

# Homelessness and Violence against Women in Australia.

## Will “The Plan” work?

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*The new Rudd Labor Government’s approach to domestic/family violence and homelessness has the capacity to radically address decades of neglect in these fields. This paper explores the potential impact of the Homelessness White Paper and the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women. In particular it examines what impact the new approach may have on the incidence of domestic/family violence and the demand for crisis accommodation. It also discusses the impacts on the specialist service provider sector and what risks may need to be addressed.*

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For the first time in Australia’s history, reducing violence against women and their children and reducing homelessness are publicly and loudly on the Prime Ministers lips. We have had a National Council convened, *The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*. This Council has had expert representatives from the women’s domestic and family violence sector and sexual assault sector meaningfully participating in the development of a National Plan to present to the Commonwealth Government. This National Council has to its credit produced a well thought out, extensive, and extremely ambitious National Plan aimed at reducing violence against women and their children over the next twelve years. Amongst its recommendations the *National Council’s Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009-2021* highlights 20 high priority issues it claims are urgent and which must be addressed if things are going to begin to change. The National Council has presented ‘their plan’ to the Commonwealth government which has committed to reviewing it and presenting it to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) with the view of developing a whole of government National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women. In the meantime, the Commonwealth Government has committed to implementing 11 of the 20 high priority recommendations listed as urgent by the National Council, and consult with States and Territories on 7 of them. Two of the high priority urgent recommendations are being considered by the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth Governments *The Road Home: Homelessness White Paper* is an important vehicle for any National Plan to reduce violence against women. *The Road Home* is an extensive and far reaching framework that ambitiously aims to halve homelessness in Australia by 2020. There is no argument that *The Road Home* has a lot of money attached to it, not least through the extensive construction of new housing.

The Commonwealth Rudd led Labor Government's approach to domestic and family violence and homelessness has for the first time in history the capacity to radically address decades of neglect in these fields. Yes Mr Rudd, as you say, the time has well and truly come; and you are right, our Nation State must have zero tolerance of violence against women in all of its forms.<sup>1</sup>

Will a Government National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women (still to be seen) and *The Road Home* do this for us?

I want to explore the potential impact of the *Homelessness White Paper*, the *National Council's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*, and some of the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments responses. In particular I want to examine what impact the new approach may have on the incidence of domestic and family violence and the demand for crisis accommodation as this has traditionally been the major response in this country. I also want to discuss the potential impacts on the specialist domestic and family violence service provider sector (mainly women's services) and what risks may need to be addressed. Additionally I will highlight a number of other concerns. These include the lack of systematic and meaningful consultation with the women's domestic and family violence sector, the lack of support to this overworked and vulnerable sector, a predominantly underpaid at risk workforce of women, and the potential to continually miss the opportunity for massive social change by not removing what could be called gender-blind blinkers. Never before has this country been in such a good position to finally create a momentum for real social change on these issues. We cannot lose this potential by marginalising women's and the women's sectors' voices, experiences and expertise.

The National Council's Plan to reduce violence against women and their children argues that ... "Without implementing a plan to reduce violence against women and their children, an estimated 750,000 Australian women will report being a victim of violence in 2021-22".<sup>2</sup> One in three Australian women already experience physical violence in their lifetime. Many groups of women such as Indigenous women, women with disabilities, women in rural and

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<sup>1</sup> The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP Prime Minister of Australia, 2008. Cited in The National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, March 2009, *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, 2009-2021*, FAHCSIA, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (March 2009) *A Snapshot to Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009-2021*, FAHCSIA, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 4.

remote areas, immigrant and refugee women, younger and older women are particularly overrepresented in these statistics. Indigenous women are completely overrepresented in the homelessness and violence statistics and are more likely to suffer more serious injury than non-Indigenous women<sup>3</sup>. Are we doing enough here? Are we doing the right thing? There is huge dissent about the current interventions.

Women with disabilities are clearly one of the most excluded, neglected and isolated groups in society. The National Plan acknowledges that ...“Women with disabilities are more vulnerable to violence, often have fewer pathways to appropriate support, and often have fewer options to escape violence particularly when perpetrated by partners and/or carers”.<sup>4</sup> They recommend working on a National Disability Strategy which will include violence against women with disabilities. This may be a good strategy but it would have also been important to provide a focus on women with disabilities in the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children – simply because they are vulnerable women.

Immigrant and refugee women are particularly vulnerable, exploited and disadvantaged. The National Plan states that ...“Immigrant and refugee women are more likely to be murdered as a result of domestic violence”.<sup>5</sup> Again, there is not much focus on this group in either of the frameworks. Nor is there any apparent recognition of the time, resources and cost of supporting families for up to 2 years to go through the processes for these families to gain access to citizenship rights such as income and housing – a cost primarily borne by the specialist women’s domestic and family violence sector.

Young women are more likely to be victims of homicide and be labelled as homeless young women when in fact most of them are leaving their homes because of violence and abuse, including sexual abuse.

Older single women affected by violence, poor and in need of affordable appropriate housing are an enormous demographic group about to need our support service sector in a huge way. Governments have the research which forecasts the impact here; governments need to resource and prepare our services as soon as possible.<sup>6</sup>

Women in regional, rural and remote areas face increased vulnerability due to drought, stress, hardship, isolation and violence supporting attitudes.

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<sup>3</sup> *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>5</sup> The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (March 2009) *A Snapshot to Time for Action: The National Council’s Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009-2021*, FAHCSIA, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 4,

<sup>6</sup> Refer to papers presented at the Women’s Housing Futures Conference Melbourne August 2009, not available on line at the time of writing this paper.

We now know the huge health impact of violence against women <sup>7</sup> and the devastating effects on children of all ages. We also now know the human rights, economic, social and civic costs of violence against women, and our obligation to the United Nations to redress this.

We are now clear that the primary cause of women's homelessness in Australia is domestic and family violence.<sup>8</sup> We are also now clear that domestic and family violence is the major driver of homelessness per se in Australia<sup>9</sup>.

So it begs a few rhetorical questions. Why is there such a disproportionate focus on 'rough sleeping' when it is known that most people who are homeless are not rough sleeping and women will put up with violence to keep a roof over their heads, or they are too scared to leave or get help, or they can't leave or tell anyone?

Focusing on poverty is critical; however we know women from all socio-economic groups experience violence because they are women not because of their economic status. Why is there such a focus on employment and education when it is clear that women traumatised by violence and abuse have many other needs to be met before they can participate effectively and safely in employment and education.

I am not saying that we should not address 'rough sleeping', of course we should. I am not saying that poverty is not a huge factor, it is. Nor am I saying that education and employment are not important. Women who are educated and employed in the public sphere are less likely to tolerate abusive behaviour, more likely to resist and leave abusive behaviour, more likely to know their rights and access supports and legal remedies, and more likely to receive a better response from police and other services. However, the timing must be thought through a little better before service performance measures such as these are introduced against women and their children who have experienced violence. Intimate partner homicide rates are remaining stable, if not increasing, so we have not got this analysis right yet.

A number of issues must be addressed if a country such as Australia is to reduce domestic and family violence against women and their children. The domestic and family violence sector has been arguing for a long time that a systematic approach must be undertaken at a multitude of levels. These include:

- Strong leadership by the Nation State through its Governments in policy, legislation, policing and judicial implementations, funding and community awareness campaigns.

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<sup>7</sup> Vic Health, 2004, *The Health Costs of Violence, Measuring the Burden of Disease Caused by Intimate Partner Violence*, Department of Human Services, Melbourne Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, *The Road Home, Homelessness White Paper*, FAHCSIA, Canberra, Australia.

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. Cit.*

- A well resourced and supported specialist domestic and family violence sector and homelessness sector.
- Responsibility taken by other parts of the service sector.
- Research, monitoring and evaluation.
- A whole of society approach.
- Improving the status of women in general.

The domestic and family violence sector has cautioned on approaches which focus primarily on housing or homelessness or focus on physical violence- though these are important of course. Many will admit that it has been an uneasy fit having the primary domestic and family violence interventions sitting under the homelessness umbrella. Many have argued that it is better placed under justice. Others argue that the homelessness umbrella is a better fit due to the need for refuges, shelters, crisis accommodation and social housing. And then we had SAAP.<sup>10</sup> What is apparent to the domestic and family violence sector is that despite *The Road Home* initially acknowledging the extent of homelessness in Australia caused by domestic and family violence, it rapidly loses sight of this fact with its subsequent focus on ‘rough sleepers’ and issues such as employment, education and training.

In *The Road Home* it is only when we get to ‘Scoping the Problem’ about homelessness in Australia that we get to the section on ‘who is homeless’. This immediately focuses on ‘rough sleepers’ before it moves to the increase of children under 12 accessing our services. Later in the section under ‘Causes’ it states “*Domestic and family violence continues to be the major driver of homelessness*”. This begs the rhetorical question again. If domestic and family violence is the main structural driver of homelessness why is it not the major focus of the Executive Summary, or the White Paper strategies, or the State and Territory implementation plans?

The lack of integration between services is pointed out, for example the National Council states ... “*Achieving these goals hinges on the entire system joining seamlessly, with all the parts working together, to assure women and their children that they will be safe and live free from violence*”.<sup>11</sup>

Both the White Paper and the National Council’s Plan claim that we currently have a fragmented system and attempt to rectify this in many ways. Yet they are clearly fraught with the risk of perpetuating silos themselves because of a lack of integration between the White Paper and the National Plan.

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<sup>10</sup> Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program.

<sup>11</sup> The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (March 2009) *Ibid.* p. 7.

And what about at jurisdictional levels? One jurisdiction, often held up as a State leading in these issues, held a State-wide Round Table on Family Violence on the same day as a State-wide Round Table on Homelessness. Consequently participants could not participate in both issues. Major stakeholders in the domestic and family violence sector and the homelessness sector did not even know about the Homelessness Roundtable.

One jurisdiction launched its State *Implementation Plan* in conjunction with the Commonwealth, and the State funded Domestic Violence peak body was not informed of the event by either party.

You will be aware of more silos like this happening in your own jurisdictions. Governments have to take a leadership role in getting rid of the silos.

So, are the frameworks and plans likely to work.

Strong leadership through a Nation State's Governments in policy, legislation, policing and judicial implementations, funding and community awareness campaigns are critical for social change campaigns such as reducing violence against women. It is without doubt that the current Commonwealth Government is clearly going in the right direction. Bringing in the jurisdictions to a National Plan via the COAG<sup>12</sup> along with the task to halve homelessness through its own work and through State and Territory *Implantation Plans* is good. Heads of State and Senior Ministers must continue to keep these pressing social issues front and centre on the agenda in a systematic and sustained way and not be tempted to be distracted by other arising issues.

The policy frameworks and *Implementation Plans* are strong nationally, and in States and Territories, more so in some than others however. Calls for urgent legal reform are timely, urgent and underway. Immediate moves to improve legislation, relationships between jurisdictions, and change unhelpful legislation are highly commended and necessary. In particular, the Shared Parenting legislation and how it is applied must be recognised for the danger that it is to women and children in abusive and unsafe relationships and repealed forthwith.

There are some very good decisions coming out of the Courts and there are still some very bad decisions. Improved legislation will help; however compulsory training in understanding domestic and family violence should be compulsory for all Judges, Magistrates, Registrars and Court volunteers.

Our members report that policing violence against women in all States and Territories is in general continually improving. However consistency across all areas is lacking and appropriate training and monitoring must continue.

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<sup>12</sup> Council of Australian Governments

Community awareness campaigns are often controversial, unhelpful or unsustainable. A great deal of resources has been invested in the past for short bursts of this so called social marketing, some never hit the air, and some were completely inappropriate and withdrawn.

One lesson is that insufficient advice from experts in a variety of fields can be ineffective or at worse counterproductive. The new public campaigns are to focus on positive behaviour. I hope the new community awareness campaign designers consult with the women's domestic and family violence sector. I also hope that enough expertise and energy is put into the issue similar to other social change attempts such as anti-littering, anti-smoking, wearing seatbelts and drunk and drugged drivers - until the social change is achieved in a sustainable way.

Funding is a controversial subject isn't it. The amount of money going into social and public housing through the White Paper framework is highly commendable. And we understand that it is a 'down payment'. It is also commendable, given that domestic and family violence is the major driver of homelessness, that some of the nation building money will go towards new and improved women's refuge complexes and to exit properties from crisis properties in general. What is missing however is the consultation, transparency and planning about how much of, and how this funding is going to be put towards improved refuges. Nor do we know what proportion of the exit properties will be prioritised or targeted for exits from women's refuges to relieve the current bottlenecks which occur. Given that domestic and family violence is the main driver of homelessness, the major cause of women's homelessness and the main reason why people seek specialist homelessness service support one would hope that there will be a transparent, articulated strategy across all jurisdictions, monitored by the Commonwealth Government to prioritise much of this housing for these women and children.

The 'safe at home' concepts are admirable, as long as in the implementation we do not get captured by prison-like home security to keep women and children locked away and protected. It will be valuable for many women where it is assessed that it will be safe for her to remain in her home, or in many cases to return to her home after a brief stay in crisis accommodation. However there will still be many women who will not feel safe to stay or who will need to temporarily leave and access crisis accommodation until legal and other safety matters are put in place to enable her to return home. It is disappointing to see the small amounts of funding allocated from the jurisdictions for the 'safe at home' support work. This is critical work that many domestic and family violence workers already do, which is unrecognised, and one worker to cover a whole rural region or two workers to cover a metropolitan region just is not going to cut it.

This brings me to the appalling oversight of the needs of the specialist women's domestic and family violence sector. This is a sector which has been under stress in all sorts of ways for many years, undertakes hard, stressful and low valued work for poor pay and conditions. Despite achieving amazing outcomes for women and their children and despite lip service from Governments, women's refuges, shelters and outreach services as a sector have not had any staffing or infrastructure capacity building or resource growth targeted towards them.

The National Council has recognised the inadequate funding of our services<sup>13</sup>. A recent survey undertaken by WESNET showed that along with lack of housing for clients, the ability to attain and retain skilled staff was at a critical point. Some *Implementation Plans* refer loosely to developing the workforce but what they mean is not clear. There is no mention of better capacity for services to recruit and retain appropriately skilled staff. Training alone will not be sufficient.

We do not have a well resourced and supported specialist domestic and family violence sector. This is a huge risk for Governments and an even bigger risk factor for women and children who are at risk from domestic or family violence. As community awareness increases, so too will demand for specialist support and services, whether it be directly or through secondary consultation and support of other services. Research has told us that when a woman seeks help for her experiences of violence and abuse and she is met with an unhelpful response she will become reluctant to seek help again until there is a further crisis. Some responses can be clearly unhelpful to the point of negligence.

It is important that other mainstream parts of the community and service sector become accountable and responsible for responding appropriately to domestic and family violence. However it is also critical that they do not make things worse. One way of strengthening the specialist domestic and family violence sector and ensure that the non-specialist services are trained appropriately and joined up with specialist services is to fund the specialist services to do that training, protocol development and integration work. Alternatively it risks more silos and more structural negligence.

The National Council asks important questions which we need answered. There are many assumptions inherent within the government *Implementation Plans* which do not answer these questions.

What interventions successfully stop men's violence against women?

It is important to evaluate men's behaviour change programs. Mainstream organisations, the community and governments have a lot of faith in them. However only a few of them are working within good practice frameworks. There is little monitoring and evaluation. Some only pay lip service to partner safety as a priority and have been captured by the therapeutic approach of working with their clients. Many should be banned as they potentially make it more dangerous for the women and children. It is timely that rigorous, credible and longitudinal research into what works is done.

Perpetrator programs alone will not successfully stop men's violence against women. A coordinated, integrated system with a strong criminal justice focus which shares the same understandings about domestic and family violence, is committed to and actively works

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<sup>13</sup> The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (March 2009) *Ibid.* p. 6,



towards the safety of women and children and perpetrator accountability, is what we should be developing and evaluating. When we have strong community awareness campaigns at all levels of our society not just in the media; strong and consistent legal and social sanctions; and strong and appropriate support for victims and their children we will start to see the end to men's violence against women.

This in itself though is still not sufficient. Violence against women in our society is underpinned by the disadvantaged social, political and economic status of women. Attempts to prevent violence against women cannot be undertaken outside of strategies aimed at structural change which will enhance women's position in society.

The National Council asks other important questions which need answers. What works in primary prevention? What services for victims and their families promote safety and recovery? What law and procedure provides a just legal response for victims? What risk assessment and risk management tools effectively trigger early intervention opportunities?

The introduction of fatality reviews across the board is essential and will help us monitor, learn and prevent. Only one state has committed to this.

It is difficult to comment on where it is all up to when only one of eight *Implementation Plans* is public and the progress of the Commonwealth is not transparent. One of the 20 Urgent recommendations from the National Council was to ... "*Develop a national primary prevention framework that draws on international and national evidence of the most effective strategies for preventing violence against women, and prioritises key settings and population groups in which to coordinate primary prevention initiatives and actions*". It will be important to meaningfully consult with the specialist violence against women sector in the formulating of this framework and be accountable to us as women about where things are up to. Whilst there is Commonwealth commitment to working with the jurisdictions to establish a National Centre of Excellence for the Prevention of Violence against women there is no commitment apparent from any of the jurisdictions in their state and territory *Implementation Plans Fact Sheets* to work towards this with the Commonwealth.

In fact the state and territory *Implementation Plans* don't mention domestic and family violence in their homelessness statistics preamble at all. This is despite the fact that it is highlighted in the White Paper as the major driver of homelessness. In fact one State does not mention domestic or family violence throughout its entire *Implementation Plan Fact Sheet*.

Some *Implementation Plans* refer to children's workers in crisis accommodation services but do not specify that this will be in domestic or family violence services despite the exceptional work these services are doing with children and which could and should be enhanced.

The Commonwealth and the jurisdictions claim that they will consult extensively. Consultation cannot practically be undertaken with all stakeholders. That is why consultations must be undertaken with National and State peak bodies and networks.

Consultation is not handpicking some individuals to talk to or to take advice from: and then asking them not to talk about what they are advising on.

The national funded homelessness peak body Homelessness Australia is not on the *Prime Ministers Council on Homelessness* nor is WESNET, the national peak body for women's domestic and family violence services across Australia. WESNET has still not been refunded as a peak body after being defunded by the Howard Government. Nor do all states and territories have funded homelessness or domestic and family violence peaks. Clearly, if we as the specialist homelessness and domestic and family violence sectors are to truly work in partnership with Governments, other not-for-profits, the community and business, as the *Implementation Plan Fact Sheets* argue we should, then our work, capacity, expertise and advice must be harnessed structurally through peak body funding support.

*The Road Home* says “While domestic violence rates in Australia have decreased slightly in the decade to 2005, the number of intimate partner homicides has remained stable. Violence will continue to be a major cause of homelessness unless rates of domestic violence fall significantly or new strategies are found to keep victims of violence mostly women safer in their homes”.

The National Council's plan argued for sweeping changes. A framework for social change through 6 outcomes, delivered through 25 strategies and 117 actions. 20 of the 117 actions are identified by the Council for 'Urgent Implementation', as the minimum intervention to instigate change. Yet Government has agreed to action 11 of the 20, consult with states and territories on 7 and consider 2 in the context of the National Plan.

I urge the Commonwealth and the States and Territories to present to us a Government National Plan to reduce violence against women and their children with the appropriate will and resources behind it which will be held up as a standard of international best practice. In the mean time I urge *The Road Home* to not forget the main driver (pun intended). As I said earlier, these directions have the capacity for the first time to radically redress years of neglect in these areas and pave the way for social change which will help women and their children participate in society equally and safely. Let's get it right.

We have stopped littering, we wear seatbelts, I don't see why we as a society cannot stop harming women and their children.

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