



# THE UNIQUE ROLE OF SPECIALIST WOMEN'S SERVICES IN ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

***“Where possible, specialist crisis services responding to victims/survivors of violence against women should be run by independent and experienced women’s nongovernmental organizations providing gender-specific, empowering and comprehensive support to women survivors of violence, based on feminist principles.”***

***UN Women (2012) Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence against Women***

With a variety of different organisations in Australia providing services to survivors/victims 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. The impact and effectiveness of these specialist services is underpinned by a set of good practice principles that are supported by international research and evidence-based practice.<sup>1</sup>

This model of practice has been built on feminist and social justice approaches to responding to violence against women and is informed by a gendered understanding of the 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. A feminist framework locates violence against women and children as occurring within a patriarchal society where male dominance and privilege are normalised.

Being attentive to existing power imbalances, these services seek to restore power, dignity and strength to survivors/victims, while advocating more broadly for social justice and equality in the recognition that people of all genders experience detrimental consequences from rigid gender expectations and the violent use of power.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last 40 years<sup>3</sup> specialist women’s services have been established in response to the need for comprehensive and trauma-informed support. 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 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.<sup>4</sup>



**Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA)**



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## GOOD PRACTICE RESPONSE

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 survivors/victims 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 is 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. Responses must work toward achieving substantive equality, particularly by promoting women's agency and empowerment and women's capacity to meet their needs.<sup>5</sup>

On 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 "rights holders", to play an active role in accessing and benefiting from the rights to which they are entitled. This includes ensuring the creation of avenues for survivors/victims to have their voices heard.<sup>6</sup>



## 2 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.



## 3 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.<sup>10</sup>

Services also play an important role in supporting and facilitating the survivor/victim'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 survivor/victim.<sup>11</sup>

## 4

### **WOMEN'S SAFETY IS CENTRAL**

The physical and psychosocial safety and security of survivors/victims 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 survivor/victim. 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,<sup>9</sup> 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. 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

### **ACCESSIBLE CULTURALLY-APPROPRIATE & SENSITIVE SERVICES**

To ensure accessibility and responsiveness to individual circumstances and life experiences, specialist services must take into account and appropriately respond to survivors/victims 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<sup>12</sup> 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.

## 6

### **ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY & 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 survivors/victims as active participants,<sup>7</sup> 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.

By placing women's interests first, providing them with information and education as well as social and economic support, survivors/victims 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.<sup>8</sup>



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*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, 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 in supporting women treat their safety as a paramount principle.<sup>13</sup> Operating from a client-centred, trauma-informed, empowering framework,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>*

## References:

<sup>1</sup> AWAVA (2016) The role of specialist women's services in Australia's response to violence against women and their children.

<sup>2</sup> NASASV (2015) Standards of Practice Manual for Services Against Sexual Violence, 2nd Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew, M. (2013) The institutional harvest: women's services and women's policy agencies. Maddison, S., and Sawyer, M. (eds.) (2013). The Women's Movement in Protest, Institutions and the Internet (pp. 87-104). New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> ANROWS (2017) Women's specialist domestic and family violence services: Their responses and practices with and for Aboriginal women: Key findings and future directions.

<sup>5</sup> UN Women (2016) Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence: Core Elements and Quality Guidelines.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, N., Larsen, S., Trotter, J. and Sullivan, C. M. (2012). Exploring the Core Service Delivery Processes of an evidence-based community advocacy program for women with abusive partners. Journal of Community Psychology, 14(1), 1-18.

<sup>8</sup> Zweig, J.M. & Burt, M.R. (2007) Predicting women's perceptions of domestic violence and sexual assault agency helpfulness: What matters to program clients? Violence against Women, 13, 1149-1178.

<sup>9</sup> Tully, D., Faulkner, D., Cutler, C., Slatter, M. (2008) Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness, Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>10</sup> UN Women (2016) Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence: Core Elements and Quality Guidelines.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> ANROWS (2017) Women's specialist domestic and family violence services: Their responses and practices with and for Aboriginal women: Key findings and future directions.

<sup>13</sup> Victorian Government Department of Human Services (2012) Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework and Practice Guides 1-3, Edition 2; Domestic Violence Victoria (2006) Code of Practice for Specialist Family Violence Services for Women and Children: Enhancing the safety of women and children in Victoria.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, N., Larsen, S., Trotter, J. and Sullivan, C. M. (2012) 'Exploring the Core Service Delivery Processes of an evidence-based community advocacy program for women with abusive partners', Journal of Community Psychology 14(1), 1-18.

<sup>15</sup> Zweig, J.M. and Burt, M.R. (2007) 'Predicting women's perceptions of domestic violence and sexual assault agency helpfulness: What matters to program clients?' Violence against Women, 13, 1149-1178; Council of Europe (2008) Combating violence against women: minimum standards for support services.



## Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA)



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Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) is one of the six National Women's Alliances funded by the Australian Government to bring together women's organisations and individuals across Australia to share information, identify issues and contribute to solutions.

AWAVA's focus is on responding to and preventing violence against women and their children. AWAVA's role is to ensure that women's voices and particularly marginalised women's voices are heard by Government, and to amplify the work of its member organisations and Friends and Supporters.

AWAVA's members include organisations from every State and Territory in Australia, representing domestic and family violence services, sexual assault services, and women's legal services, as well as organisations representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, young women, women educators, women in the sex industry and other groups. AWAVA's lead agency is the Women's Services Network (WESNET).