



Submission to the third Tasmanian Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan

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Introduction

Engender Equality is Tasmania's state-wide specialist family violence service, providing frontline counselling and support to all people affected by family violence and abuse, alongside advocacy, community education and training to address gender inequality and gendered violence in all its forms. We welcome and strongly support the commitment and work of the Tasmanian Government towards addressing family and sexual violence across the state and appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the development of the third Tasmanian Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan (the Action Plan).

Key Messages

Key Message 1. Broaden the field of vision of the Plan's analysis and actions beyond the level of individuals and families to the structural level.

Australia-wide as well as internationally, leading approaches to prevention of and response to family and sexual violence increasingly acknowledge the importance of meaningfully addressing what can be called the social determinants of family and sexual violence – the broader social and economic conditions in which people live, are educated, work, and play. These include:

Attitudes. Violence against women – who make up the large majority of victim/survivors of family and sexual violence – occurs in a social context that is shaped by multiple intersecting forms of discrimination, including not only sexism and gender inequality but also ableism, ageism, racism and colonialism, class discrimination, prejudice against people with mental illness and histories of incarceration, hetero/cisnormativity and homo/bi/transphobia.¹

Economic and infrastructural factors. Family and sexual violence is known to be linked to economic and social insecurities including financial stress, economic precarity, lack of adequate housing options, and lack of transport. Clients who present to Engender Equality with experiences of family violence often endure a number of additional marginalisations as a result of chronic experiences of abuse, including isolation from family and social supports; homelessness or insecure housing; persistent, high-level safety concerns; welfare dependency; disrupted education or workforce participation; limited or no access to childcare; and complex physical and emotional impacts of trauma.

Approaches to prevention, early intervention and response that do not complement their work at the level of individuals and families with work towards social change are thus likely to produce only partial and easily reversible progress towards ending family and sexual violence. Meanwhile, services are left ill-equipped to support clients with intersectional needs.

The existing Action Plan and its actions remain light on structural-level thinking and action. This is a particular oversight given the Tasmanian Government's stated interest in meeting the needs of victim-survivors with diverse lived experience (including children and young people, older people, Tasmanian Aboriginal people, people with disability, CALD Tasmanians, people from rural and regional communities, people with mental illness, people with experience of incarceration and LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians) as well as of children and young people – all of whom face intersectional structural barriers to safety.

¹ <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/11/23131846/Change-the-story-Our-Watch-AA.pdf>

For example, discriminatory attitudes not only help to fuel and keep invisible family and sexual violence against people with disability, but also play a role in the inadequate overall supply of disability-appropriate housing, making it significantly more difficult for people with disability to leave abusive relationships.

The third Action Plan must be fully integrated with and into existing and projected Tasmanian Government plans and frameworks, including:

- Plans aimed at groups: Tasmanian Women's Strategy, Active Ageing Plan, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, Accessible Island Disability Framework for Action, Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, Multicultural Policy and Action Plan, LGBTIQ+ Whole-of-Government Framework.
- Plans aimed at structural issues: Affordable Housing Strategy and Action Plan, Our Healthcare Future review.

Meanwhile, the Victim-Survivor Advisory Council must include victim-survivors from all of the above groups.

Key Message 2. Broaden the suite of responses to perpetration beyond criminalisation.

Expanded moves to criminalise behaviours at the heart of family and sexual violence have sent a valuable message that society should not treat any assault more leniently than another. However, a policy response that is over-reliant on criminalisation is inadequate to the goal of prevention of and response to family and sexual violence, in several ways.

Criminalisation does not meet the needs of many victim-survivors. Australia-wide, many victim-survivors of violence do not choose to engage with the police in response to their experiences.

- Over two-thirds of both men and women (69% in both cases) who experienced physical violence perpetrated by a male did not report the most recent incident to police.
- The vast majority of women (87%) did not contact the police in relation to the most recent incident of sexual assault by a male.²

While some of these non-reporters may feel intimidated by their perpetrators and/or doubtful of the value of police support – for example, people who are partnered to police officers or other people in positions of social power – other victim-survivors who are unable or not ready to engage in a formal justice or police response include people with intergenerational traumatic experience of the criminal justice system (including many Aboriginal women and children) and people who hope to reconcile with their partners on their own terms. Such victim-survivors are more likely to reach out to trusted community-based services where they can receive support that is not going to bring them into contact with police.

² ABS Personal Safety Survey.

Criminalisation does not necessarily reduce perpetration of violence. The evidence on the impact of arrest and incarceration on perpetration appears to be mixed.³ Indeed, some people are more likely to experience violence after a perpetrator is released from custody.⁴

Criminalisation on its own does not address, and in fact contributes to, the social and economic drivers of violence. Rather, it reinforces an individualised approach.

In developing the third Action Plan, particular emphasis should be placed on identifying promising non-criminalising approaches to prevention and response. Meanwhile, consultations for the development of the third Action Plan should include targeted consultation questions, individual interviews and focus groups with both victim-survivors and perpetrators to hear their assessment of non-criminalising initiatives.

Key Message 3. As victim-survivors in their own right, children require collaboration between child safety services and specialist family and sexual violence support services.

Both the direct experience of family and sexual violence and the experience of witnessing such violence are recognised as forms of child abuse. However, services and organisations can best respond to children and young people affected by family violence by using a whole-of-family focus with an understanding that the experiences of children and young people do not occur in isolation from the experiences of other family members.

Effective responses to the nuances and particularities of these experiences require sustained and productive collaboration between child safety services and specialist family violence and sexual violence services, which bring specialist insight into elements of victim-survivors' experiences that, while bearing on care arrangements and justice rulings as well as support, may fall outside the understanding of child safety and family support workers. For example, a perpetrator may be using coercive control on a child, or the child may be a part of the relationship dynamic between parents. This type of abuse can affect the ability of a target, usually the mother, to parent properly due to the control deteriorating their self-esteem and self-worth. It is often the case that perpetrators are using coercive tactics and other forms of violence on children as well as targets. Children are often used as pawns and abuse often continues post-separation.

Specialist services are also the most likely to be able to address gendered impacts of family and sexual violence. The 0-15 age group is the group where the gaps between male and female experiences of family and sexual violence – although still present, and with girls consistently experiencing more violence and abuse than boys – are the smallest, particularly in cases where children witness violence against a parent. Given the links between witnessing violence against a parent and condoning the use of violence in later life, effective response to childhood experiences of witnessing violence may also play a primary prevention role.

³ <https://20ian81kynngg38bl3l3eh8bf-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ANROWS-OofR-Perpetrator-Interventions.pdf>

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http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/RCFV_Full_Report_Interactive.pdf

Key Message 4. Locate initiatives physically and contextually in Tasmanian communities.

Family and sexual violence in Tasmania emerges from a complex set of distinctive socioeconomic circumstances. Of the Australian states and territories, Tasmania has:

- the highest proportion of population living rurally (ABS, 2016);
- the highest proportion of population over the age of 50 (ABS, 2018);
- the highest proportion of people with a disability (TasCOSS, 2018);
- the highest unemployment rate and the lowest weekly earnings (ABS, 2021);
- the lowest levels of literacy and educational attainment (UTAS, 2018);
- the highest pre-term birth rate (AIHW, 2019);
- the lowest rates of internet access (National Black Spot Database, 2022);
- the highest level of gun ownership (University of Sydney, 2021); and
- higher than average rates of mental illness and suicide (Tasmanian Suicide Prevention Strategy, 2016-2020).

Many of these issues are more acute in rural areas and in communities experiencing low economic status and extreme disadvantage – situations which often overlap. For example, Tasmania's already high levels of gun ownership are even higher in rural areas, while internet access is lowest in rural and disadvantaged communities.

Women living in rural and disadvantaged communities are more likely to have experienced family violence than women living in metropolitan areas – but limited specialist family violence services, and difficulty in safety planning leaves victim-survivors highly exposed and without protection. Meanwhile, distance from local conditions leaves family violence services at a disadvantage both in responding to violence and in leading community change by addressing underlying sociocultural values that are enabling family violence behaviours.

Placed-based, community-tailored projects provide an opportunity to overcome both geographical and sociocultural isolation and to offer intensive family violence services in communities that need them most.

Key Message 5. Funding must meet demand and broader needs.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and concurrent social and economic pressures, demand for support from specialist family and sexual violence services has increased dramatically over the past 24 months and continues to grow. Meanwhile, funding constraints are preventing existing family violence services from meeting demand. To use only the example of Engender Equality:

- In the October-December 2021 reporting period, Engender Equality received an average of 28 new client referrals a week, reflecting **a 36% increase in new client referrals from the previous quarter.**
- In the same period, operating at fully capacity, Engender Equality was able to take on 159 new clients, reflecting **an increase of 18.6% in new clients accessing our services from the previous**

quarter – a substantial increase, yet only half of what was required to meet the increase in new client referrals.

- Between 1 March 2021 and 1 March 2022, Engender Equality provided a service session to 778 victim-survivors, reflecting **an increase of 12.4% in service sessions provided on the previous 12 month period – again, a notable increase but insufficient to meet community demand.**

As a result of these significant increases in demand, new Engender Equality clients are waiting as long as six months for a first appointment with a specialist family violence practitioner.

The mental health of our staff, as well as our capacity to fulfil the obligation of our service-offer, relies on our ability to respond quickly to incoming referrals and attend promptly to the safety needs of victim-survivors: Engender staff are experiencing the overwhelm and stress of turning away victim-survivors, witnessing them give up hope of support when we have not been able to provide assistance in the help-seeking moment.

Without funding to match demand, Tasmanian services will never achieve their broad objective of eradicating family and sexual violence. (See Appendix A for an overview of Engender Equality's services.)

Meanwhile, as noted above, groups that remain acutely under-supported include:

- CALD victim-survivors
- LGBTIQ+ victim-survivors
- Rural victim-survivors
- Victim-survivors living with disability

Without additional injections of funding, the specialised intersectional needs of these groups will remain unmet.

Conclusion

Key Message 6. Governance and evaluation of the Plan must be transparent, rigorous and include Tasmanians with lived experience of family and sexual violence.

In conclusion, Tasmania requires a new Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan that is both strategically directed towards, and sufficiently resourced to deliver, community-based prevention and response activities that meet the needs of Tasmania's highly dispersed, largely rural, socially and economically disadvantaged population.

The Action Plan must recognise that the majority of Tasmanians experiencing family and sexual violence do not seek Police or justice system responses, rather they look to specialist support services that offer expert safety planning and other vital assistance without compromising their safety and autonomy.

In response to frightening levels of unmet service need both at Engender Equality and across the specialist sector, the new Plan must commit a significant increase of resources to community-based services that provide the place-based expertise Tasmanian victim-survivors so desperately need.

Finally, to be effective, the new Plan must be supported by transparent and rigorous mechanisms for governance and evaluation that include oversight of implementation and outcomes by Tasmanians with lived experience of family and sexual violence.

Summary of Key Messages

Key Message 1	Broaden the field of vision of the Plan's analysis and actions beyond the level of individuals and families to the structural level.
Key Message 2	Broaden the suite of responses to perpetration beyond criminalisation.
Key Message 3	As victim-survivors in their own right, children require collaboration between child safety services and specialist family and sexual violence support services.
Key Message 4	Locate initiatives physically and contextually in Tasmanian communities.
Key Message 5	Funding must meet demand and broader needs.
Key Message 6	Governance and evaluation of the Plan must be transparent, rigorous and include Tasmanians with lived experience of family and sexual violence.

Appendix A: Engender Equality Services

a) Counselling

Engender Equality's evidence-based, trauma-informed response to family and sexual violence provides the Government with excellent value for money. Alongside our specialised service delivery, we offer opportunities for community engagement, community development and primary prevention of violence against women. This value-add to direct service delivery is often overlooked as a function of our organisation, which participates in skill-sharing, awareness raising and community education as a component of our daily work. This key community role helps to elevate the whole of the sector by raising awareness of family and sexual violence, improving responses to victim-survivors and encouraging primary prevention initiatives.

The unique service attributes offered by a specialist service, such as Engender Equality, that facilitate help-seeking for victims of abuse in even the most tenuous circumstances include:

- *Total confidentiality and discretion* – victims who may be fearful of their perpetrator's response can access support with complete privacy, allowing them to make discreet plans to change their relationship or leave their partner with safety plans in place.
- *Flexibility* – our practitioners can support clients whose experiences of violence and abuse may be difficult to recognise or not fit existing criminal-justice definitions and who may therefore be unable to access protection from police and/or adjacent government service systems.
- *Trauma-informed* – we recognise the impacts of family violence are multifaceted and long-lasting and may intersect with a range of other experiences of disadvantage and deprivation.
- *Tailored* – we offer access to long term, non-discriminatory and individualised counselling and can provide support remotely by phone, internet or any modality that will support a client's safety.
- *Collaboration and outreach* – we arrange co-appointments with other services and sectors, including children's services, and can support clients in a range of settings including drug and alcohol rehabilitation and prison.
- *Psychoeducation and recovery* – our specialist approach includes psychoeducation about the social drivers of gendered violence and the impacts of trauma, supporting whole-of-person recovery.

b) Training

In addition to victim-survivor counselling and advocacy support work, Engender Equality has successfully delivered a wide range of training packages over many years, including specialist courses on lived experience advocacy, the gendered drivers of family violence, gender analysis for workplaces, family violence responses for alcohol and drug services, primary prevention of family violence, coercive control, men's behaviour change and more. Engender Equality has a long history of delivering specialist training and education to small and large audiences that include corporate and industrial workplaces, community sector services, women's services and child and family centres, amongst others.

Engender Equality is accredited by the national primary prevention organisation Our Watch to deliver the 'Change the Story' and 'Workplace Equality and Respect' frameworks and are separately accredited to deliver Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) bystander training and The Shark Cage™ training,

which addresses revictimisation for women with multiple experiences of abuse. In addition to delivering a range of nationally endorsed frameworks, Engender Equality has a proven record for developing and delivering our own evidence-based training packages, including short and long format courses, ranging from lived experience advocacy training for victim-survivors to advanced practitioner training in coercive control and working with men who use violence.

Current Engender-owned training packages on offer include, but are not limited to:

- Advocates for Change
- Introduction to Family Violence
- Family Violence Champions Program
- Family Violence Masterclass
- Family Violence for Workplaces
- Breaking the Trap – Working with Clients Experiencing Coercive Control
- Supporting Individuals Experiencing Family Violence – Training for Mental Health Workers
- Supporting Individuals Experiencing Family Violence – Training for AOD (Alcohol and Other Drugs) Workers

Engaging support services, like Engender Equality, in the delivery of training programs throughout the state gives us the capacity to reach and influence a wide range of community sector stakeholders across Tasmania, in addition to effecting change in the lives of individuals and organisations.

c) Advocacy

Engender Equality acknowledges the Tasmanian Government's desire to involve victim-survivors in the consultation process for the Action Plan. Engender Equality has a long-standing commitment to supporting victim-survivors and recognises the power of lived experience.

The Advocates for Change is a program run by Engender Equality that consists of a team of victim-survivor advocates from around Tasmania. Our team of Advocates come from diverse backgrounds and identities. The program started in 2018, initially with resourcing from Our Watch Voices for Change, but we have developed and customised the program over many years to be a standalone program, which is now funded within our organisation.

Our program is guided by the Experts by Experience framework and provides a powerful platform for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence to use their stories and experiences to educate, inform, bring systemic change and advocate for the prevention and reduction of gender-based violence. Our Advocates do this by engaging in media advocacy, public speaking and lobbying for legislative change.

All our advocates participate in a comprehensive four-day training program that involves learning about media, the drivers of violence, creating a speech, delivering a speech and advocating for change using their stories. Each advocate is then assessed for suitability and readiness through a multi-stage process before they become an Advocate for Change.

Our part time project coordinator sources opportunities for the advocates and supports them before, during and after an engagement, along with our team of specialised family violence counsellors if

required. Risk assessment is used to ensure that our advocates personal and emotional safety is always at the forefront.

Engender Equality believes it is necessary that all victim-survivors who are wanting to engage in our Advocates for Change program are able to. However, with limited resources and capacity we are ill-equipped to meet the demand, and thus unable to amplify the voices of those with lived-experience in the way they deserve. Additionally, Engender Equality currently has inquiries from multiple organisations with requests to help them establish lived-experience programs within their own services. Engender Equality is excited for the opportunity to support other organisations to unleash the power and potential of clients that they work with. However, with our service currently in crisis and unable to meet the demands of our clients we are powerless to engage with this meaningful work.

d) Areas where we would like to do more

Engender Equality would like to be working more actively in communities that have very high-risk populations but have no specialised local family violence services, though collaborations with other services that are funded to support them.

Engender would also like to be working more with children who have experienced family violence and with the other services that support them. In particular, all child safety and family support workers should receive training in whole-of-family basic family violence response skills – an area of training in which Engender specialises.