

Don't Forget **Gender** !

Why gender-specific services must be maintained

Vig Geddes

Representatives from community organisations on the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence recently made a presentation to the Committee about the importance of gender-specific services as the foundation for an integrated response to family violence for Victoria. This presentation occurred in response to concerns about how the Department of Human Services proposed to rollout \$28 million of the total \$35.1 million allocated to system reform in the May budget. Domestic and family violence services have since been involved in discussions with the DHS about this funding process, and in particular about the need to preserve gender-specific specialist services. The following article by Vig Geddes from DVIRC, builds on that presentation.

Since the first women's refuges were established in Australia in the 1970s, services have operated with the understanding that gender-specific services are the most appropriate response to women and children experiencing domestic violence. While this is a widely-shared view among domestic violence services, the rationale for women's services is not often articulated.

WESNET has argued that women escaping domestic violence feel safer in women-only refuges and that these services 'enable women to come together to overcome isolation, to explore feelings and options and to support and help each other to make positive changes in their lives' (Wensing 2001: 17). In her book on women's services, Wendy Weeks argued that women who have experienced domestic violence 'prefer to work with women's service providers in the belief that another woman is more able and likely to relate to her situation and her concerns' (Weeks 1994).

The first women's refuges were actively involved in community education and political action around the issue of violence. The conditions of government funding for these services has led to a greater focus on service provision and less on political activity. However most women's domestic violence services would agree with Wensing's assertion that, 'Our

analysis of gender and violence, where the structural relation of male dominance and female subordination in society is the major contributing factor, also means that we see our work in community as being as important as our work within services' (Wensing 2001:18).

The Statistics on Violence as a Gendered Issue

The case for gender-specific services for women begins with the evidence that women and children are most often the victims of family violence, and that men are most often the perpetrators. While this is obvious to those who work in the field, the extensive lobbying and false claims by men's rights groups means that this fact needs to be reiterated in any discussion about service delivery.

Recent Australian research includes:

- A report from Access Economics which estimated, based on extrapolations from US and Australian data, that 1.6 per cent of Australian men had experienced domestic violence since the age of 15, compared with 21.5 per cent of women (Access Economics 2004)¹

¹ The report also noted that violence against women results in more injury than violence against men, and that 'nearly 75% of women's violence against men is self-defence' (Access Economics 2004 Part 1: 16).

Don't Forget **Gender!**

- A VicHealth report that found 'Violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15-44, being responsible for more of the disease burden than many well-known risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking and obesity' (VicHealth 2004).
- The finding that family violence is the major factor associated with the killing of women in Australia (Mouzos 1999).

Victorian Government policy documents acknowledge the gendered nature of domestic and family violence. The *Victorian Women's Safety Strategy* (2002) notes that women are at greater risk of family violence than men and that violence against women is linked to inequality.

In its report to government on reforming the family violence system in Victoria, the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence (SSCRFV) acknowledges the need for an understanding of gender:

...the Committee is of the view that any approach to stopping violence must acknowledge, take account of and seek to address, the influence of gender. This common understanding should underpin the new family violence service system as well as the responses of both mainstream and specialist family violence services (Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence 2005: 19).

Implications for Program Funding, Service Management and Service Provision

During the development of the Committee's report, representatives of non-government organisations on the SSCRFV identified the following as essential elements of service delivery based on a gendered analysis of violence.



Services must have an understanding of gender and violence. Staff at all levels of the organization must share this understanding, and it should be reflected in service delivery. Violence is a means by which men choose to enforce control over women and children, and workers and management should be aware of the ways in which the social context supports men to do this.

Services to women who have experienced violence should be provided by women.

Services need an understanding of the difficulties women face. Services should be aware that family violence is often the underlying problem when women present with drug and alcohol or psychological issues. Women often return to perpetrators because of housing, children, self-blame and other factors. Many are fearful of being caught up in the Child Protection system. Services should have an understanding of the difficulties women have in disclosing violence, and the need to ask directly about the violence.

Safety must be core business. Services need to see women and children's safety as the paramount consideration. Safety is not just about housing. Safety planning must be done in partnership with the woman and children.

Services must have a commitment to advocacy. Workers should understand that part of their role is to act as advocates on behalf of women and children. Many professionals in mainstream services do not recognise the effect of family violence on women's health and well-being. Workers should understand the importance of advocacy to assist women in dealing with these service systems, and should also work to empower women to navigate the systems themselves.

Services need a commitment to making violence visible. To prevent violence, services must have a commitment to raising awareness about family violence in a community where there is a tacit acceptance of men's violence towards women, and where that violence is still largely seen as a private matter.

What happens when gender is ignored?

The broader community does not understand the complexity of family violence. This lack of understanding is reflected in the practices of a range of professionals and in State and Commonwealth legislation. Responses continue to minimise violence, blame women, and excuse men.

Services that do not understand the gendered nature of family violence often fail to provide an appropriate response to women and children. For example, in one mainstream housing service, all family violence workers were told by management that they were housing workers, and to only work with women experiencing violence who had housing support needs. In another mainstream service, women's family violence services had to fight to maintain a focus on women's safety as their core business. Other concerning practices that may put women and children at risk include:

- conducting programs for perpetrators and victims of violence in the same building;
- basing service delivery on a 'helper' model rather than an empowerment model;
- responding to violence as a 'problem' rather than as a crime, and seeing the effects of violence as pathology rather than as a normal response to a traumatic criminal event;
- seeing violence as a 'relationship problem' and offering couple's counselling to perpetrators and victims;
- refusing to work with a woman because she returns to the perpetrator;
- supporting the removal of children by Child Protection, rather than assisting her to be safe and to protect her children from witnessing violence.

The Influence of Government Policy

Service delivery does not take place in a neutral policy context. Other government policy directions may undermine the plans to reform the domestic and family violence service system.



The State Government's move towards tendering out domestic violence services is part of a broader trend. A recent article by John McDonald argues that 'the ascendancy of a neo-liberal, managerialist ideology has depoliticised and clinicalised domestic violence' and that 'this has effectively silenced structural analyses of domestic violence and displaced feminist service models' (McDonald 2005).

The introduction of case management and tighter specification of targets and service outcomes in SAAP-funded services contributes to domestic violence being seen as an individual problem. The SAAP program funding is about achieving client outcomes not about structural change. Funding guidelines are pushing services into depoliticised service delivery.

McDonald also draws attention to the way in which women's domestic violence services are being forced to focus on quantity rather than quality of service delivery. He describes research by Egan and Hoatson (1999) that found that 'the government's imperative for high outputs (as measured by the number of women who receive a service) compromises an agency's capacity to meet the complex needs of women escaping violence. These needs often require intensive work over extended periods. However, the quality of the work and the outcomes for the women are subordinated to managerialist formulae concerned with unit costs and throughput' (McDonald 2005: 281).

Don't Forget **Gender** !

One of the casualties of the welfare market is the safety of women and children.

McDonald cites research by Wills and Craft (2003) who undertook a content analysis of SAAP policy documents. This revealed that 'the concept of safety has become increasingly marginalized ... The idea of safety is largely missing from emergency accommodation.' (McDonald 2005: 282)

The Challenge to Maintain a Focus on Gender

Women's domestic violence services have always seen safety as their core business and have worked constantly to make violence visible. This is what sets them apart from the rest of the service system. Structural change and the elimination of violence against women and children is the ultimate goal.

The majority of our community and service providers still do not understand the complexities of family violence. Most professionals have not received adequate training in the area of family violence, which means that women continue to receive inappropriate services.

There is, however, much excellent work currently happening in Victoria. The Review of the *Crimes (Family Violence) Act*, the new family violence courts, and the recent Victoria Police Code of Practice all promise to produce better outcomes for women and children. More workers are attending training, and the level of awareness around domestic and family violence is increasing.

The challenge we face is to ensure that the principles underpinning these new initiatives reflect an understanding of domestic and family violence as gendered issue requiring structural change. In DVIRC's training programs we encourage participants to reflect how they frame their responses to women, as the choice of words will convey a message to women about how we think about violence. Government funding guidelines also contain messages about violence. It is important that the

Victorian Government works with specialist domestic violence services to articulate what it means to provide services based on a gendered analysis and that this is built into the guidelines for funding programs.

Let's face it, violence against women and children is not just a welfare or health issue, it is first and foremost a political issue.

References

- Access Economics (2004), *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy* Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra
- McDonald, J. (2005), 'Neo-liberalism and the pathologising of public issues: The displacement of feminist service models in domestic violence support services', *Australian Social Work*, September, vol. 58, no. 3 pp 276-284
- Mouzos, J. (1999), *Femicide: The killing of women in Australia 1989-1998*, Research and Public Policy Series No. 18., Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra
- Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence (2005), *Reforming the Family Violence System in Victoria: Report of the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence*, Office of Women's Policy, Melbourne
- VicHealth (2004), *The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence: Summary of Findings*, Carlton: Victoria
- Victorian Government (2002), *Women's Safety Strategy: A Policy Framework*, Office of Women's Policy
- Weeks, W. (1994), *Women Working Together: Lessons From Feminist Women's Services*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne
- Wensing, V. (2001), 'Why we still need women's services in the twenty first century', *Parity* Vol. 14, No. 2

Reports Now Available Online...

Changing Lives: A new approach to family violence in Victoria

This publication, launched by Minister Candy Broad on 8 November, outlines the government's rationale for a new approach, and some of the steps government will take.

Reforming the Family Violence System in Victoria: Report of the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence

The report of the Committee, which is made up of community and government representatives, was provided to government in early 2005.

Both reports available on the Victorian Office of Women's Policy website www.women.vic.gov.au or call the Office of Women's Policy on 03 9208 3129.