



Archived at the Flinders Academic Commons:

<http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/dspace/>

'This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

Damien W. Riggs & Kate Toone (2016): Indigenous Sistergirls' Experiences of Family and Community, Australian Social Work, DOI: 10.1080/0312407X.2016.1165267

which has been published in final form at

DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2016.1165267>

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in [Australian Social Work] on [9 May 2016], available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0312407X.2016.1165267>"

Copyright © 2016 Australian Association of Social Workers

Indigenous Sistersgirls' Experiences of Family and Community

Damien W. Riggs*

School of Social and Policy Studies

Flinders University

GPO Box 2100

Adelaide, South Australia, 5001

damien.riggs@flinders.edu.au

PH: +61 8 8201 2786

Kate Toone

School of Social and Policy Studies

Flinders University

GPO Box 2100

Adelaide, South Australia, 5001

*corresponding author

This is an Author Accepted version of a manuscript to be published in *Australian Social Work*. Copyright Taylor and Francis. doi: 10.1080/0312407X.2016.1165267

Abstract

Whilst increasing attention has been paid to the experiences of Indigenous sistergirls over the past decade, there still remains a dearth of empirical research on the experiences of this diverse population of Indigenous people. This paper seeks to add to the small body of existing literature by reporting on a thematic analysis of existing media in which eighteen sistergirls shared their experiences of family and community. The thematic analysis identified two themes within each of these topics. Specifically, when talking about family, both familial acceptance and rejection were salient themes. When talking about community, both the traditional role of sistergirls in their communities and negative responses from communities were salient themes. The paper concludes by suggesting that increased knowledge about the lives of sistergirls may assist social workers in supporting sistergirls both in their own outreach endeavours, and in providing more culturally competent services.

Keywords: community, family, Indigenous, sistergirls, wellbeing

Introduction

The experiences of Indigenous sistergirls are often discussed in western terms (such as referring to sistergirls as Aboriginal transgender women), however such terms fail to acknowledge the cultural contexts that shape the category “sistergirl” (Brown, 2004; Johnson, 2015). In some contexts (including in their own accounts), sistergirls may be discussed with regard to the broader population of gender diverse people (referring here to people whose gender differs from that normatively expected of their assigned sex, including people who may or may not physically transition, and people who may experience their gender as not limited by a western binary framework). When this occurs, it is important to acknowledge the sovereign relationship to country that sistergirls hold, and how the ontological implications of this relationship differentiate them from other groups who may be located under the umbrella of “trans and gender diverse”.

Further in terms of cultural context, sistergirls themselves clearly state that they have been a part of First Nations communities since before colonisation, and hence are neither a recent nor western phenomenon. The organization *Sisters and Brothers NT*, for example, has stated that:

There is documented evidence and oral history of Sistergirl identity in some communities pre-dating colonisation. A number of historic and contemporary words exist to describe Sistergirls including ‘Kwarte Kwarte’ in Arrente, ‘Kungka Kungka’ in Pitjantjatjara and Luritja, ‘Yimpininni’ in Tiwi, ‘Karnta Pia’ in Warlpiri which can be interpreted as like a girl’. Whilst ‘Kungka Wati’ in Pintipi and ‘Girriji Kati’ in Waramungu literally mean ‘woman/man’ (2015, np).

Yet despite the long-standing role of sistergirls in many Indigenous communities, prior to the 1990s and the introduction of the Anwernekenhe conferences (see Kerry, 2014, for a summary) little was documented about sistergirls outside of Indigenous communities. This, however, has changed in recent years, with the stories of sistergirls shared in photographic exhibitions and documentaries, a first *National Sistergirl Forum* held in 1999 (Costello & Nannup, 1999), and in 2014 the *First Australian National Trans Mental Health Study* (Hyde et al., 2014) included a sub-sample of sistergirls. Yet despite this increased recognition, sistergirls continue to report experiences of marginalization.

As with any marginalized community, a lack of knowledge amongst those whose role it is to support them can hinder both best practice approaches, and best outcomes. As such, this paper seeks to contribute to knowledge amongst social workers with regard to the experiences and needs of sistergirls, through the presentation of a thematic analysis of existing media data featuring the narratives of eighteen sistergirls. Through this knowledge, social workers may be better placed to support sistergirls both in their own outreach endeavours, and to provide more culturally competent services.

Existing Literature

As noted above, attention to the experiences of sistergirls has increased over the past decade, however much of this has appeared via media outlets or in grey literature. It is nonetheless important to summarise what is known from these sources. Kerry (2014) provides an overview of a selection of this literature (i.e., primarily the Anwernekenhe conference reports), so rather than repeating it here, in this section we focus on other materials that document the experiences of sistergirls.

In regards to the impact of colonisation on sistergirls, Kooncha Brown (2004) has spoken about first the impact of the church as a “force in fostering discrimination”, and subsequently medical professionals who have contributed to the pathologisation of sistergirls. Brown contrasts such discrimination from non-indigenous institutions with the acceptance that some sistergirls experience from their own communities:

Within the community I come from, my family does not see me as transgendered or sistergirl. I am Kooncha. I’m seen as a woman, a daughter, a sister, an aunty, and a mother - a valuable part of the family, a carer and a supporter... However in western culture, I am seen as “black” and “transgender”, both of which generally come with negative connotations (p. 25).

Further evidence of the role of sistergirls in Indigenous communities is provided by Jackie Tipungwuti (cited in Toohey, 2014), who suggests that sistergirls traditionally did not participate in hunting with men, instead favouring female roles. As Tipungwuti has noted in regards to her experiences as a sistergirl:

I'll sit with my grandmother and make a cup of tea... She loves the way I make tea.
Sistergirls do girly things. We go with the ladies. We go and get mussels, crabs. The boys go out and get turtles. We don't do men's stuff (p. 4)

Commentary on the gendered role of sistergirls is also provided by the Indigenous writer Woorama (2006), who depicts sistergirls as caring for their younger peers; “when they get to the age of six, parents give them to older sistergirls to look after because they're in that special category” (np). The Sisters and Brothers NT website has also highlighted the maternal role that

many sistergirls adopt within their communities, stating that sistergirls “often take on female roles... including looking after children and family. Many Sistergirls live a traditional lifestyle and have strong cultural backgrounds” (np).

Despite these largely positive accounts, some sistergirls have reported considerable experiences of violence. Crystal Johnson (2015), for example, has spoken about the abuse that she, her brother, and her mother were all subjected to by other family members, on the basis of Crystal being a sistergirl. Such experiences demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the diversity across Indigenous communities, and thus the diverse responses that sistergirls may receive from their families and communities. The analysis presented below makes a further contribution to our understanding of the diverse experiences of sistergirls by analyzing what a sample of sistergirls have said publically about their families and communities.

Method

Procedure and Data

Given the sensitivity of the topic, it was considered appropriate to examine existing sources in which sistergirls have spoken about their families and communities. In order to identify potential data sources, a Google search was undertaken utilizing the key terms “Aboriginal sistergirl” and/or “Indigenous sistergirl” and “media”. An additional YouTube search utilizing the same key terms was also undertaken, along with a search of the authors’ university library, again using the same key terms. Other potential media sources were identified via the Sister and Brothers NT Facebook page.

Through these search methods, ten data sources were identified. These included radio interviews, video interviews, and documentaries. The ten sources are summarized in Table 1. These sources were all produced within the last twenty years, and were considered appropriate for analysis given they feature the narratives of eighteen sistergirls themselves. It was important for us, as non-indigenous people, to centre the voices of sistergirls, rather than claiming to speak for sistergirls and their diverse worldviews. It is of course acknowledged that media representations are constructed for various purposes such as service provider education, peer support, and documentaries for viewing by the public, and that this will have an impact on the content. It is argued here, however, that given many of the data sources were Indigenous led or produced, the sistergirls whose narratives are documented had a certain degree of control over their representation.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Analytic Approach

A deductive thematic analysis of the data was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2006), focused on the topics of family and community given their salience in the previous literature. All instances of these topics were transcribed, and then read repeatedly by the authors in order to identify salient themes within each topic. Two themes were identified within each of the topics. The themes of “experiences of acceptance” and “experiences of rejection” were identified within the topic of family, and “the role of sistergirls in Indigenous communities” and “impact of negative community responses upon sistergirls” were identified as themes within the topic of community.

The following analysis presents selected extracts from each theme (which are not exhaustive of all of the extracts collated, which totaled 29 extracts for the topic of family, and 32 for the topic of community), and provides analytic commentary on key aspects of each extract. The data sources in Table 1 are numbered, and the source for each quote is indicated in square brackets.

Results

Family

The topic of family included extracts where sistergirls either used the word “family”, or spoke about kinship categories (e.g., mum, dad, sister, aunty). Family was spoken about in ways that emphasised the integral role of family in wellbeing outcomes. As the extracts below indicate, the different outcomes of either acceptance or rejection, particularly from immediate family members, had a real impact on support available to sistergirls.

Experiences of Acceptance

As this first theme would suggest, many of the sistergirls spoke about experiencing acceptance from family members. This experience was often depicted as a surprise. Many sistergirls spoke about keeping their identities a secret from family for fear of rejection, and thus experienced relief and joy when the disclosure of their sistergirl identity was met with acceptance, as can be seen in the first extract below:

Rosalina: I sort of hid it away from my family. ‘Til I was I think about the age of maybe 16 or 17. One day my mum, my mother just asked it, had to ask me, “Russell

are you a sistergirl?”. And I said “yes mum I am”. And my mum just gave me a big hug and she said “I don’t care what you are. You’re my child”. And every since then, I have trials and tribulations along the way from other family, some family accepted it, some family didn’t. But at the end of the day, it, I didn’t worry what others had to think and say about me as long as my parents, and my immediate family, they loved and supported me [1].

The accepting reaction of Rosalina’s mother appears to have been important in the context of mixed reactions from her broader family. Recent research by Bauer and colleagues (2015) suggests that parental acceptance can play an important role in mitigating suicidal ideation amongst transgender people. Whilst the research of Bauer and colleagues did not focus on the experiences of sistergirls, it is reasonable to suggest, given the extracts included in this theme, that acceptance from close family members may constitute a significant protective factor for sistergirls. The following extract reiterates the point that acceptance from close family members may be highly valued by sistergirls, and may help carry them through difficult life experiences:

Lillian: The first phone call I got [after gender affirming surgery] was from my mum: “hello, congratulations, how did everything go?”. I just cried on the phone and my mum just cried too. She wished me well and that. And I said, “ok” and she said, “I love you bub, whatever you do, I love you”. And I said, “well that’s all I really wanted to know. And I’ll hold you to that mum”. And that carries me through my life, and all my obstacles that I’ve gone through, you know, she’s helped me out [8].

Here again, the love that Lillian experiences from her mother sustains her through “obstacles” in life, and also affirms the decisions that Lillian made about her life (i.e., to have gender affirming

surgery). This point about acceptance being paired with affirmation is mirrored in the following two quotes:

Bimbo: My mother, she rang me on the phone, and she didn't know I was doing my photoshoot today, and I said "oh mum I'm getting my hair done, my nails done, I'm a bit busy" and she was like "ah ok", and she was like saying "I'm so proud of you, what you are" [2].

Kooncha: My family accepts me, you know, as Kooncha, when they look at me, my mother and father sees me as their daughter, my brother and sister see me as their sister, I think my family has given me a place within my family and also created that place within my community [8].

The quote from Bimbo suggests that her mother was not only accepting of her, but also proud of her. Similarly, the quote from Kooncha suggests that key to acceptance for some sisters is the affirmation of a female identity, including the correct use of pronouns and kinship categories (i.e., daughter, sister). This point about affirming a female identity is reiterated in the following extract:

Simone: My family supports me, like my sisters especially just by telling me... that I look nice, that you know my dress looks nice you know, my sister helps me with makeup and you know doing my eyebrows and those little things are the important things for me you know just that's the way they support me, you know? [1]

As transgender feminists such as Julia Serano (2007) have noted, women such as Simone are often critiqued for what is seen as their wholesale acceptance of norms of femininity. Yet as Serano argues, it is possible to be both critical of gender norms whilst also affirming transgender women's experiences of their gender. In the case of Simone, the affirmations that she receives from her sisters demonstrate to her that she is supported and accepted as a sistergirl and thus as a woman, with Simone echoing Lillian's sentiment that the feeling of being loved is both sustaining and important.

As this theme has shown, acceptance from close family members, and particularly a mother, can be a key form of support for sistergirls. Whilst some of the sistergirls indicated that they had previously felt compelled to hide their identity due to fears of possible rejection, the loving and validating response that they received instead made it possible to deal with other challenges that may potentially come in time. Many sistergirls also spoke of the importance of affirmations of their femininity, with this depicted as bringing joy, contentment and happiness, and as Kooncha noted, a sense of place.

Experiences of Rejection

Unfortunately, despite the positive narratives of acceptance documented in the previous theme, rejection by family was a sad reality for many of the sistergirls. Specifically, disclosing their gender identity left them vulnerable to violence or the threat of violence, particularly from fathers. These experiences created lasting emotional effects, evident in the degree of recollection that some of the sistergirls provided in regards to their experiences of violence, as can be seen in the first extract below:

Kooncha: I know of sistergirls who have been disowned from their family and they really don't have anywhere else to go, so therefore she might end up on the streets, cracking it, in other words, sex work or sex for favours. She needs a roof over her head, so therefore she might sleep with someone just to you know find a roof for the night. That kind of existence, someone is going to be so depressed that they're gonna turn to alcohol and drugs. And a lot of the sistergirls unfortunately end up like that because they don't have that support from their family or their community [8].

Here Kooncha suggests a clear relationship between lack of support from family and poor health and wellbeing outcomes. Literature documenting the experiences of sistergirls clearly shows a connection between homelessness due to family rejection, and sex work (Kerry, 2014). Similar high rates of sex work have been reported in Maori gender diverse communities in New Zealand, with links identified between the relative poverty of families of origin and sex work (Worth, 2000), and amongst white transgender women (Hoffman, 2014). Although sex work itself is not inherently a negative outcome for all women, for sistergirls who feel they have no other choice due to family rejection, sex work as a mode of survival may be linked to the disproportionate number of sistergirls who report being the victim of sexual assault and rape. Such experiences may also be linked to the anecdotal suggestion that rates of HIV infection are higher amongst sistergirls, in addition to the connections between poor mental health, drug and alcohol use, and family rejection (Costello & Nannup, 1999; Kerry, 2014).

In addition to the potential negative health sequelae of family rejection highlighted in the previous extract, family rejection may also be preceded by high levels of violence within the family, as the following extract illustrates:

Laura: When we was little kids, we used to go down to the beach and play girly things, wearing dresses, skirts, and everything, doll, doll, dollies, we used to fight for the dolls too, that's what I used to like when I was little kid. But not in front of my mum and dad. 'Cos they, when they used to see me dressed up, with the skirts and tops, they used to come and hit me, whack me with a stick, with a hose and all kind of things they used to hit me with. I tried to talk to my father to accept me to be who I am and he didn't understand me, my dad said to me "I'm gonna take you out to the bush and shoot you there with a gun and leave you there lying down dead" [2].

Notably in the case of Laura (and as was true for other sistergirls whose narratives feature in the media analysed), in later years experiences of family violence were replaced by experiences of family acceptance, often mediated through support from older sistergirls in the community. Nonetheless, the legacies of experiences of violence remain for many sistergirls.

For some sistergirls, rejection was experienced not only from close family members, but also from extended family members and friends, as the following extract highlights:

Dannii: When I came out the closet that was so hard, 'cos I lost my all of my, brother boys, guy mates find out who my true friends were, I lost half my friends. My mum understood but my dad didn't. I'm like the black duckling, like, I'm like the odd one out [6].

This brief extract from Dannii highlights two factors that are salient across the literature. First, is the significant losses that can accompany disclosing a non-gender normative identity (e.g., Galupo et al., 2014). For Dannii, these losses meant a significant reduction in her sources of

support. The second factor relates to the apparent gender differentiation in responses to sistergirls already highlighted in both this theme and the previous, namely that male family members and friends appear to be generally less accepting than female family members and friends. This mirrors previous research suggesting that mothers are often more accepting of a child's gender diversity than are fathers (Riggs & Due, 2015).

This theme of rejection by family suggests that whilst some sistergirls experience acceptance and love from their families and communities, others experience rejection, threats of violence, and hatred from their families and friends as a direct result of being sistergirls. This rejection can have lasting impacts on the wellbeing of sistergirls, and can lead to homelessness, which then places sistergirls at risk of non-voluntary sex work, sexual abuse, poor sexual and mental health, and issues with substance abuse.

Community

This second topic includes extracts where Indigenous communities were spoken about by sistergirls. Sistergirls often spoke about their role in communities (either being accepted as women or not), and the negative outcomes of rejection from community.

The Role of Sistergirls in Indigenous Communities

In this theme, sistergirls spoke about their role within Indigenous communities, both traditionally and in current times, and the effect this has in terms of affirming their identity. In the following extract, Crystal spoke specifically about the long-standing role of sistergirls on the Tiwi Islands:

Crystal: The sistergirls in our culture, we respect each other like sisters, and like aunty. And sistergirls don't have sex with each other; we have sex with straight men. It existed in our culture, we didn't have words or a name for it, everybody had a place in our community. Everybody had a place, on this beautiful island, to be who they are, to express themselves [2].

In this extract, Crystal spoke about the historical place of sistergirls in the culture of the Tiwi Islands. The islands have the largest population of sistergirls per capita of anywhere in Australia (Tsvirko, 2015), however the experiences of sistergirls there still vary widely from acceptance and celebration to rejection and exclusion. Furthermore, whilst Crystal suggests a relatively prescriptive account of sistergirls and sex, it is possible that sistergirls engage in a range of forms of intimacies beyond those engaged in with what Crystal refers to as "straight men".

In addition to affirming the historical existence of sistergirls in Indigenous communities, sistergirls also spoke about the gendered expectations placed upon them, both historically and in the present, as the following extracts illustrate:

Francene: When I was in my, say from a young person, a young lad, ten, eleven, twelve, going up into my teens, I was, the role was it seemed to be, you know the community knew who you was, mothers will ask you to be their babysitters and care for the children, caring because they knew you cared for them. You was like a mother you played that mum, you gave them comfort, you'd feed them and do all of those things that a mother would do you know and sistergirls do this today [8].

Lillian: On Aboriginal communities, if you're a sistergirl, you're expected to play the role of a woman, that means you get up, you make tea for everybody, you cook supper you wash clothes, you hang 'em out, you bring the clothes in, you cut lunches for the kids that are in the house, you do the housework, you do every single thing. All feminine clothes, ah, what I mean by that is there's long, very big long t-shirts, big long shorts, hair done up [8].

In the first extract, Francene reports on the strong maternal figure that some sistergirls have played within their families and communities. A common feature of this role is child caring and indeed child rearing through kinship care (also experienced by Crystal and Kooncha, who both reported that they have raised children). Interestingly, sistergirls often spoke about being easily accepted into these traditionally feminine roles, whilst transgender women from western cultures have often spoken about their role as parents or caregivers being more difficult to negotiate (Von Doussa, Power & Riggs, 2015).

In addition to the expectation that sistergirls will undertake traditionally feminine roles, Lillian suggested that it is expected that sistergirls will adopt a traditionally feminine appearance. As noted in the first theme, for many sistergirls this type of expectation may not be viewed as marginalizing, but rather as affirming of their gender. This may be especially true for sistergirls living remotely in traditional communities, who may have limited or no access to gender affirming surgeries and therapies such as hormones, and for whom undertaking traditionally feminine roles may be important.

The identity of sistergirls, it would appear, is significantly different to that of white transgender women, in that it is inherently linked to issues of cultural identity, sovereignty, and positions

within established community hierarchies. There is evidence to suggest that traditionally as well as today, sistergirls play an important (albeit rigidly defined feminine) role in family and community structures, which includes active positions in child raising.

Impact of Negative Community Responses Upon Sistergirls

The extracts in this final theme suggest that threats of violence, actual violence, and rejection are very real aspects of the lives of sistergirls, whether they live remotely in the Tiwi Islands or on the mainland in traditional communities, or in bigger coastal cities. For Indigenous people, a sense of place within community is an important aspect of identity and wellbeing (Browne-Yung et al., 2013), and thus discrimination from within communities can have devastating consequences. In the following extract Crystal clearly outlines her experiences of discrimination, and the consequences of this:

Crystal: You can find violence like bashing, teasing, sometimes they give you the silent treatment, you know sometimes. There is a lot of issues that need to be dealt with in our community... I was discriminated against in my workplace, like, I worked in an Aboriginal community but people were still calling me Cyril not Crystal: adjusting to a female life is really hard. And Aboriginal community it's like, they don't, they still see you as a male, not a female. And also, I've been spat at and people say, people are saying faggot and poofter and why you let a poofter work in the office and things like that [8].

In this extract Crystal details her experience of living within her community on the Tiwi Islands. In the documentary *Eye*, a group of sistergirls decided to hold grieving ceremonies for two sistergirls who had taken their own lives. Whilst the community had not previously held these

important rituals for sistergirls, when a group of sistergirls took the lead in doing so, the community rallied in support.

The following extract highlights some of the gendered consequences of sistergirls being accepted as female within their communities:

Kooncha: When you're on communities sistergirls are always are sort of like open game if you like, or fair play 'cos they're seen as feminine. We are probably more vulnerable than women because we are seen as different. And if you look at the class system in Australia, we are actually down there with murderers and thieves and child molesters [8].

Kooncha's statement in this extract in regards to sistergirls being more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence than cisgender women is statistically evident in both Indigenous and non-indigenous populations (Hyde et al., 2014). Sistergirls, however, occupy the unique position of being targets of misogyny, transphobia *and* racism shaped by ongoing histories of colonisation. The literature and other interviews reviewed also emphasised this notion of sistergirls being "open game", with some sistergirls indicating that they almost expect to be victims of violence and rape as a direct result of other's perceptions of their gender expression (Costello & Nannup, 1999).

In the following and final extract Simone again highlighted how daily experiences of discrimination may impact upon the mental health of sistergirls:

Simone: just trying to be myself everyday and going out in public is really daunting. I get days when I just don't want to go out. I'll drive to the supermarket and then I'll decide not to go in because of all this paranoia, because of experiences that I went through you know like and listening to, hearing stories from other people going through that sort of thing, discrimination and that you know. Getting teased or getting, you know hurt, because of who they are [1].

As Simone stated, she has experienced isolation from her community, due to the fact that at times appearing in public has felt simply too difficult. Research on the experiences of transgender people more broadly has repeatedly reported that rates of mental illness and wellbeing difficulties directly correlate with experiences of transphobia (Rotondi et al., 2009). Experiences of public harassment and violence can lead to anxiety which can then lead to an individual suffering from social isolation as it becomes safer for them to stay home rather than be out in public, exposed to possible harassment.

Key features of this theme are the negative outcomes for sistergirls who have experienced rejection and hate from their communities. Most of this negativity has been in relation to their identities as women not being affirmed, leading to physical and verbal abuse. The impact of such discrimination can lead to social isolation and mental health issues, leading to the high rates of poor mental health seen within sistergirl communities.

Discussion

The findings presented above highlight the impact of family and community upon the lives of sistergirls. For the sistergirls who were accepted in their community and family, the implications were both positive and negative. Positive outcomes included being accepted and supported in

roles as mothers and caregivers. However, many of the sistergirls spoke about the burdens of femininity they subsequently experienced. Explicitly gendered violence was discussed, mirroring findings from Kerry (2014) and Hyde and colleagues (2014). Despite these negative outcomes, the sistergirls whose narratives were analysed talked about joy that resulted from being able to express their gender identity and have that affirmed, and how this had a positive effect on their mental health. This aligns with the findings of Hyde and colleagues, who found that a key theme in improving mental health outcomes was the experience of acceptance.

Despite the importance of the findings presented in this paper in terms of contributing to the empirical literature on the experiences of sistergirls, it is important to acknowledge that the data we drew upon featured sistergirls who have access to media opportunities, and were typically actively engaged in their communities and had strong relationships with service providers. Most of the sistergirls had experiences of moving to larger cities and for some medically transitioning, and this may not be representative of the experience of all sistergirls, particularly those living remotely. Furthermore, with the exception of Danni, the interviewees were older sistergirls reflecting on their past experience. It would be valuable for future research to include a broader range of participants, particularly those living in remote areas who do not have connections to services, and those who are younger.

These limitations aside, the findings indicate a number of implications for social work. First, there is a desperate need for sistergirls-specific education in the curriculum of social work practitioners. Sisters and Brothers NT is currently the only service in Australia specifically providing services to sistergirls. They stress the need for a collaborative approach to improving the wellbeing of sistergirls, and are able to provide training and advice for practitioners. This is especially pertinent with regard to addressing violence directed towards sistergirls within

Indigenous communities, where sistergirls have been strong advocates for anti-violence programmes that are Indigenous-led, but which work in collaboration with existing services (e.g., Ngala Curtis, 2015; Johnson, 2015). Understanding the specific forms that violence towards sistergirls may take, and working with sistergirls to combat this, is thus an important task for social workers into the future.

The type of community driven health care advocated for by Sisters and Brothers NT corresponds with the views of the *Australian Association of Social Workers* in regards to service delivery; evident in their code of conduct which states “Where possible, social workers will seek guidance regarding service development and delivery from community members, mentors, advisors and recognised Elders from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities” (AASW, 2010, p. 18). The code emphasises the need for workers to engage with cultural consultants, and to recognise diversity within groups. Engaging with a service such as Sisters and Brothers NT, and promoting links with other services that are connected to sistergirl communities, could significantly improve sistergirl wellbeing by fostering access to mainstream services that are capable of engaging in culturally competent social work practice with sistergirls.

In conclusion, this paper has shown that whilst some sistergirls are accepted and celebrated by their communities, many experience rejection and discrimination. Violence – within intimate relationships, families, and also in public spaces – is commonplace, and sistergirls are often misunderstood, harassed, and abused. This can lead to withdrawal, isolation, and poor mental health. Contrasting this, experiences of love and recognition are likely to have a significant positive impact on the health and wellbeing of sistergirls. It is disappointing to note that services and research aimed at sistergirls and other gender diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people (such as brotherboys) is still so limited twenty years on from the first Anwerenkhe conference. HIV transmission, drug use, transactional sex, and isolation are pressing issues for sistergirls and must be addressed through engagement, consultation, and increased funding. The sistergirl community is tightknit and has an availability of strong leaders who should be formally supported in their roles of advocacy, education, and service delivery by the wider community. As noted above, social workers have an important role to play in this regard, both as advocates and in terms of culturally competent service provision.

Acknowledgments

We begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land we live and work. Support for work conducted on this paper was provided by an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship, FT130100087.

References

Australian Association of Social Workers. (2010). *Code of Ethics*. Canberra: AASW.

Bauer, G.R., Scheim, A.I., Pyne, J., Travers, R., & Hammond, R. (2015). Intervenable factors associated with suicide risk in transgender persons: A respondent driven sampling study in Ontario, Canada. *BMC public health*, 15(1), 525-532..

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(77), 101-126.

Brown, K. (2004). "Sistergirls" – Stories from Indigenous Australian transgender people *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, 28(6), 25-26.

Browne-Yung, K., Ziersch, A., Baum, F., & Gallaher, G. (2013). Aboriginal Australians' experience of social capital and its relevance to health and wellbeing in urban settings *Social Science & Medicine*, 97, 20-28.

Costello, M., & Nannup, R. (1999). *Report of the first national Indigenous sistergirl forum*. Brisbane: Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

Galupo, M.P., Krum, T.E., Hagen, D.B., Gonzalez, K.A., & Bauerband, L.A. (2014). Disclosure of transgender identity and status in the context of friendship. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 8(1), 25-42.

Hoffman, B. (2014). An overview of depression among transgender women. *Depression Research and Treatment*. Retrieved October 15, 2015, from <http://www.hindawi.com/journals/drt/2014/394283/>

Hyde, Z., Doherty M., Tilley, PJM., McCaul, KA., Rooney, R., & Jancey, J. (2014). *The first Australian national trans mental health study: Summary of results*. Perth: Curtin University.

Johnson, C. (2015). Napanangka: The true power of being proud. In D. Hodge (Ed.), *Colouring the rainbow: Blak queern and trans perspectives* (pp. 21-34). Adelaide: Wakefield Press.

Kerry, S.C. (2014). Sistergirls/brotherboys: The status of Indigenous transgender Australians.

International Journal of Transgenderism, 15(3-4), 173-186.

Ngala Curtis, B. (2015). Kungakunga: Staying close to family and country. In D. Hodge (Ed.), *Colouring the rainbow: Blak queern and trans perspectives* (pp. 35-47). Adelaide: Wakefield Press.

Riggs, D.W., & Due, C. (2015). Support experiences and attitudes of parents of gender variant children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24, 1999-2007.

Rotondi, N.K., Bauer, G.R., Travers, R., Travers, A., Scanlon, K., & Kaay, M. (2012). Depression in male-to-female transgender Ontarians: Results from the Trans PULSE Project. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, 30(2), 113-133.

Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Berkley: Seal Press.

Sisters and Brothers NT Website. Retrieved October 15, 2015, from <http://sistersandbrothersnt.com/sistergirl/>

Toohey, P. (2004). Trans Tiwi express. *Bulletin with Newsweek*, 122, 28-29.

Tsvirko, N. (2015). The sistergirls of the Tiwi Islands. *DailyMail*, 30 August. Retrieved 2 January, 2016, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3213735/The-Sistergirls-Tiwi-Islands-remote-community-northern-Australia-highest-population-transgender-people-country-including-children-young-six.html>

Von Doussa, H., Power, J., & Riggs, D.W. (2015). Imagining parenthood: The possibilities and experiences of parenthood among transgender people *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 17(9), 1119-113.

Woorama website. Retrieved October 2, 2015, from <https://suite.io/woorama/xy277>

Worth, H. (2000). Up on K road on a Saturday night: Sex, gender and sex work in Auckland. *Venereology*, 13,(1), 15-24.

Table 1. Social and documentary media sources

	Title	Source Location	Date Aired
1	Simone and Rosalina's story	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1P9gmiXOss	4/12/2013
2	Artscape: Anatomy: Eye	ABC TV	1/2/2011
3	ABC News sistergirls	https://vimeo.com/120866637	28/2/2015
4	Sistergirls share their story	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCo-_TnXfE8	15/8/2014
5	Sistergirl culture on the Tiwi Islands	http://media.caama.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/jason-foxy-empire-desantis.mp3	12/5/2011
6	Danii's Story	https://www.kildonan.org.au/programs-and-services/child-youth-and-family-support/diversity-project/think-about-it-project/	14/3/2014
7	Being Transgender in the Tiwi Islands	SBS TV, Insight	9/2013
8	Sistergirls	VHS, AFAO	2003
9	Living Black: "Sister Girls"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81XJZdhhPJ0	26/3/2013
10	First Gender and Sexual Diversity Forum for Alice Springs	https://vimeo.com/109903020	24/10/2014