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A MĀORI RESPONSE TO THE MĀORI FAMILY & SEXUAL VIOLENCE WORKFORCE

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Abstract

The significant impact of family and sexual violence in Aotearoa (New Zealand), especially amongst Māori, calls for solutions to advance the Māori workforces who are connected to their communities and meeting the demands of their people in complex and challenging contexts. Despite the increasingly national visibility of family and sexual violence in Aotearoa, the workforces, their work in Māori communities to respond and heal from

family and sexual violence —has largely remained invisible. This paper presents the results from a national project that focused on the Mahi Tūkino (Family and Sexual Violence) Māori Workforce, their professional development needs and aspirations for a National Coordinating Entity, Māori Workforce Strategy and Māori standards of practice. With decades of professional and lived experiences on the part of the authors, it presents a visionary blueprint for a Mahi Tūkino

workforce that will radically transform the way in which professionals and health and social institutions work with whānau (extended families) in these spaces of trauma, to in turn radically heal and transform Māori whānau, hāpori (communities), hapū and iwi (kinship groups). It concludes with prioritising the need for a Māori approach that is national, strategic and applies a lens to family and sexual violence that is inclusive of Te Ao Māori (world).

Keywords:

Mahi Tūkino, Family Violence, Sexual Violence, Workforce

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We recognise Te Pūkotahitanga for their support of Te Rau Ora in completing the project that informed the Report: Whakapakari Kaimahi Māori – mo te oranga me te Hiranga.

Background

Family and sexual violence is the most prevalent form of violence experienced by Māori (Fanslow et al., 2023) in Aotearoa. Higher rates of family and sexual violence amongst Māori are exacerbated through inequities, bias and discrimination (Carswell et al., 2020). Though Māori communities have responded to these

complex and challenging community issues with mahi tūkino (Māori Family and Sexual Violence) services and workforces for decades, this has often occurred with minimal resource. A strong and effective Mahi Tūkino workforce and tailored strategies are needed for this sector.

The central objective of Te Aorerekura (the National Plan to eliminate family and sexual violence) is to improve the wellbeing of all people. Its strategic priority for the workforce includes trained, skilled and sustainable family and sexual violence workforces who can safely recognise, refer and respond to violence (New Zealand Government, 2021). It is the intent under Te Aorerekura to shift the workforce towards a skilled, culturally competent and sustainable workforce. Currently, limited data exists about who the workforces are, as well as about what roles people are playing to address the impacts and harms from family and sexual violence in Aotearoa.

With these gaps in knowledge about the Māori Mahi Tūkino workforces, Te Pūkotahitanga, (Tangata Whenua Advisory Group) commissioned He Whare Wahine, a specialist team within Te Rau Ora (National Māori Workforce Development Organisation) to gather insights on the Māori workforces in the family and sexual violence domain and to identify their workforce development needs. This paper

presents a snapshot of the workforces and three key results that emerged from the project Whakapakari Kaimahi Māori – mo te oranga me te Hiranga (Te Rau Ora, 2025).

Methods

This project was informed by a mixed methods approach in which a combination of qualitative methods were implemented for the broad purposes of facilitating a breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration of Mahi Tūkino Workforces and the sector (Cresswell, et.al., 2011). Methods used included a desktop scan and literature review, a national workforce survey, stakeholder interviews, regional consultation hui and a 'sense making' hui with experts. The combination of findings from these methods are presented in this paper from the experiences of the researchers who completed the project

Researchers' Approach

We prioritised establishing and maintaining relationships with whānau (families), hapū (descent group), iwi (tribal group), kaupapa Māori providers, and sector leaders. All engagement was relational, recognising whakapapa (genealogical) connections between participants, communities, and the research team. Manaakitanga (caring) guided the

approach to participants throughout the research process. This included creating culturally safe spaces for kōrero (talk), providing kai (food) at hui (meetings), offering koha (reciprocal gift), and ensuring participants' wellbeing before, during, and after engagement.

Māori leadership was embedded at all levels of the project, including research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Participants were able to exercise control over how their contributions were recorded, interpreted, and represented. The research team acted as kaitiaki (guardians) of participant contributions and sector knowledge. Data was stored securely, access was limited to approved researchers, and findings were shared in ways that protected participant anonymity and respected intellectual property rights. All engagement followed appropriate tikanga Māori (protocols), including karakia (prayer), mihi whakatau (greetings), and whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) processes. These protocols were adapted for both in-person and virtual hui settings.

The Project

The project was firmly grounded in kaupapa Māori methodologies, which upheld Māori philosophies, principles, and cultural practices as central to the research

process (Smith, 2015). At the heart of this approach is a commitment to Māori autonomy and the advancement of whānau ora (family wellbeing), ensuring that all research actions are guided by whakapapa, tikanga, and mātauranga Māori (knowledge). Ethical practice, in this context, means not only protecting participants but also actively supporting mana (trans?) and rangatiratanga (trans?), upholding the dignity, voice, and authority of whānau and kaimahi (workers) involved. (Smith, 2021).

The project honoured the interconnectedness of all things in te ao Māori, where we viewed healing, safety, and justice through a holistic lens grounded in cultural integrity and spiritual wellbeing. By recognising the significance of mana-enhancing practices, and embedding tikanga throughout, we ensured that the cultural safety and wellbeing of all participants involved were prioritised. The project design and implementation were shaped by equity, and aligned with the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), ensuring partnership, protection, and participation. A layered, responsive methodology was used to respect the diverse realities and preferences of participants across urban, rural, and iwi-based settings.

Early insights from a comprehensive desktop scan and literature review provided the foundation for an informed, reflective, and iterative approach. Informed consent processes were developed with cultural sensitivity, and ongoing risk management was supported through regular hui with Te Pūkotahitanga, ensuring collective oversight and accountability. Throughout, as researchers, we were committed to transparent, respectful engagement, co-design of findings, and reciprocal relationships with the communities who entrusted us with their knowledge and experiences.

Findings

Māori mahi tūkinō workforces

The majority of Mahi Tūkinō workforces are predominantly Wahine Māori (77%), their age groups are distributed across three groups; 24% are between 30 and 40 years, 23% are 41 to 50 years, and 23% are between 51–60 years of age.

Most of the Mahi Tūkinō Workforces are employed in full time permanent positions (81%) with a large proportion of the workforce (70%) not represented by a union. Half of this workforce earn between \$51,000 to \$60,000. Important to note is that 15% of respondents selected the 'prefer not to say' option for this question.

The highest qualification selected by 36% of respondents was a certificate with a bachelor's degree following closely at 25%. The most common qualifications were in the disciplines of Social Sciences (47%), followed by Health (24%) and Mātauranga Māori (22%).

Practice experience amongst mahi tūkino workforces identified 43% had one to five years of experience in their positions. When asked about overall sector experience, the largest group (24%) reported three to five years, with 17% indicating more than 20 years of experience.

Forty four percent of respondents reported feeling either extremely or very confident working with whānau Māori. The areas of expertise among respondents were distributed evenly across service categories: prevention (36%), crisis intervention (36%), long-term support (33%), and whānau ora (36%), with the highest response rate being for 'all of the above' at 44%. These results illustrate a broad and multi-faceted approach (knowledge and skill set) within the mahi tūkino workforce to support individuals and whānau experiencing or living with family and sexual violence.

There were many experiences of mātauranga Māori being used to inform

practices within the workforce, with tikanga and kawa being the most utilised (82%), followed closely by whakapapa kōrero (lived experience) (79%) and Māori models of practice (76%). Ninety nine percent of respondents stated that tikanga and Māori customs as being important to their practice, and acknowledged the importance of whakapapa- that is, recognising who you are and where you come from as important.

Fifty percent of respondents identified whanaungatanga as the most utilised tikanga when engaging with whānau. When asked about barriers for integrating mātauranga Māori in their practice, the key challenges range from systemic and institutional barriers such as racism, cultural and knowledge gaps, to practical resource constraints and personal development needs.

Seventy-three percent of respondents attended a kaupapa Māori or tikanga based wānanga in the past two years. This could indicate that wānanga had a profound impact on enhancing their understanding, confidence, and ability to integrate te ao Māori perspectives into their personal and professional lives.

Amongst the 100 Organisations who participated in the national survey, the main employers of Mahi Tūkino workforces

were Non- Government Organisations (44%) and Kaupapa Māori Organisations (32%). Though, these organisations primarily serve Māori communities, 60% of these organisations engaged with multiple ethnic groups across their communities highlighting an inclusive service approach. Just under half of these organisations (46%) also provided services across both urban and rural settings.

Professional Development

Mahi Tūkino Workforces and their employers highlighted the importance of embedding kaupapa Māori into practice as a foundation for workforce development, emphasising mātauranga Māori, te reo Māori, and tikanga, with foundational contributions from whānau and community to shape formal education, workplace practices, and individual service initiatives. Currently there is no Māori Mahi Tūkino Workforce Development Framework and no National Entity coordinating their workforce development needs and resources. The New Zealand Government has led out its own family and sexual violence capability framework with Māori input informed by the Novice to Expert Framework, originally drawn from America (Benner, 1984). It is a construct that is popular in non-Māori health workforce development approaches in New Zealand.

Mahi Tūkino employers promoted both specialist and mātauranga Māori workforce development opportunities. In the last two years, 72% of this workforce completed specific family violence and sexual violence training, and 74% said they had also attended a tikanga-based or kaupapa wānanga.

Recommendations from employers and mahi tūkino workforces included creating a National Entity that would work with Mahi Tūkino organisations and workforces, to gain easier access to a combination of face-to-face wānanga and online training options that would meet the varied learning needs of the Māori workforce.

The organisations involved in this project were supportive of their workforces having dual Māori and focused or specialist family violence and sexual violence training. The majority of employers emphasised the need for greater investment by government into Mahi Tūkino Workforces and an advocacy for better government policies to align to Māori aspirations and community needs in the family violence and sexual violence domain.

Over half of the respondents shared valuable insights on how organisations can better support kaimahi Māori to ensure cultural safety and competency within the workforce. Key areas identified better

access to local and regional learning opportunities for ongoing training and development that integrates kaupapa Māori practices through structural and cultural alignment, facilitated by local leadership and reinforced by organisational commitment and supportive environments.

Other areas that were recommended included access to robust supervision, self-cares as a workforce who are exposed to high levels of distress and addressing organisational barriers, including staffing recruitment and retention, reducing the contractual reporting administrative burdens and restrictive decision-making processes.

When asked what will keep these workforces in their roles, the responses included better remuneration, job satisfaction, continual professional growth, a culturally safe and supportive work environment, and organisational support and direction.

Three Insights

Findings drawn from across this project present three insights from the national survey, stakeholder interviews, and consultation hui.

Insight One: The Need For A National Entity

Māori are the backbone of whānau-centred approaches to violence prevention and responses (Taskforce on Whānau-Centred Initiatives, 2010). They bring a depth of lived experience, cultural fluency, and relational knowledge that is essential for meaningful engagement with Māori whānau, hapū (kinship groups) and communities. Their work is grounded in tikanga Māori and guided by values such as aroha (loving care), manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and whakapapa. These approaches not only foster trust and healing but also create culturally safe spaces for whānau who may otherwise feel alienated by mainstream systems. There is a lot of strength, skill, and cultural depth among Mahi Tūkino workforces, yet the broader system within which they operate, in comparison, is often disjointed, inconsistently supported, and often misaligned with both Māori realities and aspirations.

Funding is often short-term, competitive, and not reflective of the long-term, intergenerational work required to address violence in Māori communities. Training and professional development pathways for Māori practitioners are limited, and where they do exist, they may lack cultural relevance or fail to acknowledge the

breadth of skills that kaimahi bring through their lived and cultural experiences. There is also a lack of strategic cohesion across agencies and regions, resulting in duplicated efforts, gaps in service delivery, and missed opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

Stakeholders across Aotearoa consistently reported that, while there is national recognition of the need to support Māori workforce development, current efforts are piecemeal and reactive rather than strategic and transformative. Local innovations that are effective and grounded in kaupapa Māori often struggle for survival due to inconsistent funding and a lack of formal recognition within national policy frameworks. This not only undermines the sustainability of local initiatives but also limits the ability to scale up successful approaches or share best practice across the sector.

Recommendations

To support Māori leadership in addressing family and sexual violence, a cohesive, strategic infrastructure is required, one that enables national coordination without compromising the autonomy and integrity of local, hapū and iwi-led solutions. This infrastructure must be co-designed with Māori, for Māori, and resourced in a way that recognises both the diversity and the

interconnectedness of Māori communities across Aotearoa. There is an imperative to move beyond isolated efforts toward a unified, nationally supported infrastructure. Which would be helped by the establishment of a dedicated national entity that can support and elevate Māori workforce development in a way that is both strategic and grounded in kaupapa Māori.

Ideally a national entity would not dictate decisions, but work alongside regional and local leaders, iwi, hapū, and hapori to coordinate and support a cohesive workforce strategy. Such an entity would enable alignment across sectors, elevate local initiatives by providing strategic oversight and resourcing, and ensure that workforce planning and development are responsive to both national priorities and local realities.

The national entity would operate in the spirit of partnership and Kotahitanga (working together), upholding tikanga Māori and enabling the sector to co-design solutions that reflect the aspirations, knowledge systems, and lived experiences of Māori communities. This approach would ensure sustainability, cultural integrity, and a future-focused workforce capable of addressing the complex needs of whānau affected by violence.

Insight Two: The Need For Training Of Mahi Tūkinō Workforces

Based on the literature and findings from this research, any credible development framework would centre te reo Māori, tikanga, and holistic Māori models of wellbeing (Wilson, et al., 2021). Evidencing Māori ways of understanding healing, resilience, and collective care and have provided insights which are critical to achieving lasting change for whānau Māori affected by violence. Training needs to encompass in-depth cultural competency, advanced therapeutic and clinical practice, nuanced understandings of trauma, colonisation, and intergenerational harm, and the capacity to work safely and effectively across a diverse range of whānau, hapū, and community contexts.

Kaimahi Māori across Aotearoa expressed a consistent and heartfelt call for professional development pathways that nurture both their cultural identities and their technical expertise. We propose that this calls for a dual-pronged approach to workforce development, one that gives equal mana to te ao Māori, including kaupapa and mātauranga Māori, alongside the specialist knowledge, technical competencies, and operational skills necessary for working in this complex and emotionally demanding field. This dual approach must recognise that cultural

capability is not an “add-on,” but a core requirement.

This approach is not about ensuring Māori are included within mainstream training systems, but rather insists on a fundamental shift in how knowledge is valued and taught. Recognising kaupapa Māori as a legitimate and specialist body of professional knowledge is not a cultural courtesy, it is an essential foundation for developing a skilled, resilient, and effective workforce capable of responding to Māori in ways that are authentic, safe, and transformative.

Recommendations

Training programmes must be developed and delivered with cultural depth and integrity, ensuring that mātauranga Māori is not marginalised, tokenised, or diluted. Instead, it must be upheld, protected, and taught in ways that honour its whakapapa and its significance in shaping Māori-led responses to violence.

These development pathways must be co-designed and co-delivered in partnership with iwi, hapū, Māori service providers, and community leaders, drawing on intergenerational knowledge, lived experience, and local solutions. The wisdom and expertise held by kaumātua (elders), whānau advocates, and those

who have worked in the sector for decades are invaluable and must inform the structure and content of training models.

To sustain such a workforce, structural change is required. Training and capability-building efforts must be supported by fair and equitable pay, access to accredited and culturally grounded qualifications, defined career progression pathways, mentoring and supervision from experienced Māori professionals, and secure, long-term investment.

Without these fundamental supports, the sector will continue to experience high levels of burnout, staff turnover, and the underutilisation of Māori potential. This not only weakens service delivery but also places unnecessary pressure on those who remain in the workforce, often at the expense of their own wellbeing.

Ultimately, a dual development pathway, one that nurtures both the cultural and technical dimensions of practice does more than uplift individual kaimahi Māori. It enhances the strength and responsiveness of the entire mahi tūkinō system. It ensures that whānau Māori are supported by practitioners who are not only clinically competent, but also culturally grounded practitioners who understand their context, uphold their mana, and walk alongside them in ways that foster healing,

empowerment, and collective transformation.

Insight Three: The Need For Kaupapa Māori Standards Of Practice

There was a widespread call for the development of local, regional, and national standards of practice that reflect both te ao Māori and the specialist frameworks of the family and sexual violence sectors. Stakeholders, kaimahi Māori, service providers, iwi leaders, and community advocates, emphasised the need for standards that do not simply replicate existing mainstream models, but that actively embed mātauranga Māori and kaupapa Māori principles alongside clinical, legal, and therapeutic best practices.

Such standards are essential to building a consistent, high-quality, and culturally authentic approach to workforce development and service delivery across Aotearoa. They provide a shared foundation from which services can grow, while acknowledging that whānau needs, cultural expressions, and local approaches to healing are diverse and dynamic. By grounding these standards in both Indigenous and specialist domains of knowledge, the sector can move beyond binary thinking and towards integrated, holistic models of practice that are

reflective of the real-world complexity kaimahi face every day.

It is critical that these standards are not imposed in a prescriptive or top-down fashion. Instead, they must be co-designed with hapū, iwi, and hāpori Māori, recognising their unique knowledge systems, autonomy, and leadership in preventing and responding to violence within their communities. This process must uphold the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and centre Tino rangatiratanga, ensuring that Māori are not just consulted, but are leading the design, delivery, and ongoing refinement of these standards in ways that are mana-enhancing and culturally safe.

Recommendations

At a local level, standards must be tailored to reflect the unique histories, practices, and strengths of each iwi and community. Locally designed frameworks are better able to respond to whānau realities, intergenerational trauma, and the distinct cultural and geographical contexts within which providers operate. These approaches honour the mana motuhake (autonomy) of communities and ensure relevance, trust, and local ownership of solutions.

Regionally, a coordinated approach can support collective training, resource sharing, and knowledge exchange between providers working across rural, urban, and iwi-based settings. Regional networks can also help address disparities in resourcing and capacity, and support consistency in service quality while still allowing for contextual flexibility.

At the national level, a dedicated entity is needed to provide strategic oversight, promote cohesion, and ensure accountability across the sector. This entity would work to uphold Māori leadership and Tino rangatiratanga, while also facilitating inter-agency collaboration, aligning with wider government strategies, and monitoring equity of access and outcomes across communities. National standards will act as an enabler of excellence, not a mechanism for compliance, and support a unified vision for Māori-led, culturally safe, and evidence-informed responses to family and sexual violence.

Researchers, educators, and training providers have a vital role to play in this space. They would work in partnership with Māori to develop credentialing pathways, culturally grounded qualifications, and training programmes that reflect both the depth of mātauranga Māori and the evolving technical requirements of the family and sexual violence workforce.

These efforts would include formal recognition of Māori knowledge holders and lived experience practitioners, ensuring that Indigenous expertise is validated within credentialing systems.

Together, these local, regional, and national standards of practice will help to build a dually-competent workforce, one that is grounded in te ao Māori and proficient in the specialist disciplines of family and sexual violence practice. This integrated and values-driven approach will not only enhance the capability of individual kaimahi, but also contribute to a stronger, more resilient sector. Ultimately, it offers the best opportunity for long-term, sustainable change, supporting whānau ora, restoring mana, and fostering intergenerational wellbeing within Māori communities across Aotearoa.

Conclusion

Māori responses to family and sexual violence in Aotearoa have had little recognition for their efforts in service provision to their people and communities. Māori are asserting their advocacy for better investment and support that is nationally strategic, locally relevant and applies a lens to family and sexual violence that is inclusive of Te Ao Māori. The national project Whakapakari Kaimahi Māori – mo te oranga me te Hiranga (Te

Rau Ora, 2025) provides an evidence base that is advocating for a dual focused (cultural and technical) workforce, a new Māori family and sexual violence workforce strategy, a Maori co-designed national coordinating entity, mahi tūkino training and Kaupapa Māori standards of practice.

It makes good sense to be further developing the family and sexual violence system response by placing the discussions needed with Māori leaders working in the family and sexual violence sector about the need for increased Māori responses to the high rates of family and sexual violence as a priority.

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Glossary

Aotearoa	New Zealand
Aroha	Compassion
Hapori	Community Groups
Hapū	A division from iwi and of Māori
He Whare Wahine	Specialist Team in Wahine Māori (women) issues and solutions
Hui	Meeting
Iwi	Tribe
Kai	Food
Kaimahi	Worker
Kaitiaki	Preserve, protect
Karakia	Prayer
Kaupapa Māori	Purpose is Māori
Kawa	Processes
Koha	Donation
Kōrero	Talk
Mahi Tūkino	Māori Family and Sexual Violence Workforce & Domain
Māori	First Nations of Aotearoa
Mana	Authority, prestige, control.
Mana-enhancing	Enhancing another person's authority and control
Manaakitanga	Hospitality, kindness
Mātauranga	Knowledge
Mihi whakatau	Formal welcome
Tangata Whenua	People of the Land
Te Ao Māori	Māori perspective
Te Aorerekura	New Zealand Governments National Plan to eliminate family and sexual violence
Te Pūkotahitanga	Tangata Whenua Advisory Group
Te Rau Ora	National Māori Workforce Development Organisation
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	Te Tiriti o Waitangi
Tikanga	Māori customs and traditional values

Tino Rangatiratanga	Right of Māori to rule themselves
Wānanga	Māori learning place and approach
Wahine	Female
Whakapapa	Genealogy
Whakawhanaungatanga	The process for fostering connectedness and relationships
Whānau	Family or social unit
Whanaungatanga	Connectedness and relationships
Whānau ora	Wellbeing across the family unit

About the authors:

Rolinda Karapu (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Pūkeko, Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Porou) is a Māori Specialist Practitioner, Community Researcher and Change Facilitator working with Kaitiaki-ā-Whare-Wahine at Te Rau Ora. Rolinda has worked in the family violence sector for over 30 years, specialising in Māori models of practice, whānau-centred approaches, and workforce development. Rolinda is passionate about advancing kaupapa Māori frameworks that uphold the mana of whānau and mokopuna, and has contributed to numerous community-based initiatives, national advisory groups, and research projects. Grounded in the belief that “it takes a village to raise, provide for, and keep mokopuna safe,” Rolinda’s work champions collective responsibility and Indigenous-led solutions for the protection and preservation of whakapapa.

Karina Cootes (Ngāti Raukawa ki te Tonga, Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Ngai Tahu) is a Māori Specialist Practitioner, Community Educator working in Kaitiaki-ā-Whare-Wahine at Te Rau Ora. Karina has over 20 years’ experience in the social services and family violence sectors, including extensive work in the crisis, community, and residential space. She holds a Master’s in philosophy and currently works in workforce development, delivering wānanga to frontline kaimahi who support whānau living with the impacts of family violence, sexual violence, and suicide. Karina’s mahi is grounded in Te Ao Māori and community connection, with a focus on advancing the workforce to ensure whānau receive the best support. Her experience and passion for whānau wellbeing inform her contribution to strategic approaches that uplift responses to violence and promote long-term healing and transformation.

Dr Maria Baker (Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa) started a career as a Registered Nurse and continues her dedication to Hauora Māori and mental health and is currently CEO of a Māori Health Organisation. She earned her PhD and developed the theory 'Seeking Solutions to Being Restricted' to reveal how

Māori are managing mental distress and mental health services. Maria has a long history in Māori workforce and provider development across a range of domains. Maria was a member of Te Pūkotahitanga - Tangata Whenua advisory group for this research. maria.baker@tehikuhauora.nz