



FROM VICTIMS TO CHANGEMAKERS A Grass-Roots Focus for the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children.

The Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (ERC) is a community organisation involved in a range of projects and activities across the four areas of its operation in research, community education, advocacy and networking.

Lilla: International Women's Network is an ERC initiated project to develop collaborative relationships between women's organisations working for social justice at the grass-roots level.

This submission has been supported by Deacons as part of its pro bono programme. Deacons is an international law firm which provides pro bono legal services and support to individuals and non-profit community organisations.

July 2008

INTRODUCTION

The Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (ERC) commends the Commonwealth Government's initiative to develop a National Plan of Action and welcomes this next Australian chapter in the global struggle to eliminate men's violence against women and children. This submission has been prepared by Lilla, a new International Women's Network initiated by ERC. We are an organisation coordinated by a group of young women, guided by the mentorship of older women and men working towards the common goals of social and economic justice.

In exploring the four questions posed by the National Council we have consulted and researched a range of grass-roots women's organisations working to address violence against women and their children, while drawing upon a larger body of ERC engagement with women's organisations in Australia and internationally. Additionally, our submission is informed by a range of personal experiences of men's violence against women.

Violence committed by men against women constitutes one of the most widespread yet least visible social injustices in our society. Death, injury, long lasting and inter-generational trauma, violations of human dignity, isolation, economic insecurity, homelessness, day-to-day fear in the home and the fear of walking down a street alone at night, all lie on a continuum of how men's violence impedes upon women's full, dignified participation in society.

In this submission, we have focused our discussion on domestic violence and family violence. However, it is important to note that gendered violence takes a range of forms: Australian women commonly face sexual assault, domestic and family violence, trafficking, sexual slavery and sexual harassment. These are issues confronting people from all socio-economic backgrounds, cultural groups and sexual orientations. Women who are targets of violence are denied access to their basic human rights to security, safety and shelter and ultimately lose their ability to be empowered actors in their own lives and in society.

A National Plan needs to work comprehensively with both men and women on a range of legal, educational, economic and cultural levels. However, in this submission we focus on grass-roots women's initiatives as the fundamental building blocks of any effective, sustainable and long-term effort to eliminate violence against women and their children.

In developing the National Plan, we urge the National Council to adopt as its overarching long-term strategy: the empowerment of women from victims of violence to agents of social change.

PEOPLES' MOVEMENTS BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

An effective National Plan of Action needs to be informed by Australia's long history of strong and diverse social movements addressing men's violence against women and children. Indigenous women's groups, immigrant and refugee women's groups, feminist groups, human-rights activists and advocates have all formulated creative and effective initiatives which have facilitated women's transformation from isolation and victimhood to empowerment and rights, making significant and lasting changes in the lives of many women and their children and society at large.

i) Feminist Groups and Domestic Violence

Since the 1970s, feminist groups running women's refuges have facilitated significant positive changes in the lives of many women. Some of the first refuges initiated in Australia, by women mostly from Anglo-European backgrounds, were conceptualised as places with three goals: a) Provide shelter and support to women in need; b) Run refuges by women for women; c) Overturn the system that makes refuges necessary.ⁱ As Ludo McFerrin has outlined, women's refuges in their embryonic stages of development were conceived as empowering places.ⁱⁱ Through the provision of basic rights to safe housing, supportive community networks and means to greater economic independence, women's refuges originally set out to incubate change makers.

Today, these women's refuges continue to provide crisis accommodation and crucial support for victims of domestic violence within a feminist framework enabling positive changes in the lives of many individual women. A wide diversity of women utilise these refuges, particularly recently arrived and other vulnerable women with few established networks of their own. However, three decades of difficult challenges have forced these organisations to shift their focus away from their initial commitment to empower women towards a model of service provision. While refuges continue to facilitate positive change in the lives of individual women, this shift has impacted negatively on their capacity to pursue social change that renders refuges unnecessary.

Our consultations with women offering crisis responses to domestic violence brought us in contact with overworked, under-resourced and poorly

"It is becoming harder to hang onto feminism. Over the years it has been watered down and lots of young women now do not feel inclined to carry the cause. They reckon they have equality. If they are ever in a DV situation they will realise they are not equal!"

Griffith Refuge, 2008.

"In 2007 – 08, 80 women & 130 children were turned away with the predominant reason being due to lack of accommodation. Housing waiting lists are becoming increasingly longer leading to women & children being forced to remain in emergency accommodation for prolonged periods."

Wagga Wagga Refuge, 2008.

supported workers who expressed weariness and a sense of burn-out.ⁱⁱⁱ This is unsurprising given that the community sector is one of the most underpaid in Australian society.^{iv} Workers also expressed despair at the lack of young women's involvement or long-term engagement with these difficult issues. A deepening crisis in affordable housing, competitive tendering for funding and a push from state governments towards an ethos of cost-minimisation are just some of the pressures that have reduced the scope of the crucial enabling work that women's refuges are in the ideal position to carry out.

ii) Indigenous Women's Groups and Family Violence

Drawing upon long-held practices of customary law and traditions of separate men and women's spaces, Indigenous women's groups across Australia have developed the blueprints for powerful solutions to reduce violence experienced by women and children in their communities.^v Indigenous women and children experience violence within the political, historical and economic context of the colonisation of their land. Indigenous women's groups have adopted the term 'Family Violence' to encompass the resultant grief and trauma that underpins their experience of violence. Indigenous women's groups have posed effective solutions to violence as part of larger movements to empower their people.^{vi} As a result, their overarching aim is to build strong healthy women, who are empowered to build strong healthy families and communities.^{vii}

"The ongoing effects of the process of colonisation are an underlying factor in the extent to which violence occurs in [Indigenous] populations today"
Family Violence Among Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, p3, 1999

While many Indigenous women utilise the women's refuges discussed previously, others view them as culturally inappropriate for their particular needs and prefer not to leave their communities.^{viii} Indigenous communities have devised a range of grass-roots crisis responses that reflects the diversity of Indigenous people across Australia.^{ix} Our research revealed a consistent role for young women in these solutions.^x

"Aboriginal communities have the answers, they just need the resources."
Mudjin-Gal Women's and Children's Centre, 2008

Mentorship of young Indigenous women by women elders and in particular through cultural initiation and women's "law and culture" ceremonies is a recurring, central feature of blueprints for the eradication of family violence from Indigenous communities.^{xi} For example, at a meeting of over 100 Kapululangu women and girls at the Balgo Women's Law Camp in remote Western Australia in August 2007, it was decided that widespread family violence in communities would be best addressed by the revitalisation of Kapululangu Women's Law. This Indigenous women's group has now been awaiting government resources for six years to implement their comprehensive plan which will reduce violence against women and children, while empowering young Indigenous women to take on the responsibilities for the well-being of future generations.^{xii}

There is nothing in [NT Intervention Legislation] that does anything to protect kids. This is a gross waste of public money - the services and programs that we need are not there in this planning.
**Olga Havnen, CEO,
Combined Indigenous
Organisations of the NT,
2007**

Furthermore, an absolutely critical situation which is compounding violence against women and children in remote Indigenous communities and which deserves the immediate attention of the new National Council is the 'Northern Territory Intervention.' Historically Australian governments have been the perpetrators of a great deal of violence against women and children in Indigenous communities and Lilla supports prominent Indigenous leaders in arguing that the NT intervention is a continuation of colonial violence.

While organisations like the Kapululangu women's group, that have sophisticated community solutions for family violence grounded in Indigenous women's law continue to be denied funding, precious resources are being directed to the previous Federal Governments' dangerous response to the issue violence against Indigenous children.

iii) Immigrant and refugee women's groups

Since the early 1980s, many migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and refugee women have formed their own support groups and networks in response to men's violence.^{xiii} These women and their children experience violence within the context of recent arrival, the experience of racism, uncertain visa status, economic insecurity, the fear of deportation and sometimes, poor English language skills. In particular, in refugee communities men's violence occurs within the context of the ongoing effects of grief, trauma and sometimes the experience of war.^{xiv}

Migrant and refugee women's experiences of gendered violence can take a diverse range of complicated, culturally specific forms, for example Female Genital Mutilation to dowry disputes. Migrant and refugee women often have few networks in the broader Australian community and this type of isolation significantly compounds the difficulties of leaving situations of violence. For some immigrant and refugee women, leaving violence involves her escaping or turning her back on a very close-knit emerging community that may be displaying little respect for her right to a life free from violence.

"Our communities are full of hurting men who were once child soldiers. We are in Australia now, but in some ways we haven't left those refugee camps."

**Young refugee woman
from Sierra Leone.
Canterbury Youth
Services, 2007**

Many migrant and refugee women's groups in Australia have created networks of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) women willing to support each other through the difficult challenge of leaving violent men. For example, in New South Wales,

organisations such as the Immigrant Women's Speakout Association (IWSA) have significantly impacted on many lives by creating an alternative CaLD community facilitating and supporting women's empowerment.^{xv} In our research we were particularly inspired and invigorated by IWSA's level of engagement with and mentoring of young women, a priority they have identified as central to the sustainability of immigrant and refugee women's groups. These enabling networks of immigrant and refugee women are a powerful and effective grass-roots strategy in the longer-term struggle to reformulate power dynamics between CaLD women and men and transform communities condoning cultures of violence.

BEYOND SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES: COMMON CHALLENGES FACING GRASS-ROOTS INITIATIVES

'Women' in Australia are a diverse category of people and men's violence affects women and their children in a vast range of culturally specific ways. Different crisis responses are necessary as the starting point for larger measures for social change. Across these differences, social movements have initiated a diversity of responses facilitating women's transition from situations of isolation, injury and victim-hood to become parts of strong networks with the capacity to significantly transform unequal relationships of power in our society.

i) Lack of resources

The last few decades have thrown up grave challenges for grass-roots initiatives. The main obstacle to women's organisations working towards long-term social change necessary to eliminate men's violence against women is a severe lack of resources. The scant allocation of resources available specifically for women at the federal and state level forces organisations to compete for funding and adopt a service provision model that sets out only to provide individual care rather than empowering women to become actors for larger social change.

ii) Increasing economic inequality

A women's ability to leave violent situations is inextricably tied to her financial independence from perpetrators of violence. Furthermore, her ability to heal from incidents of violence and establish longer-term financial security, independence and physical well-being, are tied to equitable access to health, education and housing. The decreasing affordability of housing, indicative of the widening gap between rich and poor in Australian society, is a critical challenge for all social movements working to eliminate violence against women and children. In addition to the immediate crisis in adequate housing, deeply embedded economic inequalities in Australian society will continue to confront grass-roots initiatives to redress unequal power relations between men and women.

iii) Sustainability of long-term solutions

For initiatives to successfully reduce and eventually eliminate men's violence against women, in the long-term, the years of experience and knowledge accrued by women's groups and social movements need to be passed on to younger generations of women.

Each of the social movements examined in this submission recognised the important role that young women play in the sustainability of their grass-roots efforts to address the issue of violence against women and children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL PLAN OF ACTION

Women's social movements hold the blueprints for the solution to the problem of men's violence against women and children. The National Plan must direct its attention and resources to grass roots initiatives, and take direction from an invaluable source of knowledge and expertise – women's organisations. Lilla urges the National Council to adopt as its overarching aim the empowerment of women from victims of violence to agents of social change.

In order to adequately resource effective measures to eliminate men's violence against women and children, the National Plan must:

1. Be backed by significant financial commitment by the Federal Government.
2. Recognise that government funding that is competitive and conditional is contradictory to the aim of empowering women.
3. Provide long term funding to women's grass roots initiatives using a funding model that does not hamper their ability to facilitate women's transition from victims to change makers.
4. Recognise that women's financial independence is fundamental to women's ability leave violent situations, and more broadly, improving women's status in society. The national plan must support measures to implement paid maternity leave, child care, and adequate wages for women, particularly in non-government sector.
5. Recognise that young women are integral to the longevity of any plan to address family and domestic violence against women and children.
6. Resource grass roots initiatives that engage, empower and mentor young women working with women's organisations.
7. Consult with Indigenous community groups in order to establish a National Indigenous Women's Council to address the particular cultural, historical and socio-economic circumstances of violence in Indigenous communities.

ⁱ McFerran, L. (2008). A History of Domestic Violence, Refuges and Exclusion in Australia. Dickson, ACT, Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations., Part 1, p 5.

ⁱⁱ McFerran, Part 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ We consulted the following organisations: Elsie Women's Refuge, Griffith Women's Refuge, Wagga Wagga Women and Children's Refuge, St Michaels Family Centre, Mudgin-Gal Women's and Children's Centre, Mary Mackillop Chapel, Walgett Family Violence Prevention Legal Service, Wanderers Aboriginal Outreach Service.

^{iv} ASU (2008). ASU Statement taken to the 2020 Summit. <http://www.asumembers.org.au>.; McManus, S. (2008). On the Frontline: Tough Job, Worse Pay. ABC Radio National's Perspective Program, ABC News (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/05/06/2236273.htm>).

^v For further information see Women for Wik at <http://www.womenforwik.org/>

^{vi} Fadwa Al-Yaman, Mieke Van Doeland and Michelle Wallis (2006). Family Violence Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Canberra, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2006) Ending Family Violence and Abuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner; Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development (2000). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Taskforce on Violence Report. Canberra.

^{vii} Interview with Mudgin-Gal Women's and Children's Centre, 17 July 2008.

^{viii} "Indigenous solutions for Indigenous communities." Indigenous worker at Mudgin-Gal Women's and Children's center, Interviewed 17 July 2008.

^{ix} "Blackout Violence" campaign supported by various Indigenous organisations, including Mudgin-Gal.

^x Women for Wik (2007) 'Aboriginal Women Have Answers Themselves': Report of the Balgo Women's Law Camp - Blue Hill (Tanami Track), 24-27 August 2007; involvement of young women at Mudgin-Gal.

^{xi} Women for Wik (2007) 'Aboriginal Women Have Answers Themselves': Report of the Balgo Women's Law Camp - Blue Hill (Tanami Track), 24-27 August 2007, p 2.

^{xii} For one outline of the comprehensive plan to address family violence, see 'Aboriginal Women Have Answers Themselves': Report of the Balgo Women's Law Camp - Blue Hill (Tanami Track), 24-27 August 2007 at <http://www.womenforwik.org/pdfs/BalgoWomensLawCamp100907.pdf>

^{xiii} For example see Immigrant Women's Speakout Association at <http://www.speakout.org.au>.

^{xiv} "Trauma is a huge issue...what some refugees really need is three or four years of counselling." Interview with a worker at Mary Mackillop Chapel, 17 July 2008.

^{xv} Immigrant Women's Speakout Association at <http://www.speakout.org.au>.