

Federal Election 2016: Family Violence

Who we are:

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 9,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians.

Social workers support, assist, and advocate on behalf of women, children and men affected by family violence and are integral to the delivery of services in the field.

Main points:

The AASW calls for:

- Consistent legislation for family violence and sexual assault across Australia, including the use of consistent assessment frameworks and response procedures.
- Significant reform of Family Law court legislation, processes and procedures to be more sensitive to and reflective of the complexities of family violence, including a significant increase in Legal Aid funding for victims of family violence.
- Greater resourcing of specialist services, including crisis, transitional and long-term accommodation services.
- Greater resourcing of community legal centres including women's legal services in order to provide legal information and advice that can be critical to escaping abuse.
- Nationwide implementation and accreditation of men's behaviour change programs—which are in such high demand that men who have used violence have to wait up to six months to even be assessed as eligible for programs.

Discussion:

The AASW takes the view that although family violence affects many members of society, it is a gendered crime most commonly perpetrated by men against women, which also deeply affects children.¹ The causes of family violence are complex and include both individual and social factors, such as gender inequality and community attitudes towards women. As a fundamental cause of violence against women, gender inequality is reflected across all aspects of a woman's life. Governments can address gender inequity within institutions and structures as well as communities and workplaces that receive government funding, and government bodies themselves, by using a gender lens to review existing legislation and policies. Among the most important changes required are closing the gender pay gap and enabling equal representation of women in decision making and leadership positions. Such changes contribute towards change in the attitudinal and normative culture of our society.

Governments need to adopt a zero tolerance position with regard to violence towards women. This needs to be reflected in laws and policies that are accompanied by swift and immediate sanctions for occurrences of violence and enforced by penalties for breaches. This should specifically include policing and the courts. In order to begin to address these larger structural issues governments need to adequately fund the service system that responds to women and children who experience violence, including family violence services, sexual assault services, health services, judiciary, law enforcement, men's behaviour change programs, and housing services.

Additionally governments need to adequately fund primary, secondary and tertiary programs across a range of settings so that the work of preventing violence against women is integrated into all levels of society. Integral to this is ensuring that every woman who makes a complaint of domestic violence is given the professional assistance of an accredited social worker. Above all, there is a significant need for governments to show leadership in regard to the educational, behavioural and attitudinal change that is desperately needed to address this national emergency.

¹ <http://anrows.org.au/sites/default/files/Violence-Against-Australian-Women-Key-Statistics.pdf>