



No To Violence

Male Family Violence
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Men's
Referral
Service

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Submission to the Senate's Finance and Public Administration Reference Committee on Domestic Violence

This submission refers to five particular themes or issues related to the terms of reference of the Senate committee inquiry. There is much more to the terms of reference that we could write, and do not wish to de-prioritise other issues that we have not commented upon here. Time and capacity constraints have necessitated a focus on only some of the issues within the terms of reference. Please direct any comments or requests for clarification concerning this submission to Rodney Vlasis, Acting Chief Executive Officer.

1. Responding to, and preventing, violence against women with disabilities

No To Violence supports the extensive body of work done by Women with Disabilities Victoria (WDV) and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV) through the *Voices Against Violence* project. This project synthesises extensive reviews of the literature and the direct experiences of women with disabilities to make a series of recommendations concerning responding to and preventing violence against women with disabilities. The seven clearly and succinctly written reports stemming from this project are available at <http://wdv.org.au/publications.htm>.

A major theme of these reports concerns the intersectionalities between gender-based violence, sexism and misogyny directed towards women by men as a result of male power, privilege and entitlement, and disability-based violence due to societal attitudes of disablism and able-bodied privilege. Women with disabilities are targeted both because they are women, and because they are living with a disability. These two sites of marginalisation and oppression intersect not only to create fear, safety risks and major abuses of these women's fundamental human rights, but also intensify their experiences of disabling environments.

No To Violence suggests that the committee takes the time required to consider both the literature and women's stories represented in these reports, rather than jumping straight to the (very important, and practical) recommendations. We cannot highlight this research and policy work enough.

2. The impact of Commonwealth government policies on perpetrator violence

Men who perpetrate domestic violence¹ do so as an act of power and control to maintain male privilege and entitlement. Domestic violence does not consist of isolated acts of physical or sexual violence, but rather is a pattern of a range of tactics that men use to control their intimate partner (and often also their children). The various tactics used by men across physical, sexual, emotional, social, financial and spiritual forms of violence and other controlling behaviours, are deliberate choices by men to attempt to stop their intimate partner from doing particular things, to make their partner do particular things, or to punish their partner for perceived injustices.

Men who perpetrate domestic violence often have entitlement-based expectations of what their partner should or shouldn't do, expectations that are totally unfair to their partner and reflect male privilege. Men often blame their partners for 'making me angry', 'making me jealous' even though she is simply talking to a male platonic friend, etc. Men then choose a variety of tactics to prevent her from leading a normal life – using constant emotional abuse to denigrate her sense of worth, threatening physical violence if she continues to do what he believes she shouldn't, online stalking to monitor her social movements and to let her know that she is unable to escape him, etc.

Women who wish to escape the violence face many barriers to do so. Not only might her sense of worth and confidence be seriously harmed by his constant emotional abuse and the blame he puts onto her for his violence and controlling behaviour, but also the act of leaving might increase risk for her and her children. It is well established that separation and attempted separation can increase risk for many women, as men escalate their violent tactics in order to maintain control over her and the family. Furthermore, financial and economic barriers to separation are present for many women, particularly those on lower incomes or in rural areas where the reality is that they will struggle to provide the basics for their family without his income. This can especially be the case for women struggling with depression, anxiety, substance abuse and other issues that are a direct consequence of his use of violence over many years.

There is therefore a direct correlation between state and Commonwealth government policies affecting women's financial and economic independence, and their ability to care for their families, and the ability of women to take action to protect themselves and their children from men's use of domestic violence. Policies that make it more difficult for women to achieve sufficient financial independence from his income, and to provide a livelihood for her family above the poverty line, create additional barriers for women to separate or to attempt to separate from his violence.

Furthermore, as perpetrators consciously use a deliberate array of tactics to control their partner's (or former partner's) life, they will take advantage of Commonwealth and state government policies that make economic independence harder for women to achieve. Perpetrators will be more able to, unfortunately with some accuracy due to the nature of these policies, emphasise to the victim that she might not be able to cope financially if she leaves, and might not be able to support her children – given that there are not sufficient social welfare and other safety nets to ensure that her family does not fall below the poverty line. This interacts with the perpetrator's use of emotionally abusive tactics to denigrate her personal worth and to make her feel responsible for 'breaking up the family' if she leaves.

¹ States and territories vary in their use of the term 'domestic violence', 'family violence', or 'domestic and family violence'. Although the Victorian preference is to use the term 'family violence', this submission will use 'domestic violence' as preferred in the terms of reference.

To this effect, we are very concerned about a range of Commonwealth policies proposed in the 2014 federal budget. The policies will not only mean that less women will have the economic support, financial means and access to social capital to separate from a man who is using violence against her, or have the confidence to access professional and community supports (given that economic and social marginalisation creates barriers towards accessing professional and community support systems). It will also mean that perpetrators, in some cases, will have more tactics to draw upon to isolate and control women, or at least will make certain tactics easier to implement. The policies will introduce a new population of currently middle class women into economic marginalisation constraining their choices - and many perpetrators will know and take advantages of this to maintain their entrapment of their partners.

The policies that we are concerned about include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Older women will face additional economic barriers to leave partners who are using violence due to changes in the low income super supplement, and the indexation of the aged pension to the CPI rather than as a percentage of average weekly earnings.
- Reductions in Family Tax Benefit allowances and eligibility thresholds will reduce the ability of many women to leave a violent partner, especially given restrictions to sole parenting benefits introduced by the previous federal government.
- Reductions in eligibility for Newstart and Youth Allowance for young people will make economic and financial independence much harder for young women experiencing violence.
- Tightened eligibility for the Disability Support Pension will make it more difficult for women who experience mental health disabilities as a result of experiencing domestic violence, to achieve economic independence.

A key consequence underlining many of these policy reforms is access to affordable housing. As highlighted by a recent evaluation of an integrated case management response working towards safety for women and their children affected by domestic violence, medium- and long-term housing insecurity and instability for separated women can undo short-term gains in risk reduction and risk management. The evaluation showed that the lack of affordable housing made these women more vulnerable to the perpetrator's continuing tactics of coercive control.²

Both purchase prices (and resulting mortgage costs) and rental costs comprise a disproportionately high proportion of most middle and working class family incomes in many areas of Australia; for women who are attempting to separate from a violent partner, often with little financial independence due to his tactics of financial abuse and control, the above Commonwealth policies make stable and affordable housing extremely difficult for at-risk women and their children. Housing instability and unaffordability makes it much easier for perpetrators to place sustained covert and overt pressure on women (including through using their children as pawns) to reunite and therefore regain control over her life.

2 Silke, M. (2014). Victims' experiences of short- and long-term safety and wellbeing: Findings from an examination of an integrated response to domestic violence. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, no. 478. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. Retrieved on 19 July 2014 from http://aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/tandi_pdf/tandi478.pdf.

Unfortunately, the impact of policies such as these on the ability of women and children to work towards their safety has the potential to undermine some of the gains being made through the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*. **No To Violence therefore recommends that significant Commonwealth economic and social policy reforms, during the policy consideration and drafting process, be put through a modelling exercise to project potential impacts on women's access to affordable and stable housing options and on their ability to achieve economic and financial independence for themselves and their children. This modelling exercise should also consider any other potential impacts of proposed policy changes on women's social marginalisation and access to social capital, community supports and services.**

3. Unfinished business in recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty

Societal and institutional forms of patriarchy which result in the subordination of women and the entrenchment of men's gender-based entitlement and privilege, exists across most if not all cultures. Correspondingly, men's use of domestic violence is an issue across most if not all cultures.

Furthermore, the difficult and sometimes horrific experiences faced by particular cultures and communities, at times of acute or sustained crises due to outside-stemming pressures or natural disasters, are also not a direct cause of men's use of domestic violence. Hundreds of thousands of Australian men in quite privileged, economically stable and socially secure positions use violence against family members, including very severe forms. Violence is a choice that each man makes, supported by predominant models/narratives of masculinity that dehumanises, sexually objectifies and reduces women, and supported by institutional processes that maintain gender inequalities and sexism.

However, the task for some men to choose nonviolence, as distinct from violence, is not insignificant. Men who have experienced and come to see violence as a normal part of family life through their own family-of-origin experiences, or who are a part of communities experiencing major social dislocation and collective trauma, have a particularly difficult task in working towards behaviour change and nonviolence. We still need to expect these men, with appropriate services, supports and where necessary involvement from civil and criminal justice systems, to choose not to use violent and controlling behaviour against family members. There are no excuses for men's use of violence – it is each man's individual responsibility to stop. However, it's important not to make the processes of behaviour change more difficult than they already are.

There are a number of efforts emerging in Australia towards working with Indigenous men who are perpetrating domestic violence. No To Violence is involved in one of these, through assisting Tangentyere Council and the Alice Springs Women's Shelter to develop a men's behaviour change program for Aboriginal men living in town camps in Alice Springs. These efforts are vital irrespective of the situation that Indigenous communities find themselves in with respect to connection with land, language and culture – all men's use of violence against women and their children needs to stop, without waiting for the major social transformations required to work towards justice for marginalised and dislocated communities.

However, the task of ending men's violence against women within particular communities and cultural contexts will be more difficult if these major injustices remain. While not currently 'fashionable', in recent times in Australia's history, dialogue about the 'unfinished business' of what it means for Indigenous nations to have sovereignty over their land has been in the public discourse. This has taken various forms such as narratives around treaty, reconciliation, Pay-

the-Rent and Black GST (Genocide-Sovereignty-Treaty) campaigns, and most recently around constitutional reform.

The consequences of European colonisation and occupation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, and the dispossession and dislocation of Indigenous communities from their land and culture, have not been fully addressed. There is unfinished business, and remaining injustices through the lack of sufficient recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. While considerable progress has been made, efforts to find ways to bring this unfinished business into public discourse have stalled (through no lack of trying by Indigenous stakeholders). This unfinished business has direct and very practical consequences for the physical, mental and spiritual health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and for the cohesion and strength of Indigenous community life.

This unfinished business is not an excuse for Indigenous men's use of family violence. Addressing the injustices stemming from the occupation of Indigenous lands will require decades, if not an ongoing process. However, service system and community efforts to stop and prevent Indigenous men's use of family violence would be more effective if this unfinished business returns to the national agenda.

4. Addressing structural gender-based privilege and violence-supporting masculinities

No To Violence congratulates the committee's inclusion of community attitudes and the prevention of men's violence against women (PMVAW) within the terms of reference. We wish to emphasise, however, that PMVAW involves more than attempting to change community attitudes about violence against women.

Primary prevention efforts can be seen on a continuum ranging from less to more 'upstream' in attempting to intervene before violence occurs. An example of a list of violence prevention activities in order from downstream to more upstream includes:

- Social marketing and local community engagement campaigns that attempt to promote helpful community attitudes regarding men's violence against women, in terms of the incidence/prevalence of VAW, its impacts, causes, emphasising men's responsibility and challenging myths or unhelpful attitudes; and which promotes the confidence and skills of community members to identify and support people who are experiencing violence.
- Whole-of-school respectful relationships approaches that combine student education and appropriate school policy and environmental reforms.
- Anti-sexism bystander intervention approaches that attempt to support social norms for men to 'stand up' and express their discontent when they hear other men make sexist jokes or comments that sexually objectify or demean women.
- Gender equity projects in particular settings that attempt to identify and address the barriers – both structural/institutional/cultural and within people's attitudes and awareness – resulting in gender inequities with respect to access, safety, participation, economic/monetary rewards, leadership and status, etc.
- Projects that address particular ways in which dominant models of masculinity reproduce male entitlement and privilege, and reinforce invisible burdens of responsibility placed on to women.

No To Violence believes that prevention efforts across this whole spectrum are required, and that changing community attitudes towards violence is not sufficient in itself. For example, there is notable work in the UK to encourage more men to become involved in the child care industry,

as direct child care and early learning workers. Like Australia, only 2% of child care workers in the UK are male. This gender imbalance is problematic in a number of ways:

- It communicates that child care, particularly care of other people's children, is not an issue that men should be concerned about or take/share responsibility for.
- In a whole-of-community sense, it places an un-negotiated burden of responsibility on to women to take responsibility for community and collective child care concerns – as this burden is not shared between men and women, the almost total reliance on women to perform child care makes it more difficult for them to pursue other pathways and options.
- Men do not share in the experiences and struggles of what it means to be part of an underpaid industry with status and recognition far below the importance of the task, and far below the status gained (often by men) working in other industries with arguably less social benefit.
- Men miss out, or do not explore, opportunities to enrich and deepen their lives through transforming their sense of what it means to be a man, towards a more flexible masculinity aligned with caring for self, women, children, communities and the environment.³

The Commonwealth government is in the best position to support a nation-wide campaign that identifies and addresses a number of barriers, at a range of levels, towards men entering the child care industry. We are not suggesting that this particular project become the priority over all others, but rather, it is just one of many examples of prevention work located at the more 'upstream' end of engaging men around masculinities, and addressing structural causes of gender inequities.

5. National summit on domestic violence

Finally, No To Violence supports calls made by Domestic Violence NSW and other organisations for a national summit to address family and domestic violence as a national emergency.

While integrated domestic and family violence response systems – involving specialist women's family violence services, men's behaviour change program providers, police, child protection authorities, courts, corrections and other stakeholders – are the responsibilities of individual states and territories, there is much to be gained through identifying and sharing best practice across jurisdictions. All Australian states and territories experience challenges, difficulties, gaps and holes with respect to integrated service delivery attempting to ensure the safety of women and children, and accountability for perpetrators.

However, states and territories differ in the nature of these difficulties and holes – what might be working better in one state or territory might not be so in others. For example, while all states and territories are struggling with the work required to better integrate family violence and child protection practice, some have travelled further in attempting to address this than others. A national summit would create significant opportunities for sharing best practice approaches concerning key linkages in domestic and family violence response systems – such as between women's services and police, courts and corrections; between family violence and child protection services; between a range of stakeholders involved in multi-agency high risk client responses; etc.

³ Pule, P. (2013). Vanquishing the violator: Men, caring and lessons from ecology. *Ending Men's Violence Against Women and Children: The No To Violence Journal*, Spring 2013.

No To Violence believes that a national summit would need to be very well organised, with sufficient lead-in time to ensure high-level representation across state and territory based police, corrections, courts, child protection and other relevant government departments and authorities. It would also need to come with a sufficient budget to support attendance by state and territory-based family violence non-government organisation peak and statewide agencies.

While the organisation of a national summit should be a priority, its success will depend on the strategic clarity, partnership development and establishment of authorising environments and imprimatur by state and territory based stakeholders. A sufficient gestation period is required to enable this to occur. Furthermore, to be successful the summit would need to be the responsibility of the Commonwealth government, and not watered down to the status of a conference or symposium.

Conclusion

Over the past five years, the Commonwealth government has significantly increased its role in supporting state and territory efforts to respond to, and prevent, men's domestic violence and violence against women more generally. The *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*, and associated new national entities such as the Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety and the Foundation to Prevent Violence Against Women and their Children, demonstrate this growing commitment.

However, at a national level, domestic violence and men's violence against women more generally is a 'top tier' social, economic, community safety, justice and public health issue. A range of Commonwealth economic and social policies have an impact on the ability of women and children to work towards safety from the actions of men who perpetrate domestic violence, and an impact on the range and extent of tactics that perpetrators can use to coercively control and entrap their intimate partner and family members. The unfinished business concerning recognition of Indigenous sovereignty needs to be put back into the national dialogue, through the proactive creation of an enabling environment by the Commonwealth. Primary prevention approaches can be deepened towards addressing the structural drivers of gender inequities and the transformation of masculinities based on power-over and male entitlement and privilege, again supported by the Commonwealth. Through establishing high-level imprimatur for, and commissioning of, a national summit, and supporting an exchange between state and territory jurisdictions to enable national benefits from initiatives such as the Voices Against Violence project concerning women with disabilities, the Commonwealth can perform an important leadership function.