

Submission to the Consultation on the Second Action Plan

Executive Summary

This submission responds to the Australian Government's consultation on the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022 - 2032.

Drawing on WAGEC's frontline experience supporting women and children escaping domestic and family violence, it outlines practical reforms to strengthen Australian's response across prevention, crisis recovery and long-term safety.

Violence does not occur in isolation and neither should the response. Women seeking safety are often also navigating homelessness, financial insecurity, trauma and complex service systems, yet these challenges continue to be addressed separately. The Second Action Plan should strengthen coordination across systems and recognise housing as fundamental to safety and recovery, and invest across the full continuum from prevention and early intervention through to crisis response, recovery and longterm support.

This submission calls for practical reforms that strengthen implementation of the next critical phase of the Second National Plan by recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right, improving responses for women facing intersecting barriers to safety, strengthening workforce capability across specialist and mainstream services, and measuring success through long-term outcomes for women and children. While informed by WAGEC's frontline experience in New South Wales, the challenges identified reflect broader systemic issues that require a coordinated national response.

About the Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre

Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC) is a Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) and feminist not-for-profit organisation that has been supporting women and children in crisis since 1977. Every night, WAGEC supports over 200 women and children escaping domestic violence, homelessness and systemic disadvantage. We do this by providing material aid, case management, wrap-around support, accommodation and crisis response.

WAGEC operates four crisis refuge accommodation sites and on average 45 transitional properties. We also deliver:

- **Crisis response and accommodation:** We provide immediate solutions to women and families in crisis, including crisis response, shelter, material aid and case management.

- **Tailored programs:** Our targeted programs work to break the cycle of violence and social disadvantage by providing tailored support that restores safety and addresses the specific needs of women and children escaping violence.
- **Primary Prevention initiatives:** We seek to stop violence before it starts by addressing the underlying drivers of gender-based violence through advocacy, workplace training and community education.

WAGEC is based in Sydney and operates refuge sites on the unceded lands of the Gadigal, Wangal and Dharawal people of the Eora Nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country and pay our respects to Elders past and present. Our Prevention activities extend across many Aboriginal nations and language groups. We seek always to work respectfully in partnership with communities and in accordance with local protocols.

WAGEC acknowledges our responsibility as a non-Indigenous organisation to ensure the culturally responsive delivery of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and to use our voice and spaces of privilege to amplify the advocacy of generations of First Nations women who have come before us and continue to work to make communities safer.

Introduction

WAGEC welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*.

The First Action Plan established important foundations for a stronger national response to domestic, family and sexual violence. Greater recognition of coercive control, increased investment in primary prevention, stronger national leadership and an enhanced focus on children and young people have all contributed to meaningful progress.

Despite these advances, women and children continue to face significant barriers to safety, recovery and long-term wellbeing. Demand for specialist domestic and family violence services continues to outstrip capacity, access to safe and affordable housing remains out of reach for many victim-survivors, and service systems are often fragmented and difficult to navigate. Women experiencing intersecting forms of disadvantage - including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disability, women on temporary visas and women leaving prison - continue to experience some of the greatest barriers to accessing support.

The Second Action Plan presents an opportunity to move beyond establishing foundations and towards embedding an integrated, coordinated response that recognises the interconnected nature of violence, housing, health, justice and social support. It should

reinforce the importance of specialist services, strengthen investment across the full continuum from primary prevention to long-term recovery, and ensure that children and young people are recognised and supported as victim-survivors in their own right and supported to heal.

This submission draws on WAGEC's frontline experience supporting more than 200 women and children every night, consultation with staff across our services, and the broader evidence base on preventing and responding to domestic, family and sexual violence. It focuses on practical reforms that will strengthen implementation of the National Plan and improve safety, recovery and long-term outcomes for women and children.

While informed by WAGEC's practice experience in New South Wales, the issues identified reflect broader systemic challenges that require coordinated national action.

Priority Area 1: Victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence

The Second Action Plan must recognise that violence cannot be addressed separately from the systems that shape women's lives. Housing, health, justice, financial security and child wellbeing all influence whether women can leave violence safely and recover. For those experiencing sexual violence outside the context of an intimate partnership there are substantial gaps in service and policy response and primary prevention.

Violence against women remains pervasive across Australia. Almost one in four women have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner since the age of 15, while 23 per cent have experienced emotional abuse and 16 per cent have experienced economic abuse by a current or former partner.¹ These figures illustrate the scale of violence but they cannot fully capture its cumulative impacts or the barriers women face when trying to reach safety or seek support that meets their needs.

Every day, WAGEC works alongside women and children through crisis accommodation, transitional housing, specialist domestic and family violence support, case management and longer-term recovery programs. Our frontline experience demonstrates that violence rarely occurs in isolation. Women experiencing domestic and family violence are also navigating homelessness, financial insecurity, trauma, poor mental health, child protection involvement, migration-related barriers and contact with the justice system.

These interconnected experiences require an integrated response. The Second Action Plan must therefore support funding and service delivery models that enable holistic,

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal Safety, Australia, 2021–22* (23 August 2023).

coordinated responses that address the circumstances shaping a woman's safety as a whole, rather than requiring her to move between separate services or programmatic responses for each part of her life.

Housing is central to safety and recovery

Safe and affordable housing is one of the most significant determinants of whether a woman can leave a violent relationship and remain safe. Without access to secure housing, leaving violence often means entering homelessness, exposing women and children to further harm and instability.

In 2024-25, Specialist Homelessness Services assisted around 117,000 people who had experienced family and domestic violence. They represented 40 per cent of all clients seeking homelessness support and were the largest client group nationally. Around 46,800 people were already experiencing homelessness when they first approached a service.² Across the broader specialist homelessness system, the need for short-term or emergency accommodation could not be met for approximately 31 per cent of clients who required it.³

These figures reflect what WAGEC sees in practice. Women may remain with a perpetrator because there is nowhere safe to go, return to violence after leaving, sleep in cars, move between temporary arrangements or remain in crisis accommodation because there is no safe and affordable long-term option available.

Housing policy cannot remain separate from domestic and family violence policy when access to housing fundamentally determines whether women and children can leave, remain safe and begin to recover.

Housing should be recognised as a core domestic, family and sexual violence intervention - not solely as a housing policy issue. Safe housing is the foundation that enables women and children to achieve safety, stability and recovery.

The Second Action Plan should establish housing security as an explicit national outcome, supported by investment across the full housing continuum. This should include immediate crisis accommodation, transitional options, rapid access to social and affordable housing, assistance to remain safely at home where appropriate, and flexible long-term support. Success should be measured by whether women and children remain safely and securely housed after support ends, rather than by the number of nights of accommodation or service contacts delivered.

Support must continue beyond the immediate crisis

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2024-25: Clients Who Have Experienced Family and Domestic Violence* (4 December 2025).

³ Ibid.

Crisis responses save lives, but safety is not secured simply because a woman has left the immediate situation of violence. For many victim-survivors, recovery may involve rebuilding financial independence, addressing trauma, supporting children, establishing new social connections and navigating complex legal, health, housing and income-support systems. For many women, these processes often take years rather than weeks.

Current funding arrangements do not consistently reflect the long-term nature of recovery. Short-term contracts, restrictive eligibility criteria and output-based measures can place pressure on services to resolve complex needs within unrealistic timeframes.

The Second Action Plan should recognise recovery and healing as a distinct, long-term stage of the response. Long-term investment should support therapeutic support, economic recovery, housing assistance, legal advocacy, and community connection. Funding models should also provide flexibility for victim-survivors to re-engage with services when needs or risks change, or additional support is required.

The need for sustained support is also evident in homelessness data. More than two-fifths of people receiving specialist homelessness support in 2024–25 had also received assistance in the previous year.⁴ This suggests that many people are not experiencing brief episodes that can be resolved through a single intervention, but are returning to services because stable housing and other underlying barriers remain unresolved.

The Second Action Plan should support responses that measure success through sustained safety and wellbeing outcomes, rather than the completion of individual service interventions.

Earlier support depends on trusted and capable first points of contact

Women do not always first disclose violence to a specialist domestic and family violence service. They may disclose to a GP, hospital worker, teacher, employer, housing worker, Centrelink employee, financial counsellor, bank or insurance company, faith leader or community organisation. These encounters are critical opportunities to identify risk and connect women with specialist support before violence escalates.

However, capability across mainstream systems remains inconsistent. Women may not be asked about violence, may be offered an inappropriate response, or may be referred to a specialist service without any practical support to make contact. Specialist services may experience challenges where a woman is referred for support and she is “out of area” - there is a public perception and expectation that all services will be in a position to offer the same responses but funding is fragmented and postcode dependent. In some cases,

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2024–25: Clients, Services and Outcomes* (4 December 2025).

disclosure can create additional risks, particularly where a woman fears losing her children, jeopardising her visa status, becoming homeless or not being believed.

Low reporting rates demonstrate the ongoing barriers many victim-survivors face in seeking help. Among women who experienced sexual assault by a male in the ten years before the 2021–22 Personal Safety Survey, only 7.7 per cent contacted police about the most recent incident.⁵ Yet recorded sexual assaults continue to rise, with more than 40,000 victims recorded by police nationally in 2024, the highest rate in the available time series.⁶

The Second Action Plan should invest in strengthening domestic, family and sexual violence capabilities across health, housing, education, disability, settlement, employment and social services. Workforce development must extend beyond recognising visible signs of physical violence, and include an understanding of coercive control, trauma, financial abuse, migration-related abuse and the complex reasons women may remain in or return to an unsafe relationship. Earlier identification will only improve outcomes if women can access appropriate support once violence is identified. This includes clear referral pathways, funded and strong partnerships between mainstream and specialist services, and investment in specialist services to meet demand.

The sexual violence sector and workforce have been highlighting their concerns about a lack of dedicated resourcing and strategy for sexual violence that occurs both within intimate partnership and family settings as well as outside for many years. There is an urgent need for a specific focus on sexual violence prevention, early intervention, response and recovery that complements the current National Plan priorities but also accounts for the rising rates of sexual violence and harassment across multiple settings and the life course of so many women.

Coercive control must be understood as a pattern

The Second Action Plan should build a shared national understanding of coercive control across all frontline systems. Domestic and family violence is not limited to physical violence. A perpetrator may maintain power and control through intimidation, isolation, financial restriction, monitoring, threats, humiliation and manipulation of children or institutions.

The prevalence of emotional and economic abuse shows why responses cannot rely on visible injury or isolated incidents. Approximately 2.3 million Australian women have experienced emotional abuse and 1.6 million have experienced economic abuse by a current or previous cohabiting partner since the age of 15.⁷ These behaviours often form

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Sexual Violence, 2021–22* (23 August 2023), based on the 2021–22 Personal Safety Survey.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Recorded Crime – Victims, 2024* (3 September 2025)

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Partner Violence, 2021–22 Financial Year* (22 November 2023).

part of an escalating pattern designed to restrict a woman's autonomy, independence and ability to seek help.

Police, courts, child protection, health and housing services need the skills and tools to recognise patterns of behaviour over time. This is particularly important in preventing the misidentification of victim-survivors as perpetrators, particularly where a woman's actions are assessed without understanding the broader context of abuse. A woman's resistance, distress or use of force in self-defence must be considered within the history of violence and control she has experienced.

Risk assessment must also account for the heightened risk that can occur post-separation, including perpetrators using legal, child protection and service systems as mechanisms of ongoing control.

Technology-facilitated abuse is now part of everyday domestic and family violence practice

Technology-facilitated abuse should be treated as a central feature of contemporary domestic and family violence responses. Perpetrators may use phones, social media, shared accounts, location services, connected household devices and financial platforms to monitor, threaten or control women. These tactics can continue after separation and can be difficult for both victim-survivors and workers to detect.

Recent Australian research found that 51 per cent of adults had experienced some form of technology-facilitated abuse.⁸ The eSafety Commissioner has also noted that growing use of digital technologies has increased exposure to harm while many specialist workers are struggling to respond to the complexity and volume of need.⁹

Through WAGEC's Building Tech Safety work, our staff have seen the importance of practical, specialist responses that support women to understand their digital environment, identify risks and make informed choices about their safety.

The Second Action Plan should invest in technology safety capability across specialist and mainstream services, expand access to specialist technical assistance and embed technology-related risk into safety planning and risk assessment. It should also require stronger accountability and support from technology companies, government and private sector organisations including essential services, financial and insurance sectors through embedded safety-by-design approaches.

⁸ eSafety Commissioner, *Gendered Violence: How Common Is It and What Are the Impacts?* (12 June 2026)

⁹ eSafety Commissioner, *Online Safety Issues Encountered by Health, Education and Law Enforcement Workers* (Research Report).

Digital safety interventions must be led by each woman's circumstances and choices. Advising a woman to delete an account, replace a device or stop using a platform may isolate her from support, remove evidence or alert the perpetrator. Effective responses need to balance safety, privacy, evidence preservation and the practical role technology plays in everyday life for women and their families.

Equity must shape the design of the response

The Second Action Plan will not meet its objectives unless it addresses the structural barriers faced by women who are least well served by existing systems. These barriers are not additional considerations separate from violence, they shape whether a woman is believed, whether she can enter a refuge, whether she has an income and whether seeking help places her at greater risk.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience violence within the context of the ongoing impacts of colonisation, racism, dispossession and the removal of their children. Responses must be community-led and aligned with the standalone First Nations National Plan.

Investment should strengthen Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to succeed both in governance and articulating the needs of their communities. This needs to occur in conjunction with mainstream services being accountable for providing culturally responsive trauma-informed support. The responsibility for navigating unsafe or inaccessible systems should not continue to fall on Aboriginal women seeking safety.

Women with disability

Women with disability face increased exposure to violence and distinctive forms of abuse, including the withholding of medication or assistance, misuse of decision-making arrangements and control by partners, family members, carers or workers.

Despite this, many crisis properties, transport options and communication processes remain inaccessible. Disability access should be embedded as a condition of service design and funding, rather than treated as an optional adjustment made after a woman seeks help.

Women on temporary visas

Women on temporary visas often experience heightened dependence on perpetrators due to financial insecurity, visa conditions and limited access to government supports. WAGEC's experience is that specialist services are frequently left to fund accommodation, healthcare, medication, food and other essentials because no government safety net is available.

WAGEC relies on the generosity of our communities through appeals, fundraising and donations to be able to support families with unstable visa status. Supporting women and

families in this situation has always been a priority at WAGEC but despite some progress in immigration law, there is still growing and significant unmet demand. Services are limited in the number of families they can house where there is no income or a mother has unstable visa status.

The Second Action Plan should ensure access to safety and support is based on need rather than visa status, including access to crisis income, healthcare, legal support and housing support.

Women leaving prison

Women leaving prison face heightened risk of homelessness, violence and family separation. Without safe accommodation at release, women may return to violent partners, unsafe environments or custody.

WAGEC's From Now program, which supports women exiting prison through access to safe and stable accommodation and wraparound support, demonstrates the value of combining housing with intensive, gender-responsive case management, parenting support and justice advocacy. Responses for women leaving custody must be embedded within domestic and family violence planning rather than treated solely as a corrections issue.

Priority 2: Prevention and early intervention

Australia has built a strong evidence base for primary prevention but resourcing and implementation remains uneven, often short-term and too reliant on individuals or organisations that are not funded. The Second Action Plan provides an opportunity to move prevention from a series of individual programs towards a sustained national approach that embeds gender equality, respectful relationships and violence prevention across the settings where people live, learn and work.

WAGEC's prevention work includes All In, a NSW Government-funded statewide Early Childhood Education prevention program based on Our Watch's evidence base and delivered using principles of First Nations ways of Knowing, Being and Doing, as well as a range of unfunded community education activities, public campaigns and training for workplaces and private sector partners on the relationship between gender inequality and violence.

Our experience in delivering prevention activities work has shown that many educators, workplaces, businesses and communities want to play a greater role in prevention, but many lack the specialist support and sustained investment needed to move beyond one-off awareness activities.

For example, WAGEC has worked with call-centre staff in the insurance sector to build their capability to recognise and respond appropriately when customers disclose domestic and family violence. This type of targeted workforce development demonstrates the value of equipping people who may be among the first to identify that someone is experiencing harm. With the right support, everyday settings can become important points for earlier recognition, safe responses and connection to specialist services.

Our experience in delivering All In as a pilot to 16 early childhood centres between 2022 and 2024 and the next phase of expansion have demonstrated that Aboriginal and multicultural communities are undertaking significant primary prevention activities, usually without funding or recognition of the nature of the work.

Prevention must continue to address the gendered drivers of violence

The strongest available evidence shows that gender inequality creates the social conditions in which violence against women is more likely to occur. *Change the Story*, Australia's National Prevention Framework, identifies four key gendered drivers: the condoning of violence against women; men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence; rigid gender stereotyping; and forms of masculinity that emphasise dominance, aggression and disrespect towards women.¹⁰

These drivers do not exist only within individual attitudes or relationships. They are reinforced through relationships, peer groups, organisations, institutions, media and wider social structures. Effective prevention must therefore focus on changing individual knowledge and beliefs, as well as transforming the environments in which gender inequality is produced and maintained.

This distinction is important. Prevention cannot be reduced to simply telling people that violence is wrong. Most Australians already recognise violence against women as a serious national problem. In the 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey, 91 per cent agreed that violence against women is a problem in Australia. However, only 47 per cent recognised it as a problem in their own suburb or town.¹¹ This gap suggests that violence can still be understood as something that happens elsewhere rather than within people's own families, workplaces, social groups and communities.

While there has been progress in community understanding, change remains slow and inconsistent. The 2021 National Community Attitudes (NCS) towards Violence against Women Survey found improvements in Australians' understanding of violence against women and rejection of gender inequality since 2017, but fewer than half of respondents

¹⁰ Our Watch, *Change the Story: A Shared Framework for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women in Australia*, 2nd ed. (2021).

¹¹ Coumarelos C, Carlton J, Thomas A, et al., *Attitudes Matter: The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), Findings for Australia* (ANROWS Research Report No. 02/2023, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2023).

demonstrated an advanced understanding of violence against women or an advanced rejection of gender inequality and violence-supportive attitudes.¹²

Some harmful misconceptions remain widespread and we encounter them every time we deliver a community education activity. Forty-one per cent of Australians incorrectly believed that women and men are equally likely to commit domestic violence, while 28 per cent believed that women and men are equally likely to experience fear as a result.¹³ These views obscure the gendered patterns, severity and consequences of domestic violence and can shape how friends, services and institutions respond when women seek help.

Prevention needs to be embedded, not delivered as a one-off activity

Brief awareness campaigns and isolated training sessions can begin conversations, but they are unlikely to produce lasting change on their own. Evidence-based prevention requires multiple, reinforcing actions across the different settings where social norms are formed and reproduced.

Change the Story emphasises that prevention initiatives need to operate concurrently across individual, organisational, community and societal levels, supported by policy, leadership, workforce development and accountability.

This means a school cannot rely on a single respectful relationships lesson while gender stereotypes remain embedded in curriculum materials, student culture and staff practices. A workplace cannot address harassment through annual online training while leadership structures, promotion practices and responses to complaints continue to reinforce unequal power. Sporting organisations cannot run public campaigns while overlooking sexism or harassment within their own teams and governance structures.

The most effective prevention approaches combine education with organisational and cultural change. In practice, this means working with leadership to set a standard and accountability, regularly reviewing policies and procedures, supporting staff who make or receive disclosures, examining the distribution of power and decision-making, and creating safe ways to challenge harmful behaviour. Prevention should become part of the core business of public and private institutions, rather than an occasional project delegated to an individual staff member.

Funding arrangements must reflect the time required for this work. Attitudes and institutional practices develop over many years and cannot reasonably be shifted through

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

short grants or campaigns that disappear just as relationships and capability are beginning to form.

WAGEC's consultation with staff identified short-term and inconsistent prevention funding as an ongoing barrier. It limits workforce stability, prevents long-term partnerships and can encourage organisations to measure activity – such as attendance numbers – rather than meaningful changes in practice, culture and outcomes.

Schools and education settings have a central role

Schools provide a critical opportunity to support children and young people to understand equality, respect, consent, boundaries and healthy relationships before harmful patterns become entrenched.

Respectful relationships education is most effective when it is age-appropriate, evidence-based and reinforced across the whole school environment. This includes comprehensive consent education, teaching about healthy relationships and gender equality, professional learning for teachers, and school policies that model and promote respectful behaviour.

There is evidence of positive change in community attitudes towards sexual violence and consent. The 2021 the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey shows the overwhelming majority of respondents rejected scenarios in which a man forced sex after a woman withdrew consent. However, the survey also found no significant improvement between 2017 and 2021 in the specific consent scenarios presented to participants, indicating that progress cannot be assumed to continue without sustained education.¹⁴

Young people are also encountering new forms of pressure and gendered harm through social media, pornography, messaging platforms and online communities. Consent education must reflect these realities by addressing digital boundaries, image-based abuse, online harassment, location tracking, pressure to share passwords or intimate images, and the ways controlling behaviour can be framed as care or commitment.

Teachers require suitable training, classroom resources and access to specialist support. Schools must also be equipped to respond safely when education prompts a student to disclose violence at home or in their own relationship. Prevention education should not identify harm without creating a clear pathway to support.

¹⁴ Christine Coumarelos, Nicole Weeks, Shireen Bernstein, Natalie Roberts, Nikki Honey, Kate Minter and Erin Carlisle, *Attitudes Matter: The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), Findings for Australia* (Research Report No. 02/2023, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), 2023).

Children and young people should also be involved in shaping prevention approaches. Programs designed without their input can quickly become disconnected from the language, technologies and pressures they experience in their daily lives. WAGEC's Youth Council Initiative (see priority area 3 for more detail) reflects the value of creating safe avenues for young people to influence services and responses that affect them.

Workplaces can reach people who may never engage with a specialist service

Workplaces have significant potential to support both primary prevention and earlier interventions. They shape norms, provide social networks and may be one of the few environments a person experiencing coercive control can access independently. Colleagues and managers may notice changes in attendance, performance, communication or behaviour before a formal disclosure occurs.

However, workplace action must extend beyond compliance training. Organisations need clear leadership expectations, gender-equitable employment practices, appropriate responses to sexual harassment, safe disclosure processes and practical support for employees experiencing violence.

Managers and frontline staff also need guidance on the limits of their role. They should be able to recognise concerns, respond without judgement and connect a person to specialist support, without attempting to undertake risk assessment or counselling beyond their expertise.

WAGEC's work with employers has shown that sector-specific training is particularly valuable. Staff in call centres, financial services, housing, healthcare and customer-facing roles may encounter signs of abuse through debt, account control, housing instability or repeated contact from a perpetrator. Training is strongest when it reflects the circumstances that workers actually encounter and is backed by a formal referral relationship with a specialist domestic and family violence service and clinical supervision and support for non-specialist workers where they are receiving escalating numbers of disclosures.

Early intervention remains underdeveloped

Primary prevention and early intervention are related but distinct. Primary prevention seeks to change the conditions that allow violence to occur. Early intervention identifies people, relationships or situations where risk is emerging and seeks to prevent violence from escalating, recurring or becoming entrenched.

WAGEC's frontline experience demonstrates that early intervention remains one of the weakest parts of the current response system. Women may interact with health services, schools, financial institutions, housing providers or community organisations many times before they reach a specialist service, yet warning signs are missed or treated in isolation.

Referral pathways are often informal and depend on the knowledge or initiative of an individual worker. This creates inconsistency and means that access to support can depend on where a woman lives, which service she approaches or which worker she happens to encounter.

Earlier intervention requires stronger capability among mainstream services, but training alone will not address this gap. Workers need clear referral pathways, opportunities to seek secondary consultation and confidence that specialist services have the capacity to respond.

The Second Action Plan should support formal, funded partnerships between specialist domestic and family violence services and the mainstream systems most likely to encounter early warning signs. These partnerships should enable shared practice, consultation, referral pathways and coordinated responses.

There is also a need for earlier and safe responses when people begin using controlling or abusive behaviours. These responses must be developed with specialist perpetrator-intervention services and must never shift responsibility for safety onto victim-survivors. There are significant gaps across the system for young people who have been exposed to violence and are either accessing services independently of a parent/carer or as part of a family accompanying an adult (see recommendations in relation to priority area 3 below).

Opportunities for earlier intervention may arise through health services, workplaces, family services, alcohol and other drug services, gambling services or community organisations. Workers in these settings need clear guidance on identifying concerning behaviour and making appropriate referrals that challenge minimisation or blame.

Online environments require a stronger prevention response

Online platforms are now major settings in which attitudes about gender, sexuality, relationships and masculinity are formed and reinforced. They can provide access to support and positive communities, but they also expose users to misogyny, sexual harassment, image-based abuse, coercive control and content that normalises domination or hostility towards women.

The 2021 NCAS found that 15 to 18 per cent of respondents viewed certain forms of technology-facilitated abuse as either not violence against women or only sometimes violence.¹⁵ This indicates a continuing gap in public understanding, despite digital technologies being embedded in everyday relationships.

¹⁵ Coumarelos C, Carlton J, Thomas A, et al., *Attitudes Matter: The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), Findings for Australia* (ANROWS Research Report No. 02/2023, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2023).

Recent eSafety research has examined attitudes that frame technology-based coercive control as caring or reasonable within intimate relationships.¹⁶ This is an important emerging prevention challenge because demands for passwords, constant location sharing, surveillance of online activity and immediate responses to messages can be normalised as signs of trust or commitment while functioning as mechanisms of control.

Responsibility cannot rest solely with individual users. Online platforms and technology companies influence what content is amplified, how abuse can be reported and whether safety risks are anticipated during product design. Prevention must therefore include stronger safety-by-design expectations, accessible reporting pathways, effective moderation and transparency about how platforms address gendered abuse.

Digital literacy and respectful relationships education should also support young people to critically assess online messages about gender, relationships, sexuality and masculinity, and to recognise manipulative or harmful behaviours.

Prevention requires a skilled specialist workforce

Primary prevention is a specialised field requiring expertise in gender equality, community development, organisational change, intersectionality, evaluation and safe engagement with resistance and backlash. It should not be assumed that any worker can deliver prevention effectively after completing a brief training course.

Specialist women's services bring frontline knowledge about how violence occurs, how systems respond and how prevention messages may affect people who are currently experiencing abuse, but may not always be best placed to deliver prevention activities and are rarely funded to do so. The involvement of specialist women's services with prevention expertise helps ensure prevention approaches remain connected to the lived realities of victim-survivors and do not unintentionally minimise the realities faced by women and children experiencing violence.

Specialist services also play an important role in responding when prevention activities lead to disclosures of violence. Prevention initiatives must be designed with clear pathways for support, recognising that conversations about gender inequality, relationships and violence may prompt participants to seek support.

Investment is needed to strengthen prevention workforce development, communities of practice, specialist supervision and career pathways. It should also recognise the prevention expertise held within homelessness and community organisations that work with women

¹⁶ eSafety Commissioner, *Track, Harass, Repeat: Investigating Attitudes that Normalise Tech-Based Coercive Control* (Research Report, 2024).

experiencing violence, but may sit outside narrowly defined domestic and family violence funding streams.

WAGEC's experience demonstrates that the separation between domestic violence and homelessness policy can create barriers to coordinated responses, despite the considerable overlap between the women and children supported by both sectors.

A strong national prevention approach requires connection between prevention, crisis response, homelessness, housing and recovery services. Organisations working directly with women and children experiencing violence hold valuable knowledge about where systems succeed, where they fail and what needs to change.

Priority Area 3: Children and young people in their own right

Children and young people are not passive witnesses to domestic and family violence. They experience violence in their own right, with impacts that can continue throughout childhood and into adulthood. The Second Action Plan provides an important opportunity to ensure children are recognised not simply as accompanying adults accessing services, but as victim-survivors with their own rights, needs and pathways to recovery.

The scale of harm experienced by children is significant. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that more than six in ten Australians (62.2 per cent) experienced at least one form of child maltreatment before the age of 18, including exposure to domestic violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect.¹⁷ Exposure to violence during childhood is associated with poorer physical and mental health, increased risk of homelessness, lower educational attainment and greater likelihood of experiencing or using violence later in life.

Preventing and responding to violence experienced by children is therefore critical not only to improving children's wellbeing today, but also to breaking intergenerational cycles of violence. The Second Action Plan should recognise children as a distinct priority across prevention, early intervention, crisis response and recovery.

Children must be recognised as victim-survivors in their own right

WAGEC's Helping Children Heal program, which provides specialist support for children and families who have experienced domestic and family violence, demonstrates that children's experiences of domestic and family violence are distinctly different to those of adults and require responses tailored to their developmental stage.

¹⁷ Haslam DM, Mathews B, Pacella R *et al.*, *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study* (2023) *Medical Journal of Australia* 218(S6): S13–S18.

Prior to receiving funding from the Department of Social Services, Helping Children Heal was funded partially or fully by community donations. WAGEC set it up in recognition that the specialist sector had been calling for specific and individualised therapeutic and case management approaches for every child who enters a refuge. WAGEC has learnt an immense amount from doing this work for almost a decade and we recognise the nuanced approach required to respond to the needs of children and young people who are victim-survivors. Children who have experienced violence often present with trauma responses, emotional dysregulation, anxiety, disrupted learning, behavioural changes, sleep difficulties and challenges forming safe relationships. These impacts often persist long after the immediate crisis has passed. Recovery requires more than physical safety. It requires consistent relationships, specialist therapeutic support, stable housing and opportunities to rebuild trust and connection.

Despite more than two decades of growing recognition of children's experiences, service systems continue to primarily organise responses around the adult victim-survivor. Children's needs are frequently considered through the lens of their parent rather than assessed and supported independently. This can result in missed opportunities to identify developmental concerns, respond to trauma or provide timely therapeutic support.

The Second Action Plan should ensure that children are recognised as victim-survivors in policy, funding, service design and evaluation, with outcomes measured against their own safety, wellbeing and recovery rather than solely the circumstances of the adult accessing support.

Earlier identification requires coordinated responses around children

Governments have an opportunity to strengthen how mainstream systems identify and respond to children experiencing domestic, family and/or sexual violence. Schools, early childhood services, health professionals, housing providers and child and family services are often among the first to notice changes in a child's behaviour or wellbeing and to be in a position to respond.

However, domestic, family and sexual violence capability remains inconsistent across these sectors, and referral pathways into specialist services including mental health support for young people are fragmented, have long waitlists and are unable to provide long-term recovery supports. Strengthening partnerships between specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services, education, health and child and family services would support earlier identification and more coordinated responses.

Children should not be required to repeatedly disclose or explain their experiences across multiple disconnected systems or fall through gaps because services operate in isolation. Services should work together to create child-centred responses that reduce the burden on

children and families while ensuring safety remains the priority. Schools must be adequately resourced to both meet demand where the impacts of violence have been disclosed but also to undertake evidence-based whole-of-school prevention approaches that engage staff, students and families.

Housing is fundamental to children's recovery

Housing security is fundamental to children's recovery. Frequent moves, prolonged stays in crisis accommodation and periods of homelessness disrupt schooling, friendships, access to healthcare and connections to community.

These disruptions compound the effects of trauma and make recovery more difficult. Stable housing should therefore be recognised as a child wellbeing intervention as much as a housing outcome. Supporting children to recover from violence requires access to safe, secure and affordable housing that enables continuity in education, therapeutic support and community relationships.

The Second Action Plan should recognise housing stability as a key measure of children's recovery and ensure responses to domestic and family violence include pathways to long-term housing security.

Responses must reflect the changing ways children experience harm

The Second Action Plan must respond to the changing ways children and young people experience harm. Technology now plays a central role in children's relationships, education and social connection, but it has also created new opportunities for abuse.

Young people may experience image-based abuse, online harassment, technology-facilitated coercive control, sexual exploitation and harmful online content. These forms of abuse often intersect with violence occurring offline and can continue beyond school hours or after a relationship has ended.

Prevention initiatives should therefore include digital literacy, online consent, respectful online relationships and practical education that helps children and young people recognise technology-facilitated abuse. Responses should also equip parents, teachers and frontline workers with the knowledge and confidence to identify online harms and connect young people with appropriate support.

Violence and abuse are already common within young people's intimate relationships. Australian longitudinal research found that 29 per cent of 18 and 19-year-olds who had been in a romantic relationship reported experiencing intimate partner violence in the

previous year.¹⁸ Emotional abuse was the most common form, affecting 25 per cent, while 12 per cent experienced physical violence and 8 per cent experienced sexual abuse. Among those who experienced emotional abuse, 12 per cent reported technology-facilitated harassment through phone calls, text messages, email or social media.¹⁹

Separate eSafety research has also identified that younger adults were more likely than older adults to accept behaviours that can contribute to technology-facilitated coercive control, including constant messaging, location tracking and controlling what a partner posts online. This suggests that some digitally controlling behaviours may be interpreted as normal or caring within intimate relationships, making them harder to recognise and challenge early.²⁰

Respectful relationships education should therefore extend beyond consent alone. It should support young people to understand healthy communication, boundaries, gender equality, digital behaviours and the early signs of controlling conduct before it escalates into more serious abuse. Early intervention during adolescence provides an important opportunity to prevent harmful patterns becoming entrenched in adulthood.

WAGEC looks forward to working with the NSW Department of Education as Respectful Relationships Education is rolled out in state schools across NSW. There is much to be learned and shared from WAGEC's experiences of delivering prevention in the early childhood sector and in pre-schools. Every child should be receiving consistent, evidence-based education about healthy respectful relationships both in formal education settings and reinforced through strong community-led prevention approaches where safe influential adults model respect, equality, inclusion and celebration of difference.

Early intervention for children and young people using violence

The consultation also asks how best to respond to children and young people who use violence or display harmful sexual behaviours. WAGEC recognises the importance of early intervention in this area while acknowledging that specialist perpetrator intervention services are best placed to lead this work. Responses should remain developmentally informed and recognise that some children displaying harmful behaviours may themselves have experienced trauma, abuse or violence.

¹⁸ Karlee O'Donnell, Pilar Rioseco, Amanda Vittiglia, Bosco Rowland and Lisa Mundy, *Intimate Partner Violence among Australian 18–19 Year Olds*, Growing Up in Australia Snapshot Series, Issue 11 (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023).

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ eSafety Commissioner, *Track, Harass, Repeat: Investigating Attitudes that Normalise Tech-Based Coercive Control* (2025)

Accountability is important, but it must sit alongside therapeutic, family-centred interventions that address the underlying drivers of behaviour while prioritising the safety and wellbeing of victim-survivors.

Children and young people should help shape the services designed for them

Children and young people should play a meaningful role in shaping the policies and services designed to support them. Too often, adults make assumptions about children's experiences without creating opportunities for children to express what safety, recovery and support mean to them.

WAGEC's Youth Council Initiative is designed to reflect the value of involving young people in the design and evaluation of services, ensuring responses are relevant, accessible and responsive to their lived experiences.

Participation must be safe, voluntary, age-appropriate and appropriately supported. Children and young people should be recognised as experts in their own lives, while ensuring they are not placed in the position of carrying responsibility for service design or decision-making beyond their capacity.

Improving outcomes for children requires more than expanding individual programs. It requires coordinated systems that respond to children's needs across housing, education, health, child protection and specialist domestic and family violence services.

The Second Action Plan should embed children as a distinct priority across implementation, ensuring they are recognised not only as members of families affected by violence, but as individuals with rights to safety, healing and long-term wellbeing.

Priority 5: System integration and workforce

Women and children experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence rarely interact with just one service or government agency. They frequently move between health services, police, courts, housing providers, homelessness services, child protection, education and specialist domestic and family violence services, often at times of significant crisis. Despite this, these systems continue to operate largely in isolation.

Women are too often required to repeat their experiences and manage communication between agencies themselves. Improving system capability requires clearer pathways between services and a shared commitment to delivering responses that are centred on the needs of victim-survivors rather than the boundaries of individual systems.

Strengthening workforce capability is fundamental to achieving earlier intervention. The National Plan's First Action Plan identifies workforce capability as one of its ten national

priorities, recognising that preventing and responding to violence depends on building the knowledge, confidence and capacity of workers across both specialist and mainstream services.

It also commits governments to developing more integrated and consistent responses across sectors, acknowledging that responsibility for identifying and responding to domestic, family and sexual violence extends well beyond specialist services.²¹

This capability uplift is particularly important across health, education, housing, homelessness, justice and community services, where workers are often among the first professionals to come into contact with women experiencing abuse.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identifies health services as a common point of disclosure for victim-survivors before they access specialist domestic and family violence support.²² Equipping mainstream practitioners to recognise indicators of coercive control and make effective referrals would strengthen early intervention and reduce the number of women and children who fall through gaps between services.

Governments should also recognise the significant overlap between the specialist domestic and family violence and homelessness workforces. Domestic and family violence remains the leading driver of homelessness for women in Australia. In 2023–24, Specialist Homelessness Services assisted around 109,500 clients who had experienced family and domestic violence. Two-thirds of these clients (around 72,000 people) identified domestic and family violence as their main reason for seeking assistance.²³

These figures demonstrate that homelessness and domestic and family violence services are responding to many of the same women and children, often with shared expertise in trauma, safety planning, housing and recovery. Despite this, policy, funding and workforce strategies continue to treat these as separate systems. Stronger integration across workforce planning and service design would better reflect the realities of women's experiences.

Finally, governments should strengthen accountability by measuring whether reforms improve outcomes for victim-survivors, rather than simply reporting on activities delivered.

• ²¹ Department of Social Services, *First Action Plan 2023–2027: National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).

²² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence* (Web Report, updated 2025).

²³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2023–24* (Web Report, Australian Government, 2025).

Shared outcomes, consistent data collection and transparent reporting across jurisdictions would provide a clearer picture of whether women and children are accessing support earlier, experiencing more coordinated responses and achieving safer, more stable long-term outcomes.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Embed housing security as a shared national outcome across the National Plan. Recognising that access to safe, affordable and long term housing is essential to preventing violence and reducing homelessness.

Safe and secure housing is fundamental to women's and children's safety and recovery. The Second Action Plan should recognise housing as a core component of an effective response to domestic, family and sexual violence with coordinated action across governments to increase access to crisis accommodation, transitional housing and long-term affordable housing. Embedding housing security as a shared outcome across relevant portfolios would strengthen prevention, support recovery and reduce the likelihood that women and children are forced to remain in, or return to, unsafe environments.

Recommendation 2

Establish a national approach to recovery that recognises safety after violence requires long-term support, not only crisis intervention.

Leaving violence is often the beginning of a complex recovery process. Women and children may require ongoing support to rebuild financial security, address trauma, access housing, navigate legal systems, support children's recovery and reconnect with community. The Second Action Plan should recognise recovery and healing as a distinct stage of the response and invest in long-term supports that allow victim-survivors to access assistance as their needs and risks change.

Recommendation 3

Ensure the Second Action Plan delivers an equitable response for women and children facing structural barriers to safety and support.

The Second Action Plan should recognise that women do not experience violence or access support in the same way. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disability, women on temporary visas, women leaving prison and other groups facing

structural disadvantage continue to encounter barriers that limit their safety, recovery and access to services. Implementation of the Second Action Plan should address these barriers so support is equitable and reflects the diverse experiences of women across Australia.

Recommendation 4

Embed recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right across all actions under the Second Action Plan.

Children and young people experience domestic, family and sexual violence directly and are affected by their immediate and long-term impacts. Children experience domestic, family and sexual violence in ways that are distinct from adults and their needs should be recognised throughout the Second Action Plan. Responses should support children's recovery in ways that are appropriate to their age and stage of development, while recognising that their wellbeing is closely connected to the safety and recovery of their non-offending parent or caregiver.

Recommendation 5

Sustain national investment in primary prevention and early intervention as a core pillar of ending violence against women and children.

Preventing violence before it occurs is essential to achieving the objectives of the National Plan. The Second Action Plan should provide sustained or increased investment in evidence-based primary prevention and early intervention initiatives that address the gendered drivers of violence, strengthen respectful relationships and build the capacity of mainstream systems to identify and respond to violence earlier. Long-term investment is essential to achieving lasting change and reducing future demand for crisis responses.

Recommendation 6

Improve system integration through shared accountability, coordinated pathways and outcomes-focused measurement across governments and sectors.

Women and children experiencing violence should not be required to navigate fragmented systems or repeatedly disclose their experiences to access support. The Second Action Plan should strengthen coordination between specialist services, government agencies and mainstream systems through clear referral pathways and collaborative service models.

Governments should also be accountable for whether reforms improve outcomes for victim-survivors. Success should be measured through outcomes that reflect women's and children's experiences, including increased safety, stable housing, improved wellbeing and reduced barriers to support, rather than activity measures alone.

Recommendation 7

Develop and implement a nationally coordinated workforce strategy that recognises the complementary roles of specialist domestic, family and sexual violence and homelessness services and invests in capability across both sectors.

Delivering the National Plan requires a skilled, sustainable workforce across specialist and mainstream services. The Second Action Plan should strengthen workforce capability through consistent training, professional development and long-term workforce planning, while recognising the significant overlap between the specialist domestic, family and sexual violence and homelessness sectors. Workforce strategies should reflect the realities of women's experiences, recognising that specialist expertise exists across both sectors and that greater integration will strengthen early intervention, improve coordinated responses and better support long-term recovery.

Contact

If you have any questions in relation to this submission, please contact CEO Nicole Yade via nicole.yade@wagec.org.au.