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GENDER AND
FAMILY VIOLENCE
PREVENTION CENTRE

National Plan Victim-Survivor Advocates Consultation Final Report

February 2022

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we come together to conduct our research and recognise that these lands have always been places of learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We honour and pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders – past and present – and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and their ongoing leadership in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence.

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This consultation was led by Associate Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon. The findings contained within this Report arise entirely from the work of Kate Fitz-Gibbon in her capacity as Director of the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre and are wholly independent of Kate Fitz-Gibbon's role as Chair of Respect Victoria.

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Abbreviations

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
ATSIAC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on family, domestic and sexual violence
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
DOCS	Department of Child Services (former, New South Wales)
DSP	Disability support pension
DSS	Department of Social Services (Commonwealth)
DV	Domestic violence
FDSV	Family, domestic and sexual violence
ICOS	Independent Collective of Survivors
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex and asexual ¹
MGFVPC	Monash Gender and Violence Prevention Centre
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NPAG	National Plan Advisory Group
NSW	New South Wales
OFW	Office for Women (Commonwealth)
OIDV	Officer involved domestic violence
RCFV	Royal Commission into Family Violence (Victoria)
RRE	Respectful Relationships Education
VCAT	Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal
VSAC	Victim Survivors Advisory Council (Victoria)

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¹ The use of this abbreviation varied across victim-survivor interviews.

List of victim-survivor-advocates interviewed

Small group interviews

- Safe and Equal Expert Advisory Panel
- Independent Collective of Survivors (ICOS)
- Narrating Our Own Resilience (NOOR) Survivor Advocacy Advisory Group
- Survivor advocates from the Domestic Violence New South Wales (DVNSW) Voices for Change group
- Officer-Involved Domestic Violence (OIDV) National Group
- Women and their children who have Experienced Abuse and Violence: Researchers and advisors (WEAVERS)

Individual advocates²

Akii Ngo	Karina Hogan
Ana Pike	Kay Schubach
Arman Abrahamzadeh	Kelly Broadhurst
Aruna Bollina	Kelly Humphries
Ash Vishwanath	Kirsty Rich
Ashton Kline	Kristen Ellis
Caitlin	Layla Alwan
Cathy Oddie	Leanne
Champo Ngweshe	Liana Papoutsis
Chanel Contos	Lon
Clare Sheehan	Louise Coleman
Deborah Thompson	Lucian Jade
Fiona	Lula Dembele
Gail Nuess	Michelle Froome
Glyn Scott	Payal Tiwari
Grace Donato	Phil Cleary
Grace Tame	Rachael Natolie
Heshani	Rana Yulianti
Is	Saraa Khaled
Issara Saeyim	Scarlett Franks
Jaimee Morgenbesser	Sharon
Jane Matts	Shelley Abazi
Janine Rees	Sina
Jasmine	Stacey Dvorak
Jo	Stacey Nelan
Juliette Mcaleer	Talie Star
Katherine Houareau	Teyarna Matheson
Kathryne	Tinashe La
Katrina Harrison	

² There were an additional ten victim-survivor advocates who did not wish to be individually identified as participating in the consultation.

Executive Summary

National Plan
Victim-Survivor
Advocates Consultation



Executive Summary

Violence against women is a national crisis in Australia. The Commonwealth Government is presently developing the National Plan to end violence against women and children (hereinafter referred to as the 'next National Plan') in consultation with states and territories; community organisations; family, domestic and sexual violence experts, victim-survivors and the wider community. The next National Plan will guide the national focus on improving responses to, and driving the elimination of, family, domestic and sexual violence nationally. The National Plan is the overarching strategy in Australia to address family, domestic and sexual violence nationally. The next National Plan will follow on from the current *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022*, which was released in February 2011 and has a 12-year mandate. The Commonwealth, state and territory governments have announced their commitment to developing a new National Plan, which will come into effect in mid-2022. In April 2021, the Department of Social Services (DSS), in partnership with the Office for Women (OFW), Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, released a *Consultation Guide* to frame the consultation process to inform the development of the next National Plan.

Over the course of October and November 2021, 80 victim-survivor advocates contributed to the consultation process to inform and support the development of the next National Plan. This follows in the wake of over a decade of inquiries into system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence at the state, territory and Commonwealth level. Key examples include the Australian Law Reform Commission and New South Wales Law Reform Committees' 2010 report, *Family Violence – A National Legal Response*; The Queensland Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence 2015, *Not Now, Not Ever* report; *The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence* (2016); The Australian Law Reform Commission's 2019 *Family Law Inquiry*; and more recently The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs' 2021 *Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence 2021*. While a number of recommendations stemming from these key inquiries have been implemented, and some have resulted in positive reform, several remain unaddressed. As such, there remains scope for significant reform and improvement. As this report reveals, key systems improvements are needed to appropriately respond to the issue, with many victim-survivors experiencing further harm as a result of system engagement.

DSS contracted the Monash Consultation Team to undertake key elements of the Australian Government's consultation to inform the development and implementation of the next National Plan. The Victim-Survivor Advocates Consultation represents the final stage of this contracted consultation process.

The purpose of this stage of the consultation process was to ensure that victim-survivor advocates were provided a dedicated opportunity to have input into the development, delivery and governance of the next National Plan. The Monash Consultation Team engaged victim-survivor advocates from across Australia through individual and small group interviews over a three-week period in October and November 2021. The 80 participants are a diverse sample, but not a representative one. It is important to recognise that there are gaps in victim-survivor advocate experiences in this report, but that does not discount the depth or importance of the experiences and views expressed by participants through this process.

This report presents the thematic views and key findings that emerged from the dedicated victim-survivor consultation. Mirroring other stages of the consultation process, this Report is forward facing. Our interviews with victim-survivor advocates were not focused on reviewing the previous National Plan or reflecting on the strengths and limits of the work plan that has derived from it. Rather, our questions were focused on building a clear understanding of what is needed under the term of the next National Plan from the viewpoint of victim-survivor advocates. In writing this Report, we have committed to privileging the voices of the 80 victim-survivor advocates who participated in this stage of the consultation and shared their expertise.



Key Findings on desired outcomes

The following key findings reflect victim-survivor advocates views on the key desired outcomes under the next National Plan. Victim-survivor advocates views are grouped into key themes.

3.1 Embedding lived experience into the governance of the next National Plan

- The next National Plan embeds victim-survivor expertise into the governance structure that oversees its development, implementation, delivery and ongoing monitoring.
- Opportunities explore how victim-survivor expertise can be embedded in sector organisations and other workplaces tackling family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Victim-survivor advocacy roles are created as part of the work of the next National Plan. These roles are remunerated, and attention is paid to ensuring spaces for contribution are trauma-informed and safe.
- As part of governance of the next National Plan diverse representation is ensured in any victim-survivor advocacy groups or roles.
- A separate consultation with First Nations communities, including First Nations victim-survivor advocates, is undertaken to determine the most effective and culturally safe governance model to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lived experience is embedded into the development, implementation, delivery and ongoing monitoring of the next National Plan.

3.2 The need for genuine commitment and funding

- The next National Plan supports genuine and bipartisan government action.
- Through the implementation of the next National Plan governments commit to shifting away from short-term 'Band-Aid' solutions, towards longer-term funding cycles.
- The next National Plan demonstrates a commitment to addressing the drivers of family, domestic and sexual violence and to providing ongoing and meaningful support to victim-survivors.
- There is a nationally coordinated approach to violence against women and children, including but not limited to, national definitions of family, domestic and sexual violence.

3.3 Key challenges underpinning system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence

- The next National Plan recognises that family, domestic and sexual violence will only be addressed when Australian women are equal to men and are no longer subject to victim-blaming stereotypes.
- Efforts to address gender inequality are intersectional.
- The next National Plan recognises that siloed and contradictory responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are retraumatising for victim-survivors who engage with key systems.
- Through the implementation of the next National Plan, significant barriers to providing ongoing and meaningful support to victim-survivors via a lack of funding for key services are addressed.
- Inconsistent responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are addressed.

3.4 Primary prevention and the role of education

- A community awareness campaign to raise understanding about the nature and prevalence of coercive

control is developed and completed.

- Campaigns are developed to build awareness of the support services available to victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence, and how to access them.
- Community campaigns, including campaign design and production process are informed by lived experience expertise.
- Education on safety, healthy and respectful relationships is embedded into early childhood education settings more consistently. Education on these topics is consistently delivered across the school curriculum in an age sensitive and iterative way.
- The merits of introducing a nationally consistent education plan on respectful relationships that is implemented at the state and territory level are considered.

3.5 Whole-of-system priorities to be advanced through the next National Plan

- The next National Plan embeds a commitment to victim-centric responses to family, domestic and sexual violence that places individualised, trauma-informed care at the forefront.
- Family, domestic and sexual violence services are culturally safe.
- The next National Plan embeds the right to recovery as a guiding principle for all system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Wrap-around supports don't require victim-survivors to navigate multiple systems and retell their experiences to multiple contact points.
- There is focus on the links between women's economic insecurity and family, domestic and sexual violence, and clear goals to address women's economic insecurity are outlined.
- System-wide training and education is implemented to ensure that all services are equipped to appropriately respond to family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Data collection of family, domestic and sexual violence is improved to enhance understanding of the issue and to influence reform.
- The next National Plan highlights the value of learning from existing community responses to family, domestic and sexual violence.

3.6 System responses requiring reform through the next National Plan

Centrelink

- The next National Plan recognises that financial support systems, such as Centrelink, are out of touch with the nuances of family, domestic and sexual violence.
- The need for victim-centric financial supports that recognise the ongoing nature of abuse and the key role that financial support can play in supporting victim-survivors are addressed.

Healthcare responses

- The need to enhance current practices among health practitioners – including GPs and hospital-based medical professionals – to inform improved identification of and responses to family, domestic and sexual violence victimisation is addressed.
- The next National Plan enhances trauma-informed health system-based responses to all forms of family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Specific opportunities to enhance early intervention practices in pre and antenatal care settings are identified.

Housing responses

- The next National Plan recognises that victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence

experience homelessness and housing insecurity, particularly in the period immediately following leaving an abusive relationship, and as an outcome of ongoing financial insecurity and experiences of poverty.

- The significant barriers to accessing safe housing in Australia for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence are addressed.
- Federal and state governments invest significantly over the lifespan of the next National Plan to support enhancing the accessibility of safe housing options and ensuring a suite of housing is available to meet the diverse and intersecting needs of victim-survivors.
- The provision of safe housing in Australia is individualised, trauma-informed, safe, and suitable to the intersectional needs of victim-survivors and any children/dependants.

Child protection and out of home care

- A review of the application of the failure to protect provision in the child protection system is undertaken to determine whether the provision is operating in line with the best interests of the child.
- Out of home care system responses to children and young people are trauma-informed, including clear recognition of historical trauma.
- The next National Plan recognises that out of home care placements may create further trauma through experiences of displacement and lack of belonging.
- State and territory governments evaluate the effectiveness and impact of training in the child protection system with the view to identifying ongoing training needs to ensure family, domestic and sexual violence specialist and trauma-informed practice.
- Responses to, and the prevention of family, domestic and sexual violence are child-centric.

Justice system responses

- The next National Plan recognises the significant barriers to reporting family, domestic and sexual violence to the police.
- The next National Plan demonstrates a commitment to making police responses safer, through a focus on trauma-informed and culturally sensitive training and practices.
- The next National Plan recognises that victim-survivors who have experienced police officer involved domestic violence face additional barriers in accessing safety and their perpetrators are often protected and/or not held accountable. The merits of establishing an independent investigations unit for officer involved domestic violence are explored.
- National Principles to inform best practice state- and territory-level responses to police officer involved domestic violence are developed.

Court responses to family, domestic and sexual violence

- National guidelines for justice system responses are developed, to ensure that victim-survivors encounter consistent treatment and outcomes when engaging with the legal system.
- National guidelines for justice system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are accompanied by ongoing training and education for judges, lawyers and court staff.
- The next National Plan reflects opportunities to make court processes accessible, culturally safe and victim-centric in family, domestic and sexual violence matters.
- Court responses to sexual violence are trauma informed.
- The attrition rates in sexual assault matters are lowered and perpetrator accountability is attained.

The Family Law System

- Significant reform of the family law system is undertaken to ensure safety needs for individuals experiencing family and domestic violence are prioritised and perpetrators are held accountable for their perpetration of family and domestic violence, including recognition of the systems abuse that is

often committed during family law engagement.

- There is a paradigm shift in the family law system whereby child safety is brought to the forefront of decision-making.

3.7 Measuring success

- The next National Plan includes indicators that measure success over the life span.
- Lived experience expertise, including victim-survivor satisfaction with the system, are embedded into measures of success as part of the next National Plan.
- System monitoring and program evaluations occur across the life span of the next National Plan.

Introduction

National Plan
Victim-Survivor
Advocates Consultation



Introduction

Violence against women is a national crisis in Australia. The Commonwealth Government is developing the next National Plan to guide the national focus on improving responses to, and driving the elimination of, family, domestic and sexual violence nationally. The National Plan is the overarching strategy in Australia to address family, domestic and sexual violence nationally. The next National Plan will follow on from the current *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022*, which was released in February 2011 for a 12-year duration. Over this term, the National Plan has been guided by the priorities and actions set out in four three-year Action Plans.

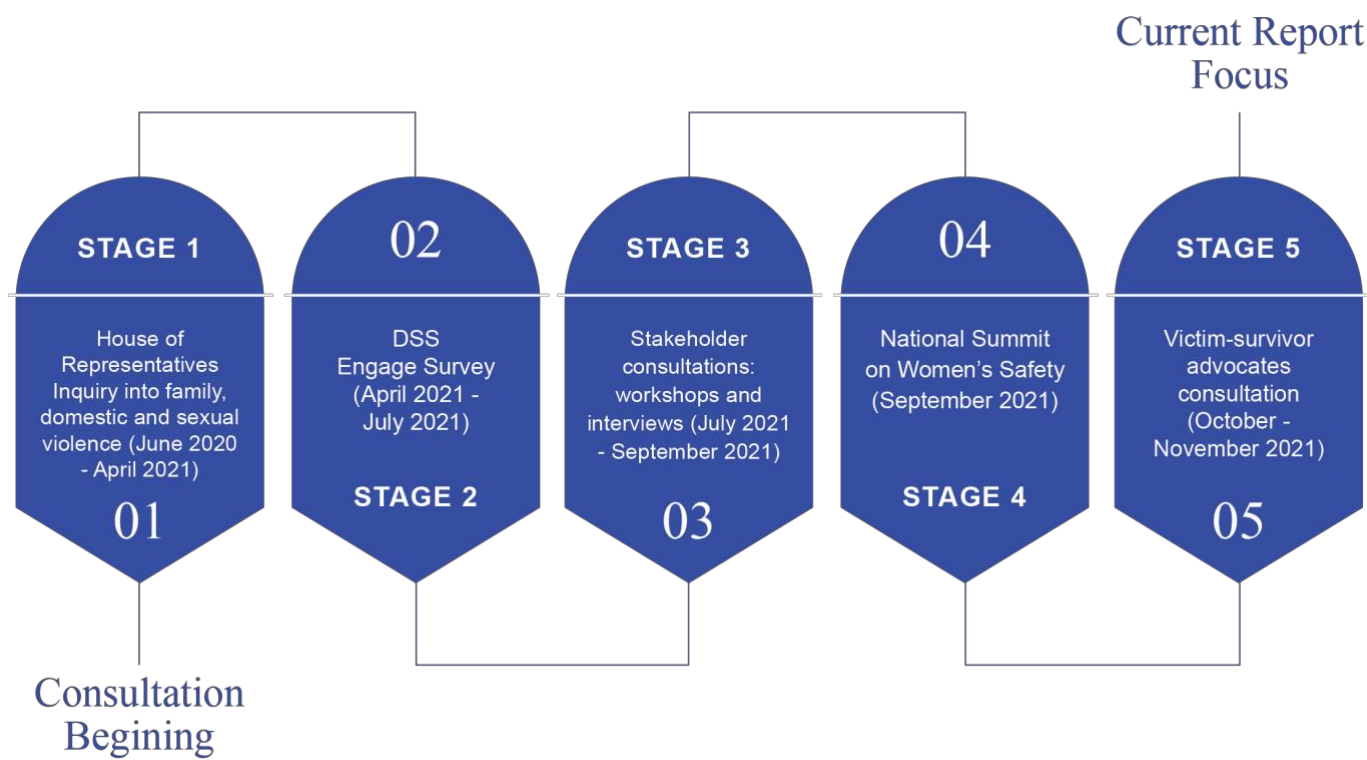
The Commonwealth, state and territory governments have announced their commitment to developing a new National Plan, which will come into effect in mid-2022. In April 2021, the Department of Social Services (DSS), in partnership with the Office for Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (OFW), released a *Consultation Guide* to frame the consultation process to inform the development of the next National Plan. The *Consultation Guide* was accompanied by a *Draft framework for Australia's National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*.³ The draft framework sets out six principles to be embedded within the next National Plan, including 'Actions will be evidence-based and build on research relating to violence against women and children'. It also includes, as one of eight national priorities, a commitment to 'Respect, Listen and Respond to the Diverse Lived Experiences of Women and Children affected by Violence'. Within this priority, the draft framework includes a commitment to 'Acknowledging the intersecting forms of inequality that enable violence against women and using the lived experiences of women and children in policy and program development'.

DSS contracted the Monash Consultation Team to undertake key elements of the Australian Government's consultation to inform the development and implementation of the next National Plan. The analysis and key findings from consultation stages 1–4 are included in a previous report produced by the Monash Consultation Team and submitted to the Department of Social Services in November 2021.⁴ The Victim-Survivor Advocates Consultation represents the final stage of this contracted consultation Process.

³ Department of Social Services. (2021) *Consultation Guide*. Available at: <https://engage.dss.gov.au/developing-the-next-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children/public-consultations-for-the-next-national-plan-consultation-guide-and-translations/>

⁴ Fitz-Gibbon, K., Meyer, S., Gelb, K., McGowan, J., Wild, S., Batty, R., Segrave, M., Maher, JMM., Pfitzner, N., McCulloch, J., Flynn, A., Wheildon, L. and Thorburn, J. (2022) *National Plan Stakeholder Consultation: Final Report*. Monash University, Victoria, Australia, doi.org/10.26180/16946884

The consultation process involved five key stages:



The purpose of this stage of the consultation process was to ensure that victim-survivor advocates were provided a dedicated opportunity to have input into the development, delivery and governance of the next National Plan. While we recognise that some victim-survivor advocates had already participated at various stages of the consultation, this stage was focused solely on capturing victim-survivor expertise and thus differs from other consultation stages where lived experience was incorporated alongside other viewpoints.

This report is focused on presenting the thematic views and key findings which emerged from the dedicated victim- survivor consultation stage. Mirroring other stages of the consultation process, this Report is forward facing. Our interviews with victim-survivor advocates were not focused on reviewing the previous National Plan or reflecting on the strengths and limits of the work plan that has come from it. Rather, our questions were focused on building a clear understanding of what is needed under the term of the next National Plan from the viewpoint of victim-survivor advocates. In writing this Report, we have committed to privileging the voices of the 80 victim survivor advocates who participated in this stage of the consultation and shared their expertise; for this reason, the Report quotes heavily from the individual and small group interviews.

Approach to the Victim-Survivor Advocates Consultation

National Plan
Victim-Survivor
Advocates Consultation



Approach to the Victim-Survivor Advocates Consultation

The Victim-Survivor Advocates Consultation was carried out over October and November 2021.

This stage of the consultation is specifically termed a victim-survivor advocates consultation, as we recognise that the individuals who were invited to participate – and who were safe and able to do so – represent those who have the platform and/or the security and support to advocate on issues relating to the development, delivery and governance for the next National Plan. We are not suggesting that the key findings presented in this report are representative of the views and experiences of all or the majority of Australians with lived experience of family, domestic and sexual violence. This stage of the consultation intends to represent the beginning of that dialogue and a commitment to privileging the voices and expertise of victim-survivors in policy development.

Individual and small group interviews

The primary mode of data collection for this stage of the consultation was individual and small group interviews, which were carried out via zoom and phone throughout October and November 2021. Specifically, 48 individual and six small group interviews were held. We also received written submissions to the thematic interview questions from three individuals.

The interviews were semi-structured. A thematic interview guide was developed by the Monash Consultation Team and was kept deliberately broad to allow for each of the interviews to be tailored to the expertise and experience of the participating victim-survivor advocate. Across the interviews, victim-survivor advocates were asked six overarching questions:

1. What has been your experience with family, domestic and sexual violence systems and responses in Australia?
2. From your experience, what are the key system and service points that require improvement? How could this be advanced through the successor National Plan?
3. What would you identify as the key challenges in service delivery and system responses that should be addressed in the next National Plan?
4. What is required to ensure accessibility, culturally safe and best practice in service responses for diverse communities?
5. How would you like to see the role of victim-survivor advocates embedded into the next National Plan?
6. How do you think the success of the National Plan should be measured? What indicators of success should be utilised?

These questions were intended to be a guide rather than a firm schedule, and interview facilitators encouraged participants to provide all information they believed relevant to the consultation, even where this did not align directly with the questions posed. It was important to the Monash Consultation Team that the consultation captured all policy and practice areas deemed relevant and important by the victim-survivor advocates themselves, within and beyond those identified through the prepared questions.

Interview participants

Due to the relatively tight timeframe within which this stage of the consultation had to be completed, there was no open call for participation in the interviews. However, to ensure diverse and intersecting views were captured in this report, a broad range of victim-survivor advocates were invited to participate. The Monash Consultation Team developed an initial list of potential participants based on their knowledge of known victim-survivor advocates and advocacy and support groups around family, domestic and sexual violence. Team members then reached out to DSS, relevant peak bodies and organisations to include their recommendations on potential participants. The Monash Consultation Team is also indebted to the victim-survivor advocates who assisted with participant recruitment by sharing details of the consultation within their advocacy groups. This snowballing recruitment strategy was vital to allowing the consultation to reach a broader range of victim-survivor advocates than would otherwise have been possible.

Interviews were conducted individually and in a group format. Where existing victim-survivor advocacy groups were formed and a rapport established, we provided members the option to participate in an individual interview or a small group interview.

All individuals were provided the option to participate in their interview via phone or zoom. Individuals were also invited to be accompanied by a support person during the interview. This happened on a number of occasions, the support person most often being a case worker. The small number of individuals who were unable to schedule an interview during the period of data collection were given the opportunity to provide written responses to each of the overarching six consultation questions. We received three written responses as part of this stage of the consultation.

Following completion of each interview, all participants received a follow-up email thanking them for their participation in the interview and providing them with a voucher or payment to compensate them for their time and expertise. The follow-up email also contained a list of relevant support services to assist any individuals who may have wanted to debrief with a practitioner following the interview.

Every effort was undertaken to ensure the diversity of victim-survivor advocates engaged through this stage of the consultation, although we recognise that there were significant limits to what was achievable within the timeframe and through virtual platforms. Where required, we worked with service providers to ensure a support person and/or interpreter was present to support the individual's participation in an interview. This was particularly important to ensure participation by individuals with disability, and by individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. While these supports were put in place, we do acknowledge that this consultation was neither fully inclusive nor accessible for all advocates. This consultation stage should be viewed as a starting point for engagement with victim-survivors on the development and implementation of the next National Plan, and not as the sole opportunity for lived experience input.

Interview participants demographics

A total of 80 victim-survivor advocates participated in the consultation process through individual and small group interviews. At the end of each interview all participants were sent a link to complete an anonymous short survey via Qualtrics to capture basic demographic details. Following the completion of all data collection from this stage of the consultation, a reminder email was sent to all participants requesting that they complete the survey if they had not already done so and felt comfortable doing it. Of the 80 participants, 69 individuals completed the demographic survey. This represents a completion rate of 86.25 percent.

Below we provide a demographic snapshot of the victim-survivor advocates who participated in this stage of the consultation process.

Age

The most common age groups for the respondents who completed the survey were 31–40 years (27.54%, n=19), 21–30 years (26.09%, n=18), 41–50 years (20.29%, n=14) and 51–60 years (17.39%, n=12). Only a small proportion of respondents were aged 60 years or above (5.80%, n=4) and just one person was aged 18–20 years (1.45%). One participant (1.45%) chose not to disclose their age.

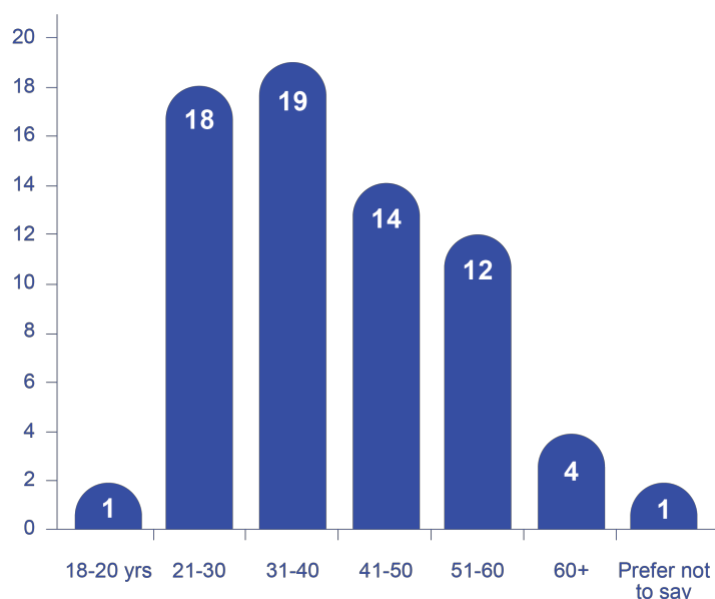


Figure 1: Age of participants

Gender identity

The majority of consultation participants were female (86.96%, n=60), followed by non-binary (5.80%, n=4) and male (4.35%, n=3). One participant identified as a Trans man (1.45%) and one participant preferred not to say (1.45%).

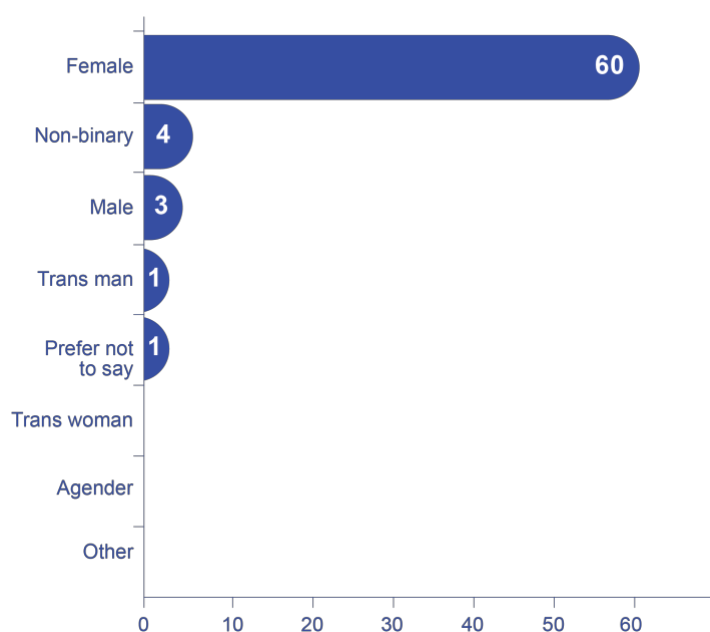


Figure 2: Gender Identity

Sexual orientation

The survey allowed participants to select multiple answers in response to sexual orientation. As noted, 69 of the total 80 participants in the victim-survivor advocate consultation completed the survey; however, there were 83 responses selected under the variable of sexual orientation. This is due to participants selecting multiple options. The majority of respondents selected heterosexual (55.42%, n=46). The most common responses after this were:

- Queer (8.43%, n=7),
- Pansexual (7.23%, n=6) and Questioning (7.23%, n=6),
- Bisexual (6.05%, n=5),
- Lesbian (4.82%, n=4),
- Other (3.61%, n=3),
- Gay (2.41%, n=2), and
- Asexual (2.41%, n=2).

Two respondents (2.41%) chose not to disclose their sexual orientation. Eleven respondents selected multiple answers.

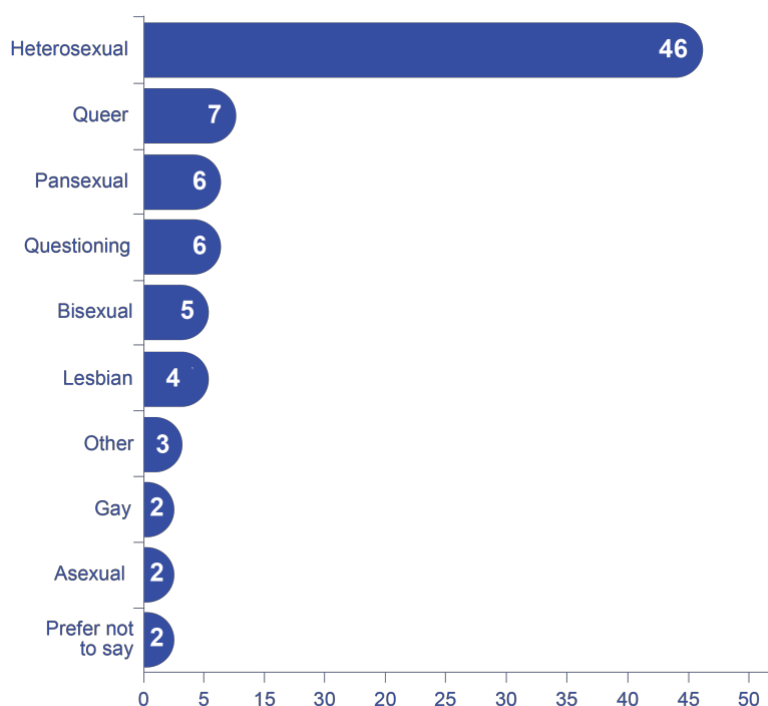


Figure 3: Sexual Orientation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Of the 69 participants who completed the survey, three people (4.41%) identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. One survey respondent did not make a selection in response to this question (explaining the total count of 68 in Figure 4). Across the entire consultation of 80 victim-survivor advocates there were five persons who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, however, two of these participants did not complete the survey. The total participation of First Nations peoples in the consultation then was 6.25 per cent (n=5).

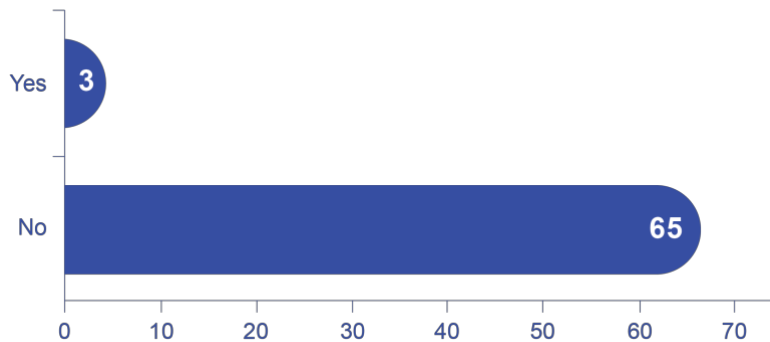


Figure 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse background

More than one-third (37.68%, n=26) of survey respondents identified as having a migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse background. While there was a provision to enable interpreters to be utilised during the interviews, all interviews and focus groups were conducted in English.

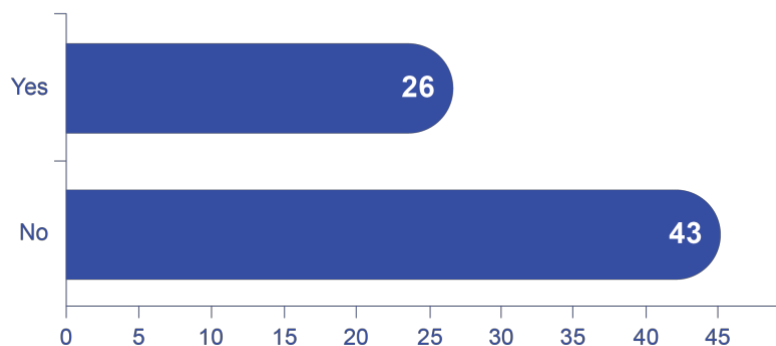


Figure 5: Migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse background

Area of residence

The most common areas participants resided in were Metropolitan (75%, n=51), Regional (19.12%, n=13) and Rural (4.41%, n=3). There were no remote participants, and one participant chose not to disclose the type of area they resided in.

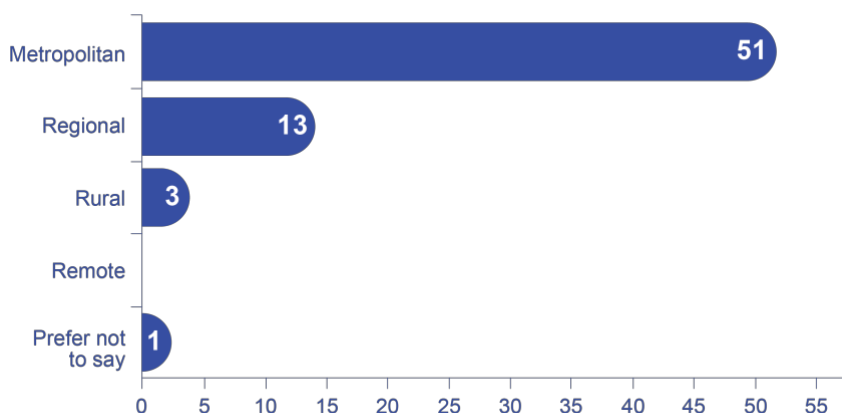


Figure 6: Type of area of residence

Participants with disability

Almost one-third (31.88%, n=22) of survey respondents identified as having disability. Two-thirds (66.67%) do not have/live with disability and one participant (1.45%) chose not to disclose their disability status.

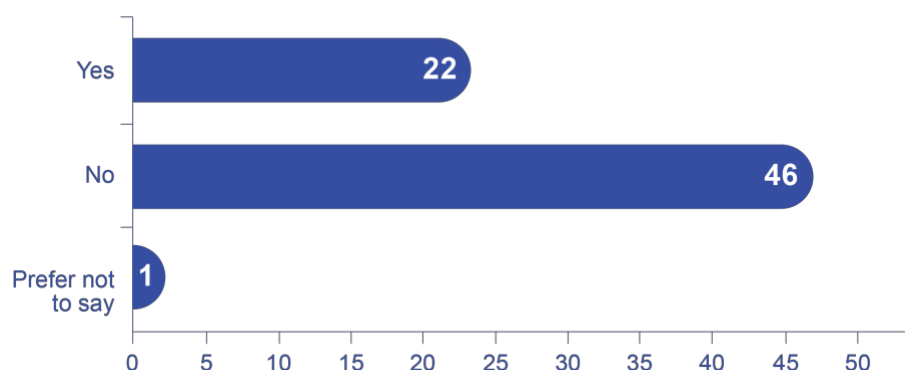


Figure 7: Disability

Participants with children

The majority of survey respondents indicated they have children (60.87%, n=42). 25 respondents (36.23%) do not have children and two respondents (2.90%) chose not to say whether they had children.

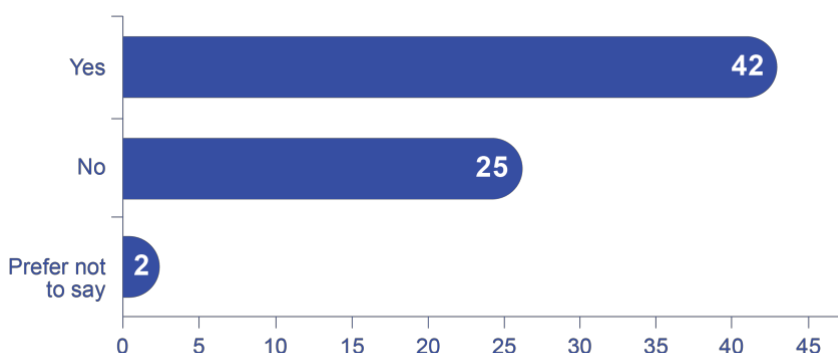


Figure 8: Participants with Children

Data analysis

Each of the individual and small group interviews was audio recorded and transcribed in full to facilitate the identification of key themes and findings within and across the interviews. All transcripts were uploaded into NVivo qualitative analysis software to allow for thematic analysis by members of the Monash Consultation team. In presenting the key themes and findings from the interviews in this Report, the Monash Consultation Team has drawn heavily on the voices of the victim-survivor advocates interviewed. These are captured through the inclusion of direct quotes throughout. These quotes and the key views of the victim-survivor advocates who participated in this stage of the consultation have been de-identified. Where possible, we have noted in our analysis whether a view was held by the majority of advocates, by some of them, or by a small minority of advocates.

Key Themes and Findings

National Plan
Victim-Survivor
Advocates Consultation



Key Themes and Findings

“ Every person that I know who’s a victim-survivor of family violence and sexual assault are collectively and individually the strongest people out there. They’re so resourceful and talented, and given the right systemic supports ... everyone achieved so much, but how much more they could do in a way where they’re safe and not continually being harmed whilst they’re trying to do good? It would just be phenomenal.

3.1 Embedding lived experience into the governance of the next National Plan

“ I feel like I receive more government consultation when they want to change the location of the bins in front of my house than when they want to change the provision of service to DFV people.

There needs to be a group of people who have had lived experience that can help move the strategy forward with proactive steps that people can see, because a lot of times people are losing faith in the system because they’re not seeing that they’re having the right people involved.

In the period immediately prior to the start of data collection for this victim-survivor advocates consultation in October 2021, there was substantive public advocacy led by members of the Independent Collective of Survivors (ICOS) and other advocates for lived experience expertise to be embedded into the development and governance of the next National Plan.⁵ Reflecting this advocacy focus, one of the key questions asked across each of the individual and small group interviews related to how victim-survivor advocates would like to see lived experience expertise formally embedded into the governance arrangements for the next National Plan. This section presents the key findings from those discussions.

Support for embedding lived experience expertise

Across the consultation, we heard unanimous support among victim-survivors for the next National Plan to embed formal mechanisms to support victim-survivor input into its governance, including implementation and ongoing monitoring. As captured in the comments of several advocates:

We need to be consulted. We need to be at the table in the decision-making. All decisions should come from us. We need to say, ‘Here’s what we need.’ We’ve got the plan. We know the plan. We know what we need. We just need to be heard and that’s what’s not happening at all.

You need to have an army of victims that are willing and able to come forward and express the changes,

⁵ Gillespie, E. (2021) These survivors of domestic and sexual violence say they’ve been excluded from the National Action Plan, SBS The Feed, 30 August. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/these-survivors-of-domestic-and-sexual-violence-say-they-ve-been-excluded-from-the-national-action-plan>; see also Victim Survivor Letter for National Action Plan, 30 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.dvnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/EMBARGOED-TILL-MONDAY-30-AUGUST-2021-VICTIM-SURVIVORS-LEFT-OUT-NATIONAL-ACTION-PLAN-TO-REDUCE-VIOLENCE-AGAINST-WOMEN-002.pdf>

because you can talk to us, they can hear the audio, they can read what we've got to say. It's still not going to be as powerful as having victims and advocates in there speaking directly.

In the same way that consultation with the specialist sector and other key stakeholders is an assumed step in the reform process, advocates supported engagement with victim-survivors to be built into processes of policy and practice change. As one advocate explained:

I think it's about kind of making sure that lived expertise is at the forefront of decisions being made and making sure that in the same way that they you would hope that they would involve the sector in those conversations and say, 'Okay, let's have a consultation with the sector before we decide how we're going to spend money because they're the ones who are dealing with it every day.' We also need to have those conversations with lived expertise because they're the ones who've come through it.

Advocates' enthusiasm to see the next National Plan embed engagement with victim-survivors was accompanied by reflections on the lack of meaningful and comprehensive engagement with individuals with lived experience previously. This viewpoint was used to stress the significant need for the next National Plan to represent a shift to a more formal model of victim-survivor engagement. As one advocate stated:

Silencing can be done in many ways but silencing where you are actively choosing not to engage victims and not hearing about their experiences, that to me is a tool of oppression. That is saying you're not valued. So, if we're truly trying to do transformational work, if we're truly trying to do the structural change that needs to be done around gender equality, around systemic change to prevent and reduce violence against women, if we're not hearing from their voices, we're systematically continuing to say you don't matter, and so if we want to create transformational change we have [to] put women's voices, victim's voices, children's voices, at the heart and centre of everything we do because that's an emancipatory transformational process and that's what we need to achieve.

Related to this, there was a view shared among some advocates that the spaces traditionally created for victim-survivor input were not conducive to meaningful co-design. As one advocate stated:

I would rather that the government takes a real step back and they allow us survivors and advocates to say exactly what they need, and to be able to give them the space to share their stories and give them the space to be able to co-design policies, solutions that they direct rather than saying, 'Oh, these are the systems that we have in place. Why didn't you access them?' I think sometimes when it comes to co-design and policy, especially if those who are creating the policy don't have lived realities in the space, it can be very condescending. The spaces that they create during the co-design process is not supportive. So even if it's not intended, you can shut down survivors.

A national victim-survivor advisory panel

“ *It's an accountability piece to make something fit for purpose because you're actually listening and working with the cohort that are going to be most impacted.*

If you believe in listening to the voices of victim-survivors, we'll have to give them a platform.

The formal establishment of a national victim-survivor advisory group was suggested as a key mechanism to achieve the embedding of lived experience expertise. Support for this approach was expressed by numerous advocates interviewed, and they noted the need for a formal structure:

I would like that at every single stage, and I think it needs to be set up formally. You could have individual ones that you do as you go along, but if they're really serious it has to be embedded right through and right from the beginning even though we've been going for a little while. But there needs to be an Advisory Group – so whoever the collaborative is to do the thinking, within that collaborative needs to be lived expertise. That's the first starting point.

Of course, national bodies must set in place processes for victims, victim-survivors to tell their stories, irrespective of whether they do or don't conceptualise it as well as someone else, a so-called expert. You have to have strategies for that. We need to hear the stories and work on them.

Victim survivor advocates interviewed noted the need for any victim-survivor advocacy group to be embedded across all stages of the life of the next National Plan; they explained that there is value to ensuring victim-survivors are engaged in advising at the outset of the Plan, throughout its operation and in examining the findings of any evaluations undertaken. As one advocate stated:

We should actually be doing every single role. Writing the successor Plan, evaluating its success, being the people funded to improve services, communicating the changes and services overall. This entire work needs to be led by the community. We should be paid for every part of our role in this as well.

Other advocates agreed, commenting:

You'd want to make sure that there's maximum opportunity for lived experience to be embedded across the whole spectrum of work that needs to be done ... the Federal Government can certainly lead by example on this by establishing that victim-survivors lived experience, content delivery, consultation processes are embedded in the decision-making around the National Action Plan.

I think direct participation in decision-making through the life of the National Action Plan would be critical, so I think a role in the governance mechanisms and also with the opportunity to review proposals, policy proposals, review budgets proposals ... be a sounding board or a place that organically comes up with policy proposals or initiatives and ideas or focus areas.

An advantage identified by advocates was that the platform afforded by a dedicated advisory group would allow for any differences between the views of victim-survivor advocates and that of government and the sector to emerge more clearly, and importantly in their view, to emerge on an equal footing. As an advocate explained:

The fact is that the victim-survivor voice is not always in alignment with government. It's not always in alignment with other family violence agencies, because I look at it as family violence agencies are very much got a range of priorities that they're wanting to deliver to their service users that is not always about the stuff that we're looking to achieve in our advocacy space. So, I guess it's that thing of saying that we can fit under the umbrella, sort of underneath, if there's a tier below. It shouldn't be like that. We should be allowed to walk alongside.

While recognising that some members of the National Plan Advisory Group (NPAG) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on family, domestic and sexual violence (Advisory Council) may have lived experience of family, domestic or sexual violence, one victim-survivor advocate argued there is still a need for victim-survivor specific positions in such groups – or the formation of a dedicated group, commenting:

It's important that people just wearing their victim survivor hats can be there. If I were, for example, on an advisory panel, I would be able to take off every other professional hat and just be a victim-survivor

because I think that would free me of some of the constraints of all these other roles that we inhabit in life. I think I'd be much more forthright and honest about what I think about all of this based on my lived experience, and I would respond very differently if I were there representing my employer, versus being there as a victim-survivor lived experience expert.

A key benefit of establishing an ongoing victim-survivor advisory panel – as opposed to a stand-alone point of input – is that it would allow for individuals to contribute as they are able to, recognising the potential ongoing impact of trauma in their lives. As one advocate explained:

There's a feeling, I think, that survivors – and this was my experience with this National Strategy ... the opportunities are limited and it's like if you miss the boat, you miss the boat. Whereas having some kind of permanent setup where survivors can contribute when they are able, and they don't just have these fleeting opportunities that if they're missed, they're missed, and they don't get a contribution. Because that fails to take into account the nature of trauma and how, 11 o'clock on Thursday, I might not be able to show up, not because I don't want to but because I've been triggered by something intense or there's some court case going on or something like that. So, I think allowing people the permanent ability to participate on their terms would be huge.

Advocates stressed that any formal governance role provided for victim-survivors must be trauma-informed. The importance of creating safe spaces for victim-survivor input was repeatedly emphasised across the consultation. As one advocate explained:

A lot of the time also, you have to keep in mind that people who have been through a severe trauma don't even want to talk about it, they can't talk about it, or due to disability, it's completely inaccessible so they are totally left out. You just need more voices at the end of the day, and you need to be able to reach people who don't have the capacity to reach out themselves. A lot of the time, people advocate because no one else [is] advocating for us and systems are not in place, so the burden is put on us to try and protect ourselves and build our own systems. That kind of self-advocacy is genuinely really exhausting.

Implicit in victim-survivors' descriptions of 'a safe space for advocacy' was the repeated desire to have their expertise truly valued. It was stressed that this requires remuneration of people for their time and commitment akin to what would be offered to any other professionals contributing in parallel roles. The need to value victim-survivor expertise is well captured in the remarks of one victim-survivor advocate:

I think just taking the expertise of victim-survivors seriously. I think valuing the expertise is a culture that needs to change. And I think if it was mandated that they need to be consulted or encouraged, or if from a government level down, that'll make a big difference to taking what we have to say seriously. A lot of us aren't just victim-survivors. A lot of us are professionals in our right, a lot of us do a lot of amazing things outside of just being a victim-survivor. And I think that's important to note, because we kind of get pigeonholed as a person that has experienced something and, 'Oh, they're going to be traumatised,' and, 'Oh, we don't want to step on their toes.' But actually, we're quite strong and professional in our own right, and we need to feel valued in that way.

The point on remuneration was raised by numerous advocates across the consultation. There was a general view that victim-survivor expertise is often not valued in the same way as other contributions, with several advocates reflecting that they are typically not paid for their involvement in advocacy activities or advisory roles. As one advocate explained:

*I get asked to speak all the time, but nobody wants to pay, and nobody has any money. And it's [*****] hard. I'm sorry. It's really hard to share over and over and over again and the experience that's come from that is worth more than any government can pay. It's ridiculous the amount of time I've had to invest*

in myself to get myself to this point.

Further highlighting the need for all victim-survivor advocacy roles to be remunerated, another victim-survivor advocate commented:

You've got to pay everybody who's involved. Pay them well ... I would hope that anyone who wants to be involved, there would be some funding to support their participation, and that should include any kind of mentoring or training or whatever.

Extending this further, another advocate emphasised the need to build in psychological support and services to any processes where victim-survivor advocates' views are sought:

I think there needs to be a proper payment framework. We should be on at least 130-odd dollars an hour and 500 bucks for half the day, 950 for a full day. And then, we need also some form of psychological support in the end, because we have to go back into our stories and back into our experience to be able to provide support. There is no way that I can do the work that I do without debriefing. Never. And it's dangerous not to have a process of debriefing.

Advocates also recognised the importance of investing in professional development for victim-survivor advocates to support meaningful participation in the policy-making process. As one advocate explained:

We need to set up a proper group, with a framework, which is what we're trying to do. Then, the other thing is a code of conduct in that space. What is the code of conduct for victim-survivors? But also, we need to provide them with training. And the training needs to be around what is policy; how is policy developed; where can I engage; at what points do we engage; what are the levers for change and where do we put them?

Taken together, these viewpoints map out the broader structures and supports that need to accompany the introduction of any stand-alone, or embedded, victim-survivor advocacy governance roles as part of the development, implementation and ongoing monitoring of the next National Plan.

Among the concerns raised in relation to a stand-alone victim-survivor advisory group was that it would create silos of contribution and that the input of victim-survivors would happen separately to input received from other key groups, including NPAG and the Advisory Council. As one advocate explained:

I think [victim-survivors] should be represented in whatever governance group is set up. I think you could do both well ... if you're representing just a victim survivor group, then you're losing opportunities in other meetings, in other areas that you're consulting with. So the best thing to do is just bring them into all of the areas.

Relatedly, victim-survivor advocates also noted that any national victim-survivor advisory group should coordinate and communicate with similar groups established at the state and territory level. Here several advocates mentioned the Victorian Victim Survivors Advocacy Council (VSAC) specifically. While some advocates noted ways in which the VSAC model could potentially be improved, it was generally regarded as an important example of what it looks like to embed victim-survivor views in the reform and policy process. Other models of victim-survivor engagement were also referred to, including groups initiated by sector organisations, such as the Domestic Violence NSW Voices for Change advocates group. Victim-survivor advocates reflected both on the merits of these groups and on the view that lack of funding had led to their dissolution.

Other models for seeking victim-survivor expertise

“ One of our common themes that we say is that we are so much more than our story. We have got so much to deliver in relation to meaningful policy development, scoping, development, delivery, evaluation.

Beyond proposals for a victim-survivor advisory panel, other modes of victim-survivor engagement were proposed by advocates during the consultation. One advocate suggested that the need to engage lived experience expertise be built into all Federal funding as an expectation of service/program delivery. As they explained:

Where the Federal Government is providing grants to an organisation to provide services to women or children or men, or whoever, experiencing domestic and family violence, that there'd be a requirement under their funding model that they also engage lived experience expertise in the design and operation of their day-to-day work with survivors. I think that would make a big difference as well. I think we might do things differently if we valued lived experience voices more.

The need to embed engagement with victim-survivors across the system, and not just at the policy level, was noted by numerous advocates, several of whom stated:

I also would like to see any funded services or funding initiatives that come out as a result of the National Plan to have embedded in them the requirement to engage with lived experience expertise and in a meaningful way, that's not superficial. I think we have to do it – there's a lot of work to be done around that to make that a safe space.

We use these services. We use them all the time and we're sent to these services, yet we have no input to help those services to get the services that we, as the consumers, the survivors [want].

It shouldn't just be on victim-survivors to put their hand up and say, 'I'd like to contribute to this.' I think that having mechanisms within services to say, 'We're giving you funding for an ongoing person that can obtain the views of, say, victim-survivor advocates to inform our ongoing policy and review and evaluation.'

Importantly, victim-survivor advocates pointed to the ways in which the expertise of lived experience could be embedded beyond government structures and advisory groups, such as through election to boards and organisation advisory roles. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

I feel like having lived experience in any organisation, like diverse lived experience is really important. Whether that's on the board or if it's people who are employed or if it's an employed group like ours, like a panel, that is constantly having conversations with the organisation about what they can do better.

Regardless of the specific model for input proposed, the importance of formality and recognition of expertise was stressed by advocates. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

Victim survivors need to be treated in the same way. If they're going to be invited to consult on something, they need to be treated with the same level of official consideration as an academic or researcher or whatever the other important contributing role is ... there's still this feeling again that ... you're asked but in a co-opting sort of way, like a box-ticking way ... the typical sort of pattern is: invite, inform, ignore. So, they've invited you and you can come along, and they sort of let you talk but they're not really listening, they're just getting you there to say that they've got you there, but your words aren't influential and they don't actually incorporate them.

The importance of diverse representation

“ I do not see representation and I feel really that yes, there are multiple different people who experience family violence, and all of those experiences are valid, but I think the perspectives of migrant and refugee women need to really be highlighted because we [are] somehow still are falling through the gaps and we’re somehow still having the conversations that we’ve been having for years now. That’s what success would look like for me.

The need to ensure diverse representation of any victim-survivor advocacy groups or roles to emerge as part of the governance of the next National Plan was emphasised by numerous victim-survivor advocates throughout the consultation, several of whom stated:

I don’t think it’s possible to capture everyone’s [experience] But representative of particular demographics and particular experiences I think are vital in that ongoing process of review once something is implemented.

Where’s the balance? Where can we kind of meet so that this plan is going to work for everybody? ... having that mixture in the committee, in the lived expertise advisory group of different backgrounds, different forms of abuse so that they’ve got that mix of people, and different expertise.

As captured here, for victim-survivor advocates involved in this consultation, the notion of diversity included the need to embed an intersectional approach⁶ and the need to ensure diversity of lived experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence. There was a broad acknowledgement among some advocates that key voices and experiences are often missing from important conversations and platforms. As one victim-survivor advocate acknowledged:

I want to find a way for those voices to be heard, because even in the midst of my victim-survivor circles, we’re missing voices that really need to be in the mix.

The consultations with victim-survivor advocates from migrant, refugee, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds underlined the need to ensure that opportunities to participate are inclusive and accessible. The need to ensure representation, alongside the value of migrant-led advocacy, was highlighted by numerous advocates throughout the consultation:

A significant percentage of women are from migrant backgrounds here in Australia ... Considering our experiences and knowing that with our experiences, also there are different, multiple layers of intersectionality that we bring into this space is important and to having responses that meet the needs of each person, not that it’s one entire community and this is what collectively, they need.

*I think an advisory board with very clear representation from all parts of Australian society. Also, another thing is I had the tiniest little bit, because my parents are old school Greek that I grew up in a very Australian setting, but I have friends who they’re Indian or something and their parents are first-generation and a lot more traditional and stuff like that, it’s a completely different [*****] ball game.*

Thinking through how diversity of representation could be ensured, one advocate had these suggestions

⁶ An intersectional approach allows an acknowledgement that dominant discourse and rhetoric that posits women’s experiences of violence as hegemonic has been harmful to multiple marginalised women (Richie, 2012). Many women’s experiences of violence and their interactions with the state are shaped by complex and interweaved social, cultural and political identities. Race, class, disability, sexuality, immigration status and other key sources of power and oppression dictate the ways in which state mechanisms respond to women who experience family, domestic and sexual violence – such responses have in some cases historically been damaging and exclusionary (May, 2015).

about any victim-survivor advocacy group established to inform the development and delivery of the next National Plan:

It would have a deliberate inclusion for looking at diversity to make sure that there's a diversity matrix both of experiences, the types of violence and abuse that people have experienced but also demographic diversity across sexuality, identity, anything you can think of, socio-economic, ability, age, gender, all of that and have a workshop with a number of other victim survivors about how we think that could be represented.

When asked how lived experience expertise could inform the development and delivery of the next National Plan, another victim-survivor advocate suggested:

I think, maybe, the answer to that is not just in understanding social entrapment and how that operates, but also in having victim survivors who have diverse experiences on tap in some sort of advisory capacity to help guide services and systems through that space.

In the group interview with victim-survivor advocates of police officer-involved domestic violence (OIDV), representation on national advocacy groups was specifically raised. Liking themselves to 'bikie wives', one of these advocates stated, 'Our voice needs to be part of that because people don't think about our perspective.' Thinking through what could be included in the Terms of Reference for an Advisory Group, one advocate discussed the potential to embed a rotating membership model, noting that this would assist in ensuring 'new voices and maximum opportunity for diversity can be heard throughout' the process. Another advocate noted the need for a flexible membership approach whereby the most relevant victim-survivors are engaged depending on the focus of the issue under consideration.

While this consultation engaged with five First Nations victim-survivor advocates, we were not able to explore in any meaningful depth which governance structure would be most appropriate – and best supported by First Nations communities – for the purpose of embedding First Nations' lived experience expertise in the development, delivery and ongoing monitoring of the next National Plan. We note that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on family, domestic and sexual violence has been established to provide advice on the development and implementation of the next National Plan and will have a lead role in developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan that will sit under the next National Plan.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan embeds victim-survivor expertise into the governance structure that oversees its development, implementation, delivery and ongoing monitoring.
- Opportunities explore how victim-survivor expertise can be embedded in sector organisations and other workplaces tackling family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Victim-survivor advocacy roles are created as part of the work of the next National Plan. These roles are remunerated, and attention is paid to ensuring spaces for contribution are trauma-informed and safe.
- As part of governance of the next National Plan diverse representation is ensured in any victim-survivor advocacy groups or roles.
- A separate consultation with First Nations communities, including First Nations victim-survivor advocates, is undertaken to determine the most effective and culturally safe governance model to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lived experience is embedded into the development, implementation, delivery and ongoing monitoring of the next National Plan.

3.2 The need for genuine commitment and funding

“ Just very quickly, really my key point with the key challenges is the politicians. So the whole political scene, the machinations, the manoeuvring, the election promises. Band-aid solutions. That’s the major challenge

Victim-survivor advocates interviewed throughout this consultation raised notable concerns about the perceived lack of government action in response to findings of numerous state and Federal-level inquiries. In the time span of the current National Plan there have been a number of significant inquiries and commissions, including the Australian and New South Wales Law Reform Commission 2010 report, *Family Violence – A National Legal Response*; the Queensland Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence 2015, *Not Now, Not Ever* report; *The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence* (2016); the Australian Law Reform Commission’s 2019 *Family Law Inquiry*; and more recently The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs’ 2021 *Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence* 2021. Despite the investment of \$1.1 billion under women’s safety in the 2021–22 Federal Budget, there was a strong view shared among victim-survivor advocates that the current National Plan, and several of the inquiries cited, have failed to lead to adequate progress in addressing violence against women and children. Victim-survivors suggested this perceived failure is, in significant part, due to a lack of commitment and funding from governments.

The politicisation of family, domestic and sexual violence

A key concern raised by victim-survivor advocates was that the next National Plan would not result in meaningful action. As stated above, there have been multiple inquiries into system responses, and some victim-survivors viewed this as a stalling tactic by governments. One victim-survivor commented:

Just that when we’ve had [multiple] inquiries or royal commissions into domestic violence, the recommendations have been made over, and over, and over, and over by the appropriate people, stakeholders who know what they’re talking about and now victims of lived experience are starting to be heard as well in these inquiries, and we’ve got all the information we need. It’s all there ... So, I’d like to [see] instead of paying lip service, as they tend to do, really listening to people submitting recommendations and taking them up.

Concerns were also raised more broadly about what it means for the government to take genuine and meaningful action to protect women and children from violence. One victim-survivor advocate cited the example of the government’s commitment to reduce suicide in Australia to zero; they suggested that a similar commitment in relation to the deaths of women and children at the hands of intimate partners and family members may be perceived by the government to carry a political cost or consequence that the former does not:

We have to begin that conversation. And I’m not going to condemn a government because women get killed. But I’m going to condemn a government if it doesn’t do anything or doesn’t begin the process of developing strategies to stop the killing of women and doesn’t begin the process by declaring that the killing of women and violence against women is a national scandal.

Advocates were eager to see a genuine commitment from the Federal Government to acknowledge family, domestic and sexual violence as a leading national issue. They emphasised that this needs to be a

bipartisan commitment that goes beyond the political party currently in power.

The need for focus on intergenerational change and long-term funding cycles

In highlighting what genuine commitment from the government should look like, a number of advocates emphasised the importance of long-term responses that operate in acknowledgement of the drivers of family, domestic and sexual violence. While lump-sum payments, for example, are important in providing immediate support to victim-survivors, they are, according to victim-survivor advocates, a 'Band-Aid' solution that cannot be relied on in isolation of longer-term commitments. Longer-term measures to support recovery, including economic stability, were viewed as critical. As one advocate explained:

It has to start at the beginning because if you don't embed this right from the start ... there's nothing that's going to shift in this culture. We're just going to continue to Band-Aid everything and then people are going to accept, 'Oh, they're just going to fix it. They're just going to give me this or give me that or handouts or whatever.' There's no resilience. It has to be started from the beginning.

The 'beginning' described by this advocate refers to an examination of the root causes of violence against women and children, such as gender inequality and the power imbalance between men and women. One victim-survivor advocate suggested that a more appropriate title for the next National Plan would be the 'National Plan to End Men's Violence Against Women and Children'. They went on to state:

There's a massive problem. The patriarchal systems that we have in place, so the policing and the law courts, they're all built on the norm of a man's freedom and they're not taking into consideration the patriarchal norms that have disadvantaged and disempowered women for hundreds of years.

Family, domestic and sexual violence is often framed as a women's issue, but victim-survivor advocates argued that it is imperative to (re)frame it as a men's issue, one that requires a deeper examination of the drivers of men's violence against women and children. A common theme raised across the interviews was that five- to ten-year plans are insufficient to adequately understand and respond to these drivers:

It has to be a generational plan which covers about 15 to 20 years. [It] can't be just a five-year commitment. It has to be a commitment that is going to change a culture because we have a culture of non-reporting, of non-speaking, of covering things or with Band-Aid approaches to fix stuff that happened a long time ago. So the plan needs to deal with the root causes of the problems over a period of time where you can see a generation change and educate kids now so that we can reshape an entire generation so that the information then filters down through – that's how we're going to change it. We're not going to change it with a five-year plan that gets changed when the next government comes in and says, 'We're not going to do that,' because then all your survivors and all your people that come out are going to lose faith in the system again and again and again.

In discussing the government commitment to the next National Plan, victim-survivor advocates heralded funding as pivotal to its success. The family, domestic and sexual violence sector is critically underfunded, with victim-survivors often left unable to find financial support during and after violence, and key support services unable to provide both crisis and ongoing support to those in need. Victim-survivor advocates believe there is a need for a meaningful financial commitment from the government. As two advocates commented:

It has to be started from the beginning. But at the outset, it has to be a 40 or 50-year plan of finances because you're going to have to embed all this money here and all this money there before your stats are going to drop down. We're still going to have population growth obviously, but I'm talking about the fact

that right now, without an intervention, everything is just going to continue to go up.

And the most frustrating thing for me that I find is trying to advocate for all these things, there's always a lack of funding. Funding, funding, funding.

One victim-survivor advocate suggested that at a base level, the federal budget needs to see a greater allocation of funds to address violence against women and children. Additionally, ongoing program funding was viewed as critical. Advocates noted that program funding is typically provided by governments on a short-term basis and is generally contingent on the government of the day. When that funding ceases or the government changes, victim-survivor advocates explained, the programs and the victim-survivors they support, are often abandoned. As posited by one advocate 'what happens to those people? They get dumped.'

There was a shared view among victim-survivor advocates that current systems of short-term and inconsistent funding equate to short-term and 'band-aid' solutions. They do little to address the fundamental drivers of family, domestic and sexual violence or provide the ongoing support for women and children that would see them equipped to build secure and safe lives free from violence and poverty. There was strong support among victim-survivor advocates for a significant shift in the way that funding is allocated to ensure a funded focus on prevention and divert from short-term funding cycles for response services.

A nationally coordinated approach

Of significant importance to victim-survivor advocates was the need for a nationally coordinated approach to family, domestic and sexual violence. As put by one victim-survivor, 'if we're talking about a National Plan, then let's talk about a *National* Plan.' Victim-survivors were critical of the current siloed approach to family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia, where systems operate on different jurisdictional levels. For instance, policing, child protection and civil protection orders are state and territory-based, whereas family law operates federally. This has practical implications for victim-survivors forced to navigate multiple complex and contradictory systems (see Section 3.3). Victim-survivor advocates also noted that the disjointed approach encourages inconsistency in understandings of family, domestic and sexual violence; acts are criminalised or legally recognised as abuse tactics in some jurisdictions, but not in others. For example, one advocate stated:

I feel like there really needs to be a national approach to family and domestic violence. Again, kind of across the board. And one example that comes to mind is again to do with child protection and DOCS.⁷ And now that I'm working in this space, I've spoken to people that have worked for both and that have said, for example, 'Oh, that doesn't meet the threshold in the ACT, but if you're in New South Wales, that would meet the threshold.' It makes no sense to me that a child in Queanbeyan and a child in, I don't know, Canberra, can be experiencing the same things but one is classed as not okay, the other one is not looked at. So just a national approach. I don't understand why it's a state-to-state thing. And it really shouldn't be.

Multiple victim-survivor advocates highlighted that the very first step in establishing a coordinated response is to introduce a national definition of domestic and family violence. As two advocates explained:

So what I suggest is we get a national definition of family violence. Let's just start with the basic stuff. Because having a different definition of family violence in each jurisdiction, state and territory, is mind boggling, to be frank. Which contributes to the silo.

⁷ DOCS is the abbreviation for the New South Wales Department of Community Services, which has since been replaced by the Department of Communities and Justice. DOCS is still commonly used to refer to the state's child protection agency.

I think we don't have a very clear consistent national definition of what domestic and family violence is, let alone coercive control. I think to have any level of sophistication in our systems, we need to really get that.

Beyond definitions, victim-survivor advocates emphasised the need for national legislation, not only for domestic and family violence, but also for sexual violence. The perceived benefits of this approach are well captured by one victim-survivor advocate:

I also do think there needs to be significant legislative reform. We've got eight jurisdictions that govern the issue of sexual assault and as such we've got eight different responses. And there's good reason that it is in the purview of the states and territories, but then what that allows for is things like, say a perpetrator commits a crime, like a sexual-assault-related crime, in one jurisdiction. It's not necessarily admissible as evidence in another jurisdiction. I think it's called similar fact evidence.

This victim-survivor advocate suggested that states and territories should continue to govern these crimes, but there should be greater consistency in legislation across each of the jurisdictions. In slight contrast, another victim-survivor advocate noted the benefit of national legislation in this space:

At the moment, there's ... nine sets of laws and definitions. I think, and I've thought for a long time, we need to have it national, full stop. All of the DVO, VRO, IVO, DVO, whatever else they're called; they need one terminology, there needs to be one set of laws across Australia. For state police to enforce but made nationally because the resources are wasted. Currently, Queensland's doing the taskforce and looking at coercive control, New South Wales has done it, Victoria's done it, Western Australia's doing it, South Australia's doing it; why wasn't it done nationally?

It was felt by victim-survivor advocates that the system would benefit from national leadership. States and territories would effectively engage in a conversation with the Commonwealth Government about legislative reform based on consistent definitions and responses to family, domestic and sexual violence, regardless of which state or territory a victim-survivor makes a report in. Victim-survivor advocates argued that this approach should also be taken in response to other non-legal responses, such as primary prevention initiatives. They believed it was for the Federal Government to bring about this shift in responses effectively and viewed it as an important demonstration of the Government's commitment to ending violence against women and children.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan supports genuine and bipartisan government action.
- Through the implementation of the next National Plan governments commit to shifting away from short-term 'Band-Aid' solutions, towards longer-term funding cycles.
- The next National Plan demonstrates a commitment to addressing the drivers of family, domestic and sexual violence and to providing ongoing and meaningful support to victim-survivors.
- There is a nationally coordinated approach to violence against women and children, including but not limited to, national definitions of family, domestic and sexual violence.

3.3 Key challenges underpinning system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence

Throughout the consultation, victim-survivor advocates spoke at length about interactions with specific

systems, highlighting key system shortcomings and their views on the needs for policy and practice reform. Broader themes also emerged from these discussions, which point to some of the challenges that currently underpin responses to family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia. These challenges include: gender inequality and victim-blaming attitudes; victim-survivors having to navigate multiple systems; the lack of funding across the family, domestic and sexual violence sector; and inconsistent system responses. These challenges are each explored here.

Gender inequality and victim-blaming

Victim-survivor advocates spoke about the role that gender inequality plays as a key driver of violence against women and children – and in maintaining the systems of oppression in which victim-survivors are expected to engage. Many advocates involved in this consultation believed family, domestic and sexual violence will not be addressed until Australian women have genuine equality. One victim-survivor advocate outlined key areas requiring attention, including the need to value traditionally feminised jobs, ensure equal pay for men and women, provide greater protections in the workplace and security for women who work on a part-time basis, and ensure the availability of consistent maternity *and* paternity leave. In highlighting these, this particular victim-survivor advocate emphasised that the ultimate goal of reforms should be to create independence for women, giving male perpetrators a diminished ability to exploit and control women through violence.

Some victim-survivor advocates reflected on gendered stereotypes and the ways in which myths and perceptions of women impact system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence.⁸ They argued that these myths legitimise violence against women and operate to prevent women from having access to stability and safety; they often contribute to experiences of disadvantage and poverty. One victim-survivor advocate emphasised the importance of countering these myths:

So the stigma of being a single mother, you know, to me it's just again that patriarchal thing. Women are supposed to find their value through an attachment from there ... Our primary value is projected onto us for our reproductive labour to aid a man. So the man owns the woman, he owns the children, we've got his name, we're all property in the end of the day. Now, if you've got a single mother who's thriving, that is the biggest threat to the patriarchy. She's proving she doesn't need a man. That's why fundamentally all of our systems don't provide a living income for single mothers...

One victim-survivor advocate specifically referenced an experience where a judge drew on gendered stereotypes about women when making a determination in a family law matter, after she had raised allegations of family violence. This victim-survivor advocate said, 'The judge was laughing at me. He was horrendous. And I was deemed a crazy liar, [a] vengeful woman.'

Gender inequality, according to victim-survivor advocates in this consultation, serves to maintain a culture of victim-blaming and silencing women who raise allegations of abuse perpetrated by men. Some pointed to problematic and sexist historical laws and practices within the criminal justice system and the ways in which the principles of these practices have been preserved over time. For example, one victim-survivor advocate commented:

And then again, legal system, you know, you have to look at the history there where women weren't allowed to be judges on rape cases up until I think even my lifetime. They weren't allowed to be on juries. If they

⁸ Family and domestic violence myths include societal beliefs that if the abuse experienced by women was truly 'that bad' they would simply leave the relationship, that some women enjoy abuse or are somehow complicit in it, and that women raise false allegations of abuse for material gain or to obtain an 'upper-hand' in family law proceedings (Policastro and Payne, 2013). Such myths are gendered and are intrinsically linked to the long history of systems in disbelieving women's accounts of abuse.

wanted to be a witness they had to have a man stand for them. I mean, the embedded devaluing and lack of belief of women is deep in their systems. So how can we ask women who have then been exposed to and experienced men's violence to go into patriarchal systems that systemically do not value them and their word, their testimony is not valued and then we have defences and mitigating factors used in legal systems that actually rely on the gendered drivers of violence. It's absolute insanity.

Victim-blaming, alongside experiences of not being believed or not being listened to by key service providers was a dominant theme throughout the interviews. Most victim-survivor advocates had first-hand experiences of having their accounts of violence delegitimised by key systems. One advocate described:

There's often an idea that she deserved it. That's a commonplace attitude and workers really need to reflect, keep on reflecting on what you're providing to avoid those judgments and assumptions, because we all know about the double standards. It's okay for a man to get drunk and walk in dark places, but if a woman does it, she deserved it, or she was too inebriated, or in a family violence, intimate relationships, the woman must have done something towards the man to act that way, or he's fully entitled to become angry and abusive if he's tired or stressed.

Another victim-survivor advocate highlighted the impact of not being believed, reflecting on the ways in which this leaves many victim- survivors unwilling to engage with the system in the future:

I know now that you only need to speak once, and if you're not listened to, then you basically don't speak up again, but when I keep looking back at it, I see all of these opportunities, and they were all missed.

For many victim-survivor advocates, sexist assumptions about women intersected with other key forms of discrimination. For example, one victim-survivor advocate, who has a disability, reflected on her experience of being treated as an unreliable witness to the violence committed against her:

I've had to get a doctor's letter that states that I have a sound mind and level of ability to be a credible, reliable and accurate witness to crimes that happen to me or to other people that I witness, and still, the police, they discriminate against you if you have disabilities ... because I have neurological disabilities, but it doesn't affect my brain, but they just assume that it affects your brain if you're neurodiverse.

A number of women from migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were also engaged as part of this consultation. Some advocates reflected on not receiving appropriate responses from key systems, including the police, due to the ill-informed and discriminatory assumptions that their particular community is inherently violent. One victim-survivor advocate described this form of victim-blaming, stating:

I think for myself it was more when I did deal with the police and all that, it's their lack of understanding, and it was just, 'Oh well, that's their culture.' It doesn't matter what culture you are, no one needs to be putting up with such behaviour.

Victim-survivor advocates interviewed for this consultation stressed the critical importance of addressing gender inequality on a fundamental level, suggesting that gender equality will not only reduce the perpetration of family, domestic and sexual violence overall, but it will also create an environment where women who do raise such allegations are believed and appropriately supported. When women are believed, victim-survivor advocates made clear, responsibility will shift towards men who commit violence, rather than the women and children who are subject to it.

The challenges of navigating multiple systems

“ *And at that pinnacle moment in your life, whether you’re still in it or you’ve left, your whole world is turned upside down, and you most days don’t even know what your own name is. Let alone the right services to call, remember this name, remember that name, fill in this form, go to this court, speak to this person. Like it’s so incredibly overwhelming that a lot of people will just kind of crash under the feeling and the pressure of it all.*

As will be discussed in Section 3.5, victim-survivor advocates heralded a shift away from the current siloed family, domestic and sexual violence systems as a critical point of reform. Advocates emphasised that the reduction of silos would reduce the retraumatising effect of system engagement on individuals with lived experience. In highlighting why this reform is necessary, victim-survivor advocates spoke about their experiences of navigating multiple systems, including but not limited to child protection, family law, civil protection order systems and Centrelink. Juggling multiple systems was described by victim-survivor advocates as time-consuming, confusing, extremely stressful and ultimately retraumatising. One victim-survivor advocate explained that this may be particularly traumatic when a victim-survivor is already at a crisis point:

And quite jarring at the time when you’re in a crisis situation and they’re quite hypervigilant about safety, about trying to navigate family violence, and police calls, affidavits, statements, all the stuff that comes with that, a lot to juggle, and still having to get on with normal life, get dressed, get up, take your kid to school, all that stuff. So navigating the system is not linear, it’s a very complex system. I’m an educated and quite resourced individual, and I still struggled.

The overwhelming nature of trying to navigate multiple systems may impact a victim-survivor’s presentation to services. When these services are not trauma-informed, this may impact their access to support. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

Often women are going to multiple services: child protection, they’re trying to get the financial support, JobKeeper, JobSeeker, whatever. They’ve got children, so the children might have mental health issues or physical disabilities and doctors and support workers and so by the time they come and see a certain person at a certain service the woman may appear to be probably not functioning and she hasn’t got her act together, well how would you have your act together if you’d been to all those places and all those circumstances happen to you?

According to victim-survivor advocates, a key point of retraumatisation was having to recount their experiences of victimisation to multiple different agencies and points of contact in the system, a product of siloed systems. As two victim-survivor advocates commented:

The systems are actually retraumatising. They’re all siloed. They don’t work together. I probably told my story of abuse countless times. I can’t even remember how many.

It’s definitely the fact that you have to jump through so many hoops and repeat yourself 20 times over. So, having to tell various people at university, ‘Hey, I’m not in class today because I’m too busy escaping domestic violence.’ ‘Hey, Centrelink, you’re the fourth person I’ve spoken to, this is everything,’ jumping around to different GPs, to different counsellors...


While navigating multiple systems is challenging, victim-survivor advocates drew attention to an additional barrier, namely, the contradictory expectations placed on victim-survivors in how they must present in each system. As one advocate highlighted, this is particularly true in respect to navigating both state-based civil protection orders and the Federal family law system:

Like I said, this tension between the state and the federal. So the state says, you must do this, you must follow this, you must do this, you’ve got to be a protective mother, you’ve got a Family Violence Protection

Order, fantastic, your son's on the order, that's great. You're doing all the right things now. But you get to the family law jurisdiction, and all that is seen as obstructionist, okay. You're obstructing access to the perpetrator to have access to the child. So then you're pulled into this whole other world of family court ... So navigating the system sounds like a linear process, but it's very complicated, and it's very contradictory, and it's extremely difficult.

As will be discussed further in Section 3.5, victim-survivor advocates emphasised the critical importance of family violence systems and services being consistent, connected, and victim-centric. There was a shared view that the current disjunction not only impedes systems' ability to protect women and children from abuse, but it also creates opportunities for perpetrators to use the system as a further tool of control over victim-survivors; ultimately it serves as a source of retraumatisation for women, often mirroring the abuse experienced in the relationship.

The lack of funding for key services

 *Well, firstly, they need either more services or more people to run the services because women are contacting the services and not getting help because they're so stretched.*

Victim-survivor advocates who participated in this consultation were eager to see a funding commitment from governments to address family, domestic and sexual violence adequately and appropriately. This view, for most, was informed by their lived experiences of engaging with underfunded systems. While a number of victim-survivors had positive experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence support services, they highlighted that many are doing this work 'out of the goodness of their heart' – demand is not met by sufficient funding:

I just want to say that they're overwhelmed, they're understaffed, and their waitlists are ridiculous.

Many advocacy services are short-term and cannot help long-term if the family violence issue is ongoing long-term and many of them are so inundated that even when you do get an advocate, they're so limited in what they can do to help you because they're just so inundated...

A lack of funding affects services' ability to provide meaningful support, and it often restricts them to being able to provide only immediate and/or crisis support, rather than the ongoing support needed by victim-survivors to build safe and secure lives. However, immediate support is often *not* immediate, with long waitlists experienced by victim-survivors:

First of all, the timeframe to get help is beyond a joke. You can't get anything for at least six months, or six weeks.

One victim-survivor who works in service delivery spoke about recent funding cuts to their organisation and the impact it has had, particularly on client waitlists. They stated that they had challenged the decision and secured some additional funding; however, discussing ongoing funding pressures, they asked, 'What about next year? Every year you [start] to panic about how you're going to pay your staff next year.' They went on:

We need to be able to give services that security in knowing that they're going to be properly funded and that that's going to be for a minimum of three years or five years or whatever they can manage. We understand they're working to a budget, too, but if the services can show that they are doing their job that they set out to do and that there's a need for their service in that area, it should be a given.

One participant emphasised that a lack of funding is also conducive to generalist responses that fail to

consider the individual needs of victim-survivors:

We still have a lack of staff who have the capacity and the capability to apply in particular an intersectional lens. So victim-survivors do come with a lot of commonalities, right. I'm not going to dispute that. But victim-survivors aren't cookie-cut. The intersectional factors that women, and obviously men, come to – obviously we're talking about a gender-based issue here, so I'm mostly speaking about women – this cookie cutter approach is inadequate, it's unfair, it's not the fault of the professional.

The failure to offer an individualised service response has significant accessibility implications for victim-survivors with intersectional needs. Concerns were raised by some victim-survivors about the inconsistency of service accessibility, with victim-survivor advocates noting that accessibility challenges are particularly acute for those in rural and remote areas. For example, one participant spoke about the limited services available in Tasmania, stating that victim-survivors 'often have to travel for at least two hours to reach a service, and most services in Tasmania have waiting lists ... they're saying their waiting list is three months unless you're in crisis.' Often referred to as 'Postcode justice', this stakeholder view is a significant issue that has been raised in Australian-based research.⁹

Victim-survivors suggested that the underfunding of key services leaves many women and children unsupported. There was a broad concern that those whose job it is to allocate funds have minimal understanding of the pressures.

It's the people in the bureaucracy, the politicians and the people who are running these organisations, they don't know what it's like on the ground and they don't see it face-to-face, and that's what always makes me upset because they're not talking from experience, and they're not talking from visually seeing what's going on.

Victim-survivor experiences of specific service responses, and the ways in which funding limitations are reflected in responses to victim-survivors, are considered in Section 3.6 of this consultation report.

Inconsistent responses

“*Yeah, fair enough, we see things differently and we've been through different experiences. That doesn't invalidate your experience, but it also doesn't invalidate mine because yours was different. It's so difficult to assess something when there's so many variables in place. People will say, 'What penalty will my ex get because he did this, this and this?' I just go, 'There's so many variables, we don't know. It depends on the judge, the lawyers, the prosecution, the witnesses, the evidence. There's too many variables in everything.*”

A key issue identified in this consultation was the inconsistency of system and service responses experienced by victim-survivors. This inconsistency operates on multiple levels. For example, earlier in this report, the contradictory nature of civil protection order systems and the family law system were acknowledged. These contradictions can be found throughout system responses, and they often place women seeking protection in an impossible position. However, inconsistency also operates within singular systems, such as the police, from whom victim-survivors receive varying responses. Victim-survivor advocates expressed frustration at these inconsistencies, as they often render the decision to engage with the system fraught with risk, with victim-survivors not knowing what response they will receive. Echoing the sentiments of journalist Jess Hill, one advocate described system and service engagement as a 'front-desk

⁹ See further Coverdale, R. (2011). Postcode justice: rural and regional disadvantage in the administration of the law. *Deakin Law Review*, 16(1), 155–187; George, Amanda & Harris, Bridget (2014) Landscapes of violence: Women surviving family violence in regional and rural Victoria. Deakin University, Australia.

lottery':

It's a front-desk lottery depending on who you get in Centrelink, depends on who you get at the police station, depends on who you get at the DV service, at your doctor's surgery, at the hospital; [wherever] you go it's a front-desk lottery.

Inconsistent responses impact women's engagement and help-seeking behaviours. For example, while some victim-survivors reported positive experiences when engaging with 1800RESPECT, the national help line for family, domestic and sexual violence, one victim-survivor spoke about calling them prior to leaving a violent relationship, and the initial response she received influenced her decision to stay in the relationship:

I was asking them for help to leave. I wanted to step through what my options were and what I could do to prepare and to do it in the most safe way possible, but basically, they said, 'If you don't leave immediately today with your kids then we're going to call child safety and report you for not being a protective parent.' I found that a particularly unhelpful response and I think that that conversation was a turning point for me. I think before that, I had hope that I could leave and at that point, I think I really lost hope that anyone would help me or was interested in helping me leave.

One victim-survivor advocate expressed frustration in relation to inconsistent responses, given that all key service and system points have clear policy and guidance on how to respond to family, domestic and sexual violence. They commented:

There are recipe books, there are legal booklets, there are bar guides for lawyers, there's everything there, but there's no consistency. Someone can choke somebody and walk away with a warning. The next person can choke somebody and be jailed for two years. Nobody has any surety that if they take action by reporting a breach or by being a witness or whatever, that the perpetrator is going to be punished to a certain extent. There's no surety, there's no consistency.

A number of the victim-survivor advocates interviewed for this consultation were involved in support groups where they provide guidance and mentorship to other victim-survivors, particularly those who have recently begun to engage with and navigate key systems. One such advocate stated that she often advised others to 'keep calling' after they've received a poor response from a service provider:

...they won't call back because they didn't get the luck of the draw when they called, to somebody who understood them. Some of them have even been victim-blamed by a counsellor, and that's really bad. I can understand why they wouldn't call back. But I do often advise to call back, you'll get somebody different, and some people have done that and have found someone who they were understood by...

Victim-survivor advocates, in highlighting the inconsistency of system and service responses, are not advocating for a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, where all victim-survivors are treated the same regardless of their circumstances; instead, they are promoting a response system that is consistently trauma-informed, safety-focused and victim-centric, as will be further discussed in Section 3.5.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan recognises that family, domestic and sexual violence will only be addressed when Australian women are equal to men and are no longer subject to victim-blaming stereotypes.
- Efforts to address gender inequality are intersectional.
- The next National Plan recognises that siloed and contradictory responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are retraumatising for victim-survivors who engage with

key systems.

- Through the implementation of the next National Plan, significant barriers to providing ongoing and meaningful support to victim-survivors via a lack of funding for key services are addressed.
- Inconsistent responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are addressed.

3.4 Primary prevention and the role of education

“ I would like to see a proportionate focus on prevention of violence ... I really think there needs to be a shift away from response and intervention-heavy initiatives because I think that they still dominate the approach to these things. Prevention needs to take up the bulk. At the moment, response is still the bulk, so I think there needs to be a shift in that direction, towards prevention.

There was significant support across the consultation for an increased focus on prevention and an investment in consistent and age-sensitive education in this space. Victim-survivor advocates identified a significant need for government to invest more in prevention efforts. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

We need to spend more time in the prevention area. Because if we look at this as a waterfall, we're catching women and children at the bottom of the waterfall. They're already in crisis, and they're drowning at the bottom of the waterfall ... we want to be catching women before they fall in. If they're partway down the waterfall, we want early intervention to get in there. Because when they get to the bottom, crisis and tertiary response is overwhelmed, which they are.

Victim-survivor views on prevention were focused on three key areas – improving and enhancing community campaigns and advertising; the role of education, broadly; and the importance of respectful relationships education, specifically.

Community campaigns and advertising

Throughout the consultation, numerous victim-survivor advocates identified community campaigns and advertising as important prevention strategies to raise awareness of and reduce family, domestic and sexual violence. As captured in the comments of one victim-survivor advocate:

In the end, that's one of the most important things, if society wants to change and the general public want change, then they're going to force governments in the end, but we really need to focus on getting that change right now, and that comes through advertising and campaigns that really stand out in the public's eye.

Associated with this was a shared view among several victim-survivor advocates that the focus on family, domestic and sexual violence in government-led campaigns and media reporting needed to increase substantially, and that this would positively contribute to prevention efforts. As one victim-survivor advocate stated:

There could be a lot more on the TV about this. I don't think there's enough. There's not enough commercials. There's not enough media. The Commonwealth Government could be putting a lot more out there on TV. We don't hear enough about it. We don't hear on the news when women get killed.... There should be a statistic like, there should be a campaign to eliminate it, like we've done in the past with, smoking campaigns, slips, skin cancer and breast cancer. This should be a big campaign like that, at a national

level. It has much, much, much more exposure to the public, because it just gets buried, I think, sometimes. They put a commercial here and there, but not enough, I don't think. Not enough at all.

For several victim-survivor advocates the need to increase efforts in this space was tied with recommendations that the Commonwealth Government increase funding in this area.

Numerous victim-survivor advocates highlighted the need for the Government to support the development and delivery of a national community campaign to raise awareness on the nature and prevalence of coercive control. This viewpoint reflects significant advocacy underway nationally at the time of interviews for this consultation. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

I think they need to look at a huge campaign for the general community which explains and educates people about the kinds of domestic violence, because I can't tell you how many people I've talked to go 'I haven't been abused because I was never hit.' Now which used to include me by the way, because I hadn't had that kind of stuff. And I think that needs to be included in the media campaign so that it goes out in the correct way so that we can inform the community, because when I talk to people like this in the general community, they have no idea. Not kidding. They have no idea. You get 'It doesn't happen in our suburb', 'We're too rich to be here.' I had someone tell me that. 'We aren't those sorts of people' and anything that goes along with that.

Beyond coercive control, other victim-survivor advocates also pointed to the need to utilise community awareness strategies to improve understanding about the roles of bystanders and allies of people experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence.

Several victim-survivor advocates also specifically emphasised the need for increased campaigns to build awareness of the support services available and how to access them. One victim-survivor advocate emphasised the need to utilise TV and print media to enhance understanding of how to access services in women who are not working and are largely based at home:

I think more awareness like on telephone or on TV or something. Because nobody knows where to go for support. Helplines. There are helplines, but that's not open. You should see these things everywhere like in catalogues or something ... We don't have any awareness, first of all. More like in catalogues or in advertisements that if you need help, you can call this number.

Mirroring this point, another victim-survivor advocate commented:

We need to do more advertising too around how women can be supported if they're choosing to leave or get rid of their perpetrator. There needs to be ads for services ... because what happens is no one knows where to go, and so they make a decision to leave, and I know this happened with my neighbour's friend, she just said, 'I don't know what to tell her, where should she go, what should she do?' ... I think everywhere we can saturate information to people, and we're not doing enough of that. We're doing dribbles of it, and occasionally when there's maybe a few deaths we'll run a few more ads. It just needs to happen consistently. Ads for where you can go, ads for how you can get support.

Reflecting on recent campaigns, several victim survivor advocates noted the need for campaigns to emphasise the 'everyday' nature of violence against women and move away from dramatised re-enactments that may not resonate with the reality of victim-survivor's lives. As one advocate explained:

You see all the ads on TV, the woman's down on the ground and he's holding his hand up for her and sometimes you think, 'These people are acting.' It is acting. It's acting on TV. People need to see the real stuff. People need to see someone that's been admitted into ED [Emergency Department] because they've

*been belted around the head or kicked in the head like I have, or sat on or strangled, and say, 'I'm not a [*****] actor. Look at me.' They need to see it in the raw form. If it's TV, I think it either dramatizes it or you know they're not real people, they're actors.*

Building on this point, another victim-survivor emphasised the need for campaigns to be informed by lived experience and for this to be built into the campaign design and production process. As two victim-survivor advocates commented:

If the government is going to fund it, they would have to have a team of survivors that would be their sources that when they use whatever production company that the production company listens to the survivors. Oh no you can't say that because that doesn't make sense. Or you have to frame it like this, or you have to say it like that, or but we don't like that. Well, that's not really important.

I just don't understand; if they engage with lived experience right from the start, they'd create a really great product and one that makes sense to people as well.

Here one victim-survivor advocate reflected on the learnings that could be gained from the work that has been led by First Nations communities in this space. As this advocate explained:

We were shown some programs rolled out by Indigenous community, and they were far more candid and direct and powerful And when I spoke to a couple of Indigenous leaders, they said, 'Yes, we show our women acting with agency because that's how they do it.' ... I thought there was an interesting dichotomy between what we were rolling out for – what we might call the 'mainstream community' and then rolling out for the Indigenous community. And I thought the Indigenous community's messaging was more powerful and was of greater significance to the progress of women.

This viewpoint reflects a broader acknowledgement across the consultation that there is much to be learnt from First Nations community-led prevention initiatives and responses.

Education

“ *We have to educate, and we're not just educating boys on how to behave, we're educating women so that they – young women so they have the confidence to say straightaway, 'I'm not going to tolerate that.'* ”

Education was viewed as a critical component of prevention activity, with numerous advocates supporting increased efforts in this space. This view was evident throughout the consultation with advocates identifying education settings as an important sight for prevention work, and the need to improve current education activities in this space. As one victim-survivor advocate stated:

I think there needs to be an emphasis, in the prevention space, on education resources for schools, for parents, for community and social services, for law enforcement, etcetera. And to be really specific, I think the focus of the education needs to be around what actually underpins a lot of abuse and whether that's in the child sexual abuse space, whether that's grooming or in the domestic violence space, coercive control. I think those things are really, really important. And also protective behaviours for young kids, so teaching kids to know their rights, teaching kids about what consent means and also about respectful relationships and things like that.

Embedding early education on healthy and respectful relationships, as well as personal safety and awareness, was viewed by some victim-survivor advocates as key to preventing family, domestic and

sexual violence. As several advocates explained:

So it's more important, from early, early ages, to embed this into our culture so that we have a culture that's safe. People are still going to do the wrong thing. I mean that's given. But if we don't change this culture from back here – our government is going to crumble; our systems are going to fail; our Centrelink and money and the way that it's being pushed into the government is going to be disastrous if we do not start to deal with this in the proper way.

Basically the key system areas, from my experience to require improvement, would be you start from the schools. So again, education on, and changing the perception of these things. So, education is the key, starting early.

For those victim-survivor advocates who supported education at an earlier stage, there was also a view that it should be iterative and embedded throughout early childhood education and schooling curriculum. As one advocate explained:

The one thing that I don't think is invested in enough is education. I think that that education has to start in day care, and I think it has to be built into the national curriculum and it has to be done every year, like be built upon every year, and it has to extend as the children get older. When we're talking to day care children or kindergarten children, we're not going and talking about domestic and family violence and how sometimes dads hit mums. We're talking about respect in a really age-appropriate way and how we don't say, 'Girls aren't as good as boys and girls aren't as clever as boys or they're not as strong,' because that's not a kind thing to say, and we build on that.

The use of education and informed awareness-raising as a strategy to prevent intergenerational violence was clearly embedded in the views of one victim-survivor advocate who stated:

Sex education, you need to have something like this so that they are well aware. If they are taught 000, I think they should also be taught what is violence. Because if a child is seeing Mummy and Daddy fighting in the house, and he should know that this is not right, this is violence. The violence is highly important for them to understand, and I guess that's the reason I took the step, because I wanted to tell my daughter that it is not okay to take a slap from a man. Because I saw my mother taking it, and I thought it's normal, and that is the reason I took 13 years to come out of the marriage. So number one is this.

Another victim-survivor advocate reflected similarly on the preventive potential of awareness-raising and education in this space, commenting:

When I go and talk to Year 10 boys and say, 'This is my story. This is what domestic violence looks like in all of its forms, and also that one in four women are impacted by domestic and family violence. So that means in that room, at least one in four of you is or will become a perpetrator.' That's a really scary thought for them but they don't necessarily have that confidence to call it out. You want to fit in with your friends, you want to be cool. You don't want to be the one that says, 'Hey, mate, that's not funny,' but we're trying to give them the confidence to do that. If this was done earlier on, I think we'd have much more chance of being able to do that and overturn those stereotypical and sexist behaviours that may be coming in from home.

Education was also viewed by victim-survivors as an important tool to counter and address problematic attitudes held across the community. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

I definitely think starting with schools, there needs to be more education about misogyny, there needs to be more education about how harmful porn can be. There needs to be consent classes. Just the general

public attitude. I've been asked, 'What were you wearing? Did you say no?' All that kind of stuff. It just leaves me with more guilt, it doesn't help anyone. I guess that's just the general way that our society at the moment's being brought up, and I think if there was more education about how harmful that can be and how useless, almost, that that is, it can alleviate a lot of the pain and the guilt afterwards for survivors.

Mirroring this view, another victim-survivor advocate recommended an approach similar to that taken for any other subject at school, explaining that education needed to be consistent and age sensitive. They explained:

To get specific about the education ... you can't just be learning about grooming in Year 10 and do it for a lesson. We need to start making it a – much like something like mathematics or science – it gets more difficult and more detailed every year you go on. So, obviously, you're not going to be teaching calculus to a kindergartener – excuse my English – but you can teach them one plus one. You can teach them things like 'if someone asks to hug you and you don't feel like hugging them, you don't have to and you won't get in trouble if you say no, and you can say no. Don't feel bad about that. If somebody doesn't make you feel comfortable, you can tell somebody else about it.' Stuff like that. It's just your basic 'know what your rights are'. And I would have benefited, for example, when I was in early high school, from learning about someone explicitly saying people have ulterior motives. Boys will say whatever they want just to get you into bed. Just because someone says that you're beautiful, doesn't mean that you have to have sex with them. Things like that. And sex education beyond 'here's a banana and a condom.'

The value of educating children and young people about family, domestic and sexual violence in settings outside of education institutions was also recognised by victim-survivor advocates. In particular, one victim-survivor advocate noted the need to expand the ways local sporting clubs could contribute to building awareness of and education on healthy relationships, respect and gender equality. Extending this, education was also viewed as an important strategy beyond the setting of schools and interventions with children and young people. Taking a whole-of-system viewpoint, some victim-survivor advocates noted the range of different settings within which education should be embedded. As one stated:

I think we still need more education. I think we need more education in schools. I think we still need more education in the workplace on family violence. And that will go, I think, towards building a culture where we change this in a couple of generations, where this isn't acceptable behaviour anymore because everyone's educated on it.

“ I think it's important that kids are given respectful relationship education at an early age. I think that's critical.

During the consultation, numerous victim-survivor advocates commented on the value of Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) and the need to expand it. Positioned as a key primary prevention initiative, RRE focuses on promoting equal, healthy and respectful relationships among children and young people. There was significant support across the consultation for further embedding and enhancing education on healthy and respectful relationships, as well as other topics related to family, domestic and sexual violence.

Noting that there is no nationally consistent approach towards embedding RRE in schools, or curriculum for RRE, victim-survivor advocates pointed to the need for greater consistency across current state and territory practices in this space. Speaking broadly on the need for personal safety education as well as RRE, one victim-survivor advocate explained:

It's not consistent ... We don't have anything that's embedded into the system ... In some states, they don't have anything. So unless you pay for an external organisation to come in ... So, they come in and someone would do one hour and they can tick the box of social and emotional wellbeing learning, right. That's great. We've done our job. But that's that. It's not embedded into the curriculum. And if another school chooses not to do that, then they don't have that education. So, it's not consistent.

Noting that responsibility for curriculum development sits at the state and territory rather than national level, one victim-survivor advocate suggested that there should be a nationally consistency education plan on respectful relationships that is then implemented at the state and territory level. This viewpoint mirrors views raised by other advocates who saw the benefit of nationally consistent approaches and sought to identify different areas where national consistency could be achieved.

Several of the victim-survivor advocates were aware of and in some cases involved, to varying degrees, in education programs delivered in this space by charity and sector-based organisations. Examples provided throughout the consultation included Ditto's Keep Safe Adventures delivered by Bravehearts, the Keeping Kids Safe resources developed by the Daniel Morcombe Foundation, and the work of Safe4Kids Australia. Some victim-survivor advocates suggested these organisations could be used more consistently by schools that do not have the expertise or resources to deliver this education themselves. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

I think you could use local organisations to help with that education, so that if teachers didn't feel comfortable, there could be organisations that they will put in touch with, they've offered – and that's up to the government to work out how that's spread, but I feel like if it's something that's done year on year, it's more than a one-off talk.

Other advocates suggested that the governments at the state and Federal level should engage in wider consultation to determine appropriate education strategies, with one advocate stating, 'I'd like to see the government consulting with the appropriate people to have targeted education and support.'



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- A community awareness campaign to raise understanding about the nature and prevalence of coercive control is developed and completed.
- Campaigns are developed to build awareness of the support services available to victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence, and how to access them.

- Community campaigns, including campaign design and production process are informed by lived experience expertise.
- Education on safety, healthy and respectful relationships is embedded into early childhood education settings more consistently. Education on these topics is consistently delivered across the school curriculum in an age sensitive and iterative way.
- The merits of introducing a nationally consistent education plan on respectful relationships that is implemented at the state and territory level are considered.

3.5 Whole-of-system priorities to be advanced through the next National Plan

A number of key themes underpinned victim-survivor advocate perceptions of the role of the next National Plan in addressing family, domestic and sexual violence. While many pointed to specific reform initiatives, their success was viewed as dependent on addressing core system shortcomings that render engagement retraumatising and often dangerous. Victim-survivor advocates emphasised the need for a commitment to individualised and trauma-informed responses, a shift away from siloed systems, a commitment to addressing women's economic insecurity, the need for system-wide training and education, the need for improved data collection, and the value of learning from localised and community-based initiatives.

A commitment to individualised and trauma-informed responses

“ *We basically have to change the systems that women are engaging with because they're not safe, they're not systems that empower women and reward women for leaving or staying and getting rid of the perpetrator. I think that's something we also have to change and we're starting to. We need to have a rhetoric that says get the woman safe.*

A dominant theme emerged from reflections on the key areas of service delivery requiring reform: the need for responses that are victim-centric, individualised and trauma-informed. Discussions on a victim-centric approach were primarily framed around empowerment and services placing victim-survivor safety at the forefront of responses. One victim-survivor advocate was critical of the current National Plan and service responses for their paternalistic approach to women's safety, where women are told what they need, rather than asked what they need:

The whole problem with the Plan is it does not give any credit to women, it doesn't give any value. Women know what they need, they know what they want, they know how to get it. They're the most resourceful people you could ever find because they've survived these relationships to start with perpetrators, and we treat them like idiots like, 'You need to follow these things, you need to study while you're dealing with family law, while you're trying to deal with your children, while you're homeless, while you're living with a disability, while you're having surgery.'

A number of victim-survivor advocates suggested that a solution to current paternalistic approaches to women's safety is ingraining a victim-centric approach, where 'the victim is the driver'. Victim-survivor advocates reflected on the need for responses to be focused on safety, as current responses can serve as a disincentive for women to leave violent relationships. For many, a pivotal first step to changing this paradigm is to systematically embed trauma-informed responses to family, domestic and sexual violence. The majority of victim-survivors consulted for the report had had at least one negative experience when

engaging with services; for many, these experiences were characterised by service providers and support workers not understanding or disregarding their trauma. Such experiences were captured by a victim-survivor who tried to report sexual assault to a specialist service:

They called me when I was at work. I might have been maybe 18 at the time. They didn't ask me if I was in a safe place to have the conversation or if now was a good time to talk. They asked me to recount my sexual assault to them on the phone, then and there. When I let them know that I was at work and it wasn't a good time to call, they said, 'Well, you'll just have to call us back.' I said, 'Well, is there any way you can book me an appointment? I can do this face-to-face. I can come in.' 'No, we can't do that. In order to assess supports for you, you have to do an intake session, and you have to do it on the phone. So you'll need to call us back.' And I found that really hard, particularly because they were supposed to be the specialist service. It felt very administrative and not very trauma-informed. And very much like we're too busy to follow you up, so you call us. That was difficult.

When responses are not trauma-informed, it can be triggering for victim-survivors. Due to services not understanding the needs of the victim-survivor, they may also result in unsafe and/or inappropriate outcomes for women and children. This was captured by one victim-survivor advocate:

Even now when I contact services people are not trauma-informed, like I can't tell you the difference between trauma-informed and not trauma-informed. It's like a chasm. So I think a lot of the services need the staff who work in these services to be trauma-informed so we're not repeating our stories and then reliving all the trauma and then trying to function with trying to find food and money and looking after children, and meanwhile just not functioning all the time because the services you keep going to keep triggering you off.

For many victim-survivor advocates consulted, the criminal justice system was a key point of contact lacking a trauma-informed response, with the adversarial nature of the system operating as a key source of secondary victimisation:

And I also think that there needs to be an emphasis on making the justice system like a trauma-informed system and a victim-centric system. And I think there's scope to, in terms of actual physical restructuring, making the courts so that victims of domestic violence and child sexual abuse don't actually have to see their perpetrator, that they don't have to be cross-examined, things like that. So, there's scope for actual building.

Another suggestion was the embedding of victim-survivors in service responses to act in a mentorship capacity for those new to the system. This mentor would have lived experience and be aware of the nuances of violence and of trauma:

In the response situation, a lot of victim survivors are asking for one-on-one support, they're asking for a mentor who's been through it. I would actually like to see some funding for survivors who are strong enough now to mentor somebody else, to work with them one-on-one. It's not actually the plan itself, it's the implementation of the plan, is how to support a victim survivor, a one-on-one mentor is the way to do that. Yeah, there's domestic violence services currently, but the workers, caseworkers, have multiple cases and most women report going into a shelter and being left to their own devices. That's when they start searching Facebook for domestic violence and joining the group and saying, 'I'm sitting in a shelter, what am I supposed to do?' There needs to be support.

In reflecting on what individualised and trauma-informed responses look like, victim-survivor advocates emphasised the need for an intersectional approach, where victim-survivors receive responses that are tailored to their specific circumstances. Concerns were raised about service responses failing to provide accessible services for women from diverse populations:

Because the misogyny and the patriarchy, which is right throughout all of Australian society, it needs to be tweaked, is what I'm saying, for the various cohorts that we work with. Whether it's disability, whether it's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [people]s, whether it's your established Italian community, or whether it's newly emerging Sudanese community. Again, just like your victim-survivor isn't cookie-cut, neither are your communities.

One thing, as a woman from a CALD background, one thing I would advocate for are services that are culturally responsive to the needs of women from CALD background. We do not have that, and if you look at services, like in Western Australia, the Ishar Multicultural Women's Health Services, it's the only multicultural women's health services in Western Australia. And that's just one service, that's the only choice a woman of colour, a woman from a cultured background has.

One victim-survivor advocate cited an example where culturally safe practice in the courts was validating and made their experience feel safer:

The judge came down and acknowledged the country – because I'm an Aboriginal woman – acknowledged the land she was meeting on today, she sat across the table from me and she was outstanding.

For some advocates, the key to catering for diverse groups was seeing more well-funded specialist services, rather than sending women with diverse experiences to generalist or mainstream services. Another victim-survivor advocate reflected on the need for victim-survivors from diverse backgrounds to have a choice in which service they engage in:

But there needs to be choice, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some people only want to access a service run by another Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation and some people purposely choose to access mainstream services.

While victim-survivor advocates placed greater weight on the need for culturally specific specialist services, this comment brings home the importance of system-wide cultural awareness training, to equip generalist services to respond to diverse populations.

Individuals who have experienced family, domestic and sexual violence face a myriad of barriers during their recovery. These barriers are often exacerbated by service responses that are not individualised and trauma informed. There was strong support from victim-survivor advocates that the next National Plan demonstrates a commitment to embedding victim-centric approaches into key services responses, allowing for a greater focus on the wellbeing and recovery of victim-survivors. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

I think the first response to the DV is also a response of care, and that doesn't really matter where you're at. That shouldn't really matter where you will be. So, that provision of care, that place of debriefing, that empathy that you need to have, the use of proper language, all these standards should be the same in all these organisations.

A shift away from siloed systems towards wrap-around supports

“ I think my most desperate desire in terms of services is that the government takes this broad view of looking at things like the disability pension, and JobSeeker, or ParentsNext, or whatever, the NDIS, victim services, and things like that. Because the only thing, the only reason I am still here, is because I finally got access to those things. But it took two years for me to get the disability pension, three years to get the NDIS, and six years to get victim services, and 12 years to get social housing.

Victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence are required to navigate multiple, extremely complex, contradictory and confusing systems. A key area of reform identified by victim-survivor advocates consulted for this report was the need for a shift away from disjointed and siloed systems, moving instead towards systems of wrap-around support. A ‘one-stop-shop’ was heralded as a potential mechanism to make system engagement easier and less traumatising:

Say you've presented in a hospital like in my case, what I would have really hoped, that there would be a one-stop-shop. So that whichever key system – what system is in place, for that to be a one-stop-shop. They could answer all those questions, rather than send you off by yourself to each individual service. And so that you felt like you were safe and cared for and there would be follow up. So staff to make accurate assessments – again, like people say, you want the past history to be taken into account so they can say, ‘Okay, we know that this client has domestic violence, blah, blah, blah. And that we’re going to support this patient with an accurate assessment, develop suitable response plan.’

Victim-survivor advocates spoke about positive examples of wrap-around supports that could serve as important models of reform, guiding the next National Plan. For example, one victim-survivor spoke about child advocacy centres, and the benefits that such centres may have for adult victim-survivors:

Child advocacy centres, they are essential, and that’s when the child doesn’t have to say what happened to them more than once. So they do the interview, but everybody is there, the social workers, the psychs, the support service, the police. So they say it once where all parties are able to listen and then they know how to support or do an intervention. And that’s something that’s really important.

Another pointed to the South Australian Multi Agency Protection Services (MAPS) as an extremely successful and beneficial initiative:

The unit is known as MAPS, M-A-P-S, that’s the Multi Agency Protection Service, and what they essentially do is they ensure that some basic information is shared across the board without having to go through the process of getting clearances or putting in an FOI or anything like that. These are government agencies, or I should say these are representatives of government agencies that are all co-located. The unit is run by [SA] Police and it’s just made such a huge difference. So if you take that principle and apply it to the CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] communities or the ATSI [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] communities you might be able to get some good results out of that.

One advocate spoke about a current Australian pilot called the Lighthouse Project, which they posited as a potentially useful program, as it seeks to break down the silos. However, they commented: ‘A couple of locations in Australia means nothing, and it’s a pilot, and no one really knows what’s happening with it.’ This criticism stems from the reality that victim-survivors have been calling for wrap-around services for many years; it is frustrating to some that these programs are only now being piloted. There would be significant value in a national commitment to providing consistent and wide-spread wrap around services for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence, as such an approach would align with victim-centric and trauma-informed principles and would ultimately minimise the time women spend in the system and reduce secondary victimisation.

Ensuring women's economic security

“ *We're not setting up women to succeed in life. We're keeping them in a place where they are dependent on men, and that's not what equality is about and that is not what we're saying. You can't say I believe in ending domestic and family violence as long as women stay beneath men. It just doesn't work.* ”

Engaging in family, domestic and sexual violence systems is expensive. Women who have experienced violence often begin this process from an already disadvantaged position, due to gendered economic inequality, more broadly, and the specific impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence. The nature of family, domestic and sexual violence often leaves women with depleted financial resources. For example, economic and financial abuse commonly involves the perpetrator accruing debts in the victim-survivor's name, controlling the family finances and restricting the victim-survivor's ability to secure and/or to maintain employment. A significant number of victim-survivor advocates interviewed for this consultation had been or were currently living below the poverty line, unable to access basic resources such as food and safe housing. As one victim-survivor advocate reflected:

I used to put \$5 worth of petrol in my car because that was all I could afford to drive to the shops to get food. And then I couldn't even afford food. I got food from the local church where I live. They used to feed me. Because if they gave me food then I could pay the bills and the house I was living in. I did a winter with no heating, and this is a brick house, so I was freezing. There was rats running through the walls. There was a possum that lived above the bedroom. There was no – there was no bed when I moved in here. I had nothing. I moved into a house with nothing. I didn't care. I was free.

Another victim-survivor advocate explained the lack of skills she had to secure employment and housing in the period following separation from her abusive partner:

At my age, depending on the demographic of women, I'm thinking of women older than me, they may have no skills whatsoever to get any job. Because I've been a home mum forever. So I didn't know how to email or anything – my ex used to actually answer all emails for me because I couldn't do them properly. I know that's really sad. So they may have no skills to operate in the world, to even function in the world. How to rent a house? Everything's online these days.

In describing their experiences of economic insecurity victim-survivor advocates highlighted their interactions with systems that either provided little financial assistance or, most notably in the case of the legal system, further exacerbated financial disadvantage. These challenges were articulated by two advocates, who stated:

I feel like a lot of people don't actually understand how financially debilitating it is to have to leave a domestic violence situation. We're talking about people who have to completely rebuild their whole lives. They leave with the clothes on their backs.

The gap for me was that there wasn't enough focus on helping me rebuild my life after the event.

Consulted victim-survivor advocates spoke at length about the need for economic security and financial independence, calling for a greater commitment from the government to provide financial assistance to people who have experienced family, domestic and sexual violence. As argued by one advocate, any kind of ongoing and meaningful support 'will always involve money'. Another victim-survivor advocate reflected on the three key supports needed by victim-survivors, all of which are related to economic security:

And she need only three kind[s] of support. First, accommodation for some time. Secondly, financial help.

And then third one is job, which matches her skillset. Once she'll get three kind[s] of support from that organisation, living there, after that she is independent. She'll come out of that place, and she will be ready to start her life again. This is really simple. Really simple.

Government financial support payments emerged as a key theme in interviews due to the recent federal government announcement of the *Escaping Violence Payment* trial, a one-off payment of up to \$5,000 for persons fleeing family and domestic violence. Victim-survivor advocates viewed these payments as insufficient, difficult to access and paternalistic:

So we're doing financial abuse by keeping people on the poverty line and not providing enough money, giving conditional payments and, 'You can have this but you can't have that until you get this.' Fine if you want to set up a bond then just set up a bond fund, 'Here, we give you \$5,000, when you need a place there's a bond fund, you come to it, we pay your bond.' We're giving this mixed message the whole time like, 'Here, we're helping you with this but we're taking away, and we're helping with this but we're taking this away.'

Similarly, another advocate critiqued the crisis payments provided by the government, arguing that they are managed in a way that disempowers women:

And the latest \$5,000 escaping violence [payment] – it cost me \$3,000 just to move out, a removal – you can't even – \$1,500 wouldn't even cover removalists really. And your bond and rent is way more than that. And the government is also saying they'll decide how it's spent. So again, it's just paternalistic.

It was argued by victim-survivor advocates that government assistance, including payments available via Centrelink, often only provides the bare minimum level of financial support, making it impossible for victim-survivors to build financial savings:

And this is the other thing I've been thinking about, we need to have some way so women can save. You can't save on Centrelink, you can't save if you're in Housing, they immediately take more money away from you. But if we had a system where you could put money aside – say with me I'm on a pension and then I earn sometimes a little bit of extra, I can put that money into a thing to start saving and I'm not penalised for having it. I'm encouraged to save, then I might be able to eventually get out of Housing, who knows? That's my dream.

Minimal government support, much of which is unavailable to victim-survivors on temporary visas, places women in perpetual cycles of poverty and insecure housing, further impacting their ability to build safe lives for themselves and for their children. For many victim-survivors, leaving an abusive relationship does not stop the violence – advocates stressed that this should not be assumed:

There's plenty of counselling and food parcels, but what we need is housing or affordable housing or finance support to get us away from these – they're predators. They just keep going. They don't stop. It doesn't stop after family court.

It was the view of a number of victim-survivor advocates that financial support needs to be ongoing, to assist in paying for supports such as housing and mental health support:

I really feel that there should be more financial compensation to survivors to have the ongoing [opportunity] not just within the immediate but, say, two to five years' worth of ongoing psychological support. Because I know even with myself and the people that I advocate for, one, accessing psychologists who are trained in victim support is rare to get into. So making sure that they have those ongoing financial supports. And also just increasing the amount of funding available to survivors trying to escape domestic violence situations and homelessness, because I don't think it's enough, from what I've been talking to

survivors with. And just even being able to have the facilities to get your stuff out of your homes and having people to be able to move your things.

The above victim-survivor advocate spoke about ‘compensation’ – this is a topic also raised in relation to the compensation that is made available to victims of crime. Advocates also described this as minimal, with one citing that they received \$1,300 per child ‘for years and years and years of family violence’. Crime compensation was viewed by advocates as another avenue for the government to provide greater financial assistance, which would entail compensation accurately reflecting the significant impact that family violence has on victim-survivors’ economic security. However, as noted by one victim-survivor advocate, ‘It never really reflects the gravity of experience ... I don’t think any amount of money can give you back those 23 years of abuse.’

The failure to hold perpetrators accountable for not paying Child Support, or only paying very minimal Child Support, was raised by victim-survivor advocates, some of whom viewed this as an example of how government systems can be used by perpetrators to commit financial abuse:

Child Support is just a formality. My partner is paying \$17.50 per month. \$17.50. You also have a kid and I don’t need to explain to you what kind of expenses you have. Okay? I can’t even afford his formula milk, okay? One box of formula milk in that. So it’s just a formality. Just a formality. Then – and even if they can give you, they can pay you for the child, they know how to manipulate it. They know how to present their pay, their salary, their remuneration less, so that they can show that they are not earning. And this is the way they can calculate.

Victim-survivor advocates also reflected on the barriers faced by women in accessing and maintaining employment. Continuous court hearings, limited access to childcare, disability and trauma can all hinder women’s ability to find work, further ingraining economic insecurity. Advocates argued that workplaces need to better accommodate victim-survivors and provide them with flexible work arrangements. Ongoing, financial support has the potential to empower victim-survivors. However, it was also recognised that more needs to be done to address the underlying causes of women’s poverty. One advocate commented:

... when we talk about recovery for women ... our systems, one, they all sort of lean towards getting people to leave but as we just discovered or said or know there aren’t really systems in place for people to go. There isn’t social housing. Women don’t have income that allows them to lead a thriving life as a single mother. Legal systems keep pushing children and parents into contact with the perpetrators. I mean, if we want to talk recovery, again, we need free ongoing support and trauma recovery for people emotionally and psychologically. To have the systems in place to support them we need them to have access to safe housing and ongoing housing. We need to have them receiving income.

The victim-survivor advocates interviewed in this consultation were eager to see a commitment from the government to prevent family violence and to work towards a society that sees women valued in all aspects of social, cultural and political life. This would need to be done in conjunction with immediate mechanisms of financial support for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence.

System-wide training and education

“ *The majority of my frustrations with the processes that go around if someone’s experienced a domestic violence situation, how little people know about how to interact with victims, and how little people know about safety. A lot of people flag things up and then send the victims back to the household in which they’re being abused, which is not their fault, but there really needs to be a lot more education...*

Strongly linked with victim-survivor advocates’ desire to see individualised and trauma-informed responses

to family, domestic and sexual violence was the importance of system-wide training and education. Victim-survivor advocates identified inconsistent sector training as a key shortcoming of system responses, even in specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services. While they were eager to see improved training and education in specialist services, victim-survivor advocates argued that such training should be delivered to *any* services that have contact with victim-survivors:

Churches, leaders, politicians, courts, judges, everything and everyone, and even we should be training doctors and pharmacists and people who work on the desk because you're going to experience different trauma.

... there still needs to be a huge amount of education across all of those [services], anybody who responds to domestic violence. The medical profession, the legal profession. When I say medical that's including psychologists and counsellors, as well as doctors, nurses, allied health workers, everyone.

One advocate highlighted that training and education needs to be informed by lived experience, suggesting that there is a key role for victim-survivors in upskilling the workforce. They spoke about some recent training that they had undergone:

I think the fundamental thing that needs to happen right from the very beginning is trauma-informed focused care training basically, and not an 'oh I did a two hour or a one hour on the internet', but I actually went to a properly designed informed training and then I get recurring updated training with lived experience as part of delivering that training. I have done that training with one group and it was really powerful and profound and they were just like, 'That's how training should be.' So I just think you have to start there because whatever you do needs to have that approach.

Victim-survivor advocates spoke about the need, particularly in the healthcare sector, for family, domestic and sexual violence training to be embedded into university degrees:

I mean, speaking from a nursing perspective, because that's what I'm doing, we've had no education in our undergraduate degree and majority of nursing in Australian [universities] doesn't discuss domestic violence at all. So, when you go to a setting like an emergency department, where so many people who experience domestic and family violence do end up going, they don't get screened properly or they don't get recognised, or they don't get sufficient care. There is no set standard implemented in Australia for nurses to receive a certain level of education regarding domestic violence, and I'm sure it's not just in nursing. It will be in other healthcare areas.

As will be highlighted in Section 3.6, healthcare responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are often inconsistent, thus, providing education for nurses, doctors and other key points of contact with the healthcare service was viewed as a valuable way to ensure that victim-survivors are receiving appropriate care at what is often a first point of contact with the system.

Training, according to victim-survivor advocates, must involve cultural awareness and diversity education. While specialist services – such as those designed for victim-survivors of migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – must have a very targeted and holistic training program for staff, advocates suggested that a basic level of cultural awareness should be present in all responses:

...it doesn't need to specifically [be] a culturally based Indian worker or – how do say this – someone of Indian descent working for the Indian community – it should just be that all people can have an understanding.

I think diversity training is very important, whether it be [with the culturally and linguistically] diverse, or whether it's [LGBTIQ+] training. I think those are very important, [because it's] quite likely you're

going to be working with those people.

In this context, training may involve staff being equipped to recognise and understand some of the unique barriers and forms of family, domestic and sexual violence experienced within diverse populations, and being aware of culturally sensitive services to which they can make referrals.

Similarly, a number of victim-survivor advocates who live with disability spoke about the need for training that dismantles misconceptions and prejudices against people with disability, again emphasising that ‘it needs to be led and designed and developed by and with disabled peoples ourselves to be accessible to people.’

Advocates emphasised the importance of accountability in training and education. For example, one victim-survivor advocate suggested that service providers should be evaluated on their knowledge:

You educate them. The only thing I can think that you can do is educate them. And if they don't pass the level of understanding, then they have to do it again. And I'm sorry, but if you don't get this concept, if you don't understand it, if you don't implement these things, there are repercussions and consequences. Because why is anyone going to change if there's no consequence?

Another victim-survivor advocate raised similar concerns about the lack of accountability, citing an experience in her workplace – a government department. This victim-survivor's workplace responded poorly to allegations of family and domestic violence perpetrated against her by a colleague. It became apparent that despite being White Ribbon accredited, no one within the workplace had done sufficient training to support a trauma-informed response. This highlights issues of workplaces ‘ticking a box’ rather than engaging in ongoing and meaningful family, domestic and sexual violence education.

According to victim-survivor advocates, improved and consistently implemented training and education is an immediate action that can be addressed in the next National Plan. It was acknowledged that cultural change may take longer, and the next National Plan should also be driving this change, however, in the meantime, ensuring that every frontline worker has an adequate level of understanding of the dynamics and nuances of family, domestic and sexual violence is critical to improving outcomes for victim-survivors.

Learning from localised and community responses

While victim-survivor advocates interviewed for this consultation felt strongly about the need for a national approach to family, domestic and sexual violence, many also recognised the significant value of addressing violence against women and children at a localised, community-based level. Some argued that the government is often eager to ‘reinvent the wheel’ despite the fact that there are a number of successful programs and initiatives across the country that are not receiving significant attention or funding.

Victim-survivor advocates pointed to the benefits of taking a community-based approach in response to diverse populations. For example, the following two quotes reflect on the value of asking communities for input on service responses:

My experience is in relation to the culturally and diverse communities – well basically is I'm first generation Australian-Albanian. So I have experience in both cultures. But for me, and my experience within my own cultural background – and this goes the same with LGBT communities, or people with disabilities, across the board. But I'm talking about my cultural background, is the government – sometimes there's communities that can offer support in DV, and it should start at the community base. So to make sure that the government, if there are any of these special diverse communities that offer these

services, for them to be properly registered and audited.

To get feedback and information from the diverse communities directly. Right now, how you're doing focus groups and getting information, it needs to be done with the communities themselves. Panels, focus groups for gender and sexuality diverse peoples, people of colour; you need to talk to them directly. A lot of the time guidebooks and policies on how to interact with diverse people are written by non-diverse people. I find that incredibly frustrating.

Another victim-survivor advocate spoke about what having 'culturally safe' services means, and highlighted that it is imperative that genuine and ongoing community partnerships form the basis of culturally safe approaches:

...but I mean real partnerships, not, oh, here's a translated thing in Serbian about this is what family violence means. We need community leaders on board of different multicultural groups. We need national bodies like FECCA, Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia ... We need immigration ministers, we need immigration departments ... we need solid partnerships in order, I was going to use the word infiltrate ... but what I'm saying is that infiltrate and to get the messages out.

Multiple victim-survivor advocates suggested that there is a key role for community leaders to play in signalling to the broader community that family, domestic and sexual violence is not acceptable – and in spreading the message that it can happen to anyone, not just within certain populations, as is a common misconception:

And we keep saying, 'But the upper class, they don't...' Oh my gosh, it's rife, it's terrible, it's disgusting, ...it's so much more hidden, and we're not really targeting it.

One victim-survivor advocate suggested that local councils should be given a 'more substantial role in anti-violence campaigns', arguing for an Office for the Safety of Women to be embedded at a local level. Beyond this, the need for a focus on local-level services should be emphasised over national generalist services:

And I do think that women in trouble need to be personally case managed. You – can't be asking women to be ringing up 1-800 phone numbers. I mean that's absurd. It's disrespectful. It's insulting and it's destined to fail. So I've got this notion of us addressing the anti-violence question at the local setting.

Community-led and grass-roots programs were mentioned by victim-survivors advocates, who suggested that governments have a lot to learn from these programs and should be focusing on evaluating them.

...why don't we go out and test some of the programs that have been floating around as a trial or pilot. That's probably the thing that I would say is missing is that every government, regardless of their political colours, they want to come along and ... they'll probably look at the risk and say well, if we spend this much money on this program we're bound to get 50% success rate. Let's just go with that. The other program might give us 80% success rate but it hasn't been proven and it hasn't been run in Australia ... it looks very vague because we haven't really tested it out yet.

Victim-survivor advocates highlighted that this approach has economic benefits for governments, as 'to get a pilot program up and running from scratch might be hard, but tapping into something that has happened on the ground' may be much more cost-effective, especially if that particular organisation can continue to run the program on behalf of the government. Victim-survivor advocates emphasised that the next National Plan should involve looking at what is already working and building on these initiatives, rather than continuously introducing new programs. Many community-led programs receive little funding and present a unique opportunity for governments to direct resources towards preventing family, domestic and sexual violence at a localised level.

Improved data collection

“ *It’s just shocking that a prime minister or a premier of the state couldn’t tell you how many women, for example, have been murdered since 1970 in what we call an act of family violence.*”

Data collection was an interesting issue raised in victim-survivor advocate interviews. Most advocates agreed that there are specific areas of family, domestic and sexual violence where data is significantly lacking and viewed this as extremely important to responding to the issue, as it furthers understanding of the prevalence of violence against women and children. However, some victim-survivors were critical of the focus on increased data collection, arguing that it is already well-known that family, domestic and sexual violence is an extremely prevalent issue, that now is the time to take action, rather than allocating resources towards confirming what is already known.

One victim-survivor expressed concern about the lack of historical data, arguing that there should be a comprehensive data set outlining how many women have been killed as a result of family, domestic and sexual violence over the last fifty years:

So I say the first step has to be the commitment of premiers and the prime minister to the documenting of the most fatal acts of violence against women. So start with the murders and then build a picture of what are the origins. I think it’s time we painted a more detailed picture of the history and fabric of the violence. And then we can move towards strategies, and we should be in the process of properly documenting some of the most outrageous cases of institutional complicity in the violence.

For this advocate, looking at historical patterns is key to understanding and addressing the drivers of family, domestic and sexual violence.

For those who advocated for improved data collection methods, children and young people were a dominant focus. One advocate highlighted that there is minimal data on how many children and young people are killed as a result of domestic and family violence:

Again, things like data for children and young people isn’t gathered. You don’t know how many children and young people are really dying from family violence, and on statistical websites, it does say that they have no clue the actual magnitude, the amount of children and young people dying and that most likely it’s underrepresented.

This victim-survivor advocate went on to argue that until such data is collected and made readily available, children and young people’s experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence will continue to be hidden.¹⁰

It was also highlighted by multiple advocates that Coroner’s reports, especially where children have died, provide a valuable opportunity to gather data on the impact of violence on children. For instance, one victim-survivor advocate talked about her brother’s suicide and the lack of consideration in the Coroner’s report of the family violence that he had endured throughout his childhood. This, she argued, was a missed opportunity to reflect on the impact of family violence and its contributing role in the deaths of children and young people.

¹⁰ Australian data on the killing of children and young people by a family member is presented in Bricknell, S. and Doherty, L. (2021) *Homicide in Australia 2018-19*. Statistical Report 34. Australian Institute of Criminology. Data on the killing of children in addition to their parent as part of an incident of intimate partner homicide is presented in the 2018 Report of the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network, available at: https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-11/website%2Bversion%2B-%2Badvdrn_data_report_2018_.pdf

Some advocates also spoke about their experiences of miscarriages and stillbirth babies as a result of family and domestic violence and found the general lack of recognition of these deaths as family violence-related to be delegitimising, ultimately compounding their trauma and grief. It was acknowledged that there are barriers to identifying causes of death in children, but there is nevertheless significant value in ensuring that greater attempts are made to collect this data:

Often it's hard to determine because usually, or at least from what I've been looking at, it's hard to determine because you need specialists to really determine what the cause of death is because it takes less force to murder a child than it does an adult and so, therefore, harder obviously to say that the child has died due to that and also to know if there was an actual motive for murder or whether it was manslaughter. That to me, it's very frustrating, the fact that in 2021 [we] are still struggling with really identifying whether a child has actually died of murder or whether it was things like that.

Police officer involved domestic violence (OIDV) was also identified as a specific area where improved data collection is needed. Advocates identified the challenges in obtaining accurate data:

We get them on Freedom of Information [FOI] from Victoria after we have to take them to Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal [VCAT] every single year. But we need that baseline to see how much of a problem there is because they can't start remediating it till they've got that, and having it at a national level would be useful.

Victim-survivor advocates who had experienced OIDV said that there is a misconception that it only involves 'a few bad apples' – they believed that police are often eager to perpetuate this narrative. They argued that the issue is far more widespread and there is a need for transparent data collection that reflects the gravity and prevalence of OIDV.

In relation to sexual violence, specifically, one advocate argued that a nation-wide survey should be undergone to accurately capture the scale of the issue. Although the statistics suggest that one in five women have experienced sexual violence, the victim-survivor advocate argued that this is a misrepresentation, as she is 'yet to meet a woman who hasn't been sexually harassed or sexually assaulted':

I think we need an Australian wide survey.... [We need to] understand the type of sexual violence people are experiencing. It needs to be from [a] young [age].... I see the statistic one in five Australian women have been sexually assaulted since they were 15. I'm like, I was 13, I'm not even in that statistic. We're not even stomaching the problem. What I think the survey needs to do is really carefully, it needs to be planned out so well to be like, 'Has this ever happened to you?' Like very specifically instances of sexual violence. Then also ask the question, 'Have you ever been sexually assaulted?'

This advocate suggested that improved data on sexual violence would assist in placing its prevention on the national agenda.

As mentioned above, some victim-survivor advocates raised concerns about a focus on data collection. For example, one victim-survivor advocate suggested that a focus on data collection can lead to misdirected action – when it is only numbers that are considered:

I think the evidence base is really good, but we have to be careful that we don't use it as an excuse to do something or not to do something. I think it has to marry with lived expertise to be able to really speak to a situation. And it's almost become a buzzword and, 'We're doing the right thing because it's evidence based,' and it's like no, no, no, no. I don't like it because they'll say, 'We decided to do this program based on the evidence and the research' ... I think in the National Plan there needs to be an understanding

that the issue is broader than that. We need to go further than just what do the data show us, but what is the explanation in between the data?

These concerns about relying solely on statistical data will be explored further in Section 3.7, where measurements of success will be considered. It is apparent that while there are key opportunities for the next National Plan to advance and improve on data collection – and the view was that this should be done nationally – it is also important to look beyond numbers and ensure that consistent data is gathered on the lived experiences of victim-survivors. This data should be given significant weight in informing future reform to system responses.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan embeds a commitment to victim-centric responses to family, domestic and sexual violence that places individualised, trauma-informed care at the forefront.
- Family, domestic and sexual violence services are culturally safe.
- The next National Plan embeds the right to recovery as a guiding principle for all system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Wrap-around supports don't require victim-survivors to navigate multiple systems and retell their experiences to multiple contact points.
- There is focus on the links between women's economic insecurity and family, domestic and sexual violence, and clear goals to address women's economic insecurity are outlined.
- System-wide training and education is implemented to ensure that all services are equipped to appropriately respond to family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Data collection of family, domestic and sexual violence is improved to enhance understanding of the issue and to influence reform.
- The next National Plan highlights the value of learning from existing community responses to family, domestic and sexual violence.

3.6 System responses requiring reform through the next National Plan

“ *It doesn't matter what system – every system is failing. Every single system is failing and in such a way that people are dying. Women are dying. Children are dying. People are taking their lives because they can't bear to spend another second being controlled and tortured.* ”

Across the consultation, victims-survivor advocates showed varying levels of engagement with a discussion on the effectiveness of individual systems responses to family, domestic and sexual violence, and the need for reform through the next National Plan. For this reason, some key system issues have not resonated as loudly in this consultation as they have in other recent inquiries and consultation processes, including the National Plan Stakeholder Consultation process. Silence should not be read as implying there are no issues present in those systems. Immigration-related issues, for example, have not emerged as a key theme at this stage of the consultation, as we did not engage with victim-survivors who are unsupported by services and likely to be experiencing the brunt of these systems. The key systems that we focus on here are Centrelink, health care systems, housing responses, the child protection and out of home care systems, justice system responses (including police and court responses), and the family law system.

“ [It] took me six months to get any money out of Centrelink because they said I had too many assets. I said, ‘I can’t eat a house.’ ”

A common theme among victim-survivor advocates interviewed for this consultation was the inaccessibility of Centrelink payments. For many victim-survivors, particularly those in the process of leaving a violent relationship, Centrelink is the first point of contact with the system. Advocates reported that this support is extremely difficult to access in the first instance and subsequently difficult to maintain eligibility for. It was the view of some victim-survivor advocates that the government financial support system often acts as an extension of the controlling abuse they have experienced in relationships. One advocate stated:

I’d like to touch on Centrelink. It’s another beast of a system... I often feel like they forget who they serve. They just do. We all somehow fall through the gaps, and it feels like they are in control of again, having that other layer of control or hold on you, so it’s just so exhausting when you’re trying to come out of one layer of control and then you have to work through these other people who have some level of control over your life. It’s ridiculous.

Two victim-survivor advocates specifically criticised the Centrelink Crisis Payment, which is a one-off payment for persons experiencing extreme circumstances. Applicants have a maximum of seven days to apply for this payment after the ‘extreme circumstance’ occurs. Domestic and family violence meets the criteria for this payment; however, it is not well known, and it also adopts an incident-based approach to domestic violence and family:

You have to apply within seven days. I didn’t find out about it for two years. There’s a lot of people who find out two weeks later and they go, ‘I’ve missed out, I can’t get it because it was two weeks since I left.’ That kind of thing is just so demoralising, when people find out they’ve missed out, they could have got it, but they didn’t know about it.

Another victim-survivor advocate was informed of the payment by Centrelink, but was told they were not eligible due to the timeframe:

And I said, ‘Well, it’s not even one incident. It’s an ongoing pattern of behaviour.’ So yeah, I couldn’t even access that.

In an experience that similarly reflects the lack of understanding of family and domestic violence, one victim-survivor advocate was told she was not eligible for Centrelink payments because she was living with the perpetrator:

My husband and I were living in two separate houses on the same property, but the day that Centrelink called me back he’d actually come into the house that I was living in to discuss how we were going to parent, co-parent, whatever you call it, and Centrelink rang and he was in the house at the time they rang. They said, ‘No, you can’t get any payments because he is in that house with you right now.’ I just didn’t pursue it after that.

Victim-survivor advocates also spoke about having their Centrelink payments cut-off and having to engage in a lengthy and complex process to have the payments reinstated. One victim-survivor advocate cited an experience where Centrelink had lost her documents. She made a complaint and also reapplied for payments, but this process took over two years. Some spoke about the challenges in re-applying specifically for the disability support pension (DSP):

...it’s taking over two years to reapply for DSP and this is placing many disabled peoples in situations of

complete financial destitution and vulnerability to violence because they can't find somewhere to live without paying rent and then – or really, really low rent. You're looking for places that are basically free or exchange for whatever to stay there. Many disabled peoples I know have been forced into slavery or sexual slavery in Australia as a result of this, including migrants and refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities who cannot get Centrelink.

Victim-survivor advocates called for more flexibility in disability support pensions, to account for the challenges faced by recipients and impacting their ability to report earnings:

If I don't report my casual work earnings within one week, I get cut off, permanently cut off and have to appeal or reapply for disability pension and I just think they need to have more flexibility around reasonable adjustments for disabilities, and same with the courts.

One victim-survivor advocate also raised concerns about the ParentsNext program,¹¹ which offers financial support alongside mentorship and training to parents with children under the age of six – the aim is to transition parents into study and employment following a period of receiving a Parenting Payment and having not engaged in work. According to this advocate, it is a 'wonderful' program, however, it is also compulsory and may, as a result, negatively impact parents' ability to care for children:

I've seen women particularly coming in who have been on the ParentsNext program. One of them was a university student studying full-time, but she still had to attend ParentsNext monthly, and they needed her to come in for her first appointment. But the problem was that some of them aren't being notified that they're getting appointments, and then they're missing appointments and being cut off completely from their payments. And they're not – the system's a little bit flawed. So either they're being forced to participate in the program rather than it being kind of a complementary program that they could access when they're ready to. They're being forced to participate, which was extra stress when you're already trying to put food on the table for your kids, often living in poverty and trying to recover from trauma. You don't need someone breathing down your neck kind of going, 'And we need you to do x, y, and z to be eligible for your little bit of pension.'

As the Australian Government's social security system, Centrelink has a significant role to play in financially supporting victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence, however, advocates emphasised that the system is rigid and often ignorant of the nuances of family, domestic and sexual violence. Instead, engagement with service providers like Centrelink can further harm victim-survivors; it often serves as a significant stressor in their lives, with the constant threat of being cut-off from payments rendering a sense of stability and security impossible for many. Victim-survivor advocates suggested that there is significant reform needed to government support systems to enable much more flexible and trauma-informed responses.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan recognises that financial support systems, such as Centrelink, are out of touch with the nuances of family, domestic and sexual violence.
- The need for victim-centric financial supports that recognise the ongoing nature of abuse and the key role that financial support can play in supporting victim-survivors are addressed.

¹¹ For further details on the ParentsNext program see <https://www.dese.gov.au/parentsnext>

Healthcare responses

There is increasing evidence in Australia on the importance of health system-based early interventions and supports for women and children experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence. During the consultation, number of victim-survivor advocates shared their own experiences seeking help and access to wider services via their general practitioner (GP, also often referred to in the consultation as family or local doctor). Disappointingly their experiences were largely negative and reflected the significant need for increased training in this space. For example, several victim-survivors described instances where GPs had not identified signs of violence and as such had not been able to offer an effective point of intervention. As one victim-survivor advocate shared:

As an adult—a young adult, in an abusive relationship, I had developed an eating disorder around the abuse, or as a result of the abuse. And I was regularly presenting to GPs or Emergency Departments, unable to keep any food down and vomiting every half hour for 12 hours, 14 hours at a time, needing a medical intervention to stop vomiting. And no one once asked me, over a period of two years, with several trips, ‘Huh, is this related to anything happening at home?’ I’d also developed a drug dependency during that time, and again, no questions asked or raised about those presentations. So that was very poor identification and awareness by medical systems.

In another case, the victim-survivor advocate described her experience, in which several GPs who had identified the violence still failed to act:

I’ve seen several GPs who haven’t taken action when they should have. One who refused to record in my notes, even after I’d left, that I had experienced domestic violence. He said, ‘We don’t want to write that in your notes, do we?’ Another one who wrote something in my notes and promised to call the police and didn’t. She actually wrote in her notes, which I’ve got a copy of, that she called the police once and they didn’t answer, and so she didn’t follow it up again. That was probably one of the most critical times where I was actually getting physically abused. I’d been hit across the back with a piece of steel, I’d been pushed flat on my back and had a piece of wood waved over me, threatening to smash my head in, but I didn’t get the help I needed. I didn’t have enough strength to call the police. I thought my GP would help.

Another victim-survivor emphasised the need for all practitioners to adopt a basic human approach – not even victim-centric or trauma informed approach – in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence:

When I went and told him that ‘I need you to write me a letter because you know every single visit that I’ve made to you, I’ve sat with my partner and I’ve not been able to tell you the real reasons. For example, do you remember you asked me for an x-ray on my back? That was not because I slipped and fell, that was because I was pushed,’ and the GP was like, ‘I cannot do that. I cannot do that.’ So, it’s just – all these systems, I think it’s the people who make up the systems and its people’s attitudes and thinking and lack of – I don’t know – humanness. It’s not even cultural awareness. I would just say it’s just being human. If someone’s there in front of you, crying and they’re in a horrible situation, what does it take to just be human with them?

There was also recognition among some victim-survivor advocates that this is a challenging but important space for doctors, and that there needs to be a clear understanding that supporting individuals experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence takes time. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

Particularly with GPs, it’s very difficult because they want to try and help you ... to really listen to the survivor and find out how they best can help you on your journey and be there as a support person, not trying to fix you but try to help you to find the correct services and the correct people. And this is not a quick journey. This is not a journey that’s going to happen overnight ... So there needs to be a thing where

the person is going to be coached enough to sit there while you work through things.

The experiences of victim-survivors presenting to hospitals following experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence were mixed in terms of the deemed effectiveness of the healthcare response. Mirroring the shared experiences with GPs, several advocates shared that the signs of violence had either been missed or ignored. As one victim-survivor advocate shared, upon presenting at the hospital:

I was really confused because not only I haven't slept for the whole night and I've been really traumatised. And, so, I found the whole process really confusing ... the triage nurses were really sympathetic, and the first thing they said was, 'well, you shouldn't be with him anymore. You should leave.' But the rest of the process, where the doctors came in and examined me, they were very, like, I was on a conveyor belt. I was sort of kept in the dark. I was more like not a human being; just a process. So, people come and go. They discuss things among themselves. They just push me to this place, to x-ray; that place to do something. And I wasn't really sure of what was going on, and there was a lot of waiting around.

As was highlighted at numerous other points of the consultation, there is a need to ensure that health-based responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are trauma informed.

Another victim-survivor advocate reflected on two visits to hospital during the period of her victimisation and that 'No questions were really asked. He wasn't asked to leave the room; he was there the entire time.' Some victim-survivors put this down to a lack of consistent awareness and understanding of family, domestic and sexual violence among health professionals, noting the need for clear professional standards and the accompanying training. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

I think a lot of healthcare workers don't have sufficient education in domestic violence ... So, when you go to a setting like an emergency department, where so many people who experience domestic and family violence do end up going, they don't get screened properly or they don't get recognised, or they don't get sufficient care.

For some advocates the consultation provided the opportunity to reflect on the missed opportunities for interventions and referrals to be offered in health settings. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

My first labour was horrendous, and the behaviour of my ex was horrendous. And the nurses let me stay there for five days just purely to get a grip on what was happening ... but no one ever said to me this may be – like no one – 'This may be family violence.' And at that stage, I didn't know I didn't know it was domestic violence. I was really oblivious. No one pointed that out to me. I think if someone had pointed that out to me, like pinpoint the behaviour and been really proactive on it, I probably would've left a lot sooner.

As captured in this quotation, several victim-survivor advocates specifically noted the significant opportunities for interventions to be provided safely to women experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence that present in obstetrics, gynaecology and during birthing. This extended to recognising the need for midwives and obstetricians to identify the common signs of how an abusive partner may present in hospital and birth settings. As one advocate explained:

Medical professionals, particularly midwives, need to notice and pick up partners who are over-attentive to the woman giving birth. He was over-attentive. He was, in public, what everybody thought was a doting dad, but what you saw behind closed doors was very different. He was very over-attentive at all of my three kids' [births], and that's a red flag, but it doesn't get picked up on.

Moving beyond the hospital setting specifically, another victim-survivor advocate noted the need to

increase awareness and understanding of family, domestic and sexual violence among maternal child health nurses, particularly given their role in facilitating new mothers/parenting groups.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The need to enhance current practices among health practitioners – including GPs and hospital-based medical professionals – to inform improved identification of and responses to family, domestic and sexual violence victimisation is addressed.
- The next National Plan enhances trauma-informed health system-based responses to all forms of family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Specific opportunities to enhance early intervention practices in pre and antenatal care settings are identified.

Housing responses

A significant number of the victim-survivor advocates who participated in this consultation had experienced housing insecurity and, in many instances, homelessness. This reflects what is known about the co-occurrence of homelessness and experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia, where domestic and family violence is the leading cause of women's homelessness.¹²

For many of the victim-survivor advocates housing was identified as the number-one issue requiring attention through the next National Plan. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

For me, the 100% number-one thing that needs to be addressed is housing. Affordable housing is the linchpin of any other system ... People can't actually address all the other issues they're going through until they know where they're sleeping that night. And I think for too long there's been a real Band-aid approach which has put a lot of emphasis on the initial crisis housing, or short-term transitional housing, and there's definitely not been enough long-term affordable social housing.

In examining victim-survivor advocates' views on housing responses and the priorities for the next National Plan, this section details advocates' experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity, challenges experienced in accessing safe housing, and the need to invest in greater housing options for perpetrators to support primary victims to remain in the home.

Experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity

“ *There's no way in this world that a mum that's not working, with kids, can afford the rent that there is today on their own. There's no way.* ”

Experiences of housing insecurity were varied across the stories shared by victim-survivor advocates – numerous advocates engaged in this consultation had experienced periods of homelessness, including living on the streets or couch-surfing with friends and family. For each of the advocates, their experience of family, domestic and sexual violence was pivotal to their experience of homelessness, in that their decision to escape violence had inevitably led to a period of housing insecurity. As two victim-survivor advocates described:

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2017) *Specialist Homelessness Services 2016-2017*. Canberra: AIHW; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2018) *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018*, Cat. No. FDV 2, Canberra: AIHW

By the time I went to the police, my husband locked the house and went to his friend's place. So, I had no place to live in, but I had my cousin's. So, I stayed at her place, but I had no clothes. So, for two days, until I got my intervention order date, two, three days, I was with her, no clothes, nothing, no stuff of my own, because he locked the house and ran. I was advised by the police that, 'You can go to the court, and that's where you can ask for the keys.' So that is the hope I was keeping. And when I went to the court, the judge said, 'I cannot get you the keys. You have to tell me whether you want to live in the house and you want to throw him out of the house, or vice versa.' But I didn't want to throw him out of the house.

There was no housing. I was told I'd be on a very long list. To get even onto the list, I had to present and probably wait for hours and hours. I didn't even bother putting my name down for public housing ... I found one crisis accommodation unit that was two-bedroomed. I have three children and a dog. It was an hour or so away from my children's schools. And then we were supposed to move in in January. The previous tenant, something had happened, and we had to wait another three months. So that fell through. So, we basically just couch-surfed with family and friends for about five months before I could secure a rental.

The degree to which experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity had been accepted by victim-survivor advocates as an everyday part of their lives was evident throughout the consultation. As one advocate explained:

When I found myself homeless, I was just sleeping on a lounge room floor. I had no mattress ... I had two kids, a four-month-old and a five-year-old. To me it wasn't the worst thing, because I'd lived in a shed before. So, I was, like, 'You know what, it's just a part of life.' It didn't stress me out.

Similar experiences were described by victim-survivor advocates from when they were younger. Advocates identified gaps in the housing available whereby an individual may be considered too old for the care options made available to children but too young and financially insecure to access other housing options. As one advocate explained:

Too old for foster care, too young for a shelter, and the youth shelter that they offered me ... would put me out of area. Then I would have had to leave school, and my schoolteachers were the only adults in my life doing anything about what was happening to me, and had any clue about it, and it was where all my friends were, and I didn't want to do that. I ended up couch-surfing for the last 18 months of high school, for the HSC, and it was when I was couch-surfing that I was gang raped ... If I'd had some safe housing, I wouldn't have been gang raped.

These viewpoints highlight the need for increased housing availability alongside a suite of housing options for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence, including age-appropriate housing options for young people.

Among those victim-survivor advocates who had experienced homelessness following experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence, there was a common acknowledgement of its personal dangers and of the violence experienced during periods of homelessness. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

I was growing up homeless a lot and then had really bad experiences trying to find stable housing for my whole life, and I was facing a lot of violence being homeless on the street ... So, I entered different relationships for protection from all the paedophiles and rapists on the streets, but I faced a lot of gang violence on the streets and that made it harder to leave the relationships I was in.

This experience highlights the significant and ongoing presence of violence in the lives of women experiencing and attempting to escape domestic and family violence. It points to the intersecting sites of violence that women experience, and the inadequacy of current housing supports.

Access to safe housing

“ *The person is stuck in a tiny little box and they're suffering from claustrophobia and trauma and PTSD, or they stick them in a place that compromises their health with chain-smokers and mould and properties that aren't really functioning. I think all of that has to change to be really a person-centred approach and you need to give long-term temporary accommodation, not this, 'Come for two days' or ... 'We'll give you a week and then we'll get you to do every two days.' It's like there is no properties, so how anyone's going to find something in a week ... I've heard so many stories about women and children having to pack up everything, move them and the kids are out of school ... it's just a ridiculous system.*

Victim-survivor advocates reflected that in many instances they had found it hard, if not impossible, to access the information and referral supports needed to know how and where they could access safe housing. As two victim-survivor advocates explained:

I went into housing, the Department of Housing in the area I was living, covered in bruises and, 'Please help me, I need to get out of where I am.' And the lady told me to fill out a form and that was the extent of the help there. Didn't tell me that I needed to get on a priority housing list for someone that's been through family violence.

Everything I went through, I had to struggle, struggle, struggle to get any help. I went to a women's crisis centre with nothing. I found my own place through community housing. Had no furniture. Had lost everything. They made me wait months and months and then I had to write letters to my local MP and things like that. And I just wonder what happens to people that haven't got that drive if you know what I mean. I'm someone that did research and just tried to help myself. But there's a lot of people out there that just fall through the cracks, that don't have that get-up to pick themselves up. They need help and I feel sorry for those people. That's my story.

There were also additional barriers to accessing safe housing identified by victim-survivor advocates who had children or other dependants in their care. As one victim-survivor advocate recounted:

I would never have taken my children to a refuge. That's why we were with family and friends. I refused. And they're not safe places. I know people that have been to them and were assaulted and it is not safe. So why on earth are they saying they're going to build more refuges?

The consultation also heard from victim-survivor advocates who had spent time in refuges and temporary housing during their childhood. One of whom reflected:

...I would've been six [years old] ... so there were bars on the window, for example. There were time restrictions on how you could come and go. You had to sign in and sign out and there were security patrols around and so forth. So I remember feeling really strange, this kind of sense of being imprisoned, I guess you could say, it's almost like we were the ones that had done something wrong, and we had our liberties taken away as a result of that ... I remember peering through the bars, the window bars ... kind of thinking, 'Well, that's freedom. This is not freedom.'

Regardless of their entry path into a temporary housing option, there was a shared view among numerous victim-survivor advocates that crisis-housing options were often not safe places:

[I] grew up homeless a lot and in the youth crisis accommodation and youth refuges and women's refuges

and then I was still homeless a lot as well and those places were really unsafe.

They just leave people for dead really and some of them are so unsafe that even the police believe that they should be shut down ...it's putting people's lives at risk ... there's just so much violence and stabbings and bloodbaths.

It's so terrifying and for women who have escaped so much violence in their lives, having to go through all this re-traumatisation and more violence, I just feel like they need to be investing more in safer housing models.

The intimidation and violence experienced in women's refugees was further captured in the reflections of another victim-survivor advocate:

In the women's refuge that I experienced, sometimes you don't feel safe, you escape from violence and then a lot of the time, the women's refuge is located in a very dangerous area and you have to share the house with the other women ... you cook food and their kids were standing around and ... hungry, so I feed them once and then the second time, I didn't offer the food because I don't have enough food as well for myself, then they would act really intimidating, putting things next to you very hard, talking to you very close in that aggressive way and when you talk to the worker who looks after the house, they're not really taking it very serious and the way they look after the house and the women in the house, sometimes it's like we're in jail. They come and tell you, 'Make sure you go to bed 8:00 o'clock. Kids, don't make the wall dirty.' I know ... we have rules because we have to share the house but ... we escaped from some place that is dangerous and when we go to the house, people talk to us like that. I just think that it's just a little bit kind of sad.

For some victim-survivor advocates the insecurity they experienced while staying in temporary and crisis housing was exacerbated by their perpetrator finding out where they were staying. As one victim-survivor advocate described:

A lot of these places that people get put in, they just get terrorised and abused and there's people on drugs and alcohol and gang violence and so much abuse going on and a lot of those men in public, social and community housing, they just go and tell all the other men on the street where – 'Oh, did you hear? This person's got housing here,' and then that word will get back to the perpetrator and they'll come and smash in their door. I've seen that happen ... It's just really sad how little security is invested in this housing.

These experiences of housing instability, lack of access to suitable housing options and ongoing experiences of violence were further amplified for victim-survivor advocates with disability. As two victim-survivor advocates described:

People are too scared to make police reports and can't make police reports when they're homeless and the NDIS system is failing people completely and they're not even providing safe, stable accommodation for people and you're not even covered by the Tenancy Act in any disability accommodation. When they decide they don't like you, they can kick you out back to the streets and they don't even have to provide minimum standards of accommodation in terms of what the Tenancy Act sets out as the minimum standards for accommodation. I've been in disability institutions where there wasn't even working, functional heating, there was electrical issues, there was plumbing issues, the cooking didn't even work, the stove or the stovetop and the oven didn't work and all sorts of issues ... The system, it does end up trapping disabled peoples in violence because they can't find anywhere that's disability accessible housing to escape to or to leave to.

People are being denied access to mainstream housing and homeless services who have major disability modification needs, put in the 'too hard' basket and told to go through the NDIS to find housing but the NDIS won't help you find long-term, stable, self-contained housing ... The group homes are fine for disabled people who do want to live in a group, shared space but most disabled people I know who live in group homes don't want to live in institutions and they want to live in self-contained housing in the community and the government is just not investing in that.

Building on this, several of the victim-survivor advocates involved in this consultation described feeling discriminated against by housing providers and inadequately responded to by the NDIS. As a victim-survivor advocate described:

When I first got all the evidence about my disabilities and gave them to the housing providers, I never knew that it would be used against me in the way that it has been long-term. I never knew it would make them not house me and I never would've given them information about my major disability modification housing needs if I knew that they would be used against me in the way that it has been.

As captured in this quotation, for many victim-survivor advocates the decision to stay with an abusive partner had been deemed safer than leaving at various points in their lives. The barriers to obtaining accessible and appropriate safe housing options were amplified for victim-survivors with intersecting needs. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

I have a sleep disability myself and I wake up easily from noise and that's also another issue, is finding a place that is peaceful and many of these crisis accommodations in different places, they're really, really noisy places and when people are recovering from trauma, you need peace to be able to actually sleep and recover properly. Many crisis accommodations and refuges, they won't let people bring their children or toddlers or babies so this can also be a major barrier and they're also excluding people with mental illness. So, if someone has drug and alcohol issues or mental illness, they're not allowed to come to the crisis accommodations.

The views and experiences expressed by victim survivors demonstrate the need for a greater suite of safe housing options, including safer immediate crisis housing options as well as long-term accommodation that is both affordable and accessible. As another victim-survivor advocate explained:

If you can get into a refuge, at some point you get ditched out and it can be within the first six months, and you're supposed to find private rental. Or if you can't do that, you're on the waitlist to get into other housing, so the public housing, which is not that accessible. So, what I'm seeing is women and children that have hit the six-month mark, they're being ushered out into other housing formats and going, 'But I can't afford this. I'm still on the pension now. I don't know how I'm going to be able to keep a roof over my head.' And that's been really upsetting for me to see that, and to see that these women are doing their best trying to raise their kids and recover from trauma and violence, and they've been faced with that, the decision of oh, I've got to go into poverty ... not going to be able to afford food. Let's get the roof over their heads. The idea is to try and keep them from going back to violent situations and partners, but when the violent situation and partner provides a roof over their head and food for their children, that's a hard choice for them to make. So, longer-term accessible housing I think is still very much in need.

The challenges experienced by victim-survivor advocates of family, domestic and sexual violence in securing private rentals specifically was referenced by several advocates throughout the consultation. One of whom explained:

My income was low, so nobody wanted to give me a house with no income, yet you've got two children that are dependent as well. So, I had to look privately, and I applied for so many houses. And I just kept getting knocked back, purely because of my income. And they don't classify child support as a taxable income either, so it wasn't until I got onto a friend of a friend who works at a real estate, that she actually got me in through the back door – without references ... So, I ended up having to find one privately, which was up to me. And because I was living in a hotel at the time, it was just like a studio apartment – I would sit on the toilet at night, in the bathroom while the boys were asleep, and I'd be there on real-estate, looking for houses and applying for everything. It's so time consuming, and you just keep getting knocked back.

For those victim-survivor advocates who had sought more permanent housing, the challenges of disclosing experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence to private rental providers and of securing a lease were identified throughout the consultation. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

*I'd really like to see the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission both include family violence as a reason for discrimination. It's not even included in the legislations as a reason for discrimination and many times, it is. I have private rental providers who refused to house me because of my violence safety modification needs, [I] got to the point where I couldn't even live in a unit or a house. I had to live in an apartment where no one could basically break into it and having to tell the real estate agencies this, they'll never [*****] house you ever, once they know that. I put in over 4,000 rental applications. I've got three jobs, multiple employment references and I study at university, I have over 15 references and a clean tenancy verification report, but they do discriminate against me for being lower income, disability pension, student and having escaped family violence in the past. They just won't house you. There's just no safe housing.*

The suite of housing options needed should also include specialised respite housing that can respond to the high-risk needs of victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence at the point of relationship separation. As one advocate explained:

The consensus seems to be that housing Australia-wide right now is just awful. I do feel like specialised respite housing is needed, because oftentimes someone gets put into general housing, if they're trying to escape a situation, they're easily findable, and that can often lead to more danger because, as we all know, the time when you leave is the time when you're most likely to be at risk.

There was a strong view among victim-survivor advocates that the housing response system needs to be individualised, trauma-informed and suitable to the intersectional needs of the individual and any children/dependants. As one victim-survivor advocate described:

I think it needs to be focused on empowering people to move forward in what works for them, so dare I say it, a more individualised system. I was in a place that was making me incredibly sick, the owner refused to fix it, the agents were playing every game in the book and using every DV tactic in the book, and I couldn't sleep in the house, but I had nowhere else to go.

Victim-survivor advocates were asked to reflect on how housing insecurity and experiences of homelessness as a result of family, domestic and sexual violence could be addressed through the next National Plan. In addition to the above reflections, numerous victim-survivor advocates emphasised the need for greater investment in housing. As one advocate recommended:

Just build more properties, seriously, build and buy more properties, and that just should be on it. It's a no-brainer. And if they buy properties that are suitable and are split up and separate and safe for people it's going to make so much more sense.

Other advocates highlighted the need for greater training of practitioners working in the housing sector:

Their staff don't have the training and I think that's another thing that needs to be addressed in the plan ... How can you ensure that these places are trained properly in DV and trauma-informed training? We don't expect them all to be experts. They don't all have to have experience, but it's about treating those people that come in with respect ... They must have been in housing for a long time, because they've become hardened to humanity ... We've got women that would rather be homeless ... and when that's a thing, that's a huge problem.

Taken together, advocates pointed to the need for an increase in training to better support housing practitioners to provide trauma-informed and intersectional responses to victims of family, domestic and sexual violence.

Housing options for perpetrators

There was a small number of victim-survivor advocates who pointed to the need to expand the housing pathways available for perpetrators of family, domestic and sexual violence. Recognising that some primary victims, typically women, may wish to remain in their homes, this approach is intended to support this choice by facilitating the relocation of the perpetrator. One victim-survivor advocate expressed strong support for this approach, commenting:

The first thing that needs to happen is that the perpetrator needs to be removed from the home. So, the victims need to be funded and supported to stay in their own home, not forced out onto the street.

There have been state and Federal level announcements in this space over the last five years, with the Victorian Government, for example, committing additional funding in August 2020 to increase short- and long-term accommodation options for perpetrators of family violence and people at risk of using family violence.¹³ The strategy was positioned as part of an increased government commitment to ensuring perpetrator visibility at all points of the system response to family violence. At the federal level, the Commonwealth Government funds the Keeping Women Safe in their Homes program, in which they have invested \$34.6 million since 2015–16.¹⁴



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan recognises that victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence experience homelessness and housing insecurity, particularly in the period immediately following leaving an abusive relationship, and as an outcome of ongoing financial insecurity and experiences of poverty.
- The significant barriers to accessing safe housing in Australia for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence are addressed.
- Federal and state governments invest significantly over the lifespan of the next National

¹³ Premier of Victoria. (2020) Keeping family violence in sight during coronavirus. *Media Release*, State Government of Victoria, 17 August, available at: <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/keeping-family-violence-sight-during-coronavirus>

¹⁴ For further details on this program, see <https://www.dss.gov.au/women-programs-services-reducing-violence/keeping-women-safe-in-their-homes>.

Plan to support enhancing the accessibility of safe housing options and ensuring a suite of housing is available to meet the diverse and intersecting needs of victim-survivors.

- The provision of safe housing in Australia is individualised, trauma-informed, safe, and suitable to the intersectional needs of victim-survivors and any children/dependants.

Child protection and out of home care

A significant number of victim-survivor advocates reflected throughout the consultation on their engagement with child protection services during their experience of family, domestic and sexual violence. In particular, numerous advocates believed that the child protection system is unconsciously biased against the mother, and that abusive fathers are too often afforded unsafe access to children:

It's people who have gone through the system, have their children taken off [them] because of perhaps a narcissistic partner or that sort of issue there, but then the child has been put into a vulnerable position with an offending father, or say they haven't been convicted because the court has overturned a disclosure or a complaint that was made and they weren't convicted of it, and they've been put back or made to see the offending father ... So yeah, there's got to be something done about putting children back into positions of vulnerability or being made to see a [perpetrator] parent.

All I understand is that a child, a minor, who has been through experience of abuse, violence, witnessing at home, and [has] already been affected by these issues, how could a judge, how could a court in Australia allow a perpetrator, someone who had already been charged with violence under their domestic violence law ... yet that person has the right to take a child or children with them by themselves. It doesn't make sense to me. Believe me, I've tried to look different ways and it doesn't make sense to me.

For one victim-survivor advocate, this was directly linked to the implementation of the parental 'failure to protect' provision in child protection:

While we continue to have in child protection 'failure to protect', so blaming the protective parent for an abuser's violence and threatening to take away children because the person failed to protect instead of going after the perpetrator to stop their abuse, that is the biggest deterrent to people coming forward when they've got children.

Some victim-survivor advocates shared at length their experiences of the child protection and out of home care systems. These experiences had similarities in terms of ongoing experiences of violence and trauma in the lives of young people that were often unaddressed into adulthood. The need for out of home care systems to be trauma-informed was repeatedly emphasised through the stories of survivors. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

Any child that is in foster care, and particularly if they come from a violent household, a violent upbringing, they're going to experience grief and loss and have a sense of not being worthy of love ... that's probably the biggest barrier to a successful foster home, really, is that sense of not being wanted, not being really valued ... I do think that, had there have been supports in place for that foster family around well, what are these children going to come with that we might need to be prepared for? What kind of things are we going to need to be considerate of? What might they need to support them from our point of view? And similarly, for us, what will it be like to live in a foster home? ... What adjustments might we need to make from our end rather than it just being a smack, bang, here you are in another family, you're living under the same roof, now get along all nice and happy and dance around the uncomfortable

conversations that no one wants to have kind of thing, you know? ... that, I think is one of the things that I struggled with the most in both foster homes ... we would pick up, move on, and just merge into their families without the need for grief or loss.

As captured here, out of home care responses were viewed as failing to adequately appreciate the high prevalence of histories of family, domestic and sexual violence among children and young people. Additionally, victim-survivor advocates noted that the removal of a child from their home in the context of family, domestic and sexual violence may mean that they are also removed from parents and other family members with whom they wish to retain a relationship. There was recognition that this can impose further trauma on children and young people through experiences of displacement and a lack of belonging, particularly in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's experiences of being removed from family, kin, community and country, and the related impacts.

Some victim-survivor advocates pointed specifically to the need for increased specialist training of professionals working within the child protection system. One victim-survivor reflected positively on the change she had witnessed in the handling of her own case following the introduction of Safe and Together training.¹⁵ She explained:

*They did get involved a couple of times and the last occasion, they became involved – there was none of this failure to protect talk, it was all mapping [the perpetrator's] behaviour. It was all very safe and together. They embodied that model, and they did an absolutely fantastic job there in being able to identify that he was using their system and weaponising their system in order to continue to enact coercive control. They were able to just pinpoint that, name it and it was quite incredible actually, because child safety [*****] things up so much often, but this was just a really, really good piece of casework, I thought.*

While some other advocates noted the implementation of Safe and Together training, there was a view shared that this had not been rolled out consistently across the system. Related to training, there was a strong view among advocates that all child protection responses should be trauma informed. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

Child protection systems obviously [need] to embed more trauma-informed practices that don't seek to blame the victims of violence, that place the blame squarely on perpetrators of violence, because at the moment, often that's very hit and miss.

The need for child-centric risk practices was emphasised by several victim-survivor advocates, who on reflecting on their own experience with the child protection system, noted that children are viewed as only an extension of their mother. As described by one victim-survivor advocate:

I feel like I had no real involvement as a child or a young person with any family violence services. I was basically seen as just like an extension of the mother again. Like, same with most of my family. Our family was known to child protection since the 1990s. So, they knew that there was family violence, they knew that as children and young people we were unsafe in our home, but there was no real intervention, no actual conversations with us. So, we had child protection services coming in and out of our home for years and years and years, but they never spoke to us at all as children despite the fact that we had different risks to our mother.

The invisibility of children in the child protection system extends to out of home care arrangements. One victim-survivor advocate explained that not only did the violence they experienced escalate, but they

¹⁵ For further information on the Safe and Together training model, see <https://www.berrystreet.org.au/about-us/how-we-do-things/the-safe-together-model>

continued to be invisible to the system as a victim in their own right:

My experience with out of home care has been that they don't do anything to mitigate risk to you in out of home care as well, because I experienced, and my family experienced lesser than what we'd experienced with our parents, but we experienced family violence in a foster care home and there was no response at all really, from anyone. It took three years for them to actually get us out of that situation. It was only because one of my other siblings ended up running away. So, at every single point in the system, we're not being listened to, we're not being heard.

Signalling some evidence of change, one victim-survivor advocate did comment that 'these days [children are] deemed to be victims in their own right. Eight years ago, not so much.'

Key findings on desired outcomes:



- A review of the application of the failure to protect provision in the child protection system is undertaken to determine whether the provision is operating in line with the best interests of the child.
- Out of home care system responses to children and young people are trauma-informed, including clear recognition of historical trauma.
- The next National Plan recognises that out of home care placements may create further trauma through experiences of displacement and lack of belonging.
- State and territory governments evaluate the effectiveness and impact of training in the child protection system with the view to identifying ongoing training needs to ensure family, domestic and sexual violence specialist and trauma-informed practice.
- Responses to, and the prevention of family, domestic and sexual violence are child-centric.

Justice system responses



Oh my god, are you hearing me?

The primary messages throughout consultations with victim-survivor advocates about justice system responses to family, domestic and sexual violence were about women's poor experiences with all components of the system. In most cases, victim-survivor advocates reflected that the justice system caused them harm rather than delivering justice. Victim-survivor advocates consistently identified the need for significant system reform to ensure a trauma-informed, culturally-safe, person-centred response. This was summarised by one victim-survivor advocate's experience with the police:

Well, I have had a couple of experiences with the police here in Australia. And the response was absolute zero. No response was the response.

Victim-survivor advocates identified a range of opportunities for justice system reform, particularly regarding police and courts. Some of the suggested reforms relate broadly to family, domestic and sexual violence; others relate to family and domestic violence only. Across the justice system, victim-survivor advocates saw the need for better understanding of these forms of violence, with some calling for national guidelines and principles to facilitate a consistent and appropriate response.

Police responses to family, domestic and sexual violence

“ And one of the police officers said – I quote, he said, ‘Do you really want to poke the bear?’ And I just thought, ‘Why am I even bothering?’ ”

While some victim-survivor advocates reflected on the positive responses that they had received from police, others identified a range of concerns about aspects of police responses to family, domestic and sexual violence.

Barriers to reporting

Many of the victim-survivor advocates felt that the barriers to reporting to police represented a significant obstacle. One of the primary barriers to calling the police in the context of family and domestic violence was said to be the risk of being faced with a police officer who does not have a good understanding of the nature and dynamics of family and domestic violence. A victim-survivor advocate who had been abused as a child by her mother found that police were ‘out of their depth’ – they were ‘confused’ that the perpetrator was a woman. Another received ‘zero response’ from police: when he reported the violence perpetrated by his male partner, he was told that with no bruising, there was ‘no evidence’. In such instances, police ‘take on the role of courts’, deciding that the violence is ‘not bad enough to press charges’.

Other advocates described how having to explain one’s story to police who are dismissive, who ask retraumatising questions or who are unable to identify the perpetrator accurately is a prospect that may turn people away from seeking police intervention at all. As one participant explained about the nature of police forces:

It’s ... masculine role models and masculine behaviours and forms of leadership that are sort of antithetical to doing this work well. We always still have victim blaming just across the board, what was she doing, why was she there, interrogating the victims when they’re in a state of trauma, all that sort of stuff ... still not understanding that trauma is an injury from abuse and instead seeing people who are traumatised as incredible not credible people because they’re experiencing trauma. So we need to completely change the system again to recognise that trauma is almost evidence of the abuse happening as opposed to being ‘oh, this person’s out of control and they can’t be trusted’ because they’re emotional and they’re not remembering things.

In some cases related by victim-survivor advocates, police questioned or minimised the experience of the women reporting. One participant shared that she had been to the police twice: the first time her ex-partner had been physically abusive, and they provided extensive support. She later returned to live with him again. When she reported on another occasion, when the abuse was not physical and involved coercion and emotional abuse, she felt the police had provided no support or response to her situation. Other advocates similarly experienced the dismissal of non-physical experiences of violence and abuse.

Another participant identified that police culture not only acts as a barrier to reporting, but is itself a driver of violence:

And then with policing, similarly, attitudes in policing – the very nature of policing is one of the gender drivers of violence. You’ve got male peer relations that support and endorse use of violence for coercion and control, using threats to control. That is a driver of gendered violence. And yet it is how our police forces operate. So how are they going to police things that they deeply don’t understand? So many within the police force ... are violent, so they support rigid gender stereotypes, because to be a cop you’ve got to be strong, you’ve got to be tough, you’ve got to be stoic. They feed into rigid adherence to gender

stereotypes. Men in decision-making positions. Hierarchies of men in power positions ... They've basically hired the wrong people to do this work.

Barriers to reporting are especially significant when the perpetrator is a member of the police. Victim-survivor advocates talked about the 'blue family', whereby police have 'got [each other's] backs'. One participant suggested the need for national guidelines on responses to officer-involved domestic and family violence (where the police officer is the perpetrator), while another suggested a dedicated unit external to police and run by women. For all the victim-survivor advocates who had been subjected to officer-involved domestic and family violence, it is especially difficult to deal with these types of perpetrators:

I would argue that any case that involves a police offender is high risk just because they know how to game the system.

Compounding the challenges of reporting family, domestic and sexual violence when the perpetrator is a police officer is the difficulty faced by victims of this kind of abuse in smaller rural and regional areas. In such locations, the small size of the community – and the fact that police are often well-known – means that finding a police officer who has no existing relationship with the family can mean travelling to another town to report. Victim-survivor advocates illustrated the challenges associated as follows:

It's obvious that regional women, we face a lot more barriers, and probably why I didn't come forward sooner was because I didn't know how I would be received, I didn't want the local police to deal with me who – one of the local cops was my son's coach, they're all [the perpetrator's] friends, they were all my partner's friends, and just not knowing what response I would receive.

When you're talking [about] what requires improvement in regional areas, I had to report at the police station where he works where everybody knows everybody. It was almost impossible. So the people coming to interview me are his colleagues. It doesn't work. You can't trust them, you don't feel safe, and even the police stations nearby, it's still regional and they still work with each other, especially if they're highway, they work together. So there's a lot of barriers.

While it appears that there is an awareness of this issue among some state police, advocates felt that not enough is being done to address the problems specific to police officers policing their colleagues:

Their new policy that they're bringing out, Victoria Police in two weeks, is great, they've got a standalone policy. They'll be the first force that does it, but it still permits safety and escape plans to be leaked on member welfare grounds like mine was. It doesn't solve any of the problems, doesn't give you any confidence as a victim. And we're fighting really hard for privacy protections for victims so our information doesn't leak, because what was in my statements got given to him by the informant, I had breaches happening with his boss passing messages on from him through the informant to me two weeks before the County Court appeal. The lines get blurred and they can't take the blue out of it, they just can't. They can't investigate themselves.

Additional barriers to reporting are faced by people whose first language is not English – people who are not necessarily aware of how to report to police or of services that are available for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities:

How many migrants know where the police station is? We all come from a different background and we are new to the country. We don't know which road leads to where.

For people from diverse backgrounds, the 'racism and discrimination' inherent in police culture presents a significant barrier:

The other thing is I think they really need to work on their racism and discrimination attitude, that culture shift because we can talk about it, we've talked about it, we're always going to be talking about it, but unless there's that culture shift, I think people from different countries are going to be in the middle of receiving these racist comments, or even if they're not saying anything, just their body language or when we're filling out a demographic form and look up and they say, 'Of course, you're Indian.' That's enough for me to not want to engage with them.

For victim-survivors of sexual violence, police responses can be equally traumatising, creating barriers to future reporting and recommendations to friends not to go to the police. One victim-survivor advocate told of her horrific experience of having to re-enact her violent rape on film for the police, and the lasting negative impact of her experiences with police responses to sexual violence:

I mean, if somebody I knew, if a friend of mine was raped now, I would support them whatever their choice, but I would not recommend that they made a report. I didn't really have a choice because there were four offenders and the family that I was living with made the report ... I just had to do all sorts of miserable things, like I was scrutinised and criticised for not remembering everything at first, and then remembering more details a couple of months later. I was criticised for having cleaned the bedroom that I was staying in at this friend's house, and just ruining evidence, or whatever. The first thing I did in the morning was get up and disinfect the place, which is what I used to do when I was sexually assaulted as a child. It was just a panicked reflex to me, but it was taken as an indication of guilt. I had to have the police over to the friend's that I was staying with many, many times over a number of months to do things. I had to do some horrible video walkthrough, which they told me was for the jury. I had to say, 'This is my home, and this is where I was raped,' and basically they filmed me in that bedroom, on that bed, and they basically asked me to show them I was held down, and how I was tied up, and where they held me, where they hit me, where they choked me, and all that sort of thing. Really horrible.

Several victim-survivor advocates noted the importance of training and education to improve police responses to family, domestic and sexual violence. Victims are often told by the perpetrator that they will not be believed; advocates emphasised that police should be trained that being believed is a crucial starting point in their response. If victim-survivors feel believed, they will 'have faith' that people will take them seriously.

Misidentification of the person in need of protection

Misidentification of the person in need of protection was identified as an area that needs to be improved in police responses to family and domestic violence in particular.¹⁶ One of the reasons for misidentification was said to be stereotypical perceptions of a family violence victim: 'If somebody doesn't fit somebody's picture of a victim, then they can't be a victim.' For one advocate, the cause of misidentification was that the perpetrator was a police officer:

So, in my case my ex was the coercive control champion; he'd wake you up all night, he'd break in, he'd destroy property, intimidation. He did do an assault, but it wasn't an assault – it didn't leave a mark, but then he said that I had dug my fingernails into his hand and that's what I was charged on the basis of minor, minor injury that I actually saw him do ... So I ended up with assault occasioning an actual bodily

¹⁶ On the misidentification of the person in need of protection, see further Nancarrow, H., Thomas, K., Ringland, V., & Modini, T. (2020). Accurately identifying the "person most in need of protection" in domestic and family violence law (Research report, 23/2020). Sydney: ANROWS; Reeves, E. (2021). 'I'm Not at All Protected and I Think Other Women Should Know That, That They're Not Protected Either': Victim-Survivors' Experiences of 'Misidentification' in Victoria's Family Violence System. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 10(4), 39-51. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcisd.1992>.

harm over that. So he basically went to the station – over the interaction he actually assaulted me, and he was basically trying to get to the station first and make an allegation. I had video evidence that proved that his story didn't add up, it didn't make sense, I gave that video to the police, I was still charged.

For this victim-survivor advocate, her misidentification – and the protection of the police perpetrator – continued into the courtroom:

We walked out of the local court thinking we were easily, easily going to get off. We were preparing to stand up to appear at sentencing with a cross-application because we just thought it was blown out of the water, and then the Magistrate handed down this finding and pretty much said, 'I can tell that he's not reliable,' but actually said in his finding that 'He's a cop so I'm going to choose to believe him.' In the District Court the District Court Judge got up, took him five minutes, he watched the video, he went, 'He's clearly the aggressor, there is no evidence, so zero evidence that it happened' and threw it all out in two seconds. I'd lived for two years with this hanging over my head. After the local court I had an AVO taken out against me. There's just no words to describe what it feels like to be a DV victim and then be the one charged.

Victim-survivors recognised First Nations women and migrant, refugee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse women as facing an increased risk of misidentification. One victim-survivor advocate commented:

I called the police first at 9:00 o'clock in the morning. They didn't contact me back until 1:00 o'clock. Between this time, the perpetrator has [approached] the police station and got an intervention order against me. So, just tell me, the priority depends upon the person visiting the police station. How many migrants know where the police station is?

Other advocates shared similar experiences, of citizen or permanent resident abusive partners making first contact with police such that when women approached police they were questioned about their own conduct and/or felt as if they were being perceived as a perpetrator. Misidentification can have significant consequences for victim-survivors of family and domestic violence; they include a loss of access to valuable supports such as housing and employment, negative impacts on visa status, negative impacts on child custody arrangements and/or child protection involvement, and secondary victimisation as a result of trying to navigate a system that has labelled them a perpetrator. Victim-survivors identified misidentification as a product of poor policing responses, and as an issue that 'needs to be looked at' in the next National Plan.

Positive experiences with police

Some victim-survivor advocates felt that their experience with police had been positive – that they had received a good response. While these experiences appeared to be in the minority, they offer powerful illustrations of the impact that a good police response can have for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence.

The primary message from people who had received a good response was that their reports of violence had been taken seriously. But some of these advocates believed that they had been 'lucky', or that the 'saving grace' was that the perpetrator was already known to police:

So I was incredibly lucky, but that doesn't happen all the time. It shouldn't be Russian roulette that when you ring up the police am I going to get someone that understands, will they be talking to me, will they understand what I'm talking about?

The saving grace for me was that he was known to police so when I did start to suspect that this wasn't

normal and realised that I was out of my depth and that he might kill me, when I went to the police in [location redacted] – they knew him and so they took me really, really seriously and they pretty much held my hand and wouldn't let me go until they knew that I was safe. And every time that I've needed to approach the police in the years since then, the police and all of the domestic violence services have been really fantastic. I think I'm in a great position because they knew him and they also knew that I had a bit of clout as an advocate as well.

For victim-survivors who received a positive response from the police, it often played a key role in validating their experiences of family and domestic violence and helped them understand what they were experiencing, as captured in the following quote:

I think that my experience was unique in that my officer always said to me, 'I believe in you and I want you to know that,' upfront and first and foremost, 'I need you to know that I believe you. And I'm here to support you. I'm impartial, but I believe you. I just think it's really important that you know that.' And so, it kind of felt like okay, whatever happens, it's good to know that this person believes me.

Some victim-survivors referred to police officers as their 'allies', which demonstrates there may be opportunities for police officers to have a meaningful and supportive role in protecting and supporting victim-survivors.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan recognises the significant barriers to reporting family, domestic and sexual violence to the police.
- The next National Plan demonstrates a commitment to making police responses safer, through a focus on trauma-informed and culturally sensitive training and practices.
- The next National Plan recognises that victim-survivors who have experienced police officer involved domestic violence face additional barriers in accessing safety and their perpetrators are often protected and/or not held accountable. The merits of establishing an independent investigations unit for officer involved domestic violence are explored.
- National Principles to inform best practice state- and territory-level responses to police officer involved domestic violence are developed.

Court responses to family and domestic violence

“ *I feel that that system there is fractured, and there needs to be a better pathway towards consolidating that system somehow to support essentially, the person that's experienced the domestic violence a little bit more.*

An integrated, trauma-informed court system was seen as pivotal to improving the justice system experience of victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. Victim-survivor advocates consistently raised the problems of a court system that, outside of a specialist court, actively harms people by retraumatising them.¹⁷ Part of this issue was said to be training, with magistrates in particular said to be 'hopeless' and 'not trained properly, certainly in coercive control'. More broadly, courts were said to have an

¹⁷ This stakeholder view is supported by research which has highlighted the ways in which the traditional adversarial court setting is largely incompatible with the lived experiences of victim-survivors (see, for example, Bell, Perez, Goodman and Dutton, 2011; Epstein and Goodman, 2019). Victim-survivors of FDSV commonly experience victim-blaming attitudes from key legal actors (Meyer, 2011; George and Harris, 2014), face suspicions of their bringing false allegations against the perpetrator (Hartman and Belknap, 2003), are denied key information about proceedings (Gillis et al. 2006) and experience the court architecture as unsafe (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016).

‘outdated’ view of domestic and family violence, still not recognising emotional, psychological and financial abuse as well as other forms of non-physical violence. Victim-survivor advocates talked about ‘how triggering and humiliating ... [it] is to talk about some of the worst moments of your life’. They felt that courts need more supports for victim-survivors so that they can achieve some level of satisfaction from the court experience.

Similarly, the lack of understanding on the part of some advocates’ lawyers was raised as part of the court response that needs reform:

I think the most disappointing is the legal system, because the barristers and the lawyers, they just push me along like [a] conveyor belt, and also – so, I didn't know what was going on. They didn't even have the facts right when they were talking.

The judges, the court workers they all need training in domestic violence ... the legal system is one of the biggest issues. I've been through the legal system as well and it is far from good. It took me three solicitors to find one that understood domestic violence.

For some migrant and refugee women the court experience was daunting: with no clear understanding of the process, of the language, of the implications of the process and the decisions made in the court. It was articulated by a number of victim-survivor advocates that specialised support is required at every stage of court processes.

As was highlighted in Section 3.3 victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence often feel as though their allegations of abuse are not believed by the systems that they interact with. In relation to the courts, it was argued that they operate ‘on the premise that women are not credible’. These experiences of not being believed and/or being blamed for the violence committed against them were common themes in interviews, with victim-survivors viewing a less adversarial and more victim-centric approach a necessary reform.

Court responses to sexual violence

“ *There was nothing in that process or system that felt affirming or healing at all to me ... it was a very traumatic experience and I feel like I'd love to see some reform happen in the criminal legal space just so that we can save other women that sort of trauma.*

Victim-survivor advocates talked about the need for a trauma-informed response to sexual violence as well, particularly in the context of the post-traumatic stress disorder and ongoing fear that can be caused by sexual violence. The high rates of attrition of sexual offences – particularly offences against children – result in victims being ‘silenced’. In addition, when sexual violence matters do get to court, it is often ‘scary’ and ‘intimidating’ for victim-survivors: ‘you’re going to have to face your offender again, so you’re triggered’.

One advocate identified the particularly challenging issues around court responses to sexual violence, noting how traumatic the court process can be for victim-survivors:

So my experience with the people that I work with is that it's overwhelming. There's no support. What's the point? They're not going to listen. I can't keep telling my story over and over and over again. In that way, the court is silencing. So it's not providing avenues that are easy for survivors to feel like if they go through the system – because they are treated like the offender with cross-examination and those types of things.

Another described the system as a 'horrific experience', suggesting that:

Cross-examination isn't about telling the truth; it's about ensuring you don't get tripped up by defence efforts to make you look like a liar.

Beyond the fact-finding process and its impact on victim-survivors, sentencing itself can contribute to silencing and blaming victim-survivors of sexual violence. As one participant explained:

It's not at all victim-centred, even at the sentencing appeal our victim impact statements weren't referenced, it was all about the perpetrator and I was victim-blamed in the hearing too, causing the violence by standing up to him by not letting him hurt my kids, all of that sort of stuff. It's really messed up. The system as it applies for rape is even worse, just trying to get police to action anything is so difficult. You're just discouraged constantly from doing it.

Victim-survivor advocates felt that judges are not held accountable for their decisions and the sentences that they impose, resulting in sexual offending not being taken seriously. They felt that better understanding of different forms of sexual violence, including grooming, would help present a more realistic picture of the nature of the abuse:

They [perpetrators] don't just coerce and manipulate their individual targets, they coerce and manipulate everyone around them. It's this real issue of power, of abusive power, that's at the crux of all these things. So, I think, yeah, bringing that to the fore is really important.

Part of a more trauma-informed response, according to one victim-survivor advocate, would be for courts to take responsibility for educating juries about the nature of sexual violence and its impact. Across the court setting, education is needed about the impact of sexual violence on people's ability to recall and describe their victimisation.

This person's court experiences highlighted this lack of understanding throughout the court experience – even from the witness assistant – with the Director of Public Prosecutions and Crown Prosecutors 'scream[ing]' at her when her memory failed. She was told that 'juries don't understand disassociation, juries don't understand that you blamed yourself, juries don't understand this and that and the other thing' but then 'every time I would say something that revealed that trauma response, I would be called a liar.'

Other victim-survivor advocates had more positive experiences at court, with one person describing the 'excellent' police case officer, a specialist police prosecutor and a skilled witness assistant. Her experience illustrates that, with a greater understanding of the nature of sexual violence should come a more appropriate criminal justice system response.

Victim-survivor advocates noted the lack of consistency in sexual violence responses across Australian state and territory jurisdictions, with variation in foundational concepts, including the definition of different offences, the age of consent and the definition of consent. Increased consistency on a national level was seen by some victim-survivor advocates as a precursor for enabling systemic reform.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- National guidelines for justice system responses are developed, to ensure that victim-survivors encounter consistent treatment and outcomes when engaging with the legal system.
- National guidelines for justice system responses to family, domestic and sexual

violence are accompanied by ongoing training and education for judges, lawyers and court staff.

- The next National Plan reflects opportunities to make court processes accessible, culturally safe and victim-centric in family, domestic and sexual violence matters.
- Court responses to sexual violence are trauma informed.
- The attrition rates in sexual assault matters are lowered and perpetrator accountability is attained.

The Family Law System



The family law system is the top of the abusive pyramid, basically.

The family law system was highlighted by victim-survivor advocates as in need of significant reform, particularly in terms of its interaction with the family violence court system. As one victim-survivor advocate explained:

It happens every day – the women believing, here’s my family violence intervention order, and everywhere I go it’s good for me. And when I get to the family law jurisdiction, honestly, it’s just shredded, shredded, it means nothing. So women get really confused, and they’ll ring and they go, so, he’s able to go to the school to pick up Johnny, but he can’t drive down my street because of the state stuff. And I’m going, correct, because your family law order says on the third Wednesday of every month he’s allowed to pick up Charlie and Johnny for dinner. But he can’t come to your street, right?

Advocates noted that ‘so many people are disappointed and hurt by the decisions of the Family Court’, and suggested that decisions should be made by more than a single judge – by a panel, or a team – given that decisions will ‘affect a family for a lifetime’.

Victim-survivors noted that the family law system is often a site of systems abuse. The National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book (2021) defines systems abuse as the abuses of processes that may be used by a perpetrator in the ‘course of domestic and family violence related proceedings to reassert this power and control over the victim’.¹⁸ Victim-survivor advocates pointed out that within relevant legislation there is ‘no penalty for people who commit perjury, which is most often the perpetrator’ – that perpetrators can ‘lie, they can influence people, and that’s what they’re good at, and they get away with it’. It was commented that the use of a decision-making panel would potentially minimise this risk by increasing the number of judges who can assess the claims.

The need for better understanding and specialist training of domestic and family violence in the Family Court, alongside a more child-centric approach, was also raised as a priority for reform. As one victim-survivor advocate noted:

I mean, we all know the family courts need a big overhaul, but I think they have a distinct lack of training. And having that level of training and education would go some way to seeing some better results, but certainly keeping it more child-focused instead of their view that it’s child-focused, where actually, all they’re trying to do is get you out of court as soon as possible.

One advocate acknowledged that, while ‘training is amazing and essential across anyone who works in the family violence area’, ‘training can only do so much – it doesn’t actually drive cultural change’. For this victim-survivor advocate, therein lies the problem: while family law and the judicial system are slowly being

¹⁸ See further: www.dfvbenchbook.aija.org.au

reformed, it's with the decision-makers – 'those people that hold that power' – where change is not happening.

Numerous victim-survivor advocates shared negative experiences of child custody decisions made by the Family Law court and a perception that the presence of family, domestic and sexual violence is not given enough weight in deciding upon the safety needs of the children involved. As one victim-survivor advocate argued:

Where there is proven domestic and family abuse ... the victim-survivor should be awarded sole parental responsibility ... I just think it should just be an automatic, if there's proven DV, you get sole parental [custody].

The impact of having to share custody with a perpetrator of domestic and family violence was illustrated by one victim-survivor advocate:

The dangers that the children are ordered into, it just – to send your children to someone you know is sexually violent, manipulative, just a perpetrator of horrible things and you are ordered to send your children to this person, that is probably – that is the most horrendous torture for a mother, and you fear for their lives as well because they're very unbalanced, these men.

The scale of the problems with court responses to domestic and family violence were summarised with the sobering words of one victim-survivor advocate:

It doesn't matter what system – every system is failing. Every single system is failing and in such a way that people are dying. Women are dying. Children are dying. People are taking their lives because they can't bear to spend another second being controlled and tortured and the systems are – the family law system is the top of the abusive pyramid, basically.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- Significant reform of the family law system is undertaken to ensure safety needs for individuals experiencing family and domestic violence are prioritised and perpetrators are held accountable for their perpetration of family and domestic violence, including recognition of the systems abuse that is often committed during family law engagement.
- There is a paradigm shift in the family law system whereby child safety is brought to the forefront of decision-making.

3.7 Measuring success

“ I think if we see women actually thriving then we've got a successful National Plan ... If we start having people come back to us and say, 'I was able to get on my feet, I was able to go and start a job or I was able to live safely' or any of that kind of stuff then we're succeeding. But we're still not hearing that. I left, gosh, 12, 13 years ago, I'm still struggling to be believed, be heard, be treated with respect.

As part of each of the consultation victim-survivor advocates were asked to share their views on how the

success of the next National Plan should be measured and what indicators of success, if any, should be utilised. The discussion of measuring success was not always easy for participants to answer. This was an area that victim-survivor advocates who are involved heavily in public or policy advocacy had spent time considering and discussing, whereas other participants, in their day-to-day lives, were not involved in considering broad policy measures but contributed important reflections on their lived experience. Both are valuable and highlight the importance of all voices in the space of victim-survivor advocacy, as well as allowing people to diversify or relinquish this identity. We know that many victim-survivors may never tell anyone other than a close friend, or anyone at all about their experiences. In this section our discussion of measuring success draws particularly on input primarily from those from whom policy and system reform was foremost.

More than a 'tick box' exercise

As noted in the Introduction to this report, many recommendations of system inquiries at the state and Federal level have been implemented in recent years. However, victim-survivor advocates who participated in this consultation critiqued approaches to reform that represented merely 'ticking a box' and moving on. There was a strong emphasis on wanting to see a different approach embedded in the delivery and ongoing monitoring of the next National Plan. For example, one victim-survivor advocate commented:

In terms of measuring the success of the National Plan, I think I wouldn't want to see it done like the Royal Commission in Victoria where we've got all these recommendations and they're doing 'tick a box', 'Oh look, we've achieved all these recommendations.' It's not actually changing the experience for victims like me on the ground. You get the conflict between advocates where people are, 'Oh, we made all these changes,' but those changes haven't got purchase, they're not working for us in practice. So I wouldn't accept that approach.

These sentiments were echoed by another victim-survivor advocate who, upon reflecting on the Victorian experience of reform asked:

...what does this actually mean for us women on the ground? I guess what I'm saying – and there's nothing wrong with looking at these recommendations or acquitting them, but acquittal doesn't equate [to] a correct implementation.

Victim-survivor advocates emphasised the need for governments not only to investigate the issue, make recommendations and provide funding, but to genuinely monitor implemented recommendations and evaluate their effectiveness in reducing violence against women and children. This ongoing evaluation will ultimately benefit the government, allowing them to allocate funding appropriately and effectively, but it is also vital to ensuring that system responses and implemented reforms do not have unintended consequences for the very cohorts of people they are designed to protect.

Beyond the risk of box ticking, victim-survivor advocates recognised that measuring success as part of the next National Plan will present challenges, but it was seen as an essential undertaking. First and foremost, several victim-survivor advocates noted that while success may be conceived as a reduction in rates of family, domestic and sexual violence, the initial period following the plan – if effective systems reforms have been embedded – should evidence a period of increased reporting and disclosures. There was shared recognition of the need to interrogate the reliability of data and, in particular, reporting rates in any measurements of 'success'. As one victim-survivor advocate commented:

There are variables in that as well that you can't account for. So is reporting accurate, for example? Are people actually reporting those things? And do people feel empowered to report those things?

Embedding lived experience into the measurement of success

“ I think they need to change all the criteria they are using to use a more human thing to reflect that because they will say, ‘But we’ve given so many millions of dollars, we did that and we did the other,’ and you’re going ‘Yeah, but have you talked to a survivor, have you ever been to a refuge, have you just seen a woman who’s had to flee her home, have you ever been stalked, have you ever had people watching your every move or monitoring your phone calls?’

Across the consultation, victim-survivor advocates repeatedly emphasised that key to any measurement of success would be an understanding of victim-survivor satisfaction. As captured in the comments of several victim-survivor advocates:

I think by what victims and survivors are saying. I think by how successful they think it is, because they’re the ones who it should be about.

I feel like often people don’t fill out client satisfaction forms and feedback forms, but I feel like they can be a really important metric of how successful things are, and how well people felt they were treated throughout the process of accessing services. I feel like looking at the reports from people who have accessed maybe just the main services, really important. See whether the general trend in satisfaction has risen or decreased.

Several victim-survivor advocates suggested this point of measurement could be examined on a service-by-service basis and through client-focused evaluations or surveys. As two advocates commented:

The way it could be measured would be to review services randomly. Either by interviewing or surveying service users and getting their stories from what they’ve been through. And how the National Plan has helped or not helped.

Essentially just getting the voices of people that have experienced the services, or any framework put forward to try to get their input. I know a lot of experiences are based on what was available in the past. And so it would be valuable to get new voices of people who are currently using those services. And whenever they’re ready to share, just so that it’s closer to the time when they’ve used it potentially to comment on that.

As well as ensuring current clients are included, one victim-survivor advocate also emphasised the need to reach clients that may not be in touch with services, as they explained:

Not just reaching out to people who have been through a service, come out the other side of a service ... you need to be contacting people who have dropped off or reaching out to people who haven’t even engaged. You need to be looking at those people falling through the cracks.

Importantly, there was a strong emphasis on understanding how service responses make victim-survivors feel, as two victim-survivor advocates explained:

How survivors or victims are coming forward and how they are feeling – the legitimacy of services – so they’re feeling like, ‘Yes, I was heard. Yes, I was seen. Yes, I was believed. Yes, I feel supported, and I feel like it was adequate.’ So when they go to report, whether it be any law enforcement agency across Australia, online reporting – that there’s follow-up ... survivors and trauma survivors need connection to

feel trust and safety. So there has to be a human interface.

I would like to see us measure in a more qualitative way, how women experience help seeking and help receiving ... I don't hear stories of women who've been through the system and who've said, 'I felt empowered at every step' or, 'I came out of this with a sense of justice and I really felt like I'm safer now.' ... Did she come out of it feeling better? How did she experience – were the police respectful in their communications with her? Did she feel like she was sidelined as a witness in the matter of her own abuse? Did she feel like she was front and centre of the process as the victim or sidelined? Did she come out of it saying, 'I feel so much safer, my kids and I can move on now' or did she say, 'I've got more pieces than ever. More broken pieces to put together than I did before I entered this process.' I want to know that stuff. I'd love for our national plan to measure that stuff, because that's the stuff that matters to victim survivors.

This emphasis on bringing to the fore victim-survivor's stories and experiences was stated numerous times across the individual and small group interviews. Alongside this there was acknowledgement that quantitative measurements would also be important, but victim-survivor advocates repeatedly emphasised the need to strike the right balance between the two. As one advocate commented:

I think you do need to have the numbers, but you've got to make sure that they're the right kind of numbers that you're actually measuring, what actually makes a difference in people's lives. And then also hear the stories so that you actually get the why or what's behind the numbers. I think that's important.

Indicators of success

Victim-survivor advocates provided numerous suggestions for individual indicators that could be used to measure success over the life span of the next National Plan. Broadly speaking, these can be summarised into eight key measurement focuses:

1. Attitudinal change
2. Rates of homelessness and poverty
3. Rates of service access
4. Rates of violence
5. Rates of women and children killed
6. Rates of reporting
7. Rates of charges and convictions
8. Recovery and wellbeing

Victim-survivor advocate views on the need to include each of these measurement focuses are briefly explored here in turn.

- 1. Attitudinal change:** Measuring attitudinal change over the life span of the next National Plan was identified by victim-survivor advocates as essential. As one advocate explained:

So, if we can change the attitude by some sort of campaign or word of mouth or just changing attitude somehow, that would be one of the successes, I would say. And for the boys and young men to treat the women with respect. There's still a lot of that stuff going on, that girls are not treated with respect. So, that's another thing, that's an issue. Because everything starts with perceptions and attitudes before you even get into that stage of someone feeling entitled enough to hit someone or hurt someone. So, everything starts

Several victim-survivor advocates reflected on the shift in attitudes towards family, domestic and sexual violence over the last ten years, including the increased visibility and community awareness of violence against women as a national issue in very recent years. The contributions of high-profile victim-survivor advocates – including Rosie Batty, Grace Tame, Brittany Higgins, Saxon Mullins and Chanel Contos – were positioned as significant to driving attitudinal change.

- 2. Rates of homelessness and poverty:** Numerous victim-survivor advocates noted the need to quantify how many women experience homelessness as a result of their experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence. Importantly, victim-survivor advocates also emphasised that consideration be given to measuring the number of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence who are provided safe and suitable housing options within a timely manner. As one victim-survivor advocate commented, 'I think you would know you were doing your job well if we had more women housed'.
- 3. Rates of service access:** Numerous victim-survivor advocates recognised that, given the high prevalence of family, domestic and sexual violence across the community, an important measure of success related to the rates at which victims are able to access services. Advocates emphasised the need to bring all services that intersect and support victims and perpetrators of family, domestic and sexual violence into view and measure changes in accessibility and service demand over time. Another measurement point suggested by victim-survivor advocates was quantifying the average number of service interactions that victim-survivors have over the course of their recovery, noting also that retelling their stories multiple times can be retraumatising to victim-survivors.
- 4. Rates of violence:** Numerous victim-survivor advocates noted the importance of embedding clear measurements of prevalence of all forms of family, domestic and sexual violence into the next National Plan. Advocates noted that success would ultimately be the elimination of all forms of violence against women, although there was shared acknowledgement of the long-term nature of that goal and the need to set clear short- and medium-term expectations.
- 5. Rates of women and children killed:** Numerous victim-survivor advocates referred to the frequency of the killing of women and children in the context of family, domestic and sexual violence as a key measurement to be embedded into the next National Plan. The reduction in total number of deaths, and in turn, the saving of women and children's lives was often mentioned as the first and key measure of success of any policy in this space.
- 6. Rates of reporting:** Victim-survivor advocates noted the need to capture data on whole-of-system reporting trends, with a view to gaining a clear understanding of *where* victim-survivors report family, domestic and sexual violence and *how* reporting trends and rates change over time and at what points of the system. The importance of identifying where early reporting is occurring, and early intervention has taken place was also noted by victim-survivor advocates, who commented:

Success should look like domestic violence and child sexual abuse not happening, ultimately. We want to see significant reductions in the numbers of victims, but we also want to see an increase in reporting. It would be good to see an increase in reporting of incidents before they actually happen, so people feeling confident to actually come forward with information, whether it's a bystander in a child sexual abuse situation, or somebody in a domestically precarious relationship, people actually standing up before things happen because they've got the tools to identify it before it reaches breaking point.

Importantly, this description extends the measurement of report beyond reports made by victim-survivors themselves to third-party reports.

7. **Rates of charges and convictions:** Victim-survivor advocates noted that an increase in the number of reported incidents that proceed through the criminal justice system to result in charges and convictions would be one measure of success, particularly in cases of sexual violence, where the attrition rate remains exceptionally high. For one victim-survivor advocate, success would occur if coercive and controlling behaviours were criminalised across Australia and perpetrators were charged with criminal offences. Other criminal justice-based measures proposed included noting the rates of intervention orders breached and court responses to those breaches, and the statistics on repeat violence.
8. **Recovery and wellbeing:** Victim-survivor advocates were supportive of the need to measure the recovery and wellbeing of individuals who have experienced family, domestic and sexual violence. It was noted that this should take into account the health, including the mental and physical health, emotional wellbeing and economic security experiences of the victim-survivor at different stages of their recovery journey. One victim-survivor advocate conceptualised this as measuring the pathway to recovery, commenting:

We need to find better [measures] – there's another indicator, the pathway to recovery ... where victim survivors go from enduring the violence, to dealing with the violence, but thriving.

Building on this, another victim-survivor advocate suggested the next National Plan should include:

Measures of life success and seeing if survivors can rebuild their life after the violence and measuring that and capturing that data, that would be really interesting, because then you're changing the narrative of yeah, we're just decreasing the violence, but we're rebuilding lives, we're creating lifelong success.

For children, victim-survivor advocates emphasised the need to measure behaviour at school and academic outcomes among children who have experienced family, domestic and sexual violence.

In addition to these focuses, which emerged most strongly throughout the consultation, victim-survivor advocates also referred to the need to measure the following: the cost of violence; the impact of education initiatives; the prevalence of intergenerational trauma; police perceptions; rates of family, domestic and sexual violence; family and domestic violence related vexatious litigation; family and domestic violence related youth crime rates; the visibility of victim-survivors at each point of the system; and system transparency.



Key findings on desired outcomes:

- The next National Plan includes indicators that measure success over the life span.
- Lived experience expertise, including victim-survivor satisfaction with the system, are embedded into measures of success as part of the next National Plan.
- System monitoring and program evaluations occur across the life span of the next National Plan.

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