



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children

Fourth Action Plan (2019–22) *Consultation summary report*



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Introduction

This document summarises the findings of consultations held across Australia by the Department of Social Services as part of developing the Fourth Action Plan under the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. It presents the observations, insights and priorities expressed by workshop participants. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the Commonwealth, or indicate any proposed actions that will be taken.

The Department of Social Services thanks all participants for their contributions.

The consultation targeted key domestic and family violence service providers from across government and non-government and across all jurisdictions. It was designed to engage metropolitan, rural and regional areas. Consultations were held over three months from July to October 2018. Over 600 organisations were consulted across 30 workshops and teleconferences, held in 12 locations across Australia.

The consultations are summarised under the following key themes, which largely guided them:

- Invest in primary prevention and early intervention to stop violence at its source.
- Make reducing violence everyone's business.
- Listen to lived experience and respect cultural knowledge.
- Acknowledge and better respond to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children.
- Respond better to sexual violence, as a form of domestic and family violence and as a separate crime.
- Improve systems so women and children are safe.
- Change the behaviour of people who choose to use violence.
- Respect the needs of children and young people as individuals.
- Learn from what's working, be flexible and tailor approaches.

Invest in primary prevention and early intervention to stop violence at its source

It was broadly agreed that stronger effort is required in primary prevention and early intervention, and that the efforts to date were valuable. In particular, the Stop it at the Start campaign and respectful relationships education were seen as useful. Participants advocated for a national public awareness campaign focusing on gender inequality to address the drivers of domestic and family violence. They sought expanded and consistent funding for the campaign to be effective over time, building on the success of the Stop it at the Start campaign.

Some participants emphasised the importance of local or state-based campaigns, and called for state/territory governments to fund them.

Other suggestions were:

- messaging using a broader understanding of violence that incorporates financial, social and emotional/psychological abuse as well as physical violence
- targeting the messaging to local communities
- layering the messaging to engage different age groups
- reducing the stigma associated with help-seeking

- challenging and countering the objectification of women in the media and popular culture.

There were differences among some consultation groups about whether the campaigns should focus on achieving attitudinal change in men or on everyone's responsibility to respect one another.

Participants strongly supported continued and expanded efforts in community education. Respectful relationships education was well supported, but with several suggestions for improvement (with varying degrees of support). These included that respectful relationships education should:

- be better integrated into schools
- begin at a young age and continue throughout the school years and beyond
- be more available in remote areas
- be delivered in culturally appropriate contexts
- be delivered by specialist workers rather than general teachers
- incorporate parental involvement.

Other community education suggestions were: using high-profile role models, incorporating prevention and awareness training in university courses and corporate human resources policies, and having national bystander education in workplaces.

The consultation group for people of diverse sex, sexuality and gender who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence pointed out that there were few specific services for them, that those that existed worked well but were concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne, and that gendered (binary) language should be avoided.

The consultation group for women with disability emphasised that education and prevention needs to be accessible to people with disability, including young people with cognitive impairment or intellectual disability. It was argued that there should be a specific version for people with cognitive impairment or intellectual disability.

Indigenous consultation groups emphasised the need for community education and prevention efforts to be culturally appropriate and competent and to acknowledge the impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma on Indigenous people.

Make reducing violence everyone's business

Participants broadly agreed that reducing family and domestic violence should be seen as a whole-of-community responsibility rather than a marginal specialist area or women's issue. This meant that all sectors of the community and business, and all levels and areas of government, need to look to how they could contribute to addressing violence, its causes and impacts. Specific areas of government that have an important role in reducing violence include health, justice and policing, education, employment and immigration.

Participants called for continued and stronger national leadership and commitment, expressed in bipartisanship, clear and consistent investment by the Commonwealth and states and territories, and a continuation of action beyond the term of the current National Plan.

More specific suggestions raised by some participants were:

- treating family and domestic violence as a public health issue, with more funding in all areas — primary prevention, response and recovery — and over the long term for better, more consistent responses
- establishing a nationally-led accountability mechanism for service delivery
- applying gender equality in federal programs and policies to drive change

- directing funding to local communities, as the source of expertise in responding to violence in their communities
- including and catering for diverse groups within the community in primary prevention and education efforts
- aligning elements of the legal system to respond better
- developing the criminal law to cover different forms of family violence, including non-physical forms
- finding champions within communities to raise awareness and encourage communities to take ownership
- further addressing the vulnerability of temporary visa holders
- improving collaboration and coordination between all levels of governments, and between governments and the community
- providing training in family, domestic and sexual violence for mainstream services
- helping workplaces become equipped to respond to disclosures of violence
- encouraging corporate human resource policies that support victims
- broadening mandatory reporting to include anyone witnessing violence (opposed by some participants, who wanted mandatory reporting reviewed)
- encouraging disclosure across the community to enable support to be provided
- improving information sharing between sectors
- educating and empowering people in the community on what they can do if they encounter someone being abused.

Making reducing violence everyone's business also means building the capacity of the specialist services that make up the domestic and family violence sector. Participants called for greater certainty in relation to funding, to meet the considerable unmet demand and a stronger emphasis on workforce training, to provide a system that is nationally consistent, trustworthy, non-discriminatory and reliable in protecting women and children.

Listen to lived experience and respect cultural knowledge

Participants across the consultations agreed that people from specific communities need to be listened to, be involved in the development of solutions and have their cultural knowledge valued and utilised.

Experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence differ for members of particular communities, such as women of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women of migrant and refugee backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people of diverse sex, sexuality and gender, older women, women with disability, young women and women from regional and remote areas. For people from more than one of these communities, experiences are even more complex.

Factors affecting the experiences and needs of women from different communities include previous or intergenerational trauma, religious or cultural background, language, location (particularly in regional or remote areas), intellectual or physical disability, diverse sex, sexuality and gender, age and socio-economic status.

Participants wanted strategies, programs and policies designed to help specific communities to be developed with those communities. They argued that programs should be culturally informed, and that their design, delivery and evaluation should be led and informed by people from these communities.

Several participants emphasised the need for greater cultural competency in the various workforces dealing with domestic and family violence, including police and health services.

Acknowledge and better respond to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children

The main thrust of consultations on this theme was that all work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must involve people from those communities — or ‘nothing about our mob without our mob’. The input of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was seen as essential in developing and delivering programs targeting violence against women and children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Such responses need to be informed by an understanding of a community’s culture, language, lore and law, as well as the impacts of intergenerational trauma. The Fourth Action Plan should work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations, local communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men to use cultural knowledge to create change.

Participants called for:

- funding for programs to address violence across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- genuine co-design of programs, including consultation of Elders
- recruitment, training and retention of local and culturally appropriate staff to empower communities affected by domestic and family violence
- greater resources to be directed to achieving behaviour change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men — including male family support workers, after-hours support and safe spaces.

While some participants called for mandatory reporting of domestic and family violence to be extended to everyone, others called for this provision in the Northern Territory to be reviewed, as some women were scared they may lose their children if they report.

Respond better to sexual violence, as a form of domestic and family violence and as a separate crime

Participants in the consultation called for greater effort to tackle the prevalence of sexual assault, both within intimate partner relationships and as a separate crime. This should include prevention initiatives that drive behaviour change and promote respectful relationships as well as support for people who have experienced sexual violence.

Women need to be empowered to report sexual violence, whether it be harassment or assault. Often, victims of sexual violence fear the repercussions of speaking up, such as disbelief and victim blaming. Courts, police and the media have a role to play in making the disclosures as safe and comfortable as possible.

There is a need for significant investment in high-quality response services to meet increased demand. Related services (such as hospitals, legal services, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, police and courts) need sound training in how to respond to sexual violence.

Responses need to take account of the different ways that different communities and groups experience sexual harassment and assault. Women with disability, for

example — who experience high rates of sexual violence — may be dependent on their abuser or face additional barriers to the justice system, including communication barriers and difficulties accessing the necessary supports, adjustments or aids to participate. Many women of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were not aware of their rights and had cultural and linguistic barriers to reporting.

Participants called for the establishment of primary prevention and community education about sexual violence, highlighting unacceptable behaviour, providing greater understanding of consent and guiding bystanders on how to prevent and intervene in harmful sexual behaviour.

Participants also called for programs that respond specifically to perpetrators of sexual violence, noting that there are currently very few targeted programs. These need to be different from domestic and family violence programs and be targeted to the different drivers of harmful sexual behaviours for young people and for adults.

Improve systems so women and children are safe

Improving our service systems emerged as a strong and consistent theme across all consultations. Participants called for better integration of services and government agencies in and across jurisdictions so that all women and children who require these services can access them. All points of entry need to be able to support women to report violence and obtain timely support. A 'wrap-around' approach was called for to help victims navigate the system and provide women, children and young people with the best support. This would require specific funding for case management.

Better collaboration and information sharing is required across systems, such as policing and justice, child protection, family law, health and specialist services to help keep women safe and support them over the medium to long term. Some called for a more accessible, victim-focused, consistent and accountable justice system across jurisdictions and in regional and remote areas.

Participants again emphasised the need to improve the workforce capability of services that interact with victims of violence — such as disability, mental health, legal, drug and alcohol, child protection, family and health services. Workers need to know how to respond to the trauma experienced by people subjected to or exposed to violence.

Because disclosure is such a key step for victims of violence to obtain support, systems needed to empower women to report violence. This requires removing barriers, whether social or structural.

Services also need to be equipped to respond to Australia's different communities, whether it be people of diverse cultures or sexuality or location.

Greater resources are needed for rural and regional services to improve their capacity to respond.

People who are unable to earn an income or who are not currently eligible for support, such as temporary visa holders, face additional barriers to economic independence, including limited finances, housing supply and child care, and may need additional or different supports. Some consultation participants voiced a need for greater support for women who did not wish to leave an abusive relationship.

There was strong support for expanding the supply of appropriate crisis accommodation. The options needed to cater for the needs of the diversity of people applying.

The women with disability consultation group emphasised that services for this cohort need to make clients safe and comfortable when reporting violence or trying to leave violent situations. Services must be accessible to them (e.g. have ramps) and understand the diversity of clients' circumstances and needs. For example:

- a family member or support worker could be the person using violence against them, making it difficult to report, particularly if they depend on that person for access to services
- it can be difficult to leave an unsafe home if it has been modified for accessibility
- some could fear losing their children if they report violence
- not having money or a job, or not knowing how to manage money, could stop people leaving violent relationships.

More information is needed on how to report people that have abused women with disability and where these women can go to get help.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultation groups raised some additional issues:

- the need to review the risks associated with mandatory reporting, particularly in the Northern Territory where it applies to all, in that some women would not report for fear of losing their children
- the need to improve the 1800RESPECT service to better engage Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse people, for example, by increasing access to interpreters
- the need for more services for men, and to include men in solutions to violence
- the need to overcome the fear and shame associated with domestic and family violence and sexual violence so that it is disclosed.

Change the behaviour of people who choose to use violence

Consultations delivered a strong message that violence should be stopped at its source, which meant holding perpetrators to account and supporting them to change their behaviour. Even when a violent relationship ended, there was a high risk that perpetrators would continue to use violence against others or the previous partner if not held to account. The legal systems and support services need to make perpetrators accountable for their behaviour. Some participants argued that stronger laws are needed for this to be done effectively, but acknowledged that justice responses need to be supported by robust service structures. Some participants pointed to a need for greater clarity about what perpetrator accountability meant in terms of actions to be taken, to avoid assumptions being made and to improve consistency of outcomes across the service system.

There is a need across the country, and particularly in regional areas, for programs aimed at changing the behaviour of men who choose to use violence. Most programs that currently exist are delivered primarily in prisons, however there is also opportunity to change violent behaviour before perpetrators enter the justice system.

Participants called for male-led behaviour change programs, including peer-support programs, and helpful tools to empower men to change their behaviour. They also called for interventions before release from prison, including counselling and education in behaviour change.

Significant investment is needed to fund behaviour change programs, equip workforces across all sectors to work with people who use violence, and improve understanding of what drives violent perpetrator behaviour to come up with effective solutions. The Fourth Action Plan should continue the investment in Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) to further build the evidence base and share best practices in perpetrator interventions. Victoria's trial of case management for perpetrators coordinated with services for victims was cited as a positive approach, but it was acknowledged to be resource-intensive and so requiring steady funding for long-term solutions.

Some participants raised the need to develop the male workforce in the sector, both to deal with violence experienced by men and to work with those who choose to use violence.

Reflecting previous themes, participants emphasised that programs need to be co-designed with and tailored for men from a variety of backgrounds, social attitudes and behaviours, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, men with disability, perpetrators of diverse sex, sexuality and gender, and men from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Some consultation groups stressed the need to address alcohol abuse as a barrier to the effectiveness of interventions to change perpetrators' behaviour. This was heard particularly strongly through the Indigenous Family Violence consultations. Alcoholism and violence were seen as learned behaviours that need to be recognised as a response to trauma, and as part of behaviour change interventions. Others put the view that trauma-informed processes didn't work for all Aboriginal men and that more support is needed for discussion-based training of males (e.g. yarning circles).

Some suggested having a more supportive service environment for men in relation to domestic and family violence, proposing that language focusing on 'women and their children' excludes men from the conversation (both as users of violence and as victims). They advocated for safe men's spaces, social recognition that women also used violence and provision of accommodation for men who are the subject of domestic violence orders.

Respect the needs of children and young people as individuals

Consultations broadly held that children and young people experiencing or witnessing violence need to be considered and supported in their own right, rather than being part of services for the woman or family. Responses for children and young people have to be centred on them, and their right to safety respected.

It is necessary to understand and cater for children and young people at their different stages of development, and for responses to be age-appropriate. Support workers need to be resourced and equipped to understand and respond to the impacts of immediate and intergenerational trauma on children and young people. Children who have experienced or witnessed violence need continuity of service and support staff. Services need to learn from and build on child safety programs and tailor their responses to the person experiencing the violence. Refuges, crisis services, safe-at-home programs and other frontline supports require staff and resources dedicated to working with children and young people as clients in their own right.

Government policies dealing with children and young people's safety need to be aligned so as to complement each other rather than duplicate effort.

It was seen as important to empower children and young people as the agents of change by instilling the values of gender equality and healthy, positive attitudes to relationships. Education about healthy relationships and violence is needed from early childhood.

Because young people disproportionately experience sexual violence, more needs to be done to raise awareness about consent and respectful relationships, for example. These programs and interventions should be delivered in schools, universities and other sites in the community frequented by young people.

More work also needs to be done to address harmful sexual behaviour *by* young people before it becomes entrenched later in life. Often young people who exhibit harmful sexual behaviours have experienced family violence throughout their lives. It was suggested that some research had shown that most young people stop harmful sexual behaviour after intervention through the criminal justice system.

Technology-facilitated abuse among young people was also cited as a problem requiring action.

Participants also agreed on the need to collect and build the evidence base on how the system can be designed to be safe for and respond to the needs of children and young people.

It was pointed out that children of diverse sex, sexuality and gender could experience identity-based violence at the hands of heterosexual parents, which is a gap that warrants further attention.

Learn from what's working, be flexible and tailor approaches

Consultation groups broadly agreed on the need across all these areas to increase the evidence base, be innovative and fund what works. Data needs to be gathered and used effectively, and our efforts evaluated. Good practice needs to be shared, and our collective knowledge built upon to bring about lasting change and continuous improvement.

Participants across the consultations gave diverse examples of initiatives and programs that are working well. These included:

- better integration of services in Victoria following the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence
- research conducted at Curtin University in Western Australia on having a continuum of responses from primary prevention to tertiary interventions and integrated system of responses
- RMIT University's work with youth justice and young users of violence on programs dealing with adolescent violence in homes
- the Invisible Practices research project at the University of Melbourne which is developing practice guidelines, resources and tools for policy-makers and practitioners working with fathers who use violence
- alcohol and other drug peak bodies starting to train their workforce to respond to domestic, family and sexual violence
- improvements in how child protection services engage and respond to perpetrators while supporting the long-term safety of victims
- Financial Training Australia training financial counsellors to work with victims of domestic, family and sexual violence
- ANROWS research on perpetrator interventions

- Victoria's trial of case management for perpetrators in coordination with services for victims, joining up family safety, alcohol and trauma services
- Respectful relationships education engaging young people in discussion about consent and empowerment and developing their basic relationship skills
- workforces addressing domestic and family violence in workplaces (e.g. Australia's CEO Challenge, Commonwealth Bank and Medibank Health Solutions)
- Australia Post helping victims of domestic and family violence with a mail redirection service
- social inclusion corporate partnerships shifting the concept of masculinity in workplaces
- organisations promoting conversations about family violence in different communities (e.g. ACON for LGBTIQ+ people)
- the North Coast Positive Adolescent Sexual Health Consortium's program on positive attitudes to relationships with children
- Undercurrent Victoria providing discussion-based sessions led by young educators in schools on attitudes (prevention) and early intervention
- men's behaviour change programs in Indigenous and CALD communities where they are developed with those communities.

The consultation group for people of diverse sex, sexuality and gender who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence said there were examples of good practice in prevention, service design, workforce development and research, but these were unevenly distributed across the country, with most in Melbourne and Sydney. Ways to share information and lessons across the country were needed.

Next steps

The Fourth Action Plan consultations culminated in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *National Summit on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children* held in Adelaide in October 2018. The [Statement from the Summit](#) called for action on the priority areas outlined in this summary and COAG agreed that these would inform the Fourth Action Plan 2019–2022.

The Department of Social Services is leading the development of the Fourth Action Plan in partnership with state and territory governments and other Australian Government agencies. The Fourth Action Plan will be released in mid-2019 and will reflect feedback from the extensive national consultations and the COAG Summit.

It will consolidate the measures implemented so far and provide a platform for future policy directions to reduce family, domestic and sexual violence after the National Plan concludes in 2022.

For more information please visit <https://plan4womenssafety.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan/the-fourth-action-plan-2019-2022/>.