

Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Who we are

WESNET is Australia's national peak body for specialist women's domestic and family violence services, 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.

Submission

It is well understood that women are disproportionately impacted by disasters (including pandemics) and that violence against women worsens after a disaster (see, for example [Thurston et al \(2021\)](#)). While there are likely a number of contributory factors to the increased violence, including grief, job loss, social isolation and drug and alcohol misuse, it is clear that already existing inequalities are exacerbated. It is also apparent that it is not just the event itself that aggravates inequality, but also the way in which services are designed and supported to respond to those most affected. Historically, emergency funds are largely allocated towards physical infrastructure, and 'shovel-ready' projects, with a comparably poor investment in care and health services and social infrastructure.

In Australia, effects of the pandemic saw services supporting victim-survivors of gender-based violence overwhelmed by demand. While additional government support was welcome, the allocation and subsequent impacts of additional emergency funds varied across jurisdictions. Channelling of monies through states via state-federal partnership agreements, with differences between state and territory service and funding models, inhibits services' ability to achieve a good service standard for all clients. The standard of service may vary considerably depending on where one lives.

WESNET makes the following key points.

- A gender lens must be applied across the spectrum of pandemic prevention, risk reduction, response and recovery efforts. Particular regard must be paid to the funding and support of services that provide assistance to those most in need, including women and children escaping violence. Increased funding to domestic and family violence services would be a valuable preparedness measure.
- A national approach is needed to ensure equitable access to services, regardless of state boundaries.

- Women and children escaping violence, particularly in the wake of a mass health event, may be traumatised in multiple and complex ways. A foundation principal of specialist domestic and family violence services is that they are expert in trauma-informed practice. These services are embedded within their communities and are well placed to understand and identify the support needs of women living in that area - particularly with respect to specific cultural and demographic characteristics.
- Women need to be provided with the opportunity to take leadership. Too often following a disaster and throughout its duration, women provide increased unpaid community support work, caring for the sick and vulnerable, while men lead physical response management roles. This has repercussions in terms of what elements of response and recovery become prioritised, as well as on women's individual and collective economic and other wellbeing (see, for example, [Alston \(2017\)](#)). This is consistent with the guiding principles of the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) which calls for the greater promotion of women in leadership, at both the community and national levels.

Signed



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WESNET acknowledges and pays respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of all the lands on which we live and work.