

Domestic violence advocates call for action on pandemic recommendations at tomorrow's Women's Safety Council meeting

Embargoed until 4:00am Thursday 6th August

Advocates are calling on the Women's Safety Council to use tomorrow's meeting to lock in the four actions experts have been calling for since the start of the pandemic.

Thursday's meeting between Women's Safety Ministers is one of the few moments dedicated to the cross-government decision making needed to address the family violence crisis, particularly in the COVID context.

"We've seen during this pandemic that when someone trying to escape an abuser can access specialist service support – it can be life saving." said Hayley Foster, CEO of Women's Safety NSW.

"When a woman can access the safety support, case management, and safe at home or refuge support she needs in moments of crisis – it can change her life. And when specialist intervention is funded - it can prevent the kind of murders that have been devastating our communities. But current government funding decisions mean, in so many cases, that's still not happening." Ms Foster added.

"At the start of this pandemic family violence experts briefed the Morrison Government on the four areas of action needed for women's safety during this time of increased risk. But the actions they've taken so far haven't even been close to what's needed. As a result, there are still massive holes in the safety net women should be able to rely on in times of crisis." added Renee Carr, Executive Director of campaigning group Fair Agenda.

"Right now, government decisions mean that many of the specialist services women rely on in moments of incredible danger have waiting lists of months. And many victim-survivors trying to access physical refuge or legal assistance can't get the support they need in key moments." said Ms Carr.

"The Morrison Government's decision to not properly resource family violence services means that many women and kids are being left on their own in moments of absolute crisis." she added.

Early in the pandemic experts warned that COVID-19 would exacerbate safety risks.

"We know that this pandemic is being leveraged by perpetrators to escalate their abuse and control; and that it's also removing the avenues many victim-survivors rely on to manage their safety, and to build safer futures for themselves and their children." Ms Foster said.

She added: "During this pandemic government inaction in this area is putting women at significant risk. And we're seeing that impact particularly on women who have recently joined our communities. In a NSW [wide survey](#) of the frontline domestic and family violence specialists that support women after police have been called to a domestic violence incident, 78% of services reported that, for women on temporary visas, lack of access to appropriate crisis accommodation was a barrier to their safety; and 96% identified lack of access to income as a safety risk.

At the start of the pandemic, expert body Australian Women Against Violence Australia, backed by Fair Agenda, [outlined](#) that governments needed to take urgent action in four areas:

- Properly fund the specialist services that support victim-survivor safety, and intervene with perpetrators,
- Ensure every woman subject to violence is able to access the income, material and health support she needs to be safe and escape her abuser,
- Ensure the legal system prioritises safety - including improving AVO standards and putting safety first in family law, and
- Maintain access to contraception and abortion care so that those facing sexual violence and reproductive coercion can access the support they need.

Media contact: Hayley Foster, 0474 779 847.

Available for comment

- Hayley Foster, CEO Women's Safety NSW, 0474 779 847.
- Rachael Natoli, survivor advocate and CEO of Lokahi Foundation - a domestic violence charity focused on case management for survivors
- A frontline worker supporting women experiencing violence, who are on temporary visas
- Renee Carr, Executive Director, Fair Agenda, 0435 597 976

Background

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.

But governments still aren't resourcing services to assist everyone who needs it. Experts have expressed particular concern that:

- Many **specialist women's and family violence services** around the country are so overwhelmed that they have waiting lists of months.
- In many states a significant number of women still cannot access **safe at home programs when they need them** – either because that service isn't funded in their area, or isn't resourced to keep up with demand.
- **Crisis accommodation services** are still beyond their capacity to provide appropriate physical shelter to those fleeing unsafe homes and the specialist staff who are needed to provide the immediate safety management assistance to those facing such significant safety risks.
- **Family Violence Prevention Legal Services** are the key specialist and culturally safe service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim-survivors of family violence – particularly women and their children. FVPLS still aren't funded to provide support across all urban, rural and remote areas where their support is needed. And were already unable to meet the demand for their support before the pandemic increased strain. The National FVPLS Forum still has no funding certainty for their vital coordination work.
- **Community legal services** were not resourced to help everyone reaching out to them before the pandemic. They are already experiencing increases in demand for assistance, and expect that will rise again when restrictions begin to ease.

Ensure every woman subject to violence is able to access the income, material and health support she needs to be safe and escape her abuser

Economic insecurity can be an insurmountable barrier to escaping escalating violence. Experts are warning that loss of income and financial insecurity associated with COVID-19 will make it even harder for women trying to escape a violent abuser.

In order to escape violence, many women will need emergency income and accommodation for themselves and their children. Unfortunately, however, most cannot access crisis funds without a period of delay, and crisis accommodation is not always available depending upon what area a woman is in, her eligibility for support, and/or the availability of accommodation that meets her requirements (if the accommodation does not have disability-access for example, or does not accommodate teenage sons or pets, or single women).

For women without permanent residency status, accessing crisis accommodation support for any length of time can be extremely difficult due to a woman's ineligibility for housing support and/or her inability to pay for the cost of her accommodation.

This crisis is making everything more challenging for victim-survivors to access support, and to be safe. As costs rise and access to many services becomes more difficult, experts have urged the Morrison Government to ensure that people with a disability and those on temporary visas aren't left behind and in danger.

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.

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.

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.