

**Perspective:**

# Jill Gallagher on self-determination, treaty and family violence

The Victorian Treaty Advancement Commission was established in January this year and treaty legislation passed the Victorian Parliament's lower house in July. The journey to Treaty is very new and it's important for our prevention and response work so we asked the new Commissioner to tell us more about this foundational reform.

It's early days for treaty and for Jill in her new role but we wanted to hear about where treaty was up to, because it's important that we all bear this process in mind when we're doing prevention and response work in the future. It's a hugely important foundational reform.

**How do you define self-determination? How does it intersect with treaty?**

Self-determination effectively means the right to choose who and how you are governed.

It can intersect with treaty in several different ways – and because the treaty process is relatively new in Australia, there are possibilities we haven't explored yet.

They are both ultimately about empowerment. For too long, this nation's first people have had little to no empowerment over their own lives. And that is a disgrace.

But things are changing. It is a slow process – it takes time to get right – but we are making progress every single day. Especially here in Victoria.

**What does self-determination and treaty mean for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children who experience family violence?**

It's very early in the process so I cannot be too prescriptive. But self-determination and treaty will give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more empowerment over their own lives.

That is a significant thing. It means Australia's first peoples will be recognised like never before. Our cultures will be celebrated like never before. And our people will have opportunities that they do not at the moment.

Whether it is around culture, language, health, employment, the justice system – treaty could cover any or all of those areas.

So for our women and children who are experiencing family violence, self-determination may mean more community-led responses.



**Is the harm of family violence recognised and built into the process and implementation of treaty advancement?**

Everything we are doing is around the process of making things better for people who have been without a voice for too long.

I fully acknowledge the harm that is done in the form of family violence. In the 1980s, I worked at the Elizabeth Morgan Aboriginal Women's Refuge and certainly gained a good understanding of family violence. In my previous role – at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation – we did a lot of work around family violence. We saw how it affected people, physically and mentally.

It's too early in the treaty process to draw definitive links between an agreement and specific outcomes, for example, family violence.

But a treaty, or treaties, can address some of the huge problems in our communities. It will benefit people and their families. And change is coming.

**How will treaty impact on the lives of victim survivors of family violence?**

We are at the beginning of the treaty journey, in some respects.

When you have a group of people who have been disempowered, and subjected to inter-generational trauma – as we know is the case in family violence matters – then treaty is a process that offers those people a little more power over their lives.

It all comes back to that one word – empowerment. ■