INTRODUCTION
Indigenous experiences of family and sexual violence have received extensive media and Government attention since 2006. Since 1999, each State and Territory government has commissioned reports to explore the extent of these problems within their jurisdictions. The reports highlight disproportionate incidences of sexual assault and family violence within Indigenous communities and the complexities associated with such experiences. They also illustrate that Indigenous communities are actively considering pathways for healing and justice for victims, their families and broader kin networks.

On 27 June 2008 the Victorian Government, in partnership with the Victorian Indigenous community, launched Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: Towards a Safer Future for Indigenous Families and Communities, a ten year plan responding to Indigenous family violence ('the Plan'). This paper critically examines the content of the Plan, the processes used to develop it and its ability to achieve its stated objectives. It questions whether, in its present form, the Plan can break the 'silence of acceptance' surrounding family violence, sexual assault, elder abuse, child abuse and neglect.

BACKGROUND
In 2001 the Victorian Government commissioned an Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce (the Taskforce), who reported their findings in December 2003. The Taskforce defined violence as:

An issue focused around a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. It extends to one-on-one fighting, abuse of Indigenous community workers as well as self-harm, injury and suicide.

Using this broad definition, the Taskforce estimated that '1 in 3 Indigenous people are the victim, have a relative who is a victim or witness an act of violence on a daily basis in communities across Victoria.'

Family violence is often premised on inequality within spousal relationships. However, Indigenous community members around the state identified high levels of partner, elder and youth abuse; violence between members of extended families; Indigenous people facing assault charges; sexual abuse; and child abuse and neglect.

Refuges and criminal sanctions alone do not properly address the broad spectrum of relationships underpinning family violence in Victorian Indigenous communities. A holistic approach to family violence, taking into account family history and context is required. The Taskforce recommended that such an approach be community driven; any action ought to reflect local priorities and empower local people to address family violence as it occurs in their communities.

The Taskforce consequently established a process for ongoing community engagement via nine Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Groups (IFVRAG). IFVRAGs consist of elders, women, men, young people and community leaders from local Indigenous communities, as well as local Indigenous organisations and service providers. Although the plan refers to IFVRAGs as 'independent entities,' they are not legal entities. IFVRAGs work at the local level to:

+ Assess local Indigenous community needs and plan appropriate services;
+ Provide advice on prevention, reduction, and response to Indigenous family violence as well as related community issues;
+ Develop cross-agency links to improve services to people affected by family violence;
+ Assist mainstream family violence services and other support services to provide culturally competent services; and
+ Promote holistic approaches to family violence in regional and local Indigenous communities,
encompassing social, emotional, spiritual, physical and cultural wellbeing of families.8

The IFVRAG infrastructure encourages communities to take ownership of family violence. It facilitates continuing community dialogue necessary to address the problem at a local level.

**INDIGENOUS FAMILY VIOLENCE PARTNERSHIP FORUM - DEVELOPING THE TEN YEAR PLAN**

In response to Taskforce recommendations, the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum was established in 2005.9 The Forum oversees and coordinates State government activities associated with Indigenous family violence, including the development of the Ten Year Plan. Aboriginal Affairs Victoria is the lead agency providing Secretariat support.

The Forum is comprised of chairs of each IFVRAG, as well as government representatives from relevant State and Federal departments. In May 2006, the Forum was expanded to include service providers such as the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Prevention Legal Service, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and Elizabeth Hoffman House.10

In August 2006 the Forum was presented with the First Draft of the Ten Year Plan. Many members were surprised by the timing and contents of the Plan. Up until this point, the Forum had been focused on reporting regional progress, airing complaints and clarifying information. No meaningful discussion as to what such a plan should entail, or how it should be developed, had taken place.

The Forum Secretariat informed members that their development of the Draft Plan had begun with a critical review of Taskforce recommendations, the priorities of Regional Action Groups and reoccurring challenges identified at Partnership Forum meetings. An external consultant had also been employed to draft a document that would feed into the development of the Plan.

The Secretariat also presented to the Forum a number of other State government initiatives specific to family violence, child protection and Indigenous affairs.11 It was acknowledged that processes would need to be developed to ensure the Plan was appropriately coordinated, streamlined and supported in line with these other initiatives.

Particularly notable is the Victorian Integrated Family Violence Reform Strategy ('the Strategy') established in 2005. The Strategy aims to better integrate police, courts and support services; improve the safety of women and children experiencing family violence; and improve accountability and access to behaviour change services for men who use violence. The central objective is to reduce reoccurring victimisation, as well as the broader social and economic impact of family violence. Reform outcomes are monitored to assess how well the system responds to all communities, including Indigenous communities.12

The Strategy includes two Forum representatives and a State-wide Steering Committee to reduce family violence.13 Regionally, there are partnership groups comprised of police, justice and community services who oversee the strategy implementation at the local level. The groups meet regularly to develop regional plans to assist clients move through the system and to establish links with existing services, including Indigenous services. Improving access to mainstream services for Indigenous people is a key emphasis.14 Importantly, many IFVRAG chairs reported that they were unaware that these regional groups existed. Very few, if any, had been invited to participate in such groups - despite their overlap and reporting requirements.

From the period April 2005, when the first Partnership Forum meeting was held, until the endorsement of the Final Draft by a majority of Forum members in April 2008, ten meetings took place in total. Three were held in 2005, one in 2006, 4 in 2007 and two in 2008.

The 2007 and 2008 meetings were focussed solely on the content of the Plan. In August 2007, the Forum was provided with a suggested timeline for its completion; members present expressed concern at the Government's insistence that the Plan be launched by mid 2008.15

Few members at this time understood that the timelines were constrained by State budgetary bidding processes. The Victorian Government at a number of meetings was asked to provide details relating to the budget bid and its contents. Government representatives on each occasion advised Forum members that this was a confidential process and therefore details could not be provided. These representatives assured Forum members that the bids placed were consistent with the actions included in the Draft Plan. The Draft Plan had not been endorsed at the time of budget bids.
In August 2007 IFVRAG chairs attending the Forum also expressed concerns over the insufficient time allowed between drafts to carry out proper community consultations. Specifically, the timeline did not allow for consultations to be conducted outside of their action groups; IFVRAGs were given less than three weeks to organise a meeting with other community members and service providers before the meeting to endorse the Final Draft Plan in April 2008.

IFVRAGs further raised serious concerns in the August 2007 meeting relating to:
+ the partnership approach between community and government and how this translated into ownership of the Plan;
+ the appropriateness of the language used in the plan;
+ the need for data relating to accessibility of current services in order to inform an evidence-based strategy;
+ the need to explicitly address the effects of violence on children;
+ the need to tackle the role of alcohol in family violence;
+ incorporating violence prevention strategies; and
+ the link between family and community violence.

The IFVRAG Chairs emphasised the need for strong wording relating to the responsibilities of individuals, communities and service systems respectively in responding to, and preventing, family violence. These concerns were consistently raised in all Forums leading up to April 2008. Many of these specific issues were not resolved in the final document.

These concerns were echoed by community members, as well as by Indigenous and non-Indigenous services that were not members of the Partnership Forum. However, there was no period allowed for public submissions during the drafting of the Plan. Similarly, there was no consultation phase with those services expected to implement the Plan; many services expressed concern about their capacity to deliver without further support.

Aside from some mention of the need to improve cultural competence and awareness, these issues are not discussed in the Plan. It is doubtful whether this is sufficient to make existing services 'culturally safe' and 'accessible' for Indigenous community members.

THE PLAN AND ITS CONTENTS
The Plan is structured according to "vision-guiding principles and values, background, achievements to date, and eight strategic objectives:
+ Cultural safety;
+ Healthy families;
+ Education, awareness, prevention;
+ Safety for victims;
+ Accountability;
+ Healing for victims and perpetrators;
+ Service capability; and
+ Research and evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of Indigenous family violence responses."

The Victorian Budget 2008 announced funds for the following specific actions itemised in the plan:
+ Indigenous men's behaviour change programs ($1.07 m);
+ Intensive case management for Indigenous men ($0.75 m);
+ Indigenous family violence outreach services ($2.79 m);
+ Family violence list and court diversion ($1.3 m);
+ Extension of local safety campaigns ($0.4 m);
+ Indigenous prevention framework and Indigenous prevention projects ($1.2 m); and
+ Indigenous workforce development ($0.56 m).

To date, no details have been provided as to when or how these items will be implemented or evaluated. Crucial details are missing as to roles and responsibilities, timelines, implementation strategy, procedures for risk management, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. While the Plan captures principles and priority outcomes, there is no demonstrable plan to guide the efforts. Without the details, one is left to ask what this Plan will achieve and for whom.

We note that the Victorian Government consistently takes this approach to plans relating to Indigenous affairs. In June 2008, a week before the plan was launched, the Victorian Auditor General tabled in the Victorian Parliament a report entitled 'Coordinating Services and Initiatives for Aboriginal People.' It clearly articulated that, since 2002, the Government has been criticised for its lack of leadership in Indigenous affairs, a poor whole-government effort to improve Indigenous outcomes and ineffective coordination and consultation.

Added criticisms included: insufficient coordination and communication between departments; lack of focus in programs and services; ambiguous roles and responsibilities of key participants; incomplete performance monitoring.
frameworks and data limitations. All of these have made it impossible to undertake robust assessments of progress in Victorian Indigenous affairs. These findings echo those of Forum members, community and service providers.20

Specific areas of community concerns that received little or no attention in the form of itemised actions in the Plan include:

- Effects of violence on children - prevention activities must be accompanied by specific services such as culturally appropriate and age appropriate counselling services.
- Sexual assault including child sexual assault - the Plan proposes to make existing mainstream services more ‘culturally appropriate.’ We question whether this is sufficient given anecdotal evidence as to the prevalence of sexual assault, as well as the inadequacy of existing interventions. The 2007 Victorian Aboriginal Women’s Ministerial Advisory Committee consultations, for example, heard clearly from Aboriginal women around the state that this is an ongoing problem and warrants continuing discussion, particularly with young Aboriginal women.
- The dramatic rise of elder abuse, which is an emerging public issue.

We recognise that the Plan is a ‘living document’21 concerned to make Victoria a safer place for Indigenous families. However, as it currently stands, the Plan is significantly flawed. We acknowledge the goodwill across Government and in the Victorian Indigenous community to respond to family violence. However, given the challenging nature of the problem, these shortcomings urgently need to be addressed. Failure to do so risks its ultimate success; this may also include the goodwill of service providers and community members.

CONCLUSION

Regional action groups have had the courage to speak up against the ‘silence of acceptance’ that surrounds Indigenous family violence. They consistently advocate for change, both within their local regions and through the state more broadly. Their leadership and commitment is evident. However, the question remains, is this Plan sufficient to break the silence of acceptance surrounding family violence, sexual assault, elder abuse, child abuse and neglect? With no demonstrable strategy guiding the effort, it seems that this Plan will have limited impact. Indigenous Elders, women and children deserve better.

Dr Kylie Cripps is an Indigenous academic and Research Fellow at the Oenoma VicHealth Koori Health Unit at the University of Melbourne. Leanne Miller is the Executive Director of Koori Women Mean Business.

4 Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce, above n 1, 123.
5 Ibid 4.
7 Ibid 15.
8 Ibid 14.
9 Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce, above n 1, 233.
16 Ibid 5.
17 Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum, above n 3, 32.
19 Ibid.
20 Victorian Auditor General, Coordinating Services and Initiatives for Aboriginal People, (2008), 11-29.