be newsworthy, or **would it be framed differently**, if it was a non-Indigenous story?
- Do I understand the links between harmful **attitudes and violence**?
- What narratives does my story **challenge or reinforce**?
- Am I imposing my **own narratives** onto this story?
- **What voices** should be included or excluded in this story?
- How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous audiences likely to respond to this story? Who **benefits or is harmed** by this story? Is that dependent on how the story is told?
- Have I considered the consequences of my reporting on victim-survivors, including those in my audience? Am I **ensuring the safety** of my sources?
- Have I considered the **impacts of this story** on communities, including on access to funding and services? Have I considered how this community might be understood if the story becomes sensationalised?

Reporting examples in the context of gender-based violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, trans and gender diverse people

NEWSWORTHY

- Reporting that **highlights evidence** of disproportionate impact.
- **Stories that examine** who failed and why.
- **Patterns** rather than isolated incidents.
- **Links to relevant policy**, such as coronial findings or unmet recommendations.
- Reporting that **explores gaps or misrepresentation** in coverage.
- Stories that save lives by **helping people recognise risk earlier.**
- Case studies and human stories that **illustrate systemic issues**, such as those highlighted in coronial inquests.

NOT NEWSWORTHY

- Stereotypes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being inherently violent.
- 'He said / she said' framing in cases of documented abuse.
- Over-emphasis on perpetrator's excuses and/ or focus on victim's behaviour or lifestyle.
- Headlines that suggest inevitability, such as 'tragic' or 'unthinkable'.
- Sensationalist or unnecessary graphic detail.
- Reporting that ignores barries to seeking help.
- Stories that omit systemic factors or broader context.

BETTER REPORTING

`'We're real women and we want to live in peace'.`

Success: This is a quote from a community member. The reporting draws attention to the disproportionate levels of violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in a way that recognises the broader context of colonisation, dispossession and ongoing disadvantage that reinforces this violence.

POOR REPORTING

`'Mum killed was … ice addict who 'starved' and 'beat' her kids'.`

Problem: Rather than focusing on the perpetrator's murder of a woman and her two children, this article focuses on the victim's parenting, alleged drug use and involvement with Child Protection. This inadvertently implies that the woman is responsible for her own murder, and those of her two children.

2. Provide context

Evidence shows that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, trans and gender diverse people occurs in the historical context of colonisation, dispossession and disadvantage.

Present-day impacts include racism, intergenerational trauma, forced child removal and entrenched poverty. It is in the public interest to highlight this context where legally possible.

Identify the broader context

- **Adopt a primary prevention approach** that connects social problems or high rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to the broader context rather than presenting these in isolation.
- **Highlight the structural and historical conditions that enable violence** (such as the introduction of alcohol), and the reinforcing social determinants (such as lack of employment opportunities). Explain how these impacts intersect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of violence.

Challenge structural and systemic inequalities

- **Explore entrenched and systemic racism in social norms, attitudes and practice** – including within the media, criminal and social justice systems.
- Highlight where discriminatory structures cause harm or increase violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, trans and gender diverse people. **Identify if legal reform is needed.**
- **Hold institutions to account** and question whether they are following their operational guidelines.

Use historically accurate and appropriate information, accurate sources, data and statistics

- **Examine if your reporting replicates and amplifies structural inequalities and racial bias** in the criminal and social justice systems by uncritically relying on how violence is framed in case notes, police statements and in court, and in the way victims and their families are treated.
- Evaluate your sources and the power they hold and **consider whose voices might be missing.**
- Investigate if statistics misrepresent the violence and reflect those findings in your coverage. For example, reporting often fails to acknowledge that in urban areas, most perpetrators of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are non-Indigenous. Consider whether you can frame statistics to put the perpetrator or racist structures in view.

Highlight the barriers and gaps in services

- **Explain the challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in seeking help or accessing culturally safe support services.** There is considerable evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women seeking support have a high risk of not being believed; being misidentified as the primary aggressor; being criminalised; or having their children removed.



3. Shift the narrative

When audiences hold deficit views, even neutral language towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be interpreted negatively.

Counter deficit discourse (which represents people as problems) by recognising the cultural pride, community ingenuity, and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This acknowledges that all people have strengths and avoids generalisations or stereotypes.

Embrace complexity

- Appreciate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities hold multiple, sometimes contradictory experiences and views, reflecting their **diverse lived realities.**
- Take a strength-based approach to reporting by recognising that **complexities are essential to accurate, respectful storytelling.** Simplifying differing perspectives into a single narrative may risk misrepresentation and harm.

Recognise community agency and solutions

- **Humanise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women** without resorting to narratives that centre trauma.
- Highlight successful primary prevention initiatives and **solutions already being taken by communities.**
- **Tell stories of sovereignty,** culture, brilliance, and leadership, and everyday excellence.

Consider your framing

- **How you frame your reporting can affect whether a survivor is believed,** and can reinforce attitudes in society around violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.
- Consider if the quotes you have chosen **reinforce stereotypes or deficit narratives.**
- **Don't reinforce stereotypes** about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being inherently violent.
- **Violence is a decision the perpetrator chooses to make.** To promote accountability, use active language with the perpetrator as the focus. For example, say 'man assaults co-worker', rather than 'woman assaulted'.
- **Don't justify, trivialise or downplay the issue,** and do not victim-blame in your reporting and in the quotes you use. For example, do not use framing that diminishes people's humanity – such as referring to them as drug users or somehow responsible for their death, injury and harm caused to them.

4. Centre diverse lived experience and expertise

Ground stories in the lived expertise, agency, perspectives and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- **Seek advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people** about who is a reputable leader or expert who has authority to speak. Take time to develop relationships and build trust in advance of a story breaking.
- **Always use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and experts as your primary sources** and highlight their leadership and authority.
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men who are invested in preventing violence may also be able to contribute vital perspectives.** Ensure they have the support of any survivors you are interviewing.
- **No single voice speaks on behalf of the entire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.** Represent multiple perspectives in your reporting.

5. Establish ethical and culturally responsive reporting practices

Observe cultural protocols

Cultural practices and protocols vary across the country. Seek advice from community members, and work to continually upskill your cultural competency to respect the protocols within the areas where you work or practice. You may need to:

- **Seek advice from community members regarding the cultural mourning practices** of naming or using the image of a deceased person. In some communities, cultural protocols include not returning to the location of the death.
- **Understand and respect grief processes** and cultural roles.
- **Identify and respect gender protocols**, kin roles and eye contact rules.

Create culturally safe newsroom processes

Cultural safety is a measurable absence of racial harm which allows people to feel genuinely safe and respected for their identity. For non-Indigenous people, creating a culturally safe space involves lifelong learning, grounded in deep listening and care for the dignity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- **Consider how to bring cultural safety into the studio or other recording site.** This could include having a shared conversation with editors, Elders and any cultural advisors in your organisation about practices to support safety and reduce or repair media harm.
- **Consider how cultural knowledge is shared with your audience,** and who you need to acknowledge as the knowledge holders.
- **Discuss image and vision release forms with your legal teams to ensure contracts acknowledge Indigenous and Cultural Intellectual Property** (ICIP) and ownership stays with knowledge holders and relevant Traditional Owners.
- Understand the community-wide impact of sudden-death reporting. **Actively work to maintain the inherent dignity and privacy of victims and survivors**, particularly in the immediate aftermath of violence.
- **There may be times when withholding information is necessary to protect cultural integrity.** Discuss your approach with a respected community member.

Take a culturally responsive and ethical approach to interviewing:

- **Give your sources agency in how they contribute to your story.** Consider if you are approaching interviews with deep listening, thinking and understanding – or if you already have a desired narrative you want to report.
- **Ask your sources and community members what would make them feel safe,** such as where they would like to record the interview, if they would like to bring a support person, or if there are any cultural considerations and protocols.
- Do not make assumptions about someone's cultural group, status and/or role. **Ask your source how they would like to be described.**
- **Take the time to listen with a 'go slower' approach**, and frame questions in a way that gives sources space to respond.
- **Recognise that silence, avoidance, and indirect communication may be cultural norms.** Be aware of your source's body language and non-verbal cues throughout the reporting process, in line with cultural protocols.
- **Check you are using appropriate and accurate terminology** for the individual, group or community you are reporting on.
- **Engage a sensitivity reader** or share your reporting or quotes with your source prior to publishing to check it will not do further harm.

Consider safety throughout the reporting process

- **Remember victim-survivors have been through trauma.** Treat interviews and storytelling with care, as media coverage can either support recovery or cause further harm. Prioritise their care, consent, and agency.
- **Explain to your source the risks** of going public on a story, including effects on legal proceedings, potential for identification, retribution, public backlash and online abuse.
- **Explain the implications of being named or not named in public.** Given the close-knit nature of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, it may not be possible to be fully de-identified. Assist them in preparing for media attention and provide advice on protecting social media profiles.
- **Be transparent** about how you will use their story. Keep in communication on changes to content or editorial approaches.
- **Consider visuals** and risk of visual identification.
- **Check if the victim-survivor has legal and emotional supports in place** throughout the process of sharing their story, and if your organisation's EAP and legal advisors can cover them, with culturally safe supports.
- **Confirm they can access support on the day the story comes out and in the following period.** Consider their circumstances for accessing support, such as disability or employment status, living and/or working in a rural or remote location, and share a list of trusted accessible services.
- Together with your editor **develop a plan to monitor the comments section** or to turn them off.



For more on Interviewing survivors visit Our Watch Interviewing survivors:

ourwatch.org.au/media-reporting/resources/interviewing-survivors

6. Provide help-seeking information

Always include details for support services at the end of every story so your audience – both victim-survivors and perpetrators – know where to go for help.

For example:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can contact **13YARN**, a confidential crisis support line for mob on 13 92 76

Men who are concerned about their own behaviour can contact the **Men's Referral Service** on 1300 766 491

If you or someone you know is affected by sexual assault or harassment, family or domestic violence, call **1800RESPECT** on 1800 737 732 or visit www.1800RESPECT.org.au

In an emergency, call 000.

OurWatch Preventing violence against women

Further Information

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to continue to provide advice or assistance in relation to potential opportunities for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls.

PLEASE CONTACT:

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ourwatch.org.au