

**Sistergirls and the impact of community  
and family on wellbeing**

**KATE TOONE**

**THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK (HONOURS)**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	4
Introduction.....	5
Impact of colonisation upon Indigenous social structure.....	9
Politics of representation .....	15
The role of social work .....	17
Method.....	19
Procedure and Data .....	19
Analytic Approach.....	20
Results .....	21
Family.....	21
<i>Experiences of Acceptance</i> .....	21
<i>Experiences of Rejection</i> .....	24
Community.....	28
<i>The Role of Sistergirls in Indigenous Communities</i> .....	28
<i>Community Responses and Impact Upon Sistergirls</i> .....	32
Discussion.....	36
Connection to other recent studies.....	39
<i>Trans studies more broadly</i> .....	39
<i>First Nations studies</i> .....	41
Limitations .....	41
Recommendations.....	43
<i>Inclusion in curricula and training programs</i> .....	44
<i>Remote Community Funding</i> .....	45
<i>AASW values</i> .....	46
Conclusions .....	47
References.....	48
Appendix 1. Documentaries Sourced.....	58

## **Abstract**

Whilst increasing attention has been paid to the experiences of sistergirls over the past decade, there still remains a dearth of empirical research on the experiences of this diverse population of Indigenous people. What has been documented to date indicates two opposing sets of experiences: one, in which sistergirls have a particular (maternal, stereotypically female) and valued role in Indigenous communities, and another, in which sistergirls experience rejection by Indigenous communities, as well as abuse and marginalization within non-Indigenous communities. This thesis sought to contribute to the literature on sistergirls by considering the ways in which this diverse group of people speak about their experiences. Specifically, this thesis reports on a thematic analysis of television news and documentary media in which sistergirls shared their experiences. The thematic analysis identified two themes: family and community. Within the first theme, two sub-themes were identified. The first of these pertained to experiences of family acceptance, whilst the second pertained to experiences of rejection by family members. The second theme also contained two sub-themes: the roles that sistergirls undertake within Indigenous communities, and community responses and their impact upon sistergirls. The thesis concludes by first linking the findings to previous research, before then exploring what social work might have to offer in terms of addressing the service needs of sistergirls.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to acknowledge that I live and work on stolen land belonging to the Kurna people, and I was born and grew up on Ngarrindjeri land.

This research would not have been possible without the sistergirls who have generously told their stories and who continue to advocate for the health and wellbeing of their peers.

I would like to acknowledge the queer activists and academics who have come before me and bravely paved the way so that discussions like this are possible.

Thank you to the village that helps me raise my daughter (particularly my family and 'queer family') and to Victoria herself who has been patient and understanding throughout this process.

Lastly thank you to those lecturers and tutors at Flinders University who have gone out of their way to support and encourage me over the past four years, particularly to Dr. Damien Riggs who has patiently supervised this project.

## Introduction

Sistergirls are often discussed in western terms (such as being referred to as Aboriginal transgender women), however this terminology is insufficient due to the complex connection to culture that shapes the category 'sistergirl' (Anwernekenhe Conference Committee, 1994; Brown, 2004). Alternative labels have been used by Indigenous communities around the world to better describe people who are assigned one of two sexes (male or female) at birth, but who identify with a gender that differs from that normally expected of their assigned sex (Anwernekenhe Conference Committee, 1994; Brown, 2004; Epple, 1998). Brown argues that sistergirls lived among traditional Australian Aboriginal communities before colonization, and hence they are neither a recent nor a Western phenomenon. The organization *Sisters and Brothers NT* agree, and state 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).

Some Indigenous people, however, debate the existence of non-heterosexual, non-cisgender people in traditional Aboriginal societies. These voices include Anthony Mundine (discussed in Clark, 2014) and the signatories to the ‘Uluru bark petition’ (Liddle, 2015), which argue that queer culture and Aboriginal Australian culture are simply not compatible. Brown’s (2004) account of the history of sistergirls, however, concludes that

the discrimination and shame which impacts Sistergirls today stems from the colonization of their land, and the introduction of the church into their communities.

Similar to the role of sistergirls in Australian Indigenous cultures, individuals who do not fit into conventional gender norms are present in Native American cultures (Epple, 1998). Epple argues that Navajo people have been labeled incorrectly and sometimes offensively as many things by Western science (i.e., berdache or gay). By contrast, a Navajo perspective acknowledges that gender is more fluid, and that maleness and femaleness is somewhat 'situational'. Closer to home, Murray (2003) draws comparisons between the way that western academia has tried to label Indigenous American gender and sexuality, and the experiences of gender diverse Maori. He states that Western ideals of binary gender and heteronormative assumptions are not adequate for describing Maori experiences, and instead introduces the Maori term 'Takatapui' to better describe this diverse population. Importantly, Murray notes that the term Takatapui cannot be easily translated into English as either 'gay' or 'transgender' without losing its distinct cultural meaning. Self identified Takatapui, Elizabeth Kerekere (Tiaki, 2011), has also grappled with language to describe her experience as both Maori and a lesbian. She claims that homosexuality and identities outside of the heterosexual gender binary were a normal part of Maori culture before colonisation by White Europeans (Tiaki).

Importantly, this emphasis on specific cultural perspectives demonstrates the fact that any one single 'catch-all' label cannot be used across cultural groups accurately. Wilson (1996) echoes Epple's claim that gender and sexuality is inherently linked to culture and therefore cannot be discussed accurately when removed from its cultural context. Wilson argues that whilst Western science has tried to understand variations of gender and sexuality within

Indigenous communities, this has typically led to 'blanket' labeling and views about the roles of gender and sexual diverse individuals within their communities. What unifies the experiences of gender diverse First Nations people, however, are the negative outcomes – such as violence and substance use (Balsam, Huang, Fieland, Simoni & Walters, 2004) and high rates of incarceration and abuse whilst incarcerated (Reisner, Bailey & Sevelius 2014) – of colonization. The issue of incarceration of the sistergirls has recently been highlighted as a pressing concern by the organization Sisters and Brothers NT. Lisa O'Brian, a sistergirl who has been incarcerated multiple times, says she experienced rape and violation from both inmates and prison staff (Clark, 2015b). She is scathing of the Northern Territory's apparent ignorance of the position of sistergirls in prisons, stating "even with a prison policy I don't think there is a lot of protection for transgender people, and that is especially true for Sistergirls. In most cases they wouldn't even come under that prison policy anyway" (Clark).

Yet despite the long-standing role of sistergirls in many Indigenous communities (see below), prior to the 1990s and the introduction of the Anwernekenhe conferences (AFAO, 1998, 2002, 2006; ANA, 2012; Anwernekenhe Conference Committee, 1994), little was documented about sistergirls in Western literature (Kerry, 2014). This, however, has changed in recent years, with the stories of many sistergirls shared in photographic exhibitions and documentaries in popular culture, along with more attention being given to their experiences by academic and health professionals (e.g., Artscape, 2011; Clark, 2015a; Kerry, 2014). A national Sistergirl forum was also held in 1999 (Costello & Nannup, 1999), and in 2014 the First Australian National Trans Mental Health Study (Hyde, Doherty, Tilley, McCaul, Rooney & Jancey, 2014) included sub-sample of sistergirls.

Yet despite this increased recognition, some sistergirls have spoken of rejection by their communities on the basis of not being able to participate in important binary gender based rituals (i.e., men's business or women's business, see Costello & Nannup, 1994). Exclusion from traditional communities along with homelessness are pressing issues for Sistergirls, and "significantly exacerbate the poor physical, physiological, and emotional environmental and spiritual health of Indigenous people" (Costello & Nannup, 1994). Furthermore, the report by Hyde and colleagues (2014) indicates that sistergirls experience discrimination and transphobia from health services, leading to increased mental distress and insufficient health care.

With all of the above points in mind, this thesis begins with a literature review that collates and highlights existing information from a number of sources including grey literature such as various conference papers and government strategy papers, and in so doing draws and builds upon a recent paper by Kerry (2014). This first section of the thesis also locates the position of Sistergirls within Australia's colonial landscape and history including exploring Sistergirl identities and terminology, before then touching on the politics of representation and what this means in terms of writing about Sistergirls. The literature review also highlights the connection of previous literature to social work as a field of practice and the health and wellbeing outcomes of Sistergirls. The thesis then turns to outline the methodology used to collect data for the project, the particular data sources that were used and which theoretical frameworks were applied. The results of a thematic analysis are then presented. Specifically, two key themes are reported: family and community. The thesis concludes by summarising the themes and findings related to previous research and exploring the implications for social work in the Australian context.

## **Impact of colonisation upon Indigenous social structure**

To say the colonisation of Indigenous nations has had a considerable impact on the social structures of Indigenous people is an understatement. Documentary evidence on this topic has come from a range of sources including white anthropologists, public commentators and Aboriginal people themselves. Professor Judy Atkinson – a Jiman (central west Queensland) and Bundjalung (northern New South Wales) woman – explains that the cultural and spiritual values of Aboriginal people were radically different from colonisers (1990). She goes on to say that “the greatest act of violence in Australia (as it is now called) began by declaring the land Terra Nullis” (p. 6). Furthermore, Atkinson suggests that an image has been painted of Aboriginal women as “second class citizens under male rule” (p. 8) prior to colonisation, and this image has been replicated throughout academia since. Atkinson argues that this is a simplistic and inaccurate portrayal. Instead, Atkinson describes gender relations before colonisation as distinct, with separate yet interdependent roles, with women being economically responsible for themselves and their children through collection of foods. Men supplied foods via hunting, and both genders had a place in child rearing and teaching children about the law. Atkinson states that all members of a community had a responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of other members of that community or family group, and this was particularly important in controlling potential violence by men aimed at women or children.

Atkinson (1990) maintains that, before colonisation, rape and sexual assault were punished within communities, but the imposition of colonial law saw these acts going unpunished for the first time, particularly when they were committed by members of white law enforcement. Sexual abuse in particular was a means by which power could be exerted

over Indigenous people, and women specifically. Atkinson attributes the 'extreme levels' of violence perpetrated by Aboriginal men towards Aboriginal women and other men in current times as a direct result of the power imbalances and disruption to community relationships caused by colonisation. Invasion and then removal from traditional lands saw the important economic balance between men and women undone. Aboriginal men were soon made reliant on women who were able participate in the white economy through prostitution. Further government interference during the assimilation period saw Aboriginal men forced to work away from their communities and Aboriginal women building relationships with white women in some instances and taking on full responsibility for child rearing. Missionaries introduced the ideal of monogamous, Christian, marriages to Aboriginal people, and declared sinful the traditional polygamous marriage arrangements that had previously occurred (Ganter, 1999). As such, it has been suggested that marriage was used as a tool of colonisation both in Australia and in America (e.g., Brook, 1997; Ellinghaus, 2008).

In terms of the effects of colonization on men and women, Megan Davis (2011) is critical of the 1987 *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* finding that Aboriginal men were more negatively affected by colonisation than Aboriginal women. She highlights the shaping effect that colonisation has had on the criminal justice system thus far, and argues that the commission did not use a gendered lens to take into account all oppressions, and as a result missed some clear indicators that both men and women have been extremely disadvantaged in the process of colonisation. An example highlighted by Davis is the idea that Aboriginal women have become self reliant because they gain access to welfare, which is denied young Aboriginal men. The glaring fault in this idea is that if women have become gatekeepers between men and financial support, they are likely to experience *more*

harassment, violence and dependence, rather than empowerment and independence, particularly in a culture traditionally based around sharing and community. Alarming, Aboriginal deaths in custody continue to be a pressing issue almost thirty years after the 1987 Royal Commission. The 2009 case of the apparent suicide of sistergirl Veronica Baxter, 34, in Silverwater Men's Prison highlights the terrible treatment of such women by the corrections system (Clark, 2015b; Jackson, 2010). Baxter was placed in the facility for men after being arrested for allegedly selling drugs, despite identifying as a woman since she was a teenager and being prescribed hormone treatment (which she was denied while incarcerated). Kane (2013) also details the troubling case of discrimination against another sistergirl, Thalia Sinded, in a Queensland prison.

Further in regards to the impact of colonization on sistergirls specifically, Kooncha Brown (2004) has stated that:

a history of transgendered culture has long existed within and played a role in traditional Indigenous Australian societies... In traditional societies we were medicine people, storytellers, holders of information and knowledge, and looked upon as very important members of the community. We became second mother to our sisters' and brothers' children and aunty to our brother-cousins and sister-cousins. The community supported these traditions (p. 25).

Brown speaks about the impact of the church through colonisation as a "force in fostering discrimination", and then later medical professionals who contributed to the pathologisation of sistergirl identities. Brown reiterates that many sistergirls are able to have 'normal' roles in their communities as women, and notes the contrast between that

and western societies:

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. Most of the time my sexual identity doesn't come into it. However in western culture, I am seen as 'black' and 'transgender', both of which generally come with negative connotations (Brown, 2004, p.25).

Other 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 notes:

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. Spending time with grandmothers is perfect for us. They are beautiful and good at being with sistergirls (cited in Toohey, 2014 p.4)

Writing by the Indigenous writer, 'Woorama' (2006), similarly gives an account of the role of sistergirls in Indigenous communities, painting them as caregivers 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." Woomera goes on to suggest that sistergirls "have their own internal law. They have their own customs, rituals, rules and leadership, and as such are a separate cultural group rather than part of an undifferentiated "gay" category".

Woomera adds to the Indigenous voices who reject a white anthropological history which omits sistergirls, instead stating that “in the old days the Sistergirls were called “Yimpininni”, and were honoured, rather than subjected to the rape, violence and marginalisation that came with western colonialism.”

The Sisters and Brothers NT website echoes claims by the sistergirls and others above in regards to the maternal role that sistergirls adopt within their communities, stating that they

often take on female roles... including looking after children and family. Many Sistergirls live a traditional lifestyle and have strong cultural backgrounds. Their cultural, spiritual, and religious beliefs are pivotal to their lives and identities.

The website authors reiterate the issues of violence and discrimination that sistergirls face, but also highlights that many sistergirls find roles of leadership in their communities. Sisters and Brothers NT agrees that the sistergirl phenomenon predates colonisation, citing oral and written history as evidence as discussed above.

Yet despite these relatively positive roles afforded to sistergirls, Jackie Tipungwuti, a sistergirl, suggests that it wasn't easy living in a 'tribal society' (cited in Toohey, 2004). Tipungwuti further suggests that sistergirls are bound by very specific rules about who they may interact with intimately:

Gay men have no laws. Lesbians have no laws. They have sex with each other.

We are sistergirls. We swear to the Bible that we better not be with each other,

because we are like sisters. We make sure that God knows we are sistergirls, that he knows we are here on this Earth, and that we don't go at each other... we do not touch our 'privacy' (p. 5).

Whilst this account of sistergirl sexuality may not encompass the experiences of all sistergirls, other evidence suggests that in some contexts sistergirls may be involved in what has been referred to as 'transactional sex'. Research by Holmes and McRae-Williams' (2011) into Indigenous homelessness and transactional sex suggests that transactional sex was common among Aboriginal women living in Darwin's 'long grass', and that this practice also included sistergirls. Specifically, they suggest that:

Although male to male exchanges were not the focus of this investigation, these exchanges were often raised by women as they were celebrated as the most lucrative form of sexual exchange... While among groups there may have been an economic imperative to encourage sister girls to be the one to engage in the sexual exchange, it appears that their participation was still a negotiated process' (p. 64).

Whilst sistergirls such as Brown (2004) have suggested that transactional sex is a part of life for many contemporary sistergirls who experience rejection from their community, it is less clear whether this was the case prior to colonisation.

Whilst there are discrepancies over estimates of the total population of Indigenous people before colonization (figures of between 300,000 and a million people have been suggested), it is clear that colonisation has had a devastating impact upon Indigenous

peoples, including a loss of, and separation from, traditional social structures and gender roles. Within ten years of settlement, Indigenous populations had begun its rapid decline. In the first hundred years, disease, mistreatment of women, and intentional violence had decreased the population of over 200 Indigenous nations by *at least* eighty percent. From the theft of Indigenous children who are now known as the Stolen Generation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, HREOC, 1997), to the assimilation period which encouraged Aboriginal people to adapt to white culture, to the Northern Territory intervention which again saw families and communities decimated by government action (Behrednt, 2007; O'Mara, 2010), it is clear that colonisation has had and continues to have devastating effects on the traditional family structures of Indigenous peoples. As the authors summarized above would suggest, this breakdown of structures and roles has had a significant impact on sistergirls, as their communities are influenced by the church, white rhetoric around gender binaries, and the medical profession, which continues to pathologise gender diverse identities.

### **Politics of representation**

Throughout colonial Australian history, white women have endeavored to be a 'voice' for Aboriginal women under the guise of feminism. Indigenous women, however, have increasingly challenged the benevolence inherent to this claim of speaking for Indigenous women. The problematic nature of 'talking for' Aboriginal women was clearly brought into the academic sphere as a result of the Bell-Huggins debate (Moreton-Robinson, 1998) in which Bell, a white anthropologist, claimed in an article purportedly co-written by an Aboriginal colleague, that interracial rape occurred in some Indigenous Australian communities, and that it was was 'everyone's' business' to speak about (Bell & Nelson, 1989). Stringer (2012) details the controversy that followed publication of Bell's article in

1989, highlighting that it took the journal two years to publish a letter by twelve Aboriginal women (led by Jackie Huggins) debating Bell's claims, and questioning the involvement of her Aboriginal colleague, Topsy Napurrula Nelson. When the letter by Huggins et al. was finally published it was accompanied by a further article by Bell defending her position and two letters positioning her as a feminist hero, supported by 'traditional Aboriginal' colleagues. The journal painted the twelve women debating Bells' right to speak about Aboriginal rape as "controversial" "antifeminist" and "hostile" (Stringer, 2012, p. 23-25 ).

Cole, Haskins and Paisley (2005) join this critique of white academics speaking for Indigenous people, noting that "Writing Aboriginal history as a white person was another form of neo-colonialism". In their book 'Uncommon Ground', they explore the position of white women in the history of colonisation, noting that white women are often portrayed as innocent "bystanders of colonisation" (p. xxii) . They quote Anne Curthoys (1993), who argues, instead, that white women in Australia "inherit "agency" and "empowerment" as part of the triumphant process of historic dispossession" (Cole, Haskins & Paisley 2005, p. xxii).

With this historical context in mind, the issue of the representation of oppressed groups by white feminists is pressing in the context of this thesis. I am a cisgendered, white Australian of mixed European heritage, and I live with a considerable amount of privilege on this basis, which I acknowledge to be a direct result of the colonisation of Australia and the genocide waged on Indigenous people. The land on which I live and write (the traditional land of the Kurna people) is stolen land, and the Aboriginal peoples' sovereignty to this land was never ceded. Given I cannot forgo this privilege, it is important in this thesis to take seriously the issue of representation, and what it means for me to speak about the experiences of sistergirls. As will be discussed in more detail below, the

data that I use, and the way I present them, is one attempt at representation that attempts to avoid the issue of 'speaking for', whilst at the same time acknowledging that my role as the person framing the voices of sistergirls requiring ongoing troubling.

### **The role of social work**

Social work in Australia has a long and checkered history in regards to working with Indigenous Australians. This history began with the unqualified, usually religious, white women who self identified as early social workers. These women of the church played an active role in the provision of 'welfare', and then the removal of Indigenous children from their families. The *Australian Association of Social Work* has formally apologized for the complicity of social workers in the history of the Stolen Generation, stating in the 'Bringing them home' report that

The Association acknowledges that social workers were involved in the forced separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families in every state and territory in Australia during this century' (HREOC, 1997, pp. 291-292).

Despite this, Mendes (2005) notes that there has been "no study of the precise role" of social workers in these historical events. It is important that as social workers, then, we are aware of and acknowledge our professions' involvement in the attempted genocide of Indigenous people, and work to actively engage with Indigenous communities and individuals in theoretical frameworks of anti-discriminatory practice.

The discussion section of this thesis will return to the role of the social work profession and individual social workers in responding to the experiences of sistergirls, specifically applying the findings to highlight the need for better resourcing of services so as to meet the diverse needs of sistergirls across Australia.

## **Method**

### **Procedure and Data**

As the scope of this research did not include primary data collection, ethics approval was not needed. However, ethical considerations around the author not identifying as transgender or an Aboriginal Australian (and in the context of the history of white academics writing about Aboriginal Australian people) were taken into account as is discussed as part of the literature review above.

A google search for the words 'Aboriginal sistergirl' and/or 'Indigenous sistergirl' and media, a youtube search for 'sistergirls indigenous' and a search of the Flinders Library archives, provided an initial sample of video and audio clips to be transcribed for analysis. Other suitable media were identified via the Facebook group page of the Northern Territory service for sistergirls and brotherboys.

Ten data sources were eventually identified and analysed including radio interviews, video interviews and various documentaries (see Appendix 1). These sources were all produced within the last twenty years and were chosen for their volume of data and because they contained the stories from people who themselves identified as sistergirls or had strong links with those communities. All sources were transcribed verbatim.

It is 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, that the sistergirls whose narratives are documented had a certain degree of control over their representation.

### **Analytic Approach**

A thematic analysis was undertaken of the identified clips. This analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) outline of thematic analysis. First, the videos and audio clips were watched or listened to multiple times by the researcher, then the data were transcribed, and the clips viewed again along with the transcriptions. Upon these multiple viewings two key themes were identified: family and community. At this point all relevant extracts pertaining to these themes were collated. The two collated themes were then again subjected to repeated readings, to identify any salient sub-themes. Two sub-themes were identified within each theme. The subthemes of 'experiences of acceptance' 'experiences of rejection' were identified within the theme of *family*, and 'the role of sistergirls in Indigenous communities' and finally 'community responses and impact upon sistergirls' were identified as sub-themes within the theme of *community*.

# Results

## Family

The first theme of *family* included extracts where sistergirls either used the word 'family' or spoke about kinship categories (mum, dad, sister, aunty and so on). Family was spoken about by most of the sistergirls with a weight that described the integral role of family in wellbeing outcomes. As the below extracts show, the different outcomes of either acceptance or rejection from particularly immediate family members thus had a real impact on sistergirls access to support.

### *Experiences of Acceptance*

As this first sub-theme would suggest, many of the sistergirls whose narratives are presented here 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 got um she just asked it, had to ask me, Russel 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 um others had to think and say about me as long as my parents, and my immediate family, they loved and supported me.

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 also. The following extract reiterates the point that acceptance from close family members (i.e., parents) 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 ill 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.

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.

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.

The quote from Bimbo is taken from a documentary that focused on the making of Bindi Cole's photographic exhibition *Eye*, and suggests that Bimbo's mother was not only accepting of her, but also proud of her. Similarly, the quote from Kooncha, taken from a documentary about *sistergirls* made by Kooncha, suggests that key to acceptance for some *sistergirls* 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, um, like my sisters especially um 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 um 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? You don't have to um change your whole lifestyle just because one of your children or family members turn out to be gay or lesbian or trans

you know, its just, all they want is just to know that you loved them you're loved  
eh, you know like for me I just want to know that I'm loved.

As trans 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 also 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 sub-theme has shown, acceptance from close family members, and particularly a mother, can be a tremendous form of support for sistergirls. Whilst some of the sistergirls whose narratives were included in the media analysed 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 sub-theme, rejection by family was a sad reality for many of the sistergirls whose narratives were presented in the media analysed. For many sistergirls, revelations of their

gender identity left them vulnerable to violence or the threat of violence, particularly from fathers. These experiences left lasting emotional effects, evident in the degree of recollection that some of the sistergirls provide in regards to their experiences of violence. Costello and Nannup, in their review of the first national sistergirl forum (1999), state that “many types of violence were identified: physical, psychological, emotional, verbal, and community. The most common forms of violence perpetrated against the sistergirl community appeared to be physical assault, sexual assault and rape”. Unfortunately, such violence may be a life long occurrence in the lives of many sistergirls, as can be seen in the first extract below:

Kooncha: I know of sistergirls who have been ah 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. Um, 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.

Here Kooncha suggests a clear relationship between lack of support from family and poor health and wellbeing outcomes, and that this may be a long term feature of life for many sistergirls. As noted above, literature documenting the experiences of sistergirls clearly shows a connection between homelessness or transience due to family rejection and sex work. 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 in transgender women more broadly (Hoffman, 2014). Although it is acknowledged that sex work itself is not inherently a negative outcome, for sistergirls who feel they have no other choice due to family rejection, sex work becomes a necessity for survival and can be linked to the disproportionate number of sistergirls who report being the victim of sexual assault and rape. These activities can 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 health sequelae of family rejection highlighted in the previous extract, family rejection can also be preceded by high levels of violence within the family, particularly as enacted upon sistergirls, as the following extract illustrates:

Laura: when we was little kids, we used to go down to the beach and play girly things, um 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 be 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 to (pause, sigh) to take you down to the bush and shoot you there with a gun and leave you there lying down dead.

When Laura spoke in this interview, as a part of the Bindi Cole documentary, she was overcome with emotion when reliving vivid memories of threats of violence from both her

mother and her father. 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 violence, 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.

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 (Galupo, Krum, Hagen, Gonzalez & Bauerband, 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 subtheme 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 subtheme of rejection from family has highlighted the fact that although some sistergirls have experienced acceptance and love from their families and communities (particularly in the long term), others have experienced rejection, threats of violence, and hatred from their families and friends as a direct result of their identities as 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. Many sistergirls, however, reported finding support in other sistergirls and this being an integral part of gaining understanding and acceptance from their families.

## **Community**

This second theme pertained to extracts from the data where Indigenous communities were spoken about by sistergirls. Sistergirls often spoke about their role in communities (either being accepted as a woman or not), and the negative outcomes of rejection from community. Many sistergirls spoke about leaving their communities after negative reactions to their sistergirl identities, however some gave accounts of their important and accepted roles in these communities as respected women.

### ***The Role of Sistergirls in Indigenous Communities***

In this sub-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. There has been debate in the literature and Indigenous media in relation to whether sistergirls existed traditionally in Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander

communities before colonisation, with some members of Indigenous communities expressing transphobic and homophobic views and claiming that the phenomenon only arose with the introduction of white culture (Clark, 2014; Liddle, 2015). Other community members, however, have spoken about the strong roles of sistergirls as accepted community leaders and maternal figures in both traditional and modern communities. Internationally, there is a wide body of evidence of community acceptance of gender variant people in native cultures before colonisation, as discussed in the literature review. In the following extract, Crystal speaks 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.

In this extract, again taken from the Bindi Cole documentary, Crystal speaks 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, 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'. This claim is however supported by Jackie Tipungwuti (cited in Toohey, 2004) and seems to fit within the general rhetoric of sistergirls themselves.

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 ah, for the children, caring because they knew you cared for them, ah, 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. And I did it in my day so I don't think it's changed at all.

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.

In the first extract, taken from the documentary produced by Kooncha Brown, 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 report that they have raised children). Interestingly, sistergirls often spoke about being easily

accepted into these traditionally feminine roles (it being an obligation of a female member of a community), 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 sub-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. As such, their choice of clothing, makeup and hairstyle may be paramount to presentation of their gender identity.

In the final extract in this sub-theme Crystal highlights the hierarchical nature of sistergirl communities in the Tiwi Islands, where sistergirl elders play a role in 'gatekeeping'. This is different to concerns about gatekeeping amongst transgender communities more broadly (where psychiatrists may gatekeep access to hormones, for example see Speer and Parsons, 2006). In the case of sistergirls, Crystal appears to suggest that gatekeeping has a positive role to play in earning respect, potentially echoing wider community practices in Aboriginal and Torres Strait island communities.

Crystal: you know for me to use that name sistergirl, I had to earn that trust and respect from them because you know they work hard for it and you know a lot of things happen, you know two of the other sistergirls that were trans women and

trans men in those days you know were beaten up and you know they were ridiculed and you know, these women were um they were like um gatekeepers who looked after them and who took care of them you know and for me to say that I'm a, that I'm a sistergirl, I had to earn the respect.

This extract from Crystal provides a perfect example of the strong culture of elder sistergirls playing a matriarchal and nurturing role towards younger sistergirls. Crystal herself reported that she has raised two young sistergirls in a parenting role and is a respected elder on the Tiwi Islands and in the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander community. The concept of 'earning' a place within this community system is something that can be seen in the broader community as well, a practice that allows an individual to then reap the benefits of being a member of community, including advocacy and support.

The identity of sistergirls, it would appear in this sub-theme, 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 in modern times, sistergirls play an important (and rigidly defined feminine) role in family and community structures, which includes active positions in child raising.

### ***Community Responses and Impact Upon Sistergirls***

Mirroring the theme of family, the two sub-themes within the theme of community juxtapose experiences of acceptance with experiences of marginalization. As the extracts in this final sub-theme illustrate, 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 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a sense of place within community is an important aspect of identity and wellbeing (Browne-Yung, Ziersch, Baum & Gallaher, 2013), and thus discrimination from within communities can and does 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, um sometimes they give you the silent treatment, you know sometimes, um. 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, because um 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. You know and people they criticise the way I am. But I don't take any, it does hurt me, because for my people, they think that I'm not human? They think that I'm not breakable. The hardest thing is changing your name. Changing myself, is sort of like I'm still dealing with it.

In this extract Crystal details her experience of living within her community on the Tiwi Islands. The Tiwi Islands have the highest rate of suicide of anywhere in the world, and violence is now commonplace, particularly aimed at sistergirls. 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 um, because we are seen as different ah and if you look at the class system in Australia, we are actually down there with murderers and thieves and child molesters.

Kooncha's statement in this extract in regards to sistergirls being more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence than cisgendered women is statistically evident in both Indigenous and non-indigenous populations (Hyde, Doherty, Tilley, McCaul, Rooney & Jancey, 2014). Sistergirls, however, experience the unique position of being targets of misogyny, transphobia *and* racism shaped by ongoing histories of colonisation. The literature and other interviews reviewed for this study also highlight this idea 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 their gender expression (Costello & Nannup, 1999).

In the following and final extract Simone again highlights 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 um daunting I get days um I get days when I just don't want to go out, ill drive to the supermarket and then ill decide not to go in because of all this paranoia um 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.

We can see from this extract that Simone has experienced isolation from her community, due to the fact that at times appearing in public feels 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 feelings of paranoia 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 sub-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

In grouping the data within the two themes of family and community, this thesis has highlighted the impact of these two areas of life upon sistergirls. For the sistergirls who were accepted in their community as women (or in a specific role as sistergirls), the implications were both positive and negative. Positive outcomes included being accepted and supported in roles as mothers and caregivers (and even being seen as appropriate child minders as teenagers when their sistergirl status became evident, because of their perceived nurturing abilities). The idea of parenting or kinship care of children seemed to be more easily navigated for sistergirls and accepted by community in comparison to white transgender participants in a study by Von Dousa, Power and Riggs (2015) and another by Haines, Ajayi and Boyd (2014) who found the role of parenting to be complex and restricted by social norms as well as legalities. None of the sistergirls spoke about legal interference in their parenting, and their roles seemed to occur with the support of their families and communities. An availability of 'office and retail' jobs, which were seen as traditionally feminine and desirable were also discussed for sistergirls living outside of the capital cities. Heterosexual relationships with cisgender men also became a possibility and were sought by most of the sistergirls whose narratives were included in the source documents reviewed. Sistergirls spoke about creating an acceptable feminine appearance including long skirts and long hair, which identified them as sistergirls and was possibly considered especially important as feminine identifiers because of the lack of access to hormone therapy or surgeries in remote areas.

However, many of the sistergirls spoke about the burdens of femininity they subsequently experienced. Explicitly gendered violence such as domestic violence from an intimate partner and sexual assault were discussed in the data, and this mirrors findings from Kerry (2014) and Hyde et al (2014). As Kooncha Brown stated, sistergirls are often 'more vulnerable' to violence than cisgender women within Indigenous communities because they are seen as 'other' and 'fair game'. This sentiment was echoed across the data, with many of the women sharing stories of domestic violence, with conversations framed in such a way that it almost appeared to be an expected occurrence for sistergirls.

Globally, transgender women face higher rates of intimate partner violence than do cisgender women (Ard & Makadon, 2011; Leonard et al., 2012). This abuse is often framed within a transphobic rhetoric wherein trans women are considered 'lucky' to find anyone who will be in a relationship with them. Because a heterosexual relationship with a cisgender man affirms their female identity, it can be suggested that sistergirls will 'settle for less' in terms of respect and safety from their partner. Despite these worrying outcomes of being recognized as women by their communities, the sistergirls interviewed talked about joy and peace from being able to express their gender identity and have that affirmed, and how this had a positive effect on mental health. This aligns with a national transgender health study conducted by researchers at Curtin University, which found that a key theme in improving mental health outcomes was the experience of acceptance (Hyde et al, 2014).

Despite the isolation felt by some sistergirls, it is interesting that for some, acceptance as women had come easily even though they are living as 'out' transgender women. Many remote sistergirls do not have access to gender affirming surgery or hormone treatment,

and therefore their physical appearance is 'visibly trans' (or would be considered so in a western context). While there are many examples of sistergirls moving to larger cities, many also stay in or return to communities where their sistergirl status is known by the whole close knit community, and yet many report being widely accepted as women. This contrasts with the experience of many white transgender women who aim to live 'stealth' and thus avoid disclosing their trans status. It has been suggested by Haines, Ajai and Boyd (2014), however, that this may no longer be the case, and trans women are choosing more and more to transition 'in place' rather than move locations, jobs and friendship circles post transition.

As Field (2008) states, social capital is a resource made up of connections within communities. For oppressed minorities in particular, having a community to turn to for acceptance and support can act as a buffer to protect mental health. Thus as Costello and Nannup (2013, p. 8) report:

The toxic effects of social exclusion significantly exacerbate the poor physical, physiological and emotional environmental and spiritual health of Indigenous people. Connectiveness is an essential aspect of our well-being.

Affirming this idea, Browne-Yung, Ziersch, Baum and Gallaher (2013) found that the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Australians was deeply affected by their social capital. For sistergirls more specifically, the findings reported in this thesis reflect what has been said by Brown (2004) and Kerry (2014), namely that the sistergirl community in itself is a tightknit one with hierarchical support networks and cultural norms, and as such plays a very important role of support and education in the lives of sistergirls.

## **Connection to other recent studies**

### ***Trans studies more broadly***

In 2014, the first National Transgender Health study conducted by researchers at Curtin University (Hyde et al 2014) found that “trans people have, and continue to experience discrimination from some non-trans LGB [lesbian, gay, and bisexual] people” (p. 5). Whilst none of the sistergirls whose narratives were analysed as part of this thesis reported interactions with lesbian, gay, or bisexual Aboriginal people, some reported that they had experienced discrimination within non-indigenous lesbian, gay and bisexual communities.

Additionally, recent experiences of discrimination were a predictor of poor mental health for participants in the Curtin study, and this was also evident in the data presented in this thesis, with most of the sistergirls reflecting on past discrimination such as being called by their birth name, which does not accurately reflect their gender identity. Participants such as Simone explicitly stated that they have changed behaviors to try and avoid discrimination (such as staying at home instead of going shopping), which shows the seriousness of the effects that misgendering and harassment can have.

The Curtin study (Hyde et al, 2014) also found that “having the freedom to be myself around my friends family and the public” (p. 26) promoted good mental health, and the findings presented in this thesis tell a similar story, with sistergirls expressing joy and happiness when family members in particular affirmed their feminine gender. A participant in the Curtin study similarly stated that “Being accepted as female means everything to me. Also having a lot of love and support from friends goes a long way”. Hyde

et al also found that whilst love and acceptance were important to many of their participants, it was distinctly missing from the experiences of some participants. The same can be said for the sistergirls whose narratives are documented in this thesis, with many discussing rejection from members of their families and communities. This is salient with reference to Hoffman's (2014) discussion of depression amongst trans women, which suggests that rejection from family members was often a factor in the women developing mental health issues, and conversely that social support reduces this risk.

Leonard et al (2012) highlight the importance of a supportive community for Australian LGBT people, stating that of their sample "Seventy-three per cent said they would turn to GLBT friends for emotional support" (p. 24). The study also found that whilst GLBT friends were important for emotional support and health advice, families of origin were still important as carers when they were sick. The same can be said for the sistergirls, who appear to place a strong importance on fellow sistergirls but also highly value connection to family. Hines (2007) has also discussed trans community friendships as being important for sharing experiences and knowledge with one another in relation to decisions around transitioning and other situations that are specific to transgender experience. Galupo et al 2014 have similarly found that friendships are important for trans people, and that they "can have an impact on an individual's process of self-acceptance as a member of a marginalized community' and provide 'familial-type support'" (pp. 161-167). The data presented in this thesis suggest that sistergirls use their support networks of other sistergirls similarly and that they are fiercely protective of each other and of their family-based connections.

## ***First Nations studies***

Globally, first nations transgender or gender diverse people have been affected by colonisation. In America, Balsam et al (2004) state that “two-spirits may be at particularly high risk for victimization” (p. 293), and suffer higher rates of abuse (physical and sexual) than other non-white LGBT females. There are parallels to the data on sistergirls presented in this thesis. Balsam et al also found in their study of Native American youth, that “two-spirit males and females were more likely to have run away from home, perhaps as a result of family rejection or social stresses” (p. 295). We can again see similarities with sistergirls who have left families and communities due to rejection, as indicated in the data presented in this thesis.

As can be said of sistergirls, there is a distinct lack of research about the health and wellbeing of gender and sexually diverse Maori people in New Zealand. Worth (2000) presents a study of Maori and Pacific Islander people who self identified as “queen, fa'afa'fine, woman or girl” and their engagement in sex work. Worth found that all participants worked in the sex industry from a young age and this could at least in part be attributed to growing up with “poverty and structural disadvantage”. This can be seen reflected for sistergirls in Kooncha Brown's (2004) statements linking transactional sex work with rejection from family and poverty.

## **Limitations**

The timeline of this research project made primary data collection difficult. As Hyde et al state:

There is a need for research specifically addressing the health and well being of sistergirls and brotherboys. However, such research will probably have to be qualitative in nature and will require fieldwork. Researchers must bear in mind that some sistergirls and brotherboys (particularly those from remote communities) may not speak English as a first language and/or have limited English skills. Researchers must be aware of the cultural sensitivities required when working with ATSI people, and with sistergirls and brotherboys in particular. Sistergirls and brotherboys should be involved at all stages of the research and help guide it. (2014, p. 65)

Therefore endeavoring to conduct primary, qualitative, research in such a limited timeframe would have been impossible to do ethically and competently, ensuring the needs of participants were met as well as accurate data. As such, the decision was made to use existing media sources that have, to date, not previously been analysed and reported publicly.

Because media data was used the participants included are sistergirls who have access to media opportunities, whether these be through an Indigenous program such as CAAMA radio or a more mainstream media source such as the SBS program Insight. This means that the women featured are actively engaged in their communities and strong advocates for their peers, and many already have strong relationships with service providers (the majority of participants are named as contributors on the Sisters and Brothers NT website). Whilst these women did of course speak on behalf of other sistergirls, most had experiences of moving to larger cities and medically transitioning to some extent, and this cannot be said to be representative of the experience of all sistergirls, particularly those

living remotely. With the exception of Danni, the interviewees were older sistergirls reflecting on their *past* experience as younger women. It would be valuable for further 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 and still early on in their transition journey.

Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory as proposed by Moreton-Robinson (2013) would be a useful framework for further research, although Moreton-Robinson is clear that this is not a methodology. She cites Rigney (1997) and Smith (1999) in stating that research in Aboriginal communities "must benefit them, be undertaken for and with our communities, prioritises their needs and interests, is empowering and self-determining" (p. 336). She highlights the ways in which certain forms of knowledge (i.e., white) are privileged within academia, and argues that this continues to deny Aboriginal women's sovereignty. Further research on sistergirls should therefore value Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders lived experiences, and recognise that much of their history is preserved through oral storytelling rather than the academically preferred written histories. Research undertaken in this way would be holistic, and require the necessary time to value connections, stories and communities. A clearer understanding of current services capacity to work effectively with sistergirls would also be valuable.

## **Recommendations**

This study has shown that sistergirls in Australia currently experience high rates of discrimination, rejection from families and communities, and violence. Their health and wellbeing outcomes have not significantly improved over the last twenty years since the

first Anwernekenhe conference. Some recommendations will therefore be made and reiterated.

### ***Inclusion in curricula and training programs***

There is a desperate need for sistergirls-specific education in the curriculum of health and community service practitioners. Balsam et al (2004), speaking about the health and wellbeing of two-spirits, state that:

Practitioners should be attuned to the extent to which AIAN cultural and spiritual practices may be important to the client. These practices may play an important buffering role against the stresses experienced by this client.

Practitioners in Australia similarly need to have an understanding of the importance of community and culture in regards to the health and wellbeing of sistergirls, specifically with reference to the lack of social capital and the barriers this can create (Field, 2008). The Curtin study (Hyde et al, 2014) highlights the discrimination and transphobia that transgender and gender diverse people face when accessing services. It is clear that education for doctors, social workers and community workers needs to improve in the areas of gender diversity, particularly for those likely to be working with sistergirls.

Sisters and Brothers NT is currently the only service in Australia specifically aimed at providing services to sistergirls and brotherboys. They have an extensive list of goals on their website, including creating an awareness of sistergirl and brotherboy identities in Aboriginal communities, delivering educational forums, and providing peer support. They

stress the need for a collaborative approach to improving the wellbeing of sistergirls, and they are willing and able to provide training and advice for practitioners. Clearly, then, this provides opportunities to practitioners for engagement.

The Curtin University report made specific recommendations pertaining to sistergirls and brotherboys (Hyde et al, 2014), which align with the approach advocated for by Sisters and Brothers NT. Specifically, they highlight the need for a greater awareness of sistergirls and brotherboys amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and recommended this be achieved using media and peer education in schools. They also state the importance of access to hormone therapy and an increased focus on mental health, and that resources for service providers need to include sistergirls and brotherboys. As above, Hyde et al call for further qualitative research to be done addressing the needs of sistergirls and brotherboys and for an increase in funding for organisations targeted at engaging with sistergirls and brotherboys. In 1999, Costello and Nannup reported a need for the government to promote employment opportunities and training for sistergirls. As there has not been a sistergirl forum since, it is unclear whether that was enacted (Costello and Nannup, 1999).

### ***Remote Community Funding***

Despite recent rhetoric around the closing (by way of funding suspension) of many remote Aboriginal communities, it is the suggestion of this thesis that the opposite should be implemented to better the health and wellbeing of sistergirls. It is clear that there have been many calls for an increase in funding for services operating in remote communities. The Little Children are Sacred report of 2007 (Wild & Anderson), for example, stated that

must be “more strategic, planned investment in local community workforces through more Aboriginal personnel (e.g. Aboriginal Community Workers, Aboriginal Community Resource Workers, Aboriginal Health Workers) to be trained and located in remote communities and towns for family support, community development and to act as local brokers” (p. 27). Kerry (2014) states that “it is through connectivity that indigenous transgender Australians can best achieve health, self-esteem, identity, and ‘country’” (p. 185), and this is particularly true for those living in rural and remote communities. Extra funding to allow expansion of services such as Sisters and Brothers NT could encourage these connections.

### ***AASW values***

The type of community driven health care argued for above 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 also states that social workers need to recognise the importance of cultural identity and practice for clients, which is particularly relevant for working with sistergirls. It emphasises the need for workers to be informed by and engaged 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 the sistergirl community could significantly improve their wellbeing by creating accessibility for them to safely attend mainstream services. The 6<sup>th</sup> Anwerenkhe conference to be held in November 2015 could

provide a good opportunity for the AASW and community service organisations to gain a better understanding of the current needs of sistergirls.

## **Conclusions**

This thesis has analysed a selection of media in which sistergirls have spoken about their experiences of community and family. It has shown that whilst some sistergirls are accepted and celebrated by their communities in their felt gender identities, all have also had experiences of rejection and discrimination. Violence, both within intimate relationships and families and also in public spaces, is commonplace and these women are often misunderstood, harassed, embarrassed, and abused. This can lead to withdrawal, isolation, and poor mental health. Contrasting this, experiences of love and recognition (particularly by family) have been shown 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 is still so limited twenty years on from the first Anwerenkhe report which clearly illustrated a need. HIV, drug use, transactional sex, and isolation are pressing issues for this community 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. Sistergirl identity is intrinsically linked to community and culture and needs to be valued as such by non-sistergirl workers and community members.

## References

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

AFAO. (1998). *Anwernekenhe II. Report of the Second National Indigenous Australian Gay Men And Transgender Peoples Conference*. Darlinghurst, Australia: Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

AFAO. (2002). *Anwernekenhe III. Third National Indigenous Gay, Sistergirl and Transgender HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health Conference*. Darlinghurst, Australia: Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

AFAO. (2006). *Anwernekenhe 4. The Fourth National Indigenous Australian Gay Men and Transgender Peoples Conference*. Newtown, Australia: Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

ANA. (2012). *Anwernekenhe 5: Anwernekenhe National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HIV/AIDS Alliance*. N. pub

Anwernekenhe Conference Committee. (1994). *Report of "Anwernekenhe": First National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Gay Men and Transgender Sexual Health Conference*. Sydney: Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

Anwernekenhe National HIV Alliance (ANA) *Strategic Plan 2011-2015* available at <http://ana.org.au/publication/ana-strategic-plan/>

Ard, K.L., & Makadon, H.J. (2011). Addressing Intimate Partner Violence in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Patients. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, August, 26(8), 930-944.

Atkinson, J. (1990). Violence in Aboriginal Australia: Colonisation and gender. *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, 14 (2), 5-21.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2008). *Child Protection Australia 2006–07*. Child welfare series no. 43. Cat. no. CWS 31. Canberra, Australia: AIHW.

Balsam, K. F., Huang, B., Fieland, K. C., Simoni, J. M., Walters, K. L., Wyatt, G.E. (2004). Culture, Trauma, and Wellness: A Comparison of Heterosexual and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Two-Spirit Native Americans *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 10(3), 287-301.

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..

Behrednt, L. (2007). The emergency we had to have. In Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (Eds.), *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* (pp. 15-20). Melbourne: Arena Publications Association.

Bell, D., & Nelson, T.N. (1989). Speaking about rape is everyone's business. *Women's Studies*

*International Forum*, 12(4), 403–416.

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

Brook, H. (1997). The Troubled Courtship of Gladys and Mick. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 32(3), 419-436.

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.

Clark, A. (2015a). Meet the Transgender 'Sistergirls' of the Tiwi Islands, *BuzzFeed inc* retrieved from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/allanclarke/sistergirls-of-the-tiwi-islands#.rpZ3JvJvK>

Clark, A. (2015b). Fears for transgender sistergirls locked up in NT prisons, *BuzzFeed inc* retrieved from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/allanclarke/fears-for-transgender-sistergirls-locked-up-in-nt-prisons#.vwGKxe1ggb>

Clark, M. (2014). Against authenticity. *Overland* 215 Winter.

Cole, A., Haskins, V., & Paisley, F. (2005). *Uncommon Ground: White women in Aboriginal history*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Costello, M., & Nannup, R. (1999). *Report of the First National Indigenous Sistergirl Forum*. Brisbane, Australia: Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

Costello, M. (2001). Partnerships, Prevention & Peer Education Enabling Appropriate Indigenous Sexual Health For Northern Queensland, A Queensland AIDS Council Indigenous Gay & Sistergirl Project.

Curthoys, A. (1993). Identity Crisis: Colonialism, Nation, and Gender in Australian History. *Gender & History*, 5: 165–176.

Davis, M. (2011). A reflection on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and its consideration of aboriginal women's issues. *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, Spring, 15(1), 25-33.

Dockery, A.M. (2010). Culture and wellbeing: The case of Indigenous Australians. *Social Indicators Research*, 99, 315–332

Ellinghaus, K. (2008). The benefits of being Indian: Blood quanta, intermarriage, and allotment policy on the White Earth Reservation, 1889-1920 *Frontiers-A Journal of Women's Studies*, 29(2-3), 81-25).

Epple, C. (1998). Coming to Terms with Navajo Nadleehi: A Critique of Berdache, 'Gay', 'Alternate Gender', and 'Two-spirit'. *American Ethnologist*, 25(2), 267–290.

Fesl, E.D. (1988). *How the English Language is Used to Put Koories Down, Deny Us Rights, or Is Employed as a Political Tool against Us*. Clayton: Koorie Research Centre, Monash University.

Field, J. (2008). *Social capital*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Routelage.

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.

Ganter, R. (1999). Letters from Mapoon: Colonising Aboriginal gender. *Australian Historical Studies*, 29(113), 114-125.

Haines, B., Ajayi, A., & Boyd, H. (2014). Making trans parents visible: Intersectionality of trans and parenting identities. *Feminism & Psychology*, 24(2), 238–247

Hines, S. (2007). *TransForming gender: Transgender practices of identity, intimacy, and care*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press

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/>

Holmes, C., & McRae-Williams, E. (2011). *"Captains" and "selly-welly": Indigenous women and the role of transactional sex in homelessness*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government of Australia, Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). (1997). *Bringing them home*. Sydney: HREOC.

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,.

Idrus, N.I., & Hymans, T.D. (2014). Balancing benefits and harm: Chemical use and bodily transformation among Indonesia's transgender waria. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(4), 789-797

Jackson, R. (2010). It's a white man's country yet why the NSW media blackout? *Australian Socialist*, 18 (4) 1-3.

Kane, J. (2013). Sistergirl inside: Doubly colonised, doubly trapped. The discriminating decision in *Sinden v State Of Qld*. *Griffith Journal of Law and Human Dignity*, 1.

Kerry, S.C. (2014). Sistergirls/brotherboys: The status of Indigenous transgender Australians. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 15(3-4) 173-186.

Leonard, W., Pitts, M., Mitchell, A., Lyons, A., Smith, A., Patel, S., Couch, M., & Barrat, A. (2012). *Private lives 2. The second national survey on the health and wellbeing of GLBT Australians*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

Liddle, C. (2015). Why the Uluru bark petition does not speak for me [online]. *Green Left Weekly*, 1066, 25 Aug 8.

Macoun, A. (2011). Aboriginality and the Northern Territory Intervention *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 46(3).

Mendes, P. (2005). The history of social work in Australia: A critical literature review. *Australian Social Work*, 58(2) 121-131.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (1998). When the object speaks, a postcolonial encounter : Anthropological, representations and Aboriginal's women's self-presentations. *Discourse : Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 19(3), 275-298.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2013) Towards an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint theory: A methodological tool. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28(78), 331-347.

Murray, D.A.B. (2003). Who Is Takatāpui? Māori language, sexuality and identity in Aotearoa/New Zealand *Anthropologica*, 45(2), 233-44.

O'Mara, P. (2010). Health impacts of the Northern Territory intervention. *The Medical journal of Australia*, 192(10), 546-8.

Parkes, Z. (2015). Perth rally against community closures [online]. *Green Left Weekly*, 1046 (7).

Reisner, S.L., Bailey, Z., & Sevelius, J. (2014). Racial/ethnic disparities in history of incarceration, experiences of victimization, and associated health indicators among transgender women in the U.S. *Women & Health*, 54(8), 750-76.

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.

Rigney, L.I. (1997). Internationalisation of an Indigenous anti-colonial cultural critique of research methodologies: A guide to Indigenist research methodology and its principles. *Journal for Native American Studies*, WICAZO SA Review 14(2), 109-121.

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.

Saewyc, E.M., Skay, C. L., Bearinger, L.H., Blum, R.W., & Resnick, M.D. (1998). Sexual orientation, sexual behaviors, and pregnancy among American Indian adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 23, 238-247.

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

Smith, Tuhiwai L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous people*. London: Zed Books.

Speer, S.A., & Parsons, C. (2006). Gatekeeping gender: Some features of the use of hypothetical questions in the psychiatric assessment of transsexual patients. *Discourse & society*, 17(6), 785-812.

Stringer, R. (2012). Impractical reconciliation: Reading the Intervention through the Huggins-Bell Debate. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 27 (71), 19-36.

Tiaki, K. (2011). Health for Takatapui.(NZNO CONFERENCE)(Conference notes) *Nursing New Zealand*, Sept, 17(8), 16(1).

Toohy, P. (2004). Trans Tiwi Express. *Bulletin with Newsweek*, 122(6429), 28-32.

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.

Wild R, Anderson P. (2007). Ampe akelyernemane meke mekarle "Little children are sacred": Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. Darwin: Northern Territory Government.

Wood, A. (2011). Why did our sister die in a men's jail? *Sydney Morning Herald*. April 10, Fairfax Media.

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

Sisters and Brothers NT. (2015) Retrieved 22/10/2015 at <http://sistersandbrothersnt.com/sistergirl/>

### Appendix 1. Documentaries Sourced

<b>Title</b>	<b>Source Location</b>	<b>Date Released</b>
Simone and Rosalina's story	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1P9gmiXOss">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1P9gmiXOss</a>	4/12/2013
Artscape: Anatomy: Eye	ABC TV	1/2/2011
ABC News Sistersgirls 20150227	<a href="https://vimeo.com/120866637">https://vimeo.com/120866637</a>	28/2/2015
Starlady talks to Ygender	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvZm0TKagz0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvZm0TKagz0</a>	8/10/2013
Sistergirl culture on the Tiwi Islands, CAAMA radio	<a href="http://media.caama.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/jason-foxy-empire-desantis.mp3">http://media.caama.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/jason-foxy-empire-desantis.mp3</a>	12/5/2011
Danii's Story	<a href="https://www.kildonan.org.au/programs-and-services/child-youth-and-family-support/diversity-project/think-about-it-project/">https://www.kildonan.org.au/programs-and-services/child-youth-and-family-support/diversity-project/think-about-it-project/</a>	14/3/2014
'transgender youth' SBS insight	SBS TV	9/2013
'Sistersgirls'	VHS	2003
Living Black: 'Sister Girls'	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81XJZdhhPJ0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81XJZdhhPJ0</a>	26/3/2013
CAAMA radio First Gender and Sexual Diversity Forum for Alice Springs	<a href="https://vimeo.com/109903020">https://vimeo.com/109903020</a>	24/10/2014