



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

Response to Draft National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children

February 2022



**INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE**

About TasCOSS

TasCOSS's vision is for one Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality where everyone has the same opportunity. Our mission is two-fold: to act as the peak body for the community services industry in Tasmania; and to challenge and change the systems, attitudes and behaviours that create poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Our membership includes individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to Tasmanians on low incomes or living in vulnerable circumstances. TasCOSS represents the interests of our members and their service users to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage, and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

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Introduction

TasCOSS welcomes the development of the Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032. We are making a written submission because we and several of our member organisations are concerned about the utility of the survey to adequately encapsulate the experience and expertise of our sector in relation to the proposed plan. In particular, we do not feel there was appropriate opportunity to discuss elements not addressed in the draft Plan.

While TasCOSS and our members support various aspects of the Plan, in particular the Principles underpinning it, we believe there are further priorities for action the Plan should include.

Key Issues

Inclusion of discrete targets and plans for how progress will be measured

Several of our stakeholders raised concerns with the lack of specific, measurable targets in the Plan. For example, although the gender equality is recognised as a foundation principle and the Plan recognises the gendered drivers of violence against women and children, there is a lack of concrete steps or targets included which outline how this issue is to be addressed. We recommend the Plan include specific examples of programs or initiatives to achieve the stated objectives, as well as information about how progress towards targets will be measured. We also recommend that any targets included within the Plan be aligned with Australia's obligations at international law – for example, in relation to gender equality, we refer to the recommendations from the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2010 on Australia's Implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW):

- That the Australian Government improve the quality of government decision-making and policy-making relating to women by ensuring that the federal Office for Women is adequately funded and has influence at the highest level of government
- That the Australian Government strengthen the independent agencies that contribute to gender equality, including the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency and the Australian Human Rights Commission
- That the Australian Government promote concrete measures such as setting targets to increase the proportion of women running for election and entering both houses of federal Parliament

Greater recognition of the need for broad systems responses to family violence

Feedback from our stakeholders indicates the Plan does not adequately address the need for responses to family violence which operate across multiple systems (for example, justice and health) to appropriately identify and respond to family violence. Family violence is not only a human rights and criminal law issue, but an issue which has significant public health and economic impacts on women, children and families. The Plan should include a focus on targets which utilise multidisciplinary approaches to addressing family violence (such as health justice partnerships).

Investment in essential services and supports

The effectiveness of the Plan will depend on funding and supports available to address the most pressing needs of victim survivors who are most vulnerable in our community. For example, any strategic work in the area of family and sexual violence must also acknowledge and address the need for far greater supports in areas such as housing and homelessness. This is an urgent issue for Tasmanian women and families, where there is a chronic shortage of social and affordable housing and demand which far outstrips what is available for women in crisis, particularly women and families who are impacted by family violence. Data shared with our member organisations indicates there was an increase of over 50% in victim survivors of family violence seeking housing assistance in the last year but the current resourcing of services means they have not been able to meet this demand. As a result, in the last year there has been a significant drop in the number of victim survivors of family violence who were housed.

We urge the federal Government to prioritise and help deliver, through incentives and other levers, the construction of social and affordable housing, as well as investing in models of community, social and public housing which cater to the needs of particular cohorts (such as women with a disability) who experience far higher rates of violence in the home, with limited options for alternative supports.

We also urge the Government to invest in measures and initiatives which respond to the recommendations made by specialist services. For example, in relation to the family law system (one of the identified areas for reform included in the Plan), we note the recommendations made by Women's Legal Services Australia and their five-step plan to increase the safety of women and children,¹ which includes the following five steps:

- Develop a specialist pathway for domestic violence cases in family courts
- Reduce trauma and support those who are most at risk of future violence and death
- Intervene early and provide effective legal help for the most disadvantaged
- Support women and children to financially recover from domestic violence
- Strengthen the understanding of all family law professionals on domestic violence and trauma

Commitment to lived experience in policy and service design

Victim survivors with lived experience of family and sexual violence are playing an important role in changing attitudes, beliefs and understandings, not just in Tasmania but throughout Australia. There is a need to create further opportunities for people with lived experience to share their stories and make recommendations for systemic change to better support victim survivors and prevent future violence. This includes expansion of programs such as peer-support models which draw on lived experience to raise awareness and improve responses.

Invest in school-based programs that work

Recent consultation within our sector highlighted the effectiveness of school-based prevention programs, such as those run by the Sexual Assault Support Service. We recommend further Federal funding to implement prevention education programs throughout the education sector, as well as the following:

- peer-to-peer initiatives within respectful relationships education programs

¹ https://www.womenslegal.org.au/files/file/SAFETY%20FIRST%20POLICY%20PLATFORM.MAY%202016_FINAL.pdf

- embedding programs as a part of a whole-school approach
- engagement of young people in planning and development of programs.

Ensure the Plan addresses the needs of Aboriginal communities

Whilst we support the development of a particular action plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, we acknowledge the importance of both intersectionality and Closing the Gap as foundation principles for the plan, and urge the Government to centre the voices, experience and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout the National Plan.

Ensure the plan recognises the particular needs of women from marginalised groups

Many communities are also experiencing particular vulnerabilities, both in their experience of family violence and how they are empowered to respond. The Plan needs to identify clear strategies and investment pathways to establish and maintain services which are accessible and appropriate for a diverse range of communities, including women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, migrant and refugee women and families, and people with disability. The Plan should also directly address ongoing funding for specialist organisations, as many women and children have needs which are best addressed by specialist services, with professionals who are appropriately trained to meet the particular needs of certain communities (such as Aboriginal Australians, women and children with disability, or women and children from migrant or CALD backgrounds).

The urgent need for training and education in the legal and criminal justice systems

In the area of law reform and criminal justice responses to family violence, we believe there is a pressing need for more mandatory training and education at all levels of the system, including first responders and police, legal practitioners, court staff and judicial officers. There is a need for consistent practices to be developed around issues which directly impact the experience of victim survivors throughout the legal process, including but not limited to the following:

- consistent jury directions and charging practices (at all levels of the Court process) in family-violence related matters
- comprehensive judicial education on issues relating to family and sexual violence, including the principles outlined in the draft Plan
- further development of specialist family violence courts
- specialist training for all professionals (including judicial officers, legal professionals and court staff) to ensure all legal and court service users are aware of and responding appropriately to instances of family violence
- clear mechanisms for complaint and action in relation to inappropriate conduct within the court setting (including conduct by legal representatives and judicial officers)
- greater funding for the development and implementation of Health Justice Partnerships, which provide both a valuable service to clients as well as an educative role in health and legal settings.

Ensure the Plan addresses needs of people in regional, rural and remote areas

Many victim survivors in Tasmania are residing in regional or remote areas with limited access to services, including supports, housing, and health services. The Plan must identify clear strategies and funding commitments to overcome the current barriers in service delivery to women in this cohort.

Address technological and other rapidly-changing threats to (women's) safety

While the National Plan is intentionally broad in focus, targeted objectives should also be included to address issues of particular concern to the sector. For example, there is a significant and increasing need for supports in the area of technological safety, with many Tasmanian women experiencing various forms of electronic or technological abuse. While we understand that in other jurisdictions family violence support services have the capacity to refer clients for a technological 'safety sweep', where their homes and/or devices can be searched to identify monitoring, stalking or abuse, this is not currently an option for services in Tasmania. This is one example of an area where consistent guidelines and funding between jurisdictions to develop and run services could have a significant impact on Tasmanian women and the family and sexual violence support sector.

Detailed plans and processes for how the sector can respond to unplanned emergencies

Our member organisations highlighted the impact of Covid 19 on the sector, which saw a withdrawal of a range of available services to women in need, such as neo-natal and post-natal care. The Plan should include detailed information about how the sector will be supported to better respond to future situations of crisis, noting that Tasmanians with vulnerabilities are far more likely to be impacted by sudden changes to service delivery often because of limited financial resources to access alternative services.

The Plan must address funding needs

TasCOSS urges the Government to commit to meaningful funding of the sector, in particular to support and further develop the research and advocacy capacity of community service organisations, to ensure policy development is responsive to the actual needs of the sector and the community. The Plan must acknowledge the unique experience and expertise of the community sector in responding to family and sexual violence and empower community organisations to continue their work. TasCOSS acknowledges the varied and different needs of community members and believes community organisations are best-placed to anticipate and fulfil these needs. Comprehensive funding is needed to ensure the specialist, general and informal workforces are trained, resourced and equipped to safely respond, heal and prevent, and enable wellbeing in response to family and sexual violence.

Recommendations

- Inclusion of specific targets and plans for how progress is to be recorded and measured
- Recognition of the need for multidisciplinary responses to family and gender-based violence
- Investment in essential services and supports
- Implementation of measures as recommended by specialist services
- Commitment to lived experience in policy and service design
- Invest in school-based programs that work
- Ensure the Plan addresses the needs of Aboriginal communities

- Ensure the plan recognises the particular needs of women from marginalised groups, including the funding of specialist services
- The urgent need for training and education in the legal and criminal justice systems
- Ensure the Plan addresses needs of people in regional, rural and remote areas
- Address technological and other rapidly-changing threats to (women's) safety
- Detailed plans and processes for how the sector can respond to unplanned emergencies
- The Plan must address funding needs