



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

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Inquiry into Domestic and Family Violence—Policy approaches and responses

Submission No. 24
Women’s Electoral Lobby

Received by Committee Support Office: 29 September 2017

Authorised for publication: 8 November 2017



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Submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety Inquiry into Domestic and Family Violence – Policy approaches and responses

September 2017

To:

Dr Andréa Cullen, Secretary,

Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety,

ACT Legislative Assembly, GPO Box 1020, CANBERRA ACT 2601.

committees@parliament.act.gov.au

Women's Electoral Lobby, established in 1972, is an independent, non-party political lobby group dedicated to creating a society where women's participation and their ability to fulfil their potential are unrestricted, acknowledged and respected and where women and men share equally in society's responsibilities and rewards.

Introduction

The Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) is a national, independent, non-party political, feminist lobby group that has worked tirelessly for 45 years to improve the position of women in society.

The Women's Electoral Lobby is dedicated to creating a society where women's participation and their ability to fulfil their potential are unrestricted, acknowledged and respected and where women and men share equally in society's responsibilities and rewards.

WEL applies a feminist approach to all its work from policy analysis and development to campaigning. WEL has developed a Feminist Policy Framework, which sets out the values, which we use to measure fairness for women and fairness for society. WEL believes that good policies should address these indicators and work with governments at all levels on achieving better and fairer policy outcomes.

Our current strategic focus areas include:

- Violence against women including securing crucial funding for women's refuges
- Financial security for women
- Women's reproductive rights

This submission responds specifically to questions that fall under our current priority area relating to violence against women.

Enquiries about this submission can be directed to Emma Davidson, National Secretary, Women's Electoral Lobby (Australia) Inc, based in Canberra. Emma can be contacted at emmadavidson@grapevine.net.au

Implementation of the ACT Government's 2016-17 funding commitments to prevent and respond to domestic and family violence in the ACT, in particular how outcomes are being measured.

The 2016 announcement by the ACT Government of increased investment into domestic and family violence responses, through the *Safer Families* package, is welcomed by WEL. The co-design process for the Family Safety Hub, working with staff from women's services in the ACT, demonstrates the commitment of the ACT Government and Directorate staff to producing better outcomes through a greater emphasis on the experience of those working directly with women escaping domestic and family violence.

WEL will continue to pursue vigorously more funds for women's refuges. The current level of funding is still far too low. Too many women and their children are turned away and left to fend for themselves. Reports of women and children sleeping in their cars through lack of anywhere else to go are occurring in the ACT, as they are in other cities around Australia.

In particular WEL is concerned for women who are at greater risk of violence or who face greater barriers in seeking help.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised from partner assaults than the general female population.
- Women with disabilities who are also more likely to experience violence than women without a disability.
- Women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who may face violence as well as other challenges, such as language barriers and social isolation.
- Women who live in regional, rural or remote areas and are often a long way from services and face barriers to escaping violence and seeking support.
- Women who experience other types of disadvantage and stigma who are also at higher risk of violence or can experience difficulties accessing support.

The time taken to resolve family court matters, combined with inadequate understanding in the Family Court of the situations of women who have experienced family violence, including the nature and frequency of financial abuse, have been widely acknowledged as major problems. WEL would like to see additional funding made available to reduce the time required to resolve matters, and additional training for officers of the Court in understanding the nature and frequency of financial abuse.

WEL is particularly concerned that some statistical collections still do not disaggregate on the basis of gender or seek gender specific information. In addition, many data collections are not publicly available in a de-identified format to enable population-level analysis of the impact of changing policies. We would like to see gendered data collection (including where relevant transgendered data) mandated in all ACT Government data collections, with exemptions where these can be evidenced as appropriate. Wherever possible, ACT Government data collections should be made publicly available in de-identified formats for population-level analysis, with an exemption and publicly accountable reason provided where a data set is not made available.

Issues and policy challenges (if any) for the ACT arising from the National funding and agenda/policy setting regime/framework – including how outcomes are measured and reported.

Federal Government cuts to housing and homelessness service funding allocations made to the ACT in the *National Affordable Housing Agreement* in 2012-13 had a heavy impact on specialist services responding to the needs of women, children, and young people impacted by domestic violence or sexual assault. Women escaping domestic violence or seeking support after the trauma of sexual assault sometimes require a model of care that enables gender segregated housing, and support services to assist with the full scope of their needs. At a time when demand for services has increased, these funding cuts passed on from Federal Government to services via the ACT Government have made it more difficult for women to find a safe place to stay.

The *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness* has been extended, but WEL are concerned that the future of this agreement continues to be dependent on ongoing extensions by Federal Government. It is also of concern that funding for specialist homelessness services relating to domestic violence are not mandated as part of the national agreement, leaving it up to the ACT Government to reaffirm their commitment to maintaining or increasing the percentage of the national agreement funds to be used for domestic violence crisis services.

WEL would like to see significant long term investment in funding of generalist and specialist homelessness services/projects, affordable housing, or emergency relief/financial counselling services.

Urgent action is needed to ensure that in the *National Partnership* bilateral negotiations with the states:

- Women's refuges are treated as a priority program.
- There are quarantined funds in the ACT for women's refuges which have the specific and primary function to provide support and accommodation to women and their children experiencing domestic and family violence.
- There is an outcomes measure for the provision of trained child-focused staff in each refuge and that these services are properly funded.
- There are earmarked funds for services which work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and LGBTQI services.

WEL continues in its view that the optimal funding option would be a Women and Children's Safety Program (WCSP) separate from the current homelessness programs, which do not serve the specific needs of women and children escaping violence. Escaping domestic violence is vastly different in character from general homelessness and requires specialised programs. It is a crisis situation, which with the specialist help provided by refuges may eventually see women and their children returning to their home and community. A WCSP program has the capacity to support a much needed highly integrated systems approach. All relevant agencies, including child protection, police, legal services, family law, and health, need to be involved for an integrated cross-sector system to work.

Best practice policy approaches and responses being undertaken in other jurisdictions to prevent and/or respond to domestic and family violence.

In the 2017 Victorian budget, the Victorian Government committed to \$1.9bn for family violence programs. WEL would like to see a similarly proportioned level of funding for family violence programs in the ACT.

Any other related matters.

Some women who experience violence do not experience it within a domestic or family relationship, or do not recognise the violence they are experiencing as domestic and family violence. This can include women who experience violence in the home when they are not living with family, women who experience sexual violence on university campuses, and the wide range of other sexual violence against women.

WEL would like an inquiry into the prevalence and impact of violence against women in the ACT generally, and an exploration of ways to reduce violence against women or mitigate its impact.