

## Experts warn COVID-19 impacts on women's safety just beginning

Key domestic violence experts are issuing a joint warning that the impacts of COVID-19 on women's safety are only just beginning to be felt, and will compound the risks women face from abusive partners or family members for months and potentially years after isolation measures are lifted.

Australia's expert body, Australian Women Against Violence Alliance, backed by campaigning group Fair Agenda are advising that:

Everything we know about the behaviour of abusers suggests that both the immediate and the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to increased danger for those experiencing abuse in their home. Beyond the additional risks created by isolation measures trapping many victim-survivors with abusers, the transition out of these measures will also compound safety risks over the months and potentially years of this recovery period.

Decades of evidence about perpetrator behaviour shows that governments must now plan for:

- Risk of escalating abuse in the home as isolation measures begin to lift, and some perpetrators using violence in response to the loss of control they have been able to exert in the home during lockdown;
- Surges in contact with services from victim-survivors who haven't had the ability to safely reach out for help while they were trapped in constant proximity with their abuser;
- Escalation of surveillance, harassment and threats by separated abusive partners as they are able to travel to victim-survivors' residences again;
- Increased numbers of women requiring crisis accommodation and case management support, as windows of opportunity for them to escape open for the first time in weeks;
- Increase in the use of violence by perpetrators when their dominance in the household is threatened by job loss or financial insecurity; and
- Greater barriers to escape for women whose financial security is undermined by job loss or financial insecurity.

All the evidence we have about compounding risk factors for violence tells us that we're going to see more people affected by violence for the first time; and more who were already dealing with abuse facing escalated violence. Without further action from governments; our communities will not only see unfathomable health and economic impacts - but also an escalation of the family violence crisis already devastating our communities.

There are women around the country reaching out for help to escape their abuser and seek a safer future. They're doing all they can on their own - but they need support for the next steps. Right now, governments' decisions are leaving thousands of women on their own with an abuser who is determined to isolate and control them, and dealing with a legal system that might actually increase risks to their safety.

Governments need to: fund specialist women's and family violence services to ensure everyone can access the service support they need for their safety; ensure the legal system makes the safety of victim-survivors and their children a priority; and assist those at particular risk due to visa status or disability to access essential support.

Quotes that can be attributed to spokespeople:

"We were already in the midst of a family violence crisis. Now the COVID-19 pandemic is adding the kind of pressure, stressors and upheaval that history shows is likely to exacerbate the violence and control that abusers are using and put more women at risk." - Dr Merrindah Andrew, AWAVA

"We know abusers are obsessed with building power and control over their target, and that they tend to escalate their abuse when that control is threatened. It's why victim-survivors are most at risk when they try to escape." - Renata Field, Domestic Violence NSW

"The first wave of impacts are already being seen - with many women trapped at home with an abuser who is now in a position to exert even more control over their lives. In the first few weeks of lockdown, we've seen some women reaching out for help for the first time; while others were completely cut off from the services they previously relied on for their safety." - Kedy Kristal, Policy Officer, WA Council for Women's Domestic and Family Violence Services

"For some, the lifting of restrictions may be the first opportunity they have to escape the house without their partner stopping them. For others, the increased opportunities for movement may mean that a separated partner starts bringing their bottled up frustration and anger back to their house, and threatening, harassing or assaulting them." - Dr Merrindah Andrew, AWAVA

"We know that men who perceive their role as one of dominance in their household, or feel entitled to wield control over their partner, are likely to respond to job loss or heightened financial insecurity by deciding to increase their abusive behaviour." - Julie Oberin, Chair of WESNET, the Women's Services Network

"For women experiencing abuse who have just lost their jobs, that financial insecurity might be the final straw that makes it impossible to escape." - Susie Smith, Co-Chair of Embolden, South Australia's peak body of domestic, family and sexual violence services

"The risks of this crisis and the recovery period are only just beginning to emerge - and the governments' current response falls well short of what is needed. There are still major gaps for women's safety that need to be a top priority for the National Cabinet and COAG." - Renee Carr, Fair Agenda

"There are women around the country reaching out for help to escape their abuser and to build safer futures. They're doing all they can on their own - they need support for the next steps. And right now, governments are leaving thousands of women on their own with abusers who are determined to isolate and control them." - Renee Carr, Fair Agenda

“Recent commitments from the Morrison Government aren’t enough to meet the scale of this challenge, and the risks women are facing. Without further action, too many women will be left on their own to manage increasing risks to their safety.” - Renee Carr, Fair Agenda

“There are still many areas where resourcing decisions from governments are leaving women at risk. Both safe at home programs and refuges and other crisis accommodation aren’t resourced to help everyone reaching out to them - leaving those who need their help facing impossible situations. The services that should be there to intervene and hold perpetrators to account aren’t resourced to do that work at the scale needed.” - Renee Carr, Fair Agenda

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Available for comment:

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- Julie Oberin, Chair, WESNET - The Women’s Services Network,
- Renata Field, Media Spokesperson, Domestic Violence NSW,
- Renee Carr, Executive Director, Fair Agenda,

## **Background**

### **What experts say is needed**

In response to Hannah Clarke's murder and the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence experts have advised governments that urgent action is needed in these areas:

#### Proper funding of the specialist services women rely on for their safety

The time a woman tries to escape her abuser, or reaches out for help, can be incredibly dangerous. It’s vital she can access the help she needs, when she needs it.

Even once the latest funding commitments are distributed, services still won’t be resourced to assist everyone who needs it. Experts have expressed particular concern about:

- There will still be a significant number of women who will not be able to access **safe at home programs**. This means they’re left to make the impossible choice between fleeing and hoping they can access homelessness services, or staying trapped at home with their abuser. Without safe at home programs which assist survivors with security for the home, protection orders and support; many women and children will remain trapped in abusive situations in perpetuity.
- **Crisis accommodation** services will still be beyond their capacity to provide physical shelter to those fleeing unsafe homes; and without the specialist staff who are needed to provide the immediate safety management assistance to those facing such significant safety risks
- **Services that intervene with men at risk of using violence to change their behaviour** expect a huge surge in demand for behaviour change programs as isolation

measures lift, and warn that without additional investment in capacity, the waiting lists for intervention with men at risk of using violence will be unacceptably long, and won't be available everywhere it's needed.

- **Family Violence Prevention Legal Services** - the key specialist and culturally safe service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim/survivors of family violence - particularly women and their children - are already unable to meet demand, and bracing for a massive increase in demand as restrictions start to lift.
- **Community legal services** warn that they're still unable to meet existing unmet need; far less the further surge in demand expected as the next wave impacts are felt. These are the kinds of services 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.

#### Ensuring the legal system prioritises safety

Even before the COVID19 pandemic, systemic failures in the justice system meant that many women and children facing violence were not getting adequate protection; and dealing with a legal system that sometimes increases risks to their safety.

Police and courts need to have women's and children's safety at the top of their agenda during this time of increased risk.

Governments need to improve AVO standards to hold perpetrators accountable and interrupt escalating violence. Too often those orders are not enforced, or don't account for the dynamics and patterns of abuse being used, and so don't provide the protection that's needed for a woman or child's safety.

While progress has been made with the urgent COVID-19 family law list enabling faster resolution of high risk parenting cases, the family law system still operates to force children into care arrangements with parents who are violent and abusive. The legislated requirement that the starting point for decisions about parenting arrangements is a presumption of shared parental responsibility must be removed so that courts can more freely consider what is in the best interests of the child in each individual circumstance with a focus on safety first.

#### Ensure every woman subject to violence is able to access the support she needs to be safe

Economic insecurity can be an insurmountable barrier to escaping escalating violence, and loss of income due to COVID-19 will increase the barriers faced by many women trying to escape a violent perpetrator. As costs rise and access to many services becomes more difficult, experts have urged the Government to ensure that people with a disability and those on temporary visas aren't left behind and in danger.

This crisis is making everything harder for all victim-survivors to access support, and to be safe. Unlike those relying on most other forms of income support, people living with a disability haven't received an increase in their payment. And those on temporary visas face existing barriers to accessing services, income and basic healthcare due to strict eligibility criteria. The risks they face are likely to be compounded by perpetrators withholding and blocking access to healthcare and finances; and they face increased uncertainty about their migration status if they are to reach

out for help. Women in these situations urgently need access to income support available to others - as well as housing, health services, interpreters and legal assistance.

### Maintaining access to contraception and abortion care

The increase in abuse and violence is expected to include sexual violence and reproductive coercion. It's known that forced pregnancy is often used by abusers in an attempt to tie their partner to them, and make it more difficult for them to escape and re-establish a separate life.

Experts are highlighting the importance of ensuring those who need contraception and abortion care are still able to access it. That means ensuring clinics and delivery avenues for medical abortion care remain operational, and that clients can access care.

## Explaining expected impacts

### **Risk of escalating abuse as stay at home measures lift**

We know that abusers are obsessed with building power and control over their family members, and that they tend to escalate their abuse when that control is threatened. It's why the most dangerous time for victim-survivors is when they try to escape.

As the restrictions on movement that have afforded many abusers greater ability to monitor, harass and intimidate their partner lift, many will respond to that (as to the loss of other types of control) by deciding to escalate their use of control, abuse and violence.

### **Escalation of threats from separated partners**

For those living separate from their abuser - the movement restrictions have prevented some of the physical harassment and stalking abusers often conduct in the wake of someone escaping. Reports show that abusers have been using online mechanisms and technology to harass and threaten partners during this time. Many will have spent those weeks stewing, and can be expected to use the lifting of movement restrictions as an opportunity to return to their ex-partner's home to harass, intimidate or harm them.

### **Anticipated wave of women attempting to escape**

For those who have experienced escalating violence and abuse during the lock-down period, the easing of restrictions may be their first chance to escape and find a safer place to stay. The time that a woman tries to escape is known to be the most dangerous, because abusers tend to respond to that loss of control by escalating their use violence - sometimes to lethal levels.

Refuges are not sufficiently funded to provide appropriate physical space - or the case management and therapeutic services needed to manage the risks for every person who has just escaped an abuser who may be intent on stalking, surveilling and harassing them.

### **Job losses likely to exacerbate abusive behaviour**

Those who perceive their role as one of dominance in their household or who feel entitled to have control over their partner, job losses and heightened financial insecurity are likely to exacerbate abusive behaviour.

Evidence from Australia and international contexts shows that situations of heightened stress and panic, increased financial pressures, and disruption to usual personal and social roles can all compound and exacerbate the underlying inequalities and beliefs that lead to violence against women.

### **Job losses for victim-survivors will increase barriers to escape**

Financial insecurity is a key barrier for women working to escape an abuser and build a safer future. For many, access to the money they need to relocate and live separately from their abuser are vital preconditions to escape, and their ability to remain living separately to their abuser. Many will be dealing with financial abuse that may preclude them from accessing any previous assets, and current income will be the determinant of their ability to relocate and put food on the table. Even before COVID-19, domestic and family violence was the leading cause of homelessness; now with job losses, the risks of victims/survivors facing homelessness are even greater.

The barriers to building safer futures are even higher for women on temporary visas - who may be facing job loss with none of the income support that is available to many others.

For women with disabilities the increased costs and difficulties of accessing basics like groceries may increase their reliance on the person who is abusing them. The Government's failure to increase the disability support payment in line with other supports like JobSeeker mean women who are experiencing abuse from their carer are facing insurmountable barriers to escape.