

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

COVID-19 Royal Commission - Terms of Reference

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.

The terms of reference must enable examination of the particular impact of the pandemic on women; and on how effectively pandemic prevention, risk, reduction, response and recovery efforts and future preparedness measures respond to gendered impacts.

- A national approach is needed to ensure equitable access to services, regardless of state boundaries.

The terms of reference must enable examination of the access and equity of services, with particular regard to the impacts of funding arrangements on nationally equitable access.

- 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.

The terms of reference must enable examination of service delivery and which type of services are best suited to providing services to vulnerable people.

- 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 leadd 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.

We hope that the Royal Commission and those supporting it take care to ensure that women – and particularly women victim-survivors from diverse backgrounds – are provided with the opportunity and support to give evidence and lead in the development of recommendations.



Bentley

Karen Bentley (she/her)
Chief Executive Officer WESNET T: 1800 937638
web: www.wesnet.org.au | www.techsafety.org.au

