

Seeking Solutions
Australia's Inaugural
Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Conference

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Gold Coast

Responding to Emerging Issues - Panel Presentation

"Women Silenced on Violence"

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This panel's theme is "Emerging issues and ways forward".

Well - a clear emerging issue is that the voice of the women's domestic and family violence sector has been increasingly silenced and excluded from this government's agenda.

This paper is quite provocative because I don't work for the government - I work for the women and children of Australia who experience domestic and family violence.

Most of you know WESNET - but for those of you who don't WESNET is the Women's Services Network. WESNET was established in 1992 and is the national peak organisation for almost 400 women's domestic and family violence services across Australia. Our members include women's refuges and shelters, information, resource and referral services, outreach services, domestic violence workers, and specialist services. Our members are in all states and territories, in metropolitan areas and in regional, rural and remote areas. Our members include Indigenous women's services and services that focus on women from immigrant, refugee and non-English speaking backgrounds.

WESNET is a grass roots organisation. Every member of the Committee works directly with women and children who experience domestic or family violence. As workers who work with these issues on a daily basis, WESNET is our national voice.

There has been a fair bit of naming things as they are over the last two days so I am going to do a bit of that too. WESNET was funded as a peak by the previous ALP government - and defunded as a peak by this current Liberal government. It doesn't matter what words the government or the Office of the Status of Women (OSW) choose to use; this is what has happened.

Since being defunded as a women's domestic violence peak the Commonwealth government has funded WESNET for three years as a consultant and adviser to the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence initiative (or the PADV as it is called). This funding ended on 30 June this year and WESNET has no formal role advising the PADV phase 2.

I can't tell you how many times I've been hauled over the coals for using the words "defunded" or "unfunded". I've been told we weren't defunded - the funding just finished..... let's call it for what it is.

If women's domestic and family violence services don't have a national voice through WESNET how on earth is the federal government going to be well informed over the real emerging issues on the ground.

How are they to understand the full extent of the impact of family violence and sexual assault on Indigenous women and children across Australia? How are they to understand the nature of domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote Australia?

Women with disabilities continue to be one of the most disadvantaged groups of women; and along with women with children who have disabilities, face enormous barriers when they are faced with violence.

Women from immigrant, refugee and non-English speaking backgrounds continue to be marginalised and disadvantaged. Somewhere between 45% and 55% of women who access women's refuges are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Young women continue to be massively over-represented in domestic violence and sexual assault statistics.

But then how can we expect a government to listen and hear what we have to say when this federal government can't even say sorry for the past and continuing injustices against our Indigenous people and

either puts asylum seekers in pseudo concentration camps or turns them away from our shores?

Susan Brennan spoke yesterday about these fundamental issues which are no less than human rights issues, and which must be addressed within a rights framework. Violence against women and children is a human rights issue. It has to stop.

Rosemary Calder advised me the day before yesterday that WESNET should desist from what she called an adversarial role with government and the Office of the Status of Women. I think this is the wrong way of looking at things. I think the federal government has put itself in an adversarial role with women! Particularly with women and their children who experience domestic and family violence.

Roma Balzer said yesterday we have to remember we are a movement for social and political reform. Mythily Iyer also said yesterday - let's stop apologising and let's rock the boat.

This government appears to have missed the point when WESNET called for massive social and political reform to enable women and children to be able to stay in their homes and perpetrators instead be forced to leave. Their interpretation of this has included the view that refugees are now out of date - and that they "make" women leave the home. It is male violence which makes women and children leave the home. Women just want the violence to stop.

We have at least six small children, in two families, murdered in the last two weeks in what are clearly domestic murders. Victoria alone has had four domestic murders in the last two weeks. Three of these have been in rural areas.

We have about 320 women's refuges across Australia and women and children are being turned away each day because the shelters are full. Domestic violence services are bending over backward to come up with innovative models, new ways of thinking and responding and solutions to what are old problems.

Yet pay and conditions remain inadequate.

The ACTU has just released a report, which says that about 60% of work is unpaid. I haven't read the report yet but I would imagine that that figure is talking about work outside of the home, and doesn't include women's unpaid labour.

I would guess that workers in the domestic and family violence field would be right up there in those statistics. From what I can see workers in our sectors are always giving, always trying that bit harder to find innovative solutions for problems in the service systems, or for families, going beyond the call of duty, working late, starting early, working long hours and accumulating time in lieu. I have never seen so much passion in a sector as what I see in the violence against women sectors.

The Australian Women's Non-government Organisations Conference (AWOC) was held 12 days ago in Canberra, just before the National Womenspeak Conference. This conference released a number of recommendations including recommendations on violence against women.

The violence against women statement reads:
'Enough is enough- we just want violence against women and children to stop'

That seems a pretty simple statement. We, as practitioners, advocates, academics, and policy workers, know that it is not that simple. But it is possible. We believe that otherwise we wouldn't be constantly striving for social change.

What we do need is a government which is brave enough to have a go, to look at the big picture, to look at long term social, ideological, institutional and structural change. Not a government which says its committed but spends an awful lot of money on glossies, pilot programs and showcases and uncoordinated, top down, projects which are detached from the grass roots, and thus divorced from the real lived lives of women and children who experience domestic and family violence.

We don't want a government which talks about partnerships in every second breath but doesn't know the first thing about them.

We don't want a government which is city-centric but worried about the rural vote so announces token rural programs and rural women's secretariats.

We are sick of the purchaser/provider split, the new managerialist language, the lack of coordination between departments, and output based funding models rather than a focus on long term qualitative outcomes.

We need a government with substance one which is committed to social, economic and political change. We need a government we can have confidence in.

This government won't even sign the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. I say that calls for a vote of no confidence!

Since the Liberal government was elected in 1996 we have seen the disempowerment of the Office of the Status of Women, the degendering of policies and programs and a mainstreaming agenda.

Lets make it clear to all governments to stop tinkering around the edges. Stop pretending to do something. Halt competitive tendering. Stop the de-gendering of policies and the general thrust towards mainstreaming. Stop the busyness the work on how to unit cost domestic violence, the re-distribution of dollars and resources from one area to another to fill gaps rather than adding much needed new dollars. And let's insist that when they're talking about welfare they don't use the excuse that the pot is only so full. I don't hear them say that with regard to the defence budget, or when they want to send out navy destroyers to prevent asylum seekers from coming to Australia. I certainly don't see that when an election is looming and the political ads, porkbarrelling and campaigns start.

We have a federal election looming. Let them hear women's voices.
