

WOMEN'S SPECIALIST SERVICES

Policy position

- Specialist women's services are the most effective way of providing services that provide optimal outcomes to victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.
- The impact and effectiveness of these specialist services is underpinned by a set of good practice principles (Attached) that are supported by international research and evidence-based practice (AWAVA, 2016).
- This model of practice has been built on feminist and social justice approaches to responding to violence against women and is informed by the gendered understanding of causes of violence.
- The use of a feminist approach ensures that violence against women, including sexual violence, is understood in terms of power dynamics and social structures, rather than treated as purely individual experiences.
- Being attentive to existing power imbalance, these services seek to restore power, dignity and strength to victim-survivors, while advocating more broadly for social justice and equality, in the recognition that people of all genders experience detrimental consequences of rigid gender expectations and the violent use of power (National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence, 2015).
- The unique role of specialist women's services lies in enabling better long- and short-term outcomes for women and children who have lived with violence.
- In practice this means helping women to recognise patterns of coercion and control, victim-blaming, advocating for a woman as she navigates the complex legal and service systems and mitigating possible negative assumptions others may have about gender equality and violence against women.
- Specialist women's services treat women's safety as a paramount principle (Department of Human Services, 2012; DV Victoria, 2006).

Background

With a variety of different organisations in Australia providing services to victim-survivors of violence, it is important to recognise the proven efficacy of the established specialist women's services sector. These services are at the forefront of ending violence against women. Their feminist framework locates violence against women and children as occurring within a patriarchal society where male dominance and privilege are normalised.

Over the last 40 years, specialist women's services have been established in response to the need for comprehensive and trauma-informed support (Andrew 2013). Guided by women-centred models of practice, these services include organisations working to address domestic and family violence (including refuges and shelters), sexual assault services and rape crisis centers (which provide support to all people regardless of gender), and organisations working with diverse groups of women including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women with disabilities and others on issues of violence against women.

Specialist women's services work with other organisations, including women's legal services, women's health centres, women's information services, working women's centres and generalist services for diverse groups of women, to provide holistic support to women and their children so they can live free of violence. While some services responding to violence also provide support to men and other people who are non-gender binary, they do so in a way that also recognises the gendered dynamics of violence.

Building on years of experience effectively responding to violence against women, specialist women's services have developed a set of good-practice principles guiding their work. Given the proven efficacy of this model, it is important that new and existing organisations incorporate these principles in their service provision to achieve the best possible outcomes for women and children. It is also important that more support and recognition is given to their key role in responding to violence against women (ANROWS 2017).

Recognising intersectionality

Recognising intersectionality - the way in which different women face multiple forms of systemic and structural oppression, disadvantage and inequality - is essential to addressing inequality through policy and program design and delivery. It is essential to note also that it is not people's identities that cause vulnerability but is instead oppressive systems and practices that are based on discriminatory biases and assumptions.

Operating from a client-centred, trauma-informed, empowering framework, specialist women's services work towards greater gender equality while recognising the complexity of intersectionality and that women are best qualified to decide on their own pathways to recovery from violence and trauma.

About WESNET

With almost 350 eligible members across Australia, WESNET represents a range of organisations and individuals including women's refuges, shelters, safe houses and information/referral services.

Harnessing its large national network of members and associate members, WESNET plays an important role in identifying unmet needs, canvassing new and emerging

issues, facilitating policy and sector debate and providing expert advice to government to provide improved responses to the problem of domestic and family violence. We do this within our communities - including the Australian Women's Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) - and in partnership with non-government stakeholders.

References and further reading

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Good practice principles

Comprehensive and integrated good-practice response is underpinned by (1) a rights-based approach that enables understanding of the gendered nature of the violence, its causes and consequences and (2) empowers victim-survivors by enabling self-determination, control over processes and choice. Good-practice service provision, takes (3) a client-centred approach, remains accountable to victim-survivors and (4) places their safety, needs and interests at the centre of all decisions. It also works to ensure that (5) perpetrators are held accountable for their use of violence. Good-practice service provision delivers (6) culturally-sensitive, holistic and accessible services to diverse groups of women.

Using these principles as a framework, specialist women's services are working to ensure the efficacy of the support they provide and to create the conditions for victim-survivors to access justice. These principles should underpin the delivery and coordination of all essential services responding to women and children subjected to violence.

(1) A rights-based approach

A rights-based approach ensures that gender-based violence is recognised as a fundamental violation of human rights, which is systemic and both a cause and consequence of gender inequality and discrimination. It also acknowledges that this violence disproportionately impacts women, children, people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, people with disability and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A rights based approach highlights that responses must not only address the impacts and trauma of violence, but must also deal with the root causes of gender inequality and other intersecting dimensions of inequality and work toward achieving substantive equality, particularly by promoting women's agency and empowerment and women's capacity to meet their needs (UNWomen, 2016).

On the one hand, a rights-based approach recognises that governments have an obligation to protect, promote and fulfil women and children's rights. On the other hand, this approach requires services to develop the capacity of women as "right holders" to play an active role in accessing and benefiting from the rights in which they are entitled. This includes ensuring the creation of avenues for victim-survivors to have their voices heard (UNWomen, 2016).

(2) Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment

As well as putting in practice a gendered understanding of violence, specialist women's services aim to redress the underlying inequalities and power imbalances that women encounter in day-to-day life. Empowerment is promoted not just as an individual process but as a collective effort towards social change. Positioning victim-survivors as active

participants, empowerment methods work to recognise, respect and promote women's agency and support women to consider their own interests, obligations and risks when making decisions - including situations where a woman might decide not to use available services (Allen et al, 2012). By placing women's interests first, providing them with information and education as well as social and economic support, victim-survivors are able to make informed decisions and choices, making them less likely to return to their abuser and more likely to seek help in the future if needed (Zweig et al, 2007).

(3) A client-centred approach

A client-centred approach works to ensure that specific attention is applied to individual women's and children's safety, confidentiality and well-being throughout all functions of a service. Specialist staff are trained to understand trauma and address the multiple and complex needs of survivors / victims as well as the impact of decisions and actions taken. This understanding can help dismantle barriers to services and assist clients to navigate complex systems such as child protection, police, courts, immigration and income support. This non-victim-blaming approach can also provide more space to redress the loss of personal power, and to restore self-respect and confidence by positively addressing shame and self-blaming, thereby ensuring that the responsibility for the violence lies with the person who has perpetrated it.

(4) Women's safety is central

The physical and psychosocial safety and security of victim-survivors subjected to violence is paramount for effective service responses and must be a foundational standard of any specialist service. Services recognise that women face many risks to their immediate and ongoing safety, which change over time and may shift suddenly, usually beyond the control of the victim-survivor. It is also important that services understand how these risks are specific to individual circumstances.

Specialist women's services put women's safety at the centre of their practices through a continuous process of ongoing risk assessment, safety planning and risk management. Best practice risk assessment and management requires consistent and coordinated approaches within and between social, health, police and justice sectors. For example, in the context of women at risk of homelessness, it is crucial that they have access to immediate and secure emergency and short-term accommodation, and that there are also systems to support women to remain at home if it is safe to do so (Tually et al, 2008). Services addressing accommodation and housing needs must also prioritise the safety and confidentiality of women and children, be gender-responsive, trauma-informed, accessible and appropriate, and be driven by principles of empowerment.

(5) Perpetrator accountability

To end violence against women, all services involved in preventing and responding to this violence must contribute to perpetrator accountability. For services supporting women who have had violence inflicted upon them, this means that services should be delivered in a manner that validates clients' experiences of violence, ensuring their

needs and choices are paramount, while the violence is not condoned, tolerated, excused, minimised or perpetuated in any way (UNWomen, 2016).

Services also play an important role in supporting and facilitating the victim-survivor's interactions with all relevant systems including the justice system, promoting her capacity to exercise her agency, and working towards a situation in which the burden of seeking justice is borne by the state and not the victim-survivor (UNWomen, 2016).

(6) Accessible Culturally-Appropriate and Sensitive Services

To ensure accessibility and responsiveness to individual circumstances and life experiences, specialist services must take into account and appropriately respond to victim-survivors who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on gender, age, culture, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, occupation, race, religion, or social status. A properly accessible service system would include 'mainstream' women's services that are fully competent to support people with a wide range of circumstances and backgrounds, together with numerous and well-resourced specialist services that are specifically devoted to supporting people with shared experiences and characteristics, such as women with disability, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. While this system does not yet exist, services and their representative organisations recognise an obligation to work towards it both internally, through competence training, accountability and capacity-building, and externally, through sector development and by advocating for more resources to be allocated to services specifically devoted to people who are particularly marginalised. For instance, ANROWS reports that it is important to cultivate stronger ties between specialist women's services and local Aboriginal organisations and leaders in order to fully meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (ANROWS, 2017).