

Women's Safety Ministers sent five urgent safety actions to lock in on Friday

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Ahead of the special meeting of Women's Safety Ministers on Friday, domestic and family violence experts have written to call for their governments to action five urgent and immediate changes to improve women's safety.

The letter authored by Australian Violence Against Women Alliance and Fair Agenda, has been signed by 67 groups, who are all jointly backing five interventions they say can and must be locked in Friday, to provide immediate improvements to women's and children's safety:

1. Fully funding the specialist services women and children rely on to be safe.
2. Putting kids' safety first in the family law system.
3. Ensuring women and children facing major safety risks can be identified and referred correctly by frontline workers in health, social, family and community services.
4. Improving AVO standards so that women and children can rely upon them for their safety, and perpetrators are held accountable for ongoing patterns of violence and abuse.
5. Ensuring everyone's calls for help can be heard.

"The murder of Hannah Clarke and her children has to be a turning point. The community is crying out for government action to put us on the path to a safer future. Experts have laid out the five specific changes governments must get started with this Friday." said Renee Carr, Executive Director of Fair Agenda - a movement campaigning for women's safety, economic security and agency.

"Women can't afford for this meeting to only result in more plans and promises of future action. Alongside long-term plans, we need these five immediate changes to urgently improve women and children's safety." added Ms Carr.

"Governments can't keep pointing to the text in the Fourth Action Plan as if that's all that's needed to make women safer. The plan isn't worth the paper it's written on if it's not matched with adequate resourcing of services, and changes to the systems that perpetuate this crisis." - said Dr Merrindahl Andrew, Program Manager AWAVA.

"With increasing awareness of the issue, and a public focus on changing attitudes, more women than ever before are seeking greater safety and support from services. Without full funding of the specialist services that women rely on to be safe, the current national action plan is set on a course to fail," Dr Andrew said.

"Sadly, we know that men who are emotionally, physically and financially abusing their partners can also be a risk to their children. Right now the government's *Family Law Act* operates to force a horrifying number of kids into care arrangements with parents who are violent and

abusive - posing an immediate and ongoing risk to their safety and wellbeing. This needs to change immediately - courts should be putting kids' safety first." - added Angela Lynch, Women's Legal Service Queensland.

"We keep hearing calls for innovative solutions to tackling domestic violence. Today the sector is renewing its call for sustainable resourcing for frontline services. These are the crucial services that make women and children safe. This for us would be real innovation" said Joanne Yates CEO Domestic Violence NSW.

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Available for comment on specific asks:

- On putting safety first in family law: Angela Lynch, Women's Legal Service Queensland
- On identifying women at immediate risk: Joanne Yates, Domestic Violence NSW
- On improving AVO standards: Hayley Foster, Women's Safety NSW
- On ensuring everyone's calls for help can be heard: Michal Morris, inTouch Multicultural Centre for Family Violence

Background on the five action areas

1. Fully fund the services women rely on to be safe

The time a woman reaches out for help, or tries to escape her abuser, can be the most dangerous,. Access to a specialist women's service can be life saving.

We cannot leave women on their own to escape an abuser who is determined to stalk, track, harass, and intimidate her. The consequences are devastating.

Right now, funding decisions across state, territory and federal governments mean many services are forced to turn women in danger away. Specifically:

- 150 women have to be turned away from specialist homelessness services every day - many of them women affected by domestic violence,
- 170,000 people have to be turned away from legal assistance services every year - the kind of service women affected by domestic violence rely on to help them protect their children, to navigate the family law system, and to deal with financial abuse,

- Services that intervene with men at risk of using violence to change their behaviour, have to turn away men who need their programs every week, and many have six month waiting lists.
- Family Violence Prevention Legal Services report that 30-40% of the women contacting them have to be turned away because they don't have the capacity to support them.

What's more:

- Family Violence Prevention Legal Services are still facing a funding cut to their National Forum - the only national voice for services working with First Nations women affected by family violence.
- The WESNET-Telstra safe phones program, which has been independently found to be effective in keeping victims/survivors safe and connected as well as increasing frontline practitioners' confidence in working with women experiencing technology abuse, is fighting Federal Government cuts.

2. Put kids' safety first

Children can be at great danger from a parent who is using domestic and family violence, and being exposed to such abusive and violent behaviour can be profoundly damaging to their wellbeing and development.

An estimated 70% of matters in family court involve family violence and abuse. Yet the starting point for decisions about parenting arrangements under the current legislation is a presumption of shared parental responsibility. This emphasis on the child having a "meaningful relationship" with both parents is so strong that it operates in practice to force large numbers of children into care arrangements with parents who are violent and abusive. This leads to ongoing damage to the child's wellbeing, and often forces the other parent to maintain contact with a perpetrator who is using abusive behaviour and causing them harm.

The Federal Government needs to remove the emphasis on shared parenting in the *Family Law Act* to enable courts to put children's safety first when making orders about where they live and with whom they spend time.

3. Identify women and children at immediate risk

Strangulation, sexual assault and coercive behaviours (including through technology), are part of an escalating pattern of abuse, and can be a sign that a woman's life is at imminent risk.

Wherever a woman is reaching out for help - whether at a community legal centre, police station, court, hospital, GP or pregnancy check up - we need that service to be able to identify when her safety is at immediate risk, and to refer her to an expert service best placed to assist her to be safe.

We also need to train those working with people who display signs of abusive and violent behaviour to identify what level of intervention is needed, and to engage the relevant accredited behaviour change or perpetrator intervention services, so we can reduce the abuse and violence women and children are facing.

4. Improving AVO standards to hold perpetrators accountable and interrupt their escalating violence

People experiencing violence should be able to rely on our civil and criminal justice system for their protection. For women and children subjected to domestic and family violence, the main mechanism for their protection is an apprehended violence order (AVO).

Under the current system, all too often those orders are not enforced, or include requirements that don't account for the dynamics and patterns of abuse being used, and can make it harder for a woman to manage her children's and her own safety.

We need all parts of the AVO system to adhere to higher standards in recognising escalating violence and holding perpetrators accountable.

Achieving those higher standards will require police and judiciary to improve their understanding of the presentation, patterns and impacts of domestic and family violence. Such specialisation is important because without adequate understanding, police and courts can inadvertently mistake the victim as the primary aggressor; undermining victim/survivors trust in the system, and it's ability to help them when they need it most.

We need a consistent and appropriate response from police and the courts, including collection of all relevant evidence, and making orders on behalf of victim-survivors where relevant, and where orders are breached ensuring sanctions are appropriate and consistent.

5. Ensure everyone's call for help can be heard

We need to ensure that regardless of her disability, cultural or language background, or geographical location, any woman reaching out for help to escape abuse and violence is able to access the assistance she needs.

Disclosing abuse and asking for help is hard enough, without having to figure out how to translate what you're going through into your second or third language. Translation and interpreting services can make all the difference for a person who is still learning English, or whose hearing or speech impairment makes it hard to communicate.