

Australian Black Panther Marlene Cummins: 'I'm over women who speak on behalf of us'

The Indigenous activist and artist says institutional racism, failures in feminism and Australia's history of 'demonising black men' has led to silence over abuse



Marlene Cummins at Mundine's Gym in Redfern, Sydney. Photograph: Alina Gozina/Blackfella Films



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In the introduction to the documentary *Black Panther Woman*, Redfern artist and activist Marlene Cummins declares: "It's time black women in this country come out with the truth of the abuses, without necessarily witch-hunting, without necessarily demonising black men either."

In 1971, Cummins was a young woman in love. Her partner Denis Walker was the handsome leader of a fledging Australian chapter of the Black Panthers, that took its inspiration from America's radical black rights movement of the same name. "We were angry, in your face, but we were so young," she says in the film.

Like the pair's relationship, the Black Panthers in Australia proved short-lived, but ignited the political consciousness of many activists, including Isabel Coe, Sammy Watson Jnr and Lionel Fogarty (who in the film says, "black power was like being proud of your black self"), who would continue to fight for racial equality throughout their lives. Cummins says it also inspired welfare programs, such as Aboriginal medical and legal services, which were largely run by women.

After she broke up with Walker, Cummins says she "went into a bit of a slump". She was living on the streets and reveals in the documentary how one evening she was allegedly taken

by two “highly respected” Indigenous men, one of whom dragged her into a flat, empty but for a tape recorder, and sexually abused her.

The documentary, directed and produced by Rachel Perkins of [Blackfella Films](#), follows Cummins as she reunites with her Black Panther counterparts from around the world at a conference in New York. It also shows glimpses of her life in Redfern, her long career as a musician and radio presenter, and struggle to “block out the past” with a string of addictions, to alcohol, drugs and gambling.

Cummins tells Guardian Australia she was not alone in being at the receiving end of abuse, allegedly perpetrated by community figures who have since been “immortalised in the history of this country, in the political history”, and that the women drew strength from one another. Violence against women perpetrated by those in positions of privilege is far from unique to the Indigenous Australian community, she adds.

What is unique are the contributing factors leading to Aboriginal women staying silent, she says – poor relations between Aboriginal people and the police and justice system, and disastrously paternalistic government policies. And at the rotten heart of all these is Australia’s institutional racism.

Cummins mentions the Intervention – the heavy-handed federal government response to allegations of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory in 2007 – as a “glaring example” of how violence against women and children is used to stigmatise Aboriginal people and as a political drawcard.

During the 60s and early 70s, a burgeoning black rights movement coincided with the feminist movement – and the two didn’t always find common ground.

The documentary shows archival footage of Coe telling white feminists, “blacks are going through violence every day of their lives and you women just talk about liberating women, want to liberate yourselves”. The Black Panthers had to be united in their fight for basic human rights, including land rights and access to better education and health services. Said Coe: “We can’t afford to split at the moment.”

“We come from a very tight, close knit kinship system,” Cummins says now. “The struggle against injustice brings us together, but it’s a cultural and spiritual thing too.” Too often the feminist movement has excluded the perspective of people of colour and failed to challenge a system that employs a “missionary mentality in dealing with Aboriginal people, since the time of invasion”, she says.

She is dubious about the word “feminist” and argues it does not come from an Aboriginal perspective. “It is a word that does not embrace Aboriginality or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. It was a white initiative,” she says, but emphasises that she does not want to discount or invalidate feminism.

She recently took part in a panel discussion and noted the presence of “celebrity feminists” who discussed Aboriginal women’s issues with “no knowledge” of her community’s dynamics. “I’m over these women who speak on behalf of us. They don’t reach out and involve us. That platform for Indigenous people needs to be given fairly and squarely.”

Cummins is ending a 30-year-silence on the abuse she suffered because she believes politicians must take more responsibility in tackling violence against women – Indigenous or otherwise. And she says it can be done without stigmatisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and without exploitation in the forms of land grabs, instead with community-led action “from the ground-level”.

“This country needs to give us a voice and not make those decisions for us.”