

PERSAC Consultation – Gender and Family Violence

In lieu of a peak body for women’s services or community based family violence, Engender Equality submits this paper to elevate the issues experienced by our client population and our sector.

Tasmania in the Global Village

Through the crisis and into the recovery Engender Equality has been concerned about the lack of analysis of the disproportionate impact on women and the children they care for, and the consequent impact this will have on gender disparities in Tasmania. I would like to raise awareness of the need to ensure that both the economic pathway and the social pathway through recovery provide opportunities for progress for all members of the community. In order to do this, it is essential that we look at common indicators of fair access and inclusion and then address barriers that prevent some populations in the community from getting their needs met.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development was adopted by all of the United Nations Members in 2015. It provides a blueprint for action to address global challenges and make sure that development measures, social policy and collective actions are directed towards a sustainable future for everyone.

Sustainability Development Goal 5:

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Pre-existing inequalities will potentially be amplified for women and girls in Tasmania if we don’t take targeted action to understand inequality and inequity, prioritise intersectionality and work toward equal inclusion and access. Secretary General Antonio Guterres is concerned that limited gains in gender equality and women’s rights made over the decades are in danger of being rolled back due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Antonio Guterres is urging “governments to put women and girls at the centre of their efforts to recover from COVID-19”. He says that this, “starts with women as leaders, with equal representation and decision-making power” (United Nations News, April 2020). With a rare opportunity to be talking about *whole of community* recovery this is our chance to embed gender considerations into the practice and planning of Covid-19 recovery.

In respect to the lack of peak representation for women or family violence in Tasmania, Engender Equality strives to raise awareness of issues that pertain to gender and violence. As promoted by Our Watch, gender inequality drives family violence and as such the nexus of gender issues and family violence are inextricable.

The experience of family violence in Tasmania

Covid-19 has provided an enabling environment for family violence and domestic abuse. The conditions which contribute to or exasperate existing misuse of power include:

- Increased fear, uncertainty and anxiety

- Changes to income, financial resources and other economic instability
- Increased time spent together in a close quarters
- Increased caring responsibilities for other family members and children
- Less respite

While these factors have increased the conditions that enable violent and abusive behaviours, victim-survivors have had less mechanisms to access help including:

- Less support from family and friends
- Reduced access to services
- Increased monitoring and control from inside the home
- Less interaction outside the home

In Tasmania,

- There are 6000 police responses to family violence each year in Tasmania. About 80% of people who experience family violence do not involve the police, but also a lot of people who experience family violence do not recognise themselves as victim-survivors.
- Many more women – probably the majority of survivors of family violence – experience coercive controlling abuse, not necessarily involving physical violence.
- Four FTE Counsellors at Engender see about 600 people per year. Many of these people have not sought a justice response.

As a service concerned with women’s safety and family violence, we are very familiar with the experiences of tens of thousands of women in Tasmania who have been subjected to family and sexual violence in their lifetimes. For some women this was a horrifying relationship that developed, and over time: it broke their spirits until they were able to get help to find a way clear of the abuse. For other women the violence they experience started as children and formed a hideous trajectory of exploitation and terror by the hands of multiple people and goes on to create unsurmountable mental health problems. To know of one person who has experienced this is outrageous but the fact that tens of thousands of women live their life in a shadow of fear and control is completely inexcusable. Especially when we have the mechanisms to improve safety and the ability to help build the fractured self-esteem and sense of identity that has resulted from ongoing patterns of intimidation, psychological sabotage and exploitation.

Family Violence and Covid -19

A wealth of research makes it clear that in times of stress or disaster, violent and abusive behaviour towards women rises. It is also evident that under conditions of lockdown and social isolation, both tactics of control and isolation increase, and that men struggling to manage stress, experiencing loss of employment or interruptions to drug supply are more likely to lash out at their partners and children.

The police have declared that there has not been an increase in reports made to them about family violence. This means that women experiencing violence have been unable or unwilling to contact police and other authorities for support. We also need to bear in mind that reports to police almost always relate to physical violence and are only the minority of family violence offences. The great majority of family violence does not in fact involve physical assault or threats but rather coercive control of women’s daily lives, which cannot but have increased during the period of social isolation.

Some of the things that we should be aware in respect to family violence and Covid-19 are;

- The tendency to revert to strict gender norms during times of natural disaster and uncertainty such as men being the protectors and decision makers and women being the carers, which in practice disempowers women and limits their freedoms and financial choices.
- Women's experiences of violence tend to be dismissed or excused more often during times of disaster or emergency with comments such as, "he's under a lot of pressure," "the kids have been playing up."
- Disasters can become catalysts for relationships to end as victim-survivors become less likely to manage their safety within the relationship. We know that at the point of leaving and just after the end of a relationship is the most likely time that women will be killed by their partners.

Further, Engender Equality highlights the experience of family violence in regional and remote communities in Tasmania as there are particular issues relating to the geography and cultural characteristic of small communities. Rural and remote communities contribute additional reinforcing factors to the presentation of family and sexual violence including;

- Barriers to accessing services
- Higher rates of gun ownership
- Fear of stigma
- Social norms that suggest family violence is a family problem and should not be spoken about

Tasmania has the most decentralised population nationally so we need to be particularly alert to these experiences and respond accordingly with specialised support and relevant services

Social and Economic Recovery

Building mechanisms that respond to women's disadvantage means enabling access to the range of rewards that women are entitled to such as careers, fulfilling relationships, and influence in their communities. For many women to participate socially and economically in this way, they need support to recover from abuse and trauma, they need safe places to raise their families and they need connections with people who can walk forward with them, until they can walk forward alone. Providing services to women who have experienced family and sexual violence is essential if we are going to get anywhere close to giving women access to the opportunities that are available to people who have not experienced abuse.

Specialist services for women are not essential because women have special needs that prevent them from fully participating in the community. Specialist services are essential because women face multiple barriers to full participation and these barriers can quickly become exasperated by sexual abuse, harassment, rape, body shaming, unrealistic expectations of beauty and eating disorders. Engender Equality is thrilled that the government is now actively investing in primary prevention programs for violence against women and we hope that the government will follow with increased investment in specialist services for women, that will aid their recovery from trauma and will contribute to the social and economic participations envisioned for all Tasmanians.

Organisations like Our Watch and AWAVA are additional authorities on the need to focus efforts to make sure women and their contribution to our communities is valued. These organisations advocate for engagement with women's organisations in the crisis recovery planning to elevate adequate understanding of the experience women who face multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage.

The aims of proactively supporting women's representation are to;

- Ensure diverse representation especially for women facing multiple forms of discrimination such as women with disabilities
- Value the expertise of women’s services and their role in representing communities who otherwise lack pathways to decisions making platform.
- Ensure that women and children’s safety is held as a paramount human right and that without this human right being met many women will be unable to participate in social and economic recovery.

Not having a women’s peak body in Tasmania and the absence of an Office for Women, specialist services are the existing mechanism with the expertise to represent women and direct efforts in Tasmania. Engender Equality implores the government to recognise and value these services and increase opportunities for consultation and leadership.

Specialist Services

As the Tasmanian community emerges from the restrictions of the early response to the pandemic, for those who have experienced control and violence in relationships, we expect to see high levels of trauma and complex ongoing impacts.

We already know from our work that the impacts of family violence are multifaceted and long-lasting. We have also found that the majority of our clients also experienced a background of disadvantage or deprivation. This leads to very high levels of complex trauma among women and children who experience family violence, which can lead to a long-term need for multiple interventions and supports. Early intervention following a crisis such as the Coronavirus pandemic is crucial in helping victim-survivors build resilience and return to full participation.

As social interfaces are reduced, it is important that all services coming into contact with the community are equipped to identify and assess family violence and trauma and know how to share information and refer victim-survivors to specialist support services. Engender Equality’s expertise and evidence-based family violence and complex trauma framework places us in an optimal position to deliver training and provide support to people and organisations who are seeking to improve their family violence service response. Engender Equality has already developed training and professional development resources but at present lacks capacity to deliver them widely.

The impacts of financial abuse and financial hardships are likely to increase in the coming months. With the loss of jobs, pending roll-back of Centrelink payments and other financial stresses bearing down on couples and families, Engender Equality anticipates an increased need to work with people on the presentation of financial abuse and how people can address risk and safety concerns with increasingly limited resources. The reduction in household incomes across Australia will pose significant and nuanced challenges to victim-survivors, including reducing opportunities to leave violent relationships and being subjected to additional financially abusive tactics. With additional funding Engender Equality can broaden support to a greater number of people exposed to financial abuse.

There must be enough provision in place for people to access services when they seek support.

Family violence is infinitely complex and it will not be addressed with an “off the shelf approach” it needs to be tailored, informed and it needs to be accompanied by systemic change that will only occur if the expertise of specialist services is valued and resources.

Moving Forward

Engender Equality appreciates that there are limited resources and that progress in eliminating family violence must be strategic and incremental.

With this in mind we advocate strongly for opportunities to represent women as a forethought in the recovery response. We advocate that addressing family violence and the impact for victim-survivors (including children) is critical to the all other expectations for recovery and growth.

Engender Equality advocates for services who understand the nuanced presentations of and responses to family violence. In our particular circumstance people have to wait weeks to use our service. Despite this we know that women will stay in abusive relationships, use less effective coping mechanisms and be less inclined to access services again, if they are unable to get into a service when they need to.

Engender Equality advocates for improved understanding of family violence amongst child and family services so the service response can be appropriate to people's situations. This improved understanding is necessary in order to increase perpetrator accountability and improve victim's safety. Too many times situations that constitute family violence and child abuse are seen as relationship issues or poor parenting on the behalf of the mother. Engender Equality has a training package and a well-developed family violence framework that can easily be shared with other services to increase 'family violence literacy' across sectors and stem the trajectory of cases that end up in crises, complex trauma, disability and death.

Summary

Engender Equality provides counselling, education and support for individuals and groups affected by family violence, along with advocacy for systemic change to gender inequity and to reduce violence against women.

As an organisation we work for the elimination of violence and abuse in Tasmania by providing a suite of integrated and specialist responses to family violence. Engender Equality's practice framework is informed by an evidence-based understanding of family violence, intersectional analysis, and supporting frameworks including human rights, social justice, anti-oppressive practice, and trauma-informed practice.

For the past 30 years Engender Equality has proven its capacity to envisage, design and lead service provision through a co-ordinate system of approaches that deliver relevant, valued and trusted services to children, young people and families affected by violence and abuse.

In respect to Covid 19, our concern is if we don't put more options of support in place now, 6 - 12 months after this crisis is over, we will be left with families who are worse off and with more trauma in the community. Increased capacity to provide service to those who are at risk now is something we desperately need in order to avoid harm to women, children and young people as a result of this crisis.

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