

Submission Snapshot

Committee on Social Policy & Legal Affairs Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence



Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand recently provided a submission to the Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, for their Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence. The submission provides a comprehensive overview of our experience delivering services to victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV).

We make 45 recommendations for the Commonwealth alongside public and private sector stakeholders to strengthen Australia's collective response to what has been described as a 'wicked' problem (Neave, 2018).

Below, we provide a snapshot of our submission and zero in on 5 key recommendations that we believe will drive significant and systemic change to securing the lives of women, children and families impacted by FDSV.

FAMILY, DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

Despite the significant gains of the past five decades, policy responses have been insufficient to reduce the prevalence and severity of FDSV. Such violence is, on the contrary, increasing in incidence and severity. The arson deaths of Hannah Clarke and her three children in February 2020—and the 30 other women killed this year in the context of family violence (Destroy the Joint, 2020)—bear devastating witness to this.



Gender Inequality and the feminisation of poverty driving FDSV

It must be recognised that vulnerability is a produced condition, created by the unequal structures of society. Women are not inherently vulnerable to men's violence because they are women; they are vulnerable as a result of the intersecting axes of oppression through which their lives are embedded.

- Women are more highly represented in insecure work;
- Women retire with significantly less in accumulated superannuation due to time out of the workforce for caring obligations;
- Only 1 in 10 First Nations people have financial security.

We assert that a focus on securing women's financial security is a practical and tangible action which serves both the achievement of gender equality and a reduction in FDSV.



All forms of FDSV are 'Complex'

There is a lack of recognition that all forms of FDSV are complex. Some of the less well known, and poorly understood forms include: coercive control, economic abuse; dowry abuse and forced marriage; technology facilitated abuse; and sibling-on-sibling sexual abuse. There is a need for improved understanding and strengthened responses to these forms of FDSV—and a shift away from categorising only some forms of violence as 'complex' as to ensure an inclusive and comprehensive understanding and response to these issues.

- Multiple forms of violence intersect for many women, children and families;
- Violence may be experienced by more than one perpetrator in the family;
- Current understandings of risk are limited by the narrow understandings of the complexity of FDSV—in particular, economic abuse must be understood as increasing the risk in women's lives;
- Children are victim-survivors of FDSV in their own right, they are not just witnesses to violence—opportunities for their voices to be heard must be prioritised.



FDSV is the prevailing face of homeless in Australia

For young people in particular, FDSV is the cause of homelessness in virtually every case. There is a critical shortage of safe, affordable and ongoing tenancy options for women affected by FDSV. Victim-survivors are often forced to choose between remaining in an unsafe relationship or fleeing to unsafe motel crisis accommodation. In addition—the shortage of housing also extends to perpetrators who are excluded from the home; and culturally safe, community owned and controlled housing options for First Nations women and children.

- Housing shortages that see perpetrators of violence bailed and returning to victim-survivors homes is a system failure which continues to endanger women and children;
- The communal model of crisis accommodation must be removed and replaced with social housing options, and core and cluster models of supported accommodation;
- Elder abuse prevails in an environment where the quality of residential aged care falls desperately below acceptable standards of care.



Financial abuse is enabled by the rise in Artificial Intelligence

There is a concern about the rising use of digital platforms, and the associated significant increase in consumer access to unregulated, fringe lenders, such as payday lenders and 'buy now pay later' schemes, which creates a further site for economic abuse to occur.

- Coerced debt is a key aspect of economic abuse, with strong evidence suggesting that it is surprisingly easy for perpetrators to manufacture a situation of long-term intractable indebtedness and associated hardship in this form;
- Migrant women face a heightened risk of economic abuse in the context of fringe lending;
- Artificial technology in the design and delivery of financial products provides no lens or scope for assessing vulnerability and risk. In particular it lacks the sophistication and nuance to recognise FDSV.

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO REFORM

Through the delivery of services to women, children and families impacted by FDSV Good Shepherd has experienced a lack of collaboration between various community and government sector stakeholders—particularly child protection and family violence and family services providers. There is an urgent need to ensure that the structures of coordination and integration are underpinned by the guiding principles of the safety of women; the accountability of perpetrators; and the agency of women.

In recognising the complexity of FDSV, attention must also be turned to a long-term investment in an integrated and coordinated approach—that calls all parts of the Australian community together. Improving collaboration among existing service providers and frameworks is a priority—equal to the realisation that together the government, community sector and the private/corporate sector all have a role to play. Addressing FDSV cannot continue to rely on only a partial sum of our parts.

Collaboration and integration requires four key principles to be developed as part of a framework of integration and coordination:

1. A shared understanding of the complexity and intricacy of FDSV;
2. Development of mutual response and space for multi-disciplinary ways of working;
3. Institutionalised capacity building;
4. Embedded victim-survivor leadership.

The social and structural determinants of FDSV—such as gender inequality, housing insecurity, and the feminisation of poverty—have been both well established and well known for many decades. Never have the intersecting axes of these determinants been so profoundly exposed than during the COVID-19 global health pandemic. The United Nations recently described family violence as the shadow pandemic to COVID-19; such a description points to the scale of the problem.

COVID-19 has provided a critical juncture, where there is an opportunity to both be confronted with the systemic failures and to seize the momentum for change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key to many of the recommendations we make in our submission is the assessment and refinement of definitions in law and policy that recognise the comprehensive nature of violence experienced by women and their children—including recognition of multiple perpetrators of abuse and expanded understandings of economic abuse. Additionally, the following recommendations provide an opportunity for government, community and private/corporate sectors to work together in shifting the dial in ways that it has been shifted before now.

1. Acknowledge the impact of gendered disadvantage on driving FDSV and work to address this, specifically:
 - a. Costing and subsidising care and domestic work, utilising ABS data on unpaid care work;
 - b. Providing free universal child care; sufficiently subsidised aged care; and sick time for all employees including those with casual employment;
 - c. Addressing the overrepresentation of women in precarious and insecure employment by developing policies that support people to practice equal sharing of care work to increase women's representation in more secure (and full time) work;
 - d. Building parity into Australia's superannuation system;
 - e. Retain the COVID-19 increase in social security payments; and permanently removes mutual obligations and all other barriers that adversely impact women with caring responsibilities.
(Recommendation 3 in full submission)

2. Determine a mechanism that ensures mandatory responses from the financial services workforce, with a priority on cultural change from the 'top down', including governance stewardship from the executive levels on this significant and serious issue, as well as an investment in up-to-date and targeted training to identify, prevent and respond to family violence. Through this mandatory compliance, financial entities should be required to conduct a review of internal hardship policies and implement practices that collaborate with financial counsellors to ensure trauma informed responses. In particular policies should ensure that:
 - a. Women are empowered to resolve issues that arise from economic abuse can be resolved without having to engage a third party advocacy;
 - b. Debt which was accrued through FDSV circumstance is effectively and efficiently investigated to identify inappropriate lending—before defaulting to hardship and debt-repayment programs.
(Recommendation 6 in full submission)

3. Provide funding for research into FDSV, financial services and technology; inclusive of the development of a national risk tool for the financial services sector in relation to identifying and responding to economic abuse.
(Recommendation 8 & 11 in full submission)

4. Invest in specialised FDSV financial counselling positions (especially in Aboriginal communities) to assist victim/survivors to recover from economic abuse and build their capacity for an independent economic future.
(Recommendation 13 in full submission)

5. Support states and territories to significantly increase investment in social housing and responses to homelessness. Specifically:
 - a. Increase the stock of affordable, accessible and social housing;
 - b. Strengthen diversified and expanded crisis housing options, including specialist women's services and specialist youth accommodation;
 - c. Invest in wrap-around support required to enable women and their children to remain in their own homes; including improving the availability of accommodation for perpetrators who are removed from the home—this will ensure ongoing safety of women and children in their homes;
 - d. Provide dedicated funding to assist those experiencing or at-risk of experiencing homelessness to move into stable housing.
(Recommendation 28 in full submission)