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Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, 2023-2032

Submission of Women's Electoral Lobby Australia

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Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) has been a constant and prominent voice advocating for gender equality and justice for women for over five decades. We develop policy priorities and undertake campaigns to eliminate barriers that hold women back from a life of dignity, safety and independence. We made a submission on the first National Plan.

WEL is committed to being an effective and representative voice for women. As a national organisation, we are well placed to continue the urgent push for rapid reform on issues such as childcare, domestic and family violence and sexual assault, pay equity, health and reproductive rights, housing and homelessness, a gender lens on climate action, and women's access to leadership in the political, public and private sectors.

We are building our focus and resources in the national organisation to strengthen WEL as a nationally representative women's advocacy organisation, with the flexibility and capacity to advocate for women at national and state levels.

Key Principles Guiding WEL's submission:

- **Gender equality as prevention:** Preventing all forms of violence against women requires addressing gendered and often, misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, institutions, and structures that enable violence, alongside key risk factors (e.g., alcohol-related harm, gambling, and adverse childhood experiences).
- **Intersectionality:** Services and programs should be designed with and for those who experience the greatest marginalisation (including First Nations women, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, women with disability, LGBTIQ+ communities, older women, and people in rural and remote areas).
- **Victim-survivor safety at the centre:** Victim-survivor safety must remain central to accountability measures and interventions for people who use violence, as well as to policing, courts, and broader system design.
- **Trauma-informed and culturally safe:** Services should be trauma-informed and culturally safe for First Nations peoples and diverse communities, supported by a culturally capable workforce.
- **No wrong door:** Access should be streamlined by reducing fragmentation of services and so improving victim/survivor ability to navigate across services and the systems which underpin them.
- **Evidence and accountability:** Investment should prioritise evidence-based approaches and strengthen data, monitoring and evaluation systems accompanied by measurable outcomes.

WEL's key priorities:

1. Embed a sustained, whole-of-community primary prevention agenda that targets gender inequality and discrimination as core drivers of continuing DFV and sexual violence.
2. Strengthen "no wrong door" victim-survivor access, including rural/remote access integrated with effective responses to technology-facilitated abuse and coercive control.
3. Build integrated service systems across health, housing, policing, courts, in schools and communities with information-sharing that improves safety and recovery of victim/survivors.
4. Expand pathways for early intervention and behaviour change, alongside strong accountability for people who use violence, with victim-survivor safety at the centre.

5. Invest in workforce capability and wellbeing (including vicarious trauma supports) and ensure culturally safe, culturally capable services (including First Nations leadership).
6. Centre children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, including addressing emerging online harms (deepfakes, online exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours) and supporting youth who use violence.
7. Commit to consistent national data, monitoring, and evaluation with shared indicators and transparent reporting.

Executive Summary

WEL's submission sets out priorities to strengthen the next National Action Plan to Prevent Violence, with an emphasis on preventing harm before it occurs, improving system coordination, and ensuring long-term recovery and healing for victim-survivors. It reflects evidence and themes highlighted in the Rapid Review and related consultation materials, and proposes practical actions that can be delivered through a nationally consistent, outcomes-focused approach.

Primary prevention must address gender inequality as a fundamental driver of violence, alongside intersecting forms of discrimination and structural disadvantage. Prevention efforts should be designed with and for those most affected—including First Nations women, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, women with disability, LGBTIQ+ communities, older women, and people in rural and remote areas. It must be trauma-informed and culturally safe. Sustained investment should support community-led initiatives, respectful relationships education that remains contemporary and responsive to emerging harms, and whole-of-community approaches that engage men and boys constructively while reinforcing accountability. Success should be measured through improvements in attitudes and norms, stronger prevention capability in priority settings, and longer-term reductions in prevalence and severity of violence.

WEL recognises that there are forces which have emerged in recent years through social media and other channels of influence which are deeply misogynistic. Prevention programs need to be cognisant of this environmental context. These forces need to be countered at every level in schools, communities and workplaces through programs which address perpetrator violence systematically.

WEL also argues for a **“no wrong door” service system that reduces fragmentation and improves safety and continuity of care**. Victim-survivors often interact with multiple systems simultaneously (including health, housing, police, courts, education, child protection and specialist services). National and jurisdictional reforms should strengthen service coordination, safe information-sharing, clear referral pathways and shared accountability arrangements. Investment is needed to expand the capacity, reach and quality of specialist services including sexual violence services which need to be differentiated from domestic and family violence services. Workforce capability needs to be addressed across specialist and mainstream settings, including support to address vicarious trauma.

A dedicated focus on **children and young people** is essential. Children and young people are victim-survivors in their own right and require developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed responses across universal and statutory systems. The National Plan should address emerging and technology-facilitated harms—including deepfakes, online exploitation and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse—through contemporary policy, specialist capability, and safe referral pathways. It should also provide safety-centred interventions for young people who use violence, ensuring accountability while prioritising victim-survivor safety. Measures of success should include earlier identification and access to appropriate supports, reduced prevalence of online harms, and improved wellbeing and recovery outcomes.

WEL's submission further emphasises that **accountability and earlier intervention for people who use violence must be strengthened in ways that centre victim-survivor safety**. Universal and statutory settings—such as primary health care, workplaces, schools and justice services—provide critical opportunities to identify risk and intervene before violence escalates. Nationally aligned risk assessment, risk management and information-sharing arrangements, paired with culturally safe and accessible service pathways, are necessary to improve consistency and effectiveness. Safeguards must also be strengthened to reduce misidentification of victims as perpetrators to prevent system misuse.

Finally, the submission highlights that **recovery and healing require long-term, integrated supports**, as well as critical crisis responses. Housing security and economic security are foundational to safety and to sustaining separation from violence. The National Plan should make rapid rehousing and long-term housing pathways a priority for funding. It should strengthen integration between domestic and family violence and homelessness systems, improve access to trauma-informed counselling and health supports for sexual violence services, and address financial abuse and the misuse of legal and administrative processes.

WEL calls for a National Action Plan that is **intersectional, evidence-informed and measurable**, with victim-survivor safety at its centre and a sustained commitment to prevention, coordination of services and accountability.

Above all, funding by Federal, State and territory governments for key programs and services needs to be allocated in their forward Budget estimates reflecting commitment to put key measures into action for the life of the Plan. This was emphasised by WEL in its submission on the first National Plan.

WEL recommends that Governments:

- **Provide sustained, long-term investment in primary prevention, specialist services (including sexual violence services), workforce development, and housing pathways through relevant National Partnership Agreements.**

Q1. Prevention: What actions can governments, workplaces, industries, schools, families and individuals take to stop violence before it starts?

Primary prevention must address gender inequality and intersecting forms of discrimination as structural drivers of violence.

Effective prevention requires action online and offline to counter harmful attitudes, gender stereotypes and misogyny.

Earlier intervention, before harm escalates, depends on community and workforce capability to recognise risk and respond appropriately.

WEL recommends that Governments:

- Invest in long-term, community-led and culturally informed prevention initiatives, including First Nations community-controlled approaches.
- Strengthen respectful relationships education and ensure it is regularly updated to address new and emerging forms of harm.
- Target key risk factors and contexts identified in the consultation paper, including alcohol-related harm, gambling-related harm, adverse childhood experiences, and earlier recognition and response.
- Expand whole-of-community strategies that engage men and boys constructively, including bystander approaches and initiatives that challenge harmful norms

The evidence supports these recommendations:

The Rapid Review Expert Panel emphasises that prevention approaches should be community-led, culturally informed, trauma-aware and sustained over time. The Panel also highlights current system fragmentation and inconsistent data and evaluation practices.

VicHealth (2017) reports that 41 per cent of Australian women have experienced violence since the age of 15, and that intimate partner violence is a leading contributor to the burden of disease for women aged 18–44.

Consistent with consultation paper themes, prevention efforts should address harmful attitudes, stereotypes and misogyny; keep respectful relationships education up to date; and respond to key risk factors, including alcohol, gambling and adverse childhood experiences.

Suggested measures of success

Success should be tracked through measurable outcomes, including:

- Improvements in population-level attitudes towards gender equality and reductions in violence-condoning norms.
- Increased reach, quality and effectiveness of prevention activity, particularly in priority settings, with demonstrated improvements in knowledge and skills.
- Longer-term reductions in the prevalence and severity of violence, monitored through consistent national indicators.

Q2. Services and support: How can services and supports work better for people who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, family, domestic or sexual violence?

Victim-survivors commonly engage with multiple systems at the same time (including health, housing, police, courts, schools, child protection, and specialist services). The extent to which these systems coordinate effectively through shared protocols, safe information-sharing, and clear referral pathways has a direct impact on safety, continuity of care, and recovery outcomes:

- Equity Economics (2024) reported that 104,187 people experiencing family and domestic violence sought homelessness support in 2022–23.
- Of these, 63,205 people required accommodation, 18,713 people remained homeless or became homeless, and 93 per cent were women and children.

Access to support is not consistent across Australia. People in rural and remote communities, and those facing additional barriers to access, are more likely to experience service gaps and delays, which can increase

WEL recommends that Governments:

- Expand the capacity, reach and quality of specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services with models that are culturally safe and accessible to all women. No woman or her children should be turned away by a service because of a lack of capacity due to insufficient resources.
- Strengthen service coordination and safe information-sharing across relevant systems to reduce fragmentation and improve continuity of care.
- Invest in workforce capability across specialist and mainstream services, including core competencies in trauma-informed and culturally safe practice.
- Integrate DFV responses with housing and homelessness supports, including rapid rehousing options and long-term pathways to secure, stable accommodation.

Implementation considerations

To support effective delivery, WEL recommends:

- Workforce supports that address vicarious trauma and build sustainable practice, consistent with themes raised in the consultation paper.
- Clear service standards, shared pathways and cross-agency accountability arrangements to support consistent, victim-survivor-centred responses.
- Improved data collection, monitoring and evaluation to strengthen accountability and enable continuous improvement, noting the Rapid Review's findings regarding inconsistent monitoring practices.

Q3. Children and young people: How can communities and services best support children and young people to stay safe from violence?

Children and young people are victim-survivors in their own right and require responses that are developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and distinct from adult-focused service models. The National Plan should address emerging and technology-facilitated forms of harm, including deepfakes, online exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours, pornography and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse through contemporary policy settings, clear practice guidance, and strengthened prevention. WEL welcomes the work of the eSafety Commissioner in the online context.

- The Rapid Review identifies sexual violence prevention as a priority and highlights technology-facilitated abuse as an emerging challenge requiring coordinated national action.
- The Australian Child Maltreatment Study, cited in the Rapid Review, reported that 37.3 per cent of girls and 18.8 per cent of boys experienced child sexual abuse.
- The Rapid Review also notes that one in eight children has been coerced into producing sexual abuse material online.

Children and young people should be supported to participate meaningfully in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the policies and services that affect them.

WEL recommends that Governments:

- Embed child- and youth-centred, trauma-informed supports across universal and statutory settings, including early childhood services, schools, health services, and child protection.
- Impose legal requirements on social media companies to protect children and young people to interact safely online.
- Strengthen prevention and early intervention for families and communities to identify risk earlier and respond before harm escalates.
- Implement specific responses to online harms (including deepfakes and online exploitation), supported by specialist capability and clear, safe referral pathways.
- Provide developmentally appropriate, safety-centred interventions for young people who use violence, with a focus on behaviour change and accountability while prioritising victim-survivor safety.

Measures of success

Success should be monitored through measurable outcomes, including:

- Earlier identification of risk and increased access to appropriate supports for children and young people.
- Reduced prevalence of online harms, alongside improved reporting mechanisms and response pathways.

- Improved safety, wellbeing, and recovery outcomes for children and young people engaged with services.

Q4. People who use violence: What more can be done across the community to promote healthy, safe relationships and strengthen accountability for people who use violence?

People who use violence often have contact with a range of services and in a number of settings including: health services, workplaces, schools and the justice system, well before violence escalates. These contact points provide important opportunities for earlier identification of risk, timely intervention and referral for support. The Rapid Review identified significant national gaps in perpetrator program responses and a lack of consistent, nationally aligned risk assessment and management systems.

Accountability mechanisms must be strengthened in ways that centre victim-survivor safety. Responses should be coordinated, evidence-informed and proportionate to risk, and should avoid approaches that increase victim-survivor harm or shift responsibility onto victim-survivors.

WEL recommends that the Governments:

- Expand accessible pathways for early intervention and behaviour change, including at key contact points such as primary health care, workplaces, schools and justice settings.
- Strengthen community capability, including families, employers and community organisations to recognise early warning signs of harmful behaviour and respond safely through clear guidance, referral pathways and support.
- Ensure culturally safe, trauma-informed and accessible responses for First Nations communities and diverse communities, including culturally specific service options where appropriate.
- Improve the consistency, quality and accountability of perpetrator program responses, including through nationally aligned risk assessment, risk management and information-sharing arrangements across relevant agencies.

Safety and safeguards

To minimise victim-blaming and secondary harm, system responses should prioritise victim-survivor risk and safety planning, including safe information-sharing practices and clear protocols. Safeguards should be strengthened to reduce misidentification and to prevent accountability systems from being weaponised.

Q5. Recovery and healing: What would make the biggest difference in helping people and families to recover and heal after being affected by family, domestic and sexual violence?

Recovery requires long-term, integrated supports across housing, income, health, legal and social services. These supports must extend beyond immediate crisis responses to enable sustained safety, stabilisation and healing.

- Economic security is fundamental to both safety and recovery. Financial hardship and housing insecurity can prevent people from leaving violence, limit options to establish safety, and increase the risk of returning to unsafe situations. Women, Violence and Poverty (2024) estimates that it costs approximately **\$18,000** for a victim-survivor to leave and establish safety. The report also notes that **72%** of Parenting Payment Single recipients are at risk of poverty, and that rents increased by **40%** between April 2020 and March 2023.
- Equity Economics (2024) identifies significant unmet housing need among people experiencing family and domestic violence, consistent with the service demand outlined in Question 2.

- KPMG (2016) estimated the annual cost of violence against women and children at approximately **\$22 billion** (2015–16).

WEL recommends that Governments:

- Expand long-term housing pathways for victim-survivors, including increased social and affordable housing supply and rapid rehousing options, and strengthen integration between domestic and family violence (DFV) and homelessness systems.
- Strengthen income and other economic supports that reduce the risk of returning to violence, including by reducing waiting periods for processing payments, improving payment adequacy, and ensuring supports are accessible to people experiencing violence.
- Ensure timely access to trauma-informed counselling and health support, including specialist sexual violence services and culturally safe options for priority communities.
- Address systems misuse: including financial abuse and the misuse of justice and administrative processes, through safeguards, targeted legal assistance, workforce capability and cross-system accountability mechanisms.

Q6. Access to support: What makes it easier for people to access support or services related to family, domestic or sexual violence?

Access to support is not consistent across Australia. People in rural and remote communities, and those who face additional barriers to access are more likely to experience service gaps and delays. Barriers may result from speaking a language other than English; having a disability; feeling culturally unsafe; wishing to preserve privacy and/or keeping safe.

The consultation paper identifies that access barriers are more pronounced in rural and remote communities and for people facing additional barriers to access. It highlights priorities for action including technology-facilitated abuse, coercive control, and harm in police and court responses. A genuine “no wrong door” approach requires coordinated entry points across systems, safe and lawful information-sharing, and clear referral pathways so that victim-survivors do not need to repeatedly retell their story or navigate fragmented services.

WEL recommends that Governments:

- Strengthen “no wrong door” access through clear pathways, warm referrals, navigation supports, interpreters, and culturally safe and accessible service options.
- Improve rural and remote access through service models that reduce distance, cost and privacy barriers, including outreach, mobile and hybrid service delivery, and locally embedded partnerships.
- Strengthen responses to technology-facilitated abuse through practice guidance for mainstream and specialist services and workplaces, and safety-by-design approaches where relevant.
- Improve police and court responses to reduce further harm, strengthen recognition and response to coercive control, and embed consistent, victim-survivor-centred practice.

Cross-cutting enablers

Governance and coordination

- Reduce siloing across policy areas and align reporting mechanisms across relevant bodies.
- Establish clear accountability arrangements across Federal, State and territory governments, supported by transparent public reporting.

Workforce

- Improve workforce capability across specialist and mainstream services, including shared core competencies.
- Embed support for vicarious trauma and workforce wellbeing.
- Build a workforce that is culturally capable and reflects community diversity.

Data and evaluation

- Build a national evidence ecosystem with consistent indicators and definitions, outcomes tracking, and evaluation, noting the Rapid Review's findings that inconsistent monitoring limits accountability.