

WHEN IT COMES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, THE RESPONSE CANNOT BE ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

By Dr Anna Cody

In the past weeks, we have seen tens of thousands of Australians united in a single message: no more violence against women. From the time emergency National Cabinet was called to the time they met; three more women had been killed.

We have an epidemic of gendered violence in this country, and we must - and can - do better.

On Wednesday, the federal government announced a commitment of \$925 million over five years to the Leaving Violence program, which provides those escaping violence with financial support in the form of \$1500 cash and the rest in goods vouchers.

But there is no one-size-fits-all solution to men's violence against women, just as there are no two women who have experienced abuse in the same way.

While I acknowledge the commitment to enable women and children to leave violent situations, there must be a cash injection into the frontline services this program will refer survivors to, and support for specific community-developed initiatives.

Communities already have many of the answers on how to work with violent men, to support women, and to stop the violence from happening.

Specialist services are already turning women away, and without appropriate long-term funding, more and more victim-survivors will be forced to return to their perpetrators.

First Nations victim-survivors experience generational trauma, systemic racism, and cultural insensitivity within mainstream service providers that can further traumatise them, while culturally and racially marginalised communities face obstacles such as language barriers, cultural taboos, and discriminatory practices that can prevent them from accessing culturally appropriate services.

Imagine having to flee your home and leave everything behind, escaping with only the clothes on your back - and arriving at a refuge where nobody speaks your language, and you don't know how you will financially support yourself and your children. Imagine leaving an abusive relationship and being worried you will lose your right to stay in Australia. Perhaps the help you need is finding safe and affordable housing and navigating the justice system, not in-kind vouchers.

We cannot assume that every woman and child escaping an abusive relationship has the same needs. This is not a time to take away a survivor's choice or autonomy - it is a time to listen to what they need. Leaving violence is not a split-second decision, and to truly support those escaping violence, a holistic approach - and listening to communities about what they know works - is critical.

We need to listen to what victim-survivors are telling us and build on community-developed programs which have proven to be effective.

Two weeks out from the Federal budget, the government has the opportunity to provide appropriate funding to these life-saving services. This includes investment in funding for culturally sensitive and trauma-informed support services that are accessible and inclusive of

all survivors, regardless of their background or identity. It includes a commitment to specialised initiatives for First Nations and culturally and racially marginalised communities developed by them.

We must appropriately fund First Nations family violence prevention legal services, women's legal services and other community legal services and legal aid. There needs to be investment in social housing and proper income support so older women leaving violent men can support themselves, such as a specific domestic violence payment for women leaving violent men paid through Centrelink at a pension rate.

The government must shift its focus away from knee-jerk reactive responses. We need prevention and early intervention. We need men's behaviour change programs, consent education, and safe reporting pathways. We need trauma-informed response training for police (such as the Victoria Police Family Violence Centre of Learning) across all police services, and a review of the ways in which our justice system serves to protect perpetrators and re-traumatise survivors.

We need to prioritise the voices of those with lived expertise. We need to acknowledge the prevalence of underreported instances of gendered violence as a sobering reflection of the stigma and shame that continue to shroud survivors.

We need all sectors of our society to examine and prevent how their products and services can be manipulated to perpetrate domestic and family violence.

We have an opportunity here. Australia is ready to make change, to stop this scourge of men's violence against women. To stop the rapes, the murders, the online and tech-facilitated harassment, coercive control, financial abuse, and the sexual violence.

This is about creating a better Australia, where victims can completely rely on the justice system to listen to them, respond appropriately, and prioritise their protection.

Australia needs to become a nation where women don't have to send their locations in their group chats before going on a date, don't have to hold their keys between their knuckles as they walk through dark carparks, and most importantly – an Australia where women can feel safe inside their own homes.

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