



COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms CP McMillan MP—Chair
Mr MC Berkman MP
Ms CL Lui MP
Mr TL Mander MP
Mr RCJ Skelton MP

Staff present:

Ms L Pretty—Acting Committee Secretary
Ms C Furlong—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IN QUEENSLAND AND INQUIRY INTO THE CHILD PROTECTION REFORM AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2021

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

THURSDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2021

Thursday Island

THURSDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2021

The committee met at 9.40 am.

KUPPUSAMY, Ms Ganthi, Chief Executive Officer, Pormpur Paanth Aboriginal Corporation (via teleconference)

CHAIR: Good morning, Ganthi. It is Corrine McMillan, chair of the committee. I would love to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet this morning and pay our respects as a committee to elders past, present and emerging. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to be here on your land, so thank you immensely. Where are you talking to us from, Ganthi?

Ms Kuppusamy: Pormpuraaw.

CHAIR: Lovely. Thank you so much for your time today. As you know, in May this year the Queensland parliament asked our committee to do an inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, so we just want you to share your expertise and experience with the committee. We will hand over to you, Ganthi. We will be all ears and then I am sure we will have a few questions for you.

Ms Kuppusamy: We forwarded our submission sometime in August explaining how social isolation and loneliness impacted our community. I have outlined previously that we have counselling services. Pormpur Paanth is a community controlled Aboriginal corporation. We have about 15 programs and integrated services. We have domestic and family violence counselling and education; we also do a bit of early intervention in terms of counselling and education; social and emotional wellbeing; family wellbeing services; child care, long day care and after-school care; the women's shelter, women's group and men's group. We also do youth activities, school holiday programs, playgroup and night patrol services that come under domestic violence prevention and also NDIS services.

I note that these services have increased during COVID season since 2020 and people are more isolated. In a remote community technology is not as good as in cities, so it is so limited to keep in touch with family and friends. Sharing crowded accommodation causes domestic violence issues, and social and emotional wellbeing services are also increased because clients come and get counselling services from our social and emotional wellbeing counsellors. Not only has the requirement increased but also the services we offer have increased since 2020. Going back to health, social and emotional wellbeing can impact our health as well. People are drinking too much so there are drug and alcohol issues, not taking care, so that leads to poor health and causes various social issues in the community including unemployment, feeling of lack of purpose in the community and also social isolation.

CHAIR: It is just layer upon layer of issues that contribute to social isolation and loneliness, isn't it?

Ms Kuppusamy: Yes.

CHAIR: It is not necessarily one particular issue, but it is that layering effect that has a profound impact.

Ms Kuppusamy: Yes, especially when you are in a remote community, because the population is only 700 and it is 10 hours drive from Cairns to the main city. So with this isolation it is not a big help, because previously before COVID people could travel to Cairns for shopping or to meet up with friends and family, and it has all stopped now. It is not happening. That is why drinking and drug and alcohol issues have increased and we end up with more domestic violence and family violence.

CHAIR: I am the member for Mansfield but we have a number of members who represent different electorates in Queensland. As you are probably aware, Cynthia Lui MP, the member for Cook, is on the committee.

Ms Kuppusamy: Yes, she is very supportive. She always supports communities in different ways. She visited us last year. She went to the women's shelter and she met with our women's group and our men's group, children's services. It was really good.

CHAIR: She is with us. We are on her land today on Thursday Island at the moment. I am sure Cynthia will have come comments and at least would love to say hello and may even have a question or two for you.

Ms Kuppusamy: No worries.

Ms LUI: Ganthi, you have raised a number of challenges for communities that contribute to social isolation and loneliness. You spoke about transport and access to services. You also mentioned connectivity and how that can be quite isolating for people in community. The other big one that you and I both know—and I think for the benefit of community—is severe weather events and cyclones. I know that Pormpuraaw is one of those communities that gets locked in.

Ms Kuppusamy: Yes.

Ms LUI: I was hoping that just for the benefit of the committee you could expand a bit on how those sorts of challenges play on the complexity of living in a remote community.

Ms Kuppusamy: Yes, with the cyclone season it is homelessness—we do not have a shelter—and that will cause overcrowding in houses. That will definitely increase domestic violence and social issues, which happened previously. We have very limited housing in the community at the moment. Also, people cannot travel to cities during the cyclone season and they cannot meet up with friends. We only have one shopping place here and there is a lack of transport, as you mentioned previously.

Ms LUI: That often keeps local people locked in for weeks on end. Do you have a time frame or estimation of how long usually that community gets locked in?

Ms Kuppusamy: I would say the previous time was more than a week. The road was also closed at the time and trucks were unable to come and deliver food, so it was a bit of a struggle there. The internet was down, people could not withdraw cash and we had to organise some cash somehow. Everyone helped each other. The aged-care services arrived and we just shared resources at that time.

Mr MANDER: Thank you for calling in and thank you for your submission. It is very informative and gives us a good insight into some of the challenges you have that are probably unique in communities. You have talked about some ideas with regard to how you might be able to improve things. You have said that dedicated counselling services would help. Is there anything that you are doing at the moment that, if you had more funding, would be a worthwhile investment? You have some programs that are proving to be very effective. Can you shed a bit of light on that?

Ms Kuppusamy: I think additional counselling will support the community during the isolation and loneliness period, especially the social and emotional wellbeing counselling and women's group activities. If we got additional funding we could increase women's group activities. For example, probably we can have one-to-one counselling sessions with the ladies or take them for shopping just one on one. It is the same for the youth service: you can have a one-on-one or you can do home visits. Also, with night patrol services people feel safe at night-time, especially when they feel loneliness and isolation. One of our services we currently have is night patrols, which is part of DV prevention. They really appreciate that service. Because of limited funding, we only deliver the night patrol four days per week. To deliver culturally appropriate services we have to make sure we have the right people in the night patrol services. That is a bit costly as well. These are the processes in place to support the community at the moment with isolation and loneliness which are impacting their mental health issues and social issues during this time. When people are overcrowded it can cause domestic violence and people drink more. Because they have nothing much to do, they drink more and they look for drugs. These are all impacting social issues.

Mr MANDER: Do you have any programs or services that are directly targeted at men, particularly in the DV space with regard to education and prevention?

Ms Kuppusamy: Yes. Currently we have men's support services funded by the state government. We deliver programs like stress management and anger management, and sometimes we do take men for on-country activities. Those are more cultural connecting activities. We do a bit of case management counselling as well with the men. We have a psychologist—an Indigenous male who comes every fortnight to deliver services. We also have two men's support service staff from the community. One is from Thaayorre and another is from Mungkan. These are the main clans in Pormpuraaw.

Mr MANDER: Thank you. I appreciate the insight.

CHAIR: Ganthi, thank you sincerely for your time this morning. The committee really appreciates the opportunity to try to dig a little deeper into your submission and understand some of what you have provided for us. I also want you to know that we did really try hard to get to Thursday Island

Pormpuraaw. It was on my first list of places to visit. I know that the committee would love to come one day. One of our responsibilities as a committee is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, so certainly it would be a wonderful opportunity to visit Pormpuraaw sometime. We really hope that we meet you one day.

Ms Kuppusamy: I am looking forward to it. Pormpuraaw is a really good community because we have a lot of good services at the moment. Of course we need additional services, but the people are pretty humble.

CHAIR: I think the experience of the committee has always been that people like yourself and our other First Nations sisters and brothers are incredibly humble people. We have certainly enjoyed the opportunity to get to know you. I am glad the state government is looking after you and your community. I know that we can always do more, but it is really good to hear that we are providing some great services for you out there. Ganthi, thank you so much; we really appreciate your contribution. Thanks for providing some feedback.

Ms Kuppusamy: No worries. Always feel free to contact me if you need additional information.

TREVALLION, Aunty Ivy, Private capacity

CHAIR: Aunty, you are here to talk to us about the child protection bill; is that right?

Ms Trevallion: Yes.

CHAIR: Or social isolation and loneliness?

Ms Trevallion: I think that too.

CHAIR: I might just start with a couple of formalities. Firstly, we acknowledge the land upon which we meet this morning and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge our good friend Cynthia Lui MP, member for Cook, as a First Nations person and somebody who grew up here. It is good to be here and good to have Cynthia on our team. I acknowledge you, Aunty Ivy, as well as a traditional owner. It is a pleasure to be here and an honour to be working with you. Congratulations on the Queensland Greats award you received this year. You should be really proud of yourself. Thank you for the great work you do in the community which earned you that award. Well done. It is really great.

Aunty, as you know, we have two things happening. To save money, we wanted to try and do a little bit around social isolation and loneliness and a little bit around the Child Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill so that we were not going backwards and forwards from Brisbane and costing the government a lot of money. If we talk about the child protection bill first, there are a couple of changes that we are proposing. One change is that children who live in care are afforded the opportunity to have more of a say in the families they live with, the support they get, the school they go to et cetera. Another one is changes to the blue card. We are asking that, for families who have children in care, people who are associated with that child have a blue card or at least apply for a blue card. That is around protecting children. We know that as a result of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse we need to do more to protect our children. Do you have any comments in relation to some of those issues, Aunty?

Ms Trevallion: I do. When it comes to our children, they should not be penalised. They have gone through a lot being removed from their home into an environment, whether they are with families or whether they are with services that are established to provide services. We have a duty of care to these kids irrespective of what they do. Does that make sense?

CHAIR: Absolutely.

Ms Trevallion: My issue of concern is that most organisations get a lot of money for looking after black kids, whether they are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or South Sea Islanders—whoever—plus non-Indigenous children. On top of that, they employ a lot of Indigenous staff as well. In terms of providing services for these kids who are in care, we are talking about families, but when you are looking at group homes that are set up it is considered as a family home for the kids as well because the people are coming in interchangeably to look after the children. If the organisations are going to manage the children, they need to make sure there are proper services in place; for example, two staff go out and pick them up. If there is something wrong with the children, get additional services involved. You are over-utilising the staff. They are underskilled as it is. You are upskilling them on the job, plus they need extra additional services to be able to help the children. This is not only specialist services but also social and emotional wellbeing counselling services for these kids. My question is: how do we make organisations accountable so they not only look after the staff but look after the kids they have to take care of, because that is a big responsibility? That is one issue that I have. The second issue is about this other one here.

CHAIR: Social isolation, yes.

Ms Trevallion: My example relates back to when COVID started and we were isolated. There were no-fly zones around in this district, but my issue, which is very interesting, is that teaching staff were isolated. Some were fresh out of the oven—like, fresh out of uni—and being sent out to remote communities. I do not believe that we did a good job in terms of supporting all of these people. There should have been additional services for people like that plus people on the ground. As it is, people are scared of COVID—Torres people now can travel backwards and forwards—and it really puts the wind up all our people. They tend to hide and stay away, so they self-isolate from fear that they might catch COVID. What sorts of services do we have for them on the ground? This is just generally from my own—

CHAIR: I come from a family of teachers and I am a teacher as well. My beautiful little second cousin—her name is Savannah Brown—was transferred here as a 21-year-old. She spent four or five years on Thursday Island as a teacher, so I understand exactly what you are saying about the young teachers. Her experience was quite isolating and lonely.

Ms Trevallion: There is romanticism around going to a remote community.

CHAIR: There is.

Ms Trevallion: But what people do not realise is that when the sun goes down you are on your own. During the day you have all the people to talk to, but after that you have nobody. There are not only teachers but also single people who come up here. They turn to the pub. Alcoholism goes up. They drink a lot. All that sort of stuff is not happening.

Ms LUI: Aunty Ivy, just going back to the child protection bill, you mentioned the services that provide services to look after kids who are removed. Our children up here in the Torres Strait and all of our communities are quite remote. One of the proposals we are putting forward is to give kids more capacity to make decisions around school, around the family they get to stay with. Then there is that other component of those specialised services that take care of kids. Just from that remote perspective and giving kids more capacity to make decisions, how do you think that will benefit our kids? Do you think it is a good proposal moving forward?

Ms Trevallion: Forty years ago, children had the freedom to run amok and we could live with the time spent on growing pains for all these children at that point in time. Today we do not have that luxury of having that space for the children to be children growing up. Two things: I think it is a good idea that children should have a choice of who they live with, but we have to make sure that the children are safe. Safety comes first and foremost. A lot of the times we sweep everything up underneath the carpet. The kids we look after might get abused unbeknownst to anybody, and then they are expected to live their life or continue on with their education. But because of family reasons, and because of the coercive behaviour of the people they live with and feeling that they do not have the choice to say something, they find themselves in that situation where they have to live there until they finish school. That should not be the case. They should have a choice of where they are going to live. That is one side of the coin.

The other side of the coin is that sometimes the decision has been made for them to live there because their parent is in a different relationship and cannot provide, so how do we then listen to what the children are saying and make sure they are protected—or do we give the children the choice of, 'Okay, you can go back into that space and put up with whatever you are putting up with until you finish school'? I do not think that is right. I do not think the children should carry that burden alone. Where siblings witness the violence that is occurring within the home, but because of age factors in some instances they cannot—they feel helpless because they cannot say what they want to say, so they put up with what is happening around them even though it hurts them so much. At the end of the day, these kids are not going to open up. It takes a long time for social and emotional wellbeing to kick in. Does that make sense? I would like to think that children would have a little bit more say in their lifestyle or have a voice and somebody to listen to.

CHAIR: Aunty, just following on from Cynthia, Julia Gillard prompted the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The inquiry has found that some people take 20, 30 or 40 years to share the fact they had been abused. They take a long time. Do you think that if we give kids the opportunity to say, 'I don't want to go and live with that family; I want to go and live with that family,' they will be more open and honest about any abuse that has been happening? Do you think that if we give them more of a voice they will be more open about the fact that 'I don't want to go and live there because I'm being abused'?

Ms Trevallion: I would like to think so, but then again it depends on individual children, whether they are willing to share that information with you.

CHAIR: Because ultimately that is what we would—

Ms Trevallion: What I would like to see is—if that is the process we are going to follow—that we have somebody to mediate, to say, 'Why is it that you choose to go and live in this house?' Then the child will have an opportunity to express what they want or why they chose this particular family. But do we have this sort of service on the ground at the moment?

Mr SKELTON: That is a good question, because it has come up. I think that links back to community link workers being embedded in community hubs or GP clinics that know where the services are that can talk one-on-one with each individual. Obviously it will have to be culturally appropriate and location based, as has been stated by other groups—someone who is local but trusted and has the knowledge to find all of the relevant services. As you said, it is based on trust. The children have to feel comfortable before they are going to say anything, and they need to feel that this person is listening and this person can actually do something and they know where these things are to help.

Ms Trevallion: Culturally appropriate but also culturally competent is really important—and how much is the program designed in a cultural way? We may need to pull in the cultural aspect for our kids about how we do business. I think most of the services do not have that and kids get lost in the process, don't you think? They get no grounding at all. I am sorry, I have to go. I have five minutes to get to the meeting.

CHAIR: Aunty, thank you so much.

WALSH, Ms Gabrielle, Torres Shire Council

YORKSTONE, Ms Dalessa, Chief Executive Officer, Torres Shire Council

CHAIR: It is lovely to meet you both. You are coming to talk to us about the child protection bill. I will just acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet this morning and pay my respects to eldest past, present and emerging. I acknowledge you both and the contributions you have made to this community. Your leadership is much appreciated. I acknowledge Cynthia Lui as a First Nations woman. The Queensland parliament is the richer for having Cynthia as a member of parliament representing the Torres Strait. I am going to hand over to you to talk a little bit about your concerns, positive or negative issues, and then the members will have some questions.

Ms Yorkstone: Thanks for having us. I have met most of you along the way. I have been living and working in the Torres Strait and Cape York. I am initially from Bamaga. I used to be CEO down at Bamaga but I now find myself at beautiful Thursday Island with the Torres Shire Council. Apologies from our mayor. Mayor Vonda Malone is travelling down south. As you know, we will all be in Mackay next week for our local government conference, so some of us have started travelling. We are also coming to the next one. Will it be the same committee that is doing the next inquiry?

CHAIR: We will try and do the two together rather than go backwards and forwards from Brisbane and cost the government a lot of money. It is a bit unusual, but I think it is a good way to manage it.

Ms Yorkstone: I too on behalf of our community acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respects to eldest past, present and emerging. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today.

I will cover the first one, which is the proposed child safety legislation. On behalf of council, again I would like to advise the committee that council will put forward a formal written response in relation to the proposed bill. I suppose the three things we will cover in our submission will be domestic violence, blue cards and the impact on Torres Strait Islanders with regard to different regional approaches. We will talk just a little bit about that today, but we will have full coverage in our submission.

The second issue we will cover is the intersection of the Meriba Omasker Kaziw Kazipa (Torres Strait Islander Traditional Child Rearing Practice) Act and the proposed child safety legislation, how they will interact and other such matters that stem from these issues. They are the main two issues we will be looking at. I apologise that today council is not in a position to put forward a full formal response, but we will be putting in a formal response to those two. Do we want to talk about them together?

CHAIR: Let's talk about the child protection bill first. Just talk to us about any positives, negatives, concerns, issues or things you want us to take away and consider—things that we haven't got right, things that we have got right.

Ms Yorkstone: Probably the first one is with regard to domestic violence and the blue card—how they interact together and also its impact on Torres Strait Islanders, particularly in relation to employment and gaining employment here, the different regional policies.

Ms Walsh: Apologies that we did not have the time to get the formal document to you. The areas we are concerned about will be more fulsomely explained in the written submission. There are currently discretely different approaches to the matter of domestic violence in the courts. I will give you a classic example of this. Here at the courthouse on Thursday Island a matter may be heard. There may be no admissions. There may be mediation but the matter is adjourned sine die. It will not appear. The attitude by the previous magistrates or the current magistrate or whomever and all parties is such that there is an attempt to resolve the matter, often within the family—there are pluses and minuses about that—whereas the more orthodox approach is that it might be heard in Mackay. The outcome might be that you have a Torres Strait Islander living in Mackay who will have a record and a Torres Strait Islander living on Thursday Island who will not. Both of them may wish to apply at some time for a position in our sports complex at the pool wherein they need to have a blue card. The different approaches around Queensland towards family and domestic violence involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people I think has to be considered. We think it has to be considered, and we want to elaborate on that in our written submission.

CHAIR: Great. That is really good feedback.

Ms Walsh: I think there can be some unintended consequences from this but maybe we cannot anticipate them at the moment. That is one of the issues we wanted to address. The other issue relates to the legislation from last year. We note that currently in the bill it refers to the Adoption Act. We want greater consideration of the youth act of last year because it has an immediate intersection—and a complicated intersection—around the issue of child protection in that context.

One of the things that I heard Aunty Ivy talk about—and she is absolutely right—is the need for much greater transparency to be exercised, and we have constantly as a council said this. Too often the people who are here providing the services are not culturally aware, like me non-Indigenous, have no particular history, mean well, and therefore the level of trust and the level of fear is going to be informed by that simple fact. To adjust for that, there must be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders working in those roles, leading those roles, having agency in those roles, for this to ever work. It is a small-l liberal concept to say that you can do what you like and children can choose where they want to go. The reality is so much more complex than that.

In terms of this region and the people of this region even more so—I am not going to tell you something that you do not already know—the whole process of dispossession and apartheid on this island, of distrust, leads to today. The trauma that you were talking about lives to today. Unless and until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are given agency—proper agency, not just words; actually mean it—I do not think there is going to be any progress. It will be small-l liberal well-meaning whiteys putting something up through the parliament. I do not think that has any utility anymore. We have done that for decades. The times have to change. That will be front and centre of our submission as well. In our submission we will be picking up points we have already made to the Queensland parliament and points that we have made to the Australian parliament in this regard. What we are going to say is not new. What you are going to hear is not new. What needs to be new is the approach. The only way that approach is going to be new is if you give agency to those who matter, which is the people themselves. Does that make sense?

CHAIR: Absolutely.

Ms Yorkstone: Just to expand on that point—and I think Aunty Ivy was talking about it here where she spoke about the kids having that voice or other things like that—you have to understand Indigenous people and you have to understand Torres Strait Islander people. Another fine example of it is that we see it at two spectrums of life. We see it at the beginning—we see the abuse in kids—but we see that in elder abuse too. It happens so commonly, but it is about who speaks up. As Gabrielle said, it is about that agency, but it is about that community and it is about that family looking out and speaking up. For us, you will get victimised; you will pay a consequence for speaking out. You will be disowned by family and community, so it is really understanding and making sure that people can actively have that voice. But where can they go to speak to that in confidence? It is like the kids at that end; it is the same spectrum.

An elder in the family—and it happens, I know, all the time, to my family members as well—will be abused. The kids will take their pension and go. They will leave them at home and do not come back and visit them until it is the day before pension or when pension is finished. It happens. It happens everywhere. Torres Strait Islanders—we are not the only ones it happens to, but when you go and talk to that aunty now and say, 'Is everything okay here?' she will say, 'Yes, everything's all right.' That is what happens with the kids as well. 'Is everything else okay here?' 'Yes, everything's all right.' It is because they have almost accepted that as a way of normal. This is life; this is what happens. 'I get abused' or 'I don't have food for a couple of days' or 'I live rough and then I'm okay again.' It is that cycle. I think it is more than just the agencies and the government. I think it comes down to community, and I think that comes down to family and people.

The coronavirus and the vaccination are just the same. The other fear that is going around here—I know I am getting bit off track—is they are thinking, 'If I persuade my aunty to have it and then they are sick and then they die, I get the blame.' So there is a little bit of that that is starting to go around as well. It is about everyone speaking up.

Ms Walsh: One of the things from that is that there is this awful practice because of what the CEO has just said—that internalisation—and therefore the language that has been used against you is absorbed and accepted as though it is the truth. How is that done? Well, for example, here a matter might be before the court and it is to do with domestic violence. There is a view that reparation is like family counselling: you sit down, you talk to each other and resolve the matter in the interests of the family. That puts an enormous amount of pressure on a woman because she does not want her family to break down. We do not have a situation where, if a person comes out of the Torres Strait and they are king hit, the expectation is that they will be taken to the Thursday Island Hospital and then when Thursday Island

they finish that they come back to the person who has king hit them and have a chat. But that is the construction here and it is totally inappropriate. It just simply means it intensifies the fear of the children and nothing progresses. The assumptions that are built on that are dreadful.

As I said, we do not have to go into detail about that. Intergenerational trauma is not just about individuals; it is about the whole community. It is a social trauma that is palpable and the only way of changing it is empowerment, agency and all the things that have been said for the last 20 years. You cut down half of Tasmania's forests to write reports and not implement them. It is unsurprising. We know the answers; we are just not implementing them.

CHAIR: Gabrielle, you know that Minister Fentiman, the Attorney-General, is in town as we speak. The government has given Justice McMurdo the task of drafting laws around coercive control and domestic and family violence here in Queensland. I really encourage you, when the opportunity arises, to talk with Justice McMurdo. I really encourage you to do that, because there is so much to do in this space not only here but across Queensland.

Just as you were speaking I reflected for a moment and recognised that we have two very strong, empowered women sitting in front of us in both of you. Both the Child Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill and the social isolation and loneliness inquiry have not really explored this issue, but when I have two people like yourselves sitting in front of us I am interested: what is the role of women in leadership and the empowerment of women in communities to challenge some of these experiences? Has there been an opportunity missed in some of the work we have been doing for the last 50 years in this country? Has there been an opportunity missed by not spending enough time, investing in resources to develop our women in communities to take that strong role and challenge some of these behaviours and experiences that families have?

Ms Yorkstone: In Torres Strait Islander culture we all have a role. We have specific roles. The women have a role, the men have a role, the younger ones coming up as they go through their initiation have roles and our elders have roles. As Torres Strait Islanders and Indigenous people, we are dying younger; it is very scary. Instead of inheriting our leadership or eldership roles when we are 60 or 70, we have to do it by the time we are 40 or 45 because we are dying at 50 or 55. Before 60 there are not many of us around.

One of the things we are finding—and it is certainly what I observe in our community—is that there are more females than males. I can see that in the stats already. We are starting to see that in all of our records and we are starting to see that in different practices. For example—and Cynthia will know this—when particular islands have dancing, there are a lot of women dancers now. When you have dance practice you have a lot of women there at that dance practice. When you have deaths you have males there, but you have a lot of women. In our culture, for Torres Strait Islander people the males are passing on earlier, which then really leaves a lot of burden for the females to take on. You observe that, but we are also observing that women are coming through leadership now as well. This is now out of the community context into the workplace. Of course, the Queensland government is a fine example of that at this stage with the number of female politicians we have.

I think there is a lot of opportunity out there but, as we said earlier, we have to be able to bring that back to community and let there be community-led proposals, community-led pathways. It is one thing to develop a program and say, 'This is good for you. I'm the mastermind in South-East Queensland. Here's your funding. Go and do it.' It is about turning the tables around and saying, 'It's your community. You tell us what's missing. You tell us how to design it. You tell us how much funding you need.' For too long we have been told, 'Here's the program. Here's your money. Go spend it,' rather than saying, 'What's your program? What's your gap? What's your funding, and what do you need to be able to spend that?' It comes back down to that investment in developing leadership.

In council we have quite a few females in our organisation, which is good. We have a local program that we mentor the local staff through who put their hands up. We are finding that a lot of our long-term employees are females, so they are staying longer in the organisation. We are seeing that stability. They are the mum of the house, but they have to be able to provide for the family. They have to get the kids to school. Being a female is hard work, I can tell you now. I think if we let that design come from locally it can be done to continue to develop into that field.

Ms Walsh: I do know where you are coming from. I guess what I would say is that I have this colour hair because I am 70. I was involved in the women's movement at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, so I understand the motivation behind your question. I think it is critical to hear what the CEO has said. It is also critical not to ever view culture as a piece of cement. It is an intuitive process. It changes over time. There has been anthropological evidence right back in time of matrilineal societies within the Torres Strait. The very characteristics that the CEO has just described—of men

dying younger, of women being educated—will themselves deliver outcomes. Sayers' dialectic: the more women are involved in that, the more it is accepted; the more it is accepted, then the anticipation is that it will occur. Girl children will do that, and it happens over time. That is what will occur. It will not be supplanted. It will not be because you have been told; it will be because organically this is what occurs, because culture is dynamic and not static. The culture today is different to the culture 20 years ago and different to the culture 120 years ago. To characterise culture as somehow or other monolithic and static is utterly false.

CHAIR: Gabrielle, you are incredibly articulate, thank you.

Ms LUI: I just want to go back to the different roles in Torres Strait culture and how everyone has a role to play—men, women, our youths and the elderly. Can you describe how our kinship structure, family structure and community structure all play a part in keeping that balance you and I know? You talk about leadership and women playing more active roles in communities, but I guess for Torres Strait Islanders we have observed there are more women stepping up and now we are seeing fewer men in the lines that we form when we get up to do our traditional dance. That is quite concerning. Could you just expand a bit more in the cultural context on the different roles and how we build everyone back to that good balance where we are seeing more men in our dance lines and performing well in community? I think that is one aspect that we are losing. Even though women are playing more active roles in the community, we are actually losing the other bit that we need in our male counterparts. I would appreciate your thoughts around that.

Ms Yorkstone: Another important observation is that when you go to a land meeting men are there. When it comes to land matters, the men are there. I am talking about traditional matters and all of those things. We see a lot of male leadership there. It does just seem that with the other stuff we do not see too many men there. That is the way I see it. I do not know how we get back to that. As Gabrielle said, it is true: culture evolves. When I was growing up my mum had a very silent role. My mum would never speak. My mum would be in the kitchen. My mum would be cooking and cleaning and my dad would take part in that. But now that I am the adult and I am in that area, I am finding that with any type of breaking news the women are there. That is what I am saying. I am observing that more now. I do not know whether it is to do with our population and whether it has to do with—

Ms LUI: Is it an empowerment thing, do you think? If you have more men standing up to talk about land issues—and that is probably where masculinity comes in, where there is a lot of this going on—and then women have been the caregivers and been involved in all of this other stuff, do you think it is that level of empowerment? Women are feeling more empowered over here and hopefully more empowered over there but there is not that middle ground? When we are talking about child protection, you have women sitting around talking about child protection in this community. Do you think there is that level of empowerment or there just seems to be something missing? I am not sure.

Ms Yorkstone: Possibly. Like we said, it is probably more organic. It is the way it has evolved. It is certainly different now to what it used to be. I do not know that there is a school context too much and I do not know, for the next generation, where it changes or where it starts to come back into play where we can have that balance again.

Ms LUI: The one thing that keeps coming up in conversations that I have around domestic violence—and you have touched on domestic violence and child protection. I have sat with many women and had very passionate conversations about domestic violence, raising awareness in community and so on and so forth. Going back to that point about the separation that currently exists between men and women—going back to the child protection bill now and the amendments we are proposing to give children more voice—do you think that will have some benefits for young men being raised in community leading into the future? If their situation has been—I am just going to use domestic violence as an example. If it is domestic violence they were removed from, to be placed in out-of-home care and then have that capacity to make decisions around care moving forward or anything to do with their future, if they now can have more voice in that sense, do you think that will benefit them in their future? How will it influence outcomes for them in the future in being able to stand up positively in community, feel empowered and be part of conversations around child protection and domestic violence? I think it is that bit in between we are missing. I am seeing this as a positive thing for our kids, but we are talking down the track where we want them to be able to thrive effectively in community free from domestic violence.

Ms Yorkstone: I think it will be hard to put a blanket on it. I think it is a complex matter and I think people are different. People come from different fabrics of background. People come from different thinking. People come from different value systems, and that is the one thing that will really determine it. What value system was that child reared up in? If they have a good value system that

they grow up in, which we all strive to do for all our community and all of our children, if their voice is heard then you know that their upbringing has come from good values. If they have that opportunity to make a decision, they will make it based on that principle of where they are coming from. I think kids will be different. It will just be based on the value system that they grew up in. That is what I think.

Ms Walsh: One only has to consider what occurred and the writings at the end of the 1960s and 1970s in America with the Black Panthers, Afro-American men, and about their position and the development of single families and missing fathers in all of that to have some understanding. I will just give you an anecdote. It actually broke my heart. One of our staff who works in utilities, which is the water and sewerage area of council, came to me crying and said to me that he was really upset because he wanted his children to be proud of him and that all he did was 'work with shit'—his words; he did not do anything of value. His children just saw him as having a menial job dealing with sewage. I said to him, 'You've got one of the most important jobs in council. You're keeping the whole community healthy.' I talked about public health and all of the things that have occurred because they did not have effective sewerage. I said, 'So you should be seen as a hero in this community because your work is so valuable, and your children should be proud of you because of that.'

Why am I telling that story? Because there is a lack of value, and it is an economic value. At the moment the CEO has issued an instruction to try to equalise the salaries of the outdoor workforce, which is predominantly men, because they were earning, as skilled tradespeople, less than a young girl who has just come straight from school and sitting at reception. That is emasculating. I suppose that is not the right term, but it is diminishing. It is a structural thing. The CEO is right: you just cannot put a cloak over it. There are real structural problems that are both social and economic that must be addressed in order to keep children safe. It is not just society, it is not just welfare—in inverted commas—and it is not just having good health; it is structural. Until those things are addressed in this region the drivers for this will remain. It was as true in 1972 as it is in almost 2022. That is the truth, I think.

Mr MANDER: You are saying the legislative changes are really tinkering around the edges until we deal with these fundamental issues?

Ms Walsh: Yes. AR Ferrare, whom anyone who ever trained as a teacher would have read, talked about what it was like exactly in the same circumstances as here for families, where there are 20 in a room trying to sleep and the father has to get up and work in the field. He will hit the child to shut them up because they have to earn some money. The economic conditions create the circumstances, the fabric around you, so if those economic conditions are not addressed—I have to be honest with you: I have a background as a unionist. I was furious with the unions over this. They would not accept that it was necessary to equalise. They still wanted their patch, the old awards. Meanwhile, it is impoverishing our workforce. So the CEO just said, 'We're going to do it.' That sort of will to change the economic and social architecture is what is needed. Then you have real answers about women leadership and their equalisation and the righting of that so men do not feel diminished and women are not exhausted from having to take on so much of the burden, because that is what the truth is.

CHAIR: Well said.

Mr BERKMAN: Some of the submissions raised concerns about changes in the provisions around the consideration of DV in blue card assessments, particularly the data that showed First Nations women are disproportionately identified as perpetrators of domestic violence and how that can play out in the consideration of blue card applications. Is that an issue on the ground here? Do you think that is likely to be a concern for your communities?

Ms Walsh: Can I say something? That enrages me. The reason it enrages me is that women eventually have to have some agency, and if they retaliate they are seen as the perpetrator. There is so much work to be done. Regardless of whether it is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous, there is so much work on answering your question that we already know the answers to. Jess Hill's work is really good on it. Read it. There are answers already and it is not specific to this culture.

CHAIR: Gabrielle, I just want you to know that the committee understands the retaliatory nature of the statistics. We absolutely understand that the statistics are the result of situations where a female makes a DV application and immediately the next day the male makes a DV application. We know the context and we understand that there are a whole heap of wrongs in all of that. The concern is that, sadly, our First Nations women are disproportionately represented in those statistics. We are not suggesting that they are perpetrators by any means. What we are aware of is disproportionately exacerbating those statistics by then saying, 'You may not get access to a blue card, and therefore Thursday Island

you may not get access to work.’ In defence of the committee, we absolutely appreciate that there is a whole heap of work that needs to be done at the scene of the incident because women are being accused of being retaliatory perpetrators, which—

Ms Walsh: And of course the committee will have access to all of the work that has been done around that, which includes the fact that women are not believed. There may be some minor petty crime, in inverted commas, and they are fearful of even speaking to the police, even though their matters should not even be before the courts; they should be diverted out. There is so much material around this, and you would know.

CHAIR: Yes. Just getting back to the member’s question, the issue, then, is that many women are given an order, and the intent of this law is to protect children. It is a privilege for those who are given the opportunity to work with children. It is a privilege to have access to children, but what we do not want to do is unintentionally restrict women from the workforce.

Ms Yorkstone: It is like we touch on one thing—as we did with Minister Fentiman yesterday and we also had a deputation with Minister Fentiman late last evening—but then we forget the other things because there are dependencies. For us, housing is an issue here. You have so many families living in one house, and it all ends up in these stats. We have these stats, and I will read you the stats we got off the Queensland crime map. It reveals that for the Torres Strait, in our region, there were 362 offences committed between July, August, September and October 2021. In four months there were 362 offences committed. That is regional. For the Torres shire there were 130 of them here; 93 were assaults. Out of the region 59 were unlawful entry, but there were 34 assaults for Torres shire and 20 unlawful entry offences. In that short period of time for our region there were 362 offences, and it is because we do not have access to housing. We do not have good jobs.

Gabrielle just explained. I said to the staff, ‘Just make it happen. Forget the unions. Get the wages right,’ because I am not going to have the outdoor staff getting this amount of money. They can get the dole and stay home for more money. Why are they working for this? It is because of the wage system and it is because we are a local government. But I said, ‘Bugger that! We’re paying above award wages.’ People here are paying \$6 for a loaf of bread. They cannot make ends meet. They cannot get to—sorry—ever have a house.

Ms Walsh: They cannot buy food; therefore, they have to steal. If you are hungry, you steal.

Ms Yorkstone: There are a lot of things that need to happen, and it is just not one issue.

CHAIR: Gabrielle, you gave the example where a large number of families are living in a house and the men are going to work, and of course if the kids are noisy and they are not getting sleep and they have to get up early to go to work, then what happens is they hit the kids to keep them quiet.

Ms Walsh: There is that isolation too for women. One of the things that was really interesting in Doomadgee was that it was found that women did not have their own bank accounts. They did not know how to have their own bank accounts. All of their money was through their male partners. The first thing that has been done at Doomadgee is learning how to open a bank account as part of the community safety strategy. That was sent down to the bureaucrats to Brisbane and they said, ‘Where’s your alcohol management plan?’ What? There is such a disconnect, isn’t there? Imagine that being the response! Here we are talking about the real drivers and the response back from Brisbane is, ‘Where’s your alcohol management plan?’

The CEO is so right and she is so passionate about this. Until we change those things, until it stops being \$362 to buy food when it is \$120 if I catch a ferry, a plane, and get into Cairns, until that stops, and until it stops being \$900 a week to rent an enclosed carport—that is more expensive than the Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and parts of Brisbane. How can someone who earns \$5.60 more than the Queensland minimum wage every fortnight possibly hope? So the only way to do it is to get lots and lots and lots of people to put their money in the family and they are living in a two-bedroom enclosed carport for \$900 a week. It is an utter disgrace. I feel very passionate about this because these are the real drivers that create the situations that break down communities, break down families, create violence, create disturbance, create abuse. We know it; we have known it for decades. If those real drivers are not addressed, no amount of excellent legislation is going to mean a dot of beans. Do you know what I mean? It is not going to materially change it. It is critical. I am not trying to diminish that, but unless those really important economic drivers are actually addressed it is just a waste. Well, it is just frustrating going around in circles.

Ms Yorkstone: We have just fixed up one element but we have not looked at everything because there so many other dependencies that influence that last outcome.

CHAIR: Dalessa, thank you. I know it is hard for you and I am very sorry that we cannot do more, but we are here to listen.

Mr BERKMAN: I wanted to say that I am sorry the question was clumsily worded. I would specifically point to the submission made by Sisters Inside, which was an issue they raised in particular, that the unintended consequences of those changes around DV can be very real.

Ms Walsh: It is correct what you are saying. It is the same as the unintended consequence that having different judicial approaches in different parts of Queensland can have quite deleterious outcomes for Torres Strait Islanders because they do not just all live in the Torres Strait. They live throughout Queensland and they may want to come home. They may want a job and they will not be able to get a blue card. It has to be thought through. This must be thought through, because the architecture around jurisprudence is a racist one. There is an implicit undefined—I cannot think of the right word at the moment. It is unusual for me not to think of words. It is that sort of unconscious racist bias. It is a paternalism. It is 'We'll help you through this.' We must be very careful because there are significant regional differences in terms of jurisprudence in Queensland that will, sure as night follows day, have a consequence here that is not intended by this committee, not intended by the bill and not intended by the parliament of Queensland—I am sure.

Ms LUI: Having sat through all of the social isolation and loneliness and child protection public hearings, just from the conversations here you kind of see that you cannot really separate the two, can you, when you are in a remote setting?

Ms Yorkstone: No.

Ms Walsh: You cannot; this is absolutely right. There is a perversity about this—and this is what we say in our submission—in our shire and our region that, as the CEO has correctly said, there is social congestion, yet it delivers isolation. It is a perversity. It delivers the isolation; do you understand what I am saying? It is exactly the opposite construction that you might think of in a non-Indigenous context, but you are isolated in that way. Regional isolation is also an issue that we raised and so did the coroner. In the Power boys' case the coroner found that contributing factors to that tragedy—where indeed children died—were geographic isolation and appalling telecommunications. That is critical for police trying to deal with a matter on Cape York or here. It is critical to address telecommunications, economic and other drivers if we are going to address child abuse. You cannot help someone if you cannot hear them. They died, and that is what happened.

Ms Yorkstone: It is all of the dependencies. You just cannot look at the issue through one angle with one lens. The Torres Shire Council covered that in our 10-point plan to the state and our 10-point plan to the federal government. It is all of those issues. We need housing. We need to fix up telecommunications. Telstra needs to deliver on the Universal Service Guarantee. We are not Third World; we are Australians. Where are our options? Why do we not have all of the other service providers like down south? When is the conduit from Cairns to Cape York that has the optic fibre ever going to be expanded? There are lots of towers. Everybody has mobile phones. If that bandwidth does not expand, you are wasting time.

CHAIR: Dalessa, since I arrived I have not had any reception at all, so I have experienced that firsthand.

Ms Yorkstone: Can you imagine if there is a lady at home and she needs to ring the police, or if there is a child at home who is being abused and they need to call someone? Where do they go? This is what we mean. We never start from the same level playing field as South-East Queensland or mainland Australia. We are always steps behind. It is should not be like that. We are all taxpayers. We all get burdened with the same tax bills but, boy, try getting some food down the road! It is hard work. Once you have four or five mouths to feed you are in trouble. Five days out from pay, you have nothing left.

Ms Walsh: You are trying to study. Children here are trying to get an education during COVID, and so with it all going online—brilliant, but the download and upload speeds are so appalling. What is required for a minimum for an educational institution is one. What they will get at different times of the day on different days of the week at best is 0.75, normally 0.45. The worst case scenario that you need is one and the desirable is two. What do they get here? They get 0.45 to 0.75. What did that mean? That meant that teachers had to go out with hard copies of the material and deliver it, completely destroying the reason for it in terms of COVID. This is madness. As the CEO said, the Torres Shire Council has raised all of these things ad nauseam, year in and year out. We have quantified it. We have tried to talk about it. Nothing seems to be happening.

Ms Yorkstone: Tragedies happen and people lose their lives, but we still do not get good telecommunications. It has just come out in the coroner's report. I do not know when anyone will stop and listen and really start reaching out to Northern Australia and the Torres Strait and Cape York, because we are suffering.

Mr SKELTON: I have a complaint in with the Ombudsman about Telstra because mine is intermittent. I get less than one megabyte at times because it is unique topography where I live in the hinterland. I imagine that is what the issue is; I do not know. But it is ongoing. It has not been addressed. They are still charging, though.

Ms Walsh: Of course, and it is reverse onus. You have the telcos, without providing any literacy for the communities of the Torres Strait, requiring them to be the technicians and resolve the problems. This is nuts. This is really something out of *Monty Python*.

CHAIR: I am conscious of the time.

Ms Yorkstone: A written submission is coming.

CHAIR: Gabrielle and Dalessa, speaking for myself personally, I have learned so much talking to you both. The issues are—

Mr SKELTON: Deeper than legislation.

CHAIR: Absolutely. Thank you immensely for your time this morning. People like myself and others on the committee have been very aware of the unconscious racial bias that many of us hold. It is absolutely perverse throughout legislators. It is perverse through Queensland and through the country, but having the time to talk with you about these issues highlights the very real risks and issues that you live with day in and day out. The committee very much appreciates your input. We very much look forward to receiving your submission, both on the child protection bill and on the social isolation and loneliness bill, if you would be so kind as to do that. Like having the member for Cook in our parliament, the parliament is all the better for the contributions you make and the submissions you make.

We have to keep working hard to level the playing field, to build equality and equity of access in this country. Otherwise, we do not progress and we do not make life better for our First Nations people, despite the fact that our intention is absolutely to do that. A lot has happened in the Torres Strait in the last few years. There is a refurbished \$50 million hospital. We watched the helicopter come in and land last night. The intention is to make life better here. We will continue to work hard to do that. I know that the member for Cook is absolutely committed to doing that for you and with you. Thanks so much for your time today. The committee looks forward to receiving your submission.

The committee adjourned at 11.20 am.