



The Aboriginal Gender Study

COMMUNITY REPORT

A research report prepared by the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia Ltd.

What is gender?

Gender is more than just being born a man or a woman. The way we think about gender includes the beliefs people have about how women and men should behave and dress (femininity and masculinity), the type of jobs they should have, and their responsibilities in family and community life.

What is gender equity?

In a non-Aboriginal context, gender equity means that women and men have access to the same rights and opportunities in life, and equally share in the benefits that come from these. This does not mean that they have to become the same. Instead, gender equity is about men and women being treated fairly according to their needs. Taking Aboriginal culture and worldviews into account, through this study, a broader view of gender equity emerged.

Why is this research important?

Beliefs about gender are not the same across all cultures. There has been very little research that has directly asked Aboriginal people about the types of roles and responsibilities that they think are important for men and women, or how their gender influences their experiences or opportunities.

This information is important to understand how policies, programs and services developed for Aboriginal people

could be improved to meet the specific needs of women and men. Understanding what Aboriginal people think is fair or unfair will also help to determine whether general policies developed by the government about gender equity are relevant for Aboriginal people.

What did we do?

We spoke with almost 50 Aboriginal women, men and LGBTQ people living in three communities in South Australia. We collected stories about what it means to be a strong Aboriginal woman or man, and the many roles, responsibilities and experiences women, men and LGBTQ people have in family and community life.

We also talked about the situations in everyday life that they felt were fair or unfair for themselves and other people in the community. In this report we describe some of the key findings arising from these discussions, including some direct quotes from our yarns with groups of women, men and LGBTQ people.

Who was involved?

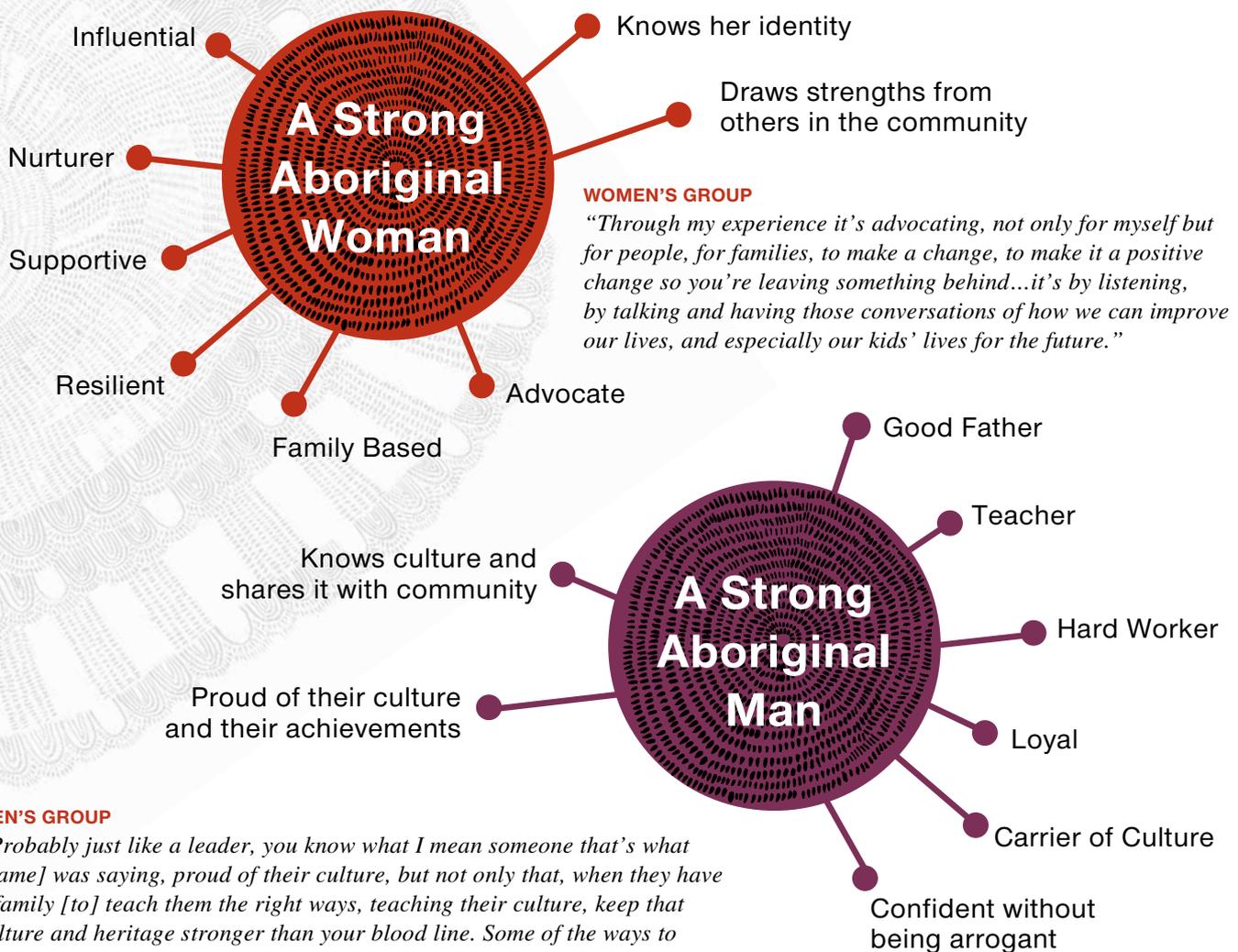
The study was a partnership between the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia Ltd. (AHCSA), The University of Adelaide and the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI).

HOW THIS PROJECT SUPPORTED ABORIGINAL WAYS OF DOING RESEARCH

1. We collected Aboriginal stories as told by Aboriginal people.
2. The information we collected is Aboriginal owned and held by AHCSA.
3. Aboriginal people were involved as leaders of the research, as part of an advisory group that provided cultural advice, and in collecting, understanding and presenting the stories we were told.
4. Two Aboriginal people new to academic research helped to run the study, building their research skills and they helped non-Aboriginal staff to learn about Aboriginal ways of doing things.
5. Culturally relevant methods of collecting information were used, such as yarning, with a clear protocol describing what to do if participants felt distressed.
6. When yarning finished, workshops were held in each location to ensure our understandings were accurate and respectful.

Study Findings

How were strong Aboriginal men and women described?



MEN'S GROUP

"Probably just like a leader, you know what I mean someone that's what [name] was saying, proud of their culture, but not only that, when they have a family [to] teach them the right ways, teaching their culture, keep that culture and heritage stronger than your blood line. Some of the ways to keep that close to their heart, something that they cherish and treasure. Like black fellas our culture, they try to take it away. It's only very little now you see Elders or Elders that are still living that still kind of pass it on."

How is gender learned?

Role models are important for learning about gender and for developing a strong cultural identity.

A good role model is someone who has strong family connections, is a leader and teacher, and plays an active role in the community.

Men often identified other men who were teachers and mentors in the community, and women spoke about the importance of having female role models. Some people in this study said that male role models are less visible in the community.

Parents, peers and the wider community, as well as schools, sports clubs and the church, influence and reinforce views about masculine and feminine roles and behaviour.

MEN'S GROUP

“You’ve got to have that one or two rocks in your life that you can look up to as a younger fella. It programs you early.”

What areas of daily life are influenced by gender?

There are clear cultural roles for women and men around family and community responsibilities and maintaining culture. Some roles are specific to men and women, and these were described as being different but equally important.

WOMEN'S GROUP

“If you get a wombat or a kangaroo, it’s only men that are allowed to cook, but women not and only men allowed to hunt for it. So within that sort of thing there’s specific roles too and women are not allowed to do this, or not allowed to go in that area, or men are not allowed to go in that area. There’s all sort of things too just within culture itself.”

Nurturing is significant for both men and women and is not restricted to biological parents, as Aunties and Uncles are highly regarded in the raising of children.

Having a strong work ethic is important for both men’s and women’s identity, and brings respect from the community.

There are different expectations for Aboriginal women and men about when it is acceptable to express emotions. In general, men are expected to limit their emotions except at certain times, like during Sorry Business. Limiting emotions was identified as potentially harmful to men’s wellbeing and to family relationships.

Women in this study often spoke about being a ‘survivor’, and how they managed the many challenges in their daily life, including making a choice to be strong and supporting other women to do the same. Men in the study did not discuss surviving trauma, and very few spoke about having support networks as women did.

How was fairness described for Aboriginal men and women?

People involved in this study were not always familiar with the term ‘gender equity’. However, they did explain the ways that equity or fairness is apparent or could be strengthened in their communities - through sharing responsibilities to family and the community. This was described as **men and women standing together in the family, community and workplace**.

WOMEN'S GROUP

“I see equality in the young people, as far as when I look at...they have equal ownership in homes... in raising their children.”

Giving back to the community by participating in local events, working in health or other community organisations or being an advocate for Aboriginal people, was named as important for men and women, and was a way of sharing responsibilities.

The way people spoke about equity as equally fulfilling caring responsibilities to family and community is different to the way gender equity is generally discussed in non-Aboriginal society, where the focus is often on individual and unequal power between women and men.

What was described as being unfair?

People in this study had many different views about whether family and home duties are shared equally between women and men. Responsibilities for parenting were sometimes discussed as shared, but some women felt that raising and looking after children still falls unequally onto the mother. Young men said they worked hard to look after their children and support their partners.

The expectation for men to be strong and silent about struggles means that some men lack support and feel disconnected to their community and the people around them. This was spoken about by men and women in this study, who identified that there are limited accessible spaces for men in their communities to discuss personal and family issues.

MEN'S GROUP

“It’s something we’re trying to get going, I reckon. It’s there – just the brothers, they talk to each other. Do you know what I mean? And we all chat and let each other know. But we don’t know what’s going on in the wider community, you know, how they struggle. We can see that they are but there’s not that much...”

Racism was experienced by men and women in this study. Many talked about the negative effects of stereotypes of being Aboriginal AND male or female or LGBTQ. For men, this had an effect on employment opportunities and custody decisions. Women spoke about being labelled as ‘bad’ mothers and hysterical. It was agreed that the media plays a significant part in spreading racist and gendered stereotypes.

Episodes of transphobia and homophobia within and outside of the community were also commonly reported by LGBTQ people in this study. This was described as verbal abuse, physical violence, isolation from community and silencing of their trauma.

LGBTQ WOMEN'S GROUP

"...I recently got bashed by my brother last week after coming out to him while I was in [another country]. Yes, it's something that's crazy. Thank you. I never thought that that would happen. But it did happen. [crying] Sorry. [addressing the group.] It's literally what it is and then it's like the silence thing afterwards like nothing ever happened, he was drunk, whatever. But it comes out in those moments when they're either intoxicated or on drugs or something and you can't tell anybody because of the discourse around Aboriginal people are violent..."

Government policies were also named as preventing men in particular from fulfilling certain cultural roles.

WOMEN'S GROUP

"Back in the day, we had the capacity to have our men, who had vast experience in hunting and gathering. They went and took our young people out bush. They didn't need a police clearance. They didn't need 20 other adults with them because there was 40 students and the ratio that that brings. There wasn't all of that, that prevented that cultural... And that meant that he, the male, had so much to give. That was him in his entirety. That was the Aboriginal man teaching the Aboriginal children what was to be passed on."

What next?

This research was exploratory and has provided important information about how gender influences the experiences of Aboriginal women, men and LGBTQ people in South Australia. We believe this provides an important base for further research to explore:

- Views about men's and women's cultural, family and community roles in other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and how these could be strengthened to support gender equity in culturally relevant ways;
- Why some men might be feeling disconnected to their communities and culture, and the different ways that women and men need support to strengthen their connection to culture; and
- The experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQ people.

In addition to research, this study has identified a need for:

- More ongoing funding for community-led initiatives that support men who feel disconnected to reconnect with their community;
- Aboriginal health and community services to provide training developed by and for Aboriginal LGBTQ people, to raise awareness of their specific needs; and
- Community awareness strategies, developed in partnership with Aboriginal people, to counteract racial and gender stereotypes and promote positive Aboriginal role models, targeted at Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Limitations

This study involved people in three Aboriginal communities in metropolitan and regional South Australia, and did not include those living in remote areas or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Therefore, the findings may not reflect views about gender or gender equity in other communities.

A Note on Language In this report participants are referred to as Aboriginal as no participants identified as Torres Strait Islander. Participants have also been referred to as male, female or LGBTQ. We use the term LGBTQ as participants only identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer. We use this term respectfully and with permission from participants.

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