



# Submission to the inquiry into domestic violence in Australia

SOS Women's Services

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## SOS Women's Services

### About us

SOS Women's Services was established in April 2014 to advocate for specialist women's refuges in Sydney's inner-city that were facing closure under the NSW Government's *Going Home Staying Home* (GSH) reforms. SOS Women's Services later broadened its advocacy to articulating the necessity of women's services across NSW.

The first round of tenders released in November 2013 required existing services in NSW, including women's and girls' refuges, to undergo a competitive tender process for the first time.

Generally, women-only services across NSW were not permitted to tender as women-only services and they had to either partner with generic or men's services or decide to become generic themselves and take men into their service. With the exception of a few, tenders were generalist and based on 'case mix' models of providing homelessness services to men, women, families and young people. The size of the service packages was geared towards large organisations or consortia, further disadvantaging small independent services.

SOS Women's Services advocated for the restoration of \$6 million in funding cuts to inner Sydney, the continued funding of the inner city specialist women's services and recognition of the need for women-only services across NSW.

Under the GSH policy, 336 individual services have been consolidated into 149 packages run by 69 providers.

Women's refuges, including domestic violence refuges that have operated independently for decades, are now being managed by mainstream providers such as Mission Australia, Wesley Mission and St Vincent de Paul with many well-regarded, long-established, independent women's services now closing.

### Our comments

We have addressed three key terms of reference.

- a the prevalence and impact of domestic violence in Australia as it affects all Australians and, in particular, as it affects:
  - ii: women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- b the adequacy of policy and community responses to domestic violence;  
the effects of policy decisions regarding housing, legal services, and women's economic independence.
- c the ability of women to escape domestic violence.

## Effect of GSH on Aboriginal women

A study of all domestic violence incidents reported to NSW police from 2001 to 2010 found the over-representation of indigenous Australians had not changed over the last decade. The rate of recorded domestic assault for indigenous women is more than six times higher than for non-indigenous women.<sup>1</sup>

The same report also found that 19 out of the top 20 NSW Local Government Areas (LGAs) for domestic assault were in rural or regional LGAs. The top five LGAs were all remote (Bourke, Walgett, Moree Plains, Coonamble and Wentworth). The only urban LGA found in the top 20 in 2010 was Campbelltown.

Several refuges across NSW that deal with Aboriginal clients have been significantly affected by the GSH reforms, including Campbelltown, Wilcannia, Brewarrina, Kempsey and Marrickville. These services have either been taken over by major faith-based organisations or have become generalist services for men, women and families.

We have been informed by Aboriginal women that Aboriginal women they know will often avoid calling police and tend to only contact Aboriginal staff in Aboriginal-managed refuges or in refuges with a strong Aboriginal presence that are known and trusted by the community. Other women have expressed reluctance to access refuges where men are present in the building or that are run by church groups. Some have experienced abuse in faith-based settings, further compounding their hesitation.

We believe this could create problems for police if women refuse to go to a particular refuge, especially in remote areas where there are long distances between services.

Our analysis shows that travelling west of the Blue Mountains to the Far West, there will no longer be any women-only refuges run by women, and this could have a detrimental effect on domestic violence rates in Aboriginal communities.

### **Recommendation**

*We believe that due to the high rates of domestic violence already experienced by Aboriginal women, these services must continue to be operated by Aboriginal women and should not have been subject to a competitive tendering process. We will be seeking full restoration of funding for all of these services.*

## Effect of policy decisions

In the 24 months to March 2014, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOSCAR) found domestic violence assaults increased by 2.5 percent and indecent assault and other sexual offences increased 12 percent.<sup>2</sup> BOSCAR suggested that as the rise in domestic violence assaults were for grievous bodily harm (which would require medical attention) it was more likely to reflect an increase in incidents rather than an increase in the reporting.

On average, 94 domestic violence assaults are reported to police each day, but as BOSCAR estimated in 2012, less than 50 percent of victims of domestic violence reporting it to police.<sup>3</sup>

A large proportion of the increase in indecent assault, act of indecency and other sexual offences came from an increase in reports by child victim, with girls aged 17 and under comprising 84 percent of the victims.<sup>2</sup>

GSH tenders had a basic premise of 'no wrong door', meaning virtually any client group could access virtually any of the post-tender services. While on one hand this emphasizes the desire for access to all, it didn't recognise community need, the specialisation of services built up over decades, and the particular requirements of different client groups. Examples of differing client groups' requirements include the effectiveness and value of services being specialised towards women with mental health issues; women with substance dependency; women with complex trauma as a result of childhood abuse; women leaving custody and single women/women with children escaping domestic violence. A common factor in all these client groups is often a background of gendered abuse and trauma, which in turns indicates a suitability for and, in many cases, the necessity of gender specific services. Because of the generalised nature of the tenders, and the regional/district focus, there was also not sufficient emphasis on specialist services for Indigenous women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Prior to the GSH reforms these specialist services existed throughout NSW and in many cases they were established by women for women, in response to identified community needs.

Under the GSH reforms, women's refuges were not able to tender as women-only refuges, meaning they could no longer operate as they were. Just one women's package (which included women with children) was released for the entire inner-city, and there were no tenders specifically for women and girls who have experienced childhood sexual assault, abuse or neglect, mental health and/or drug and alcohol issues, or for women leaving custody.

Under the Government's reforms the three existing girls-only refuges in Sydney were facing closure, however after lengthy negotiations one has now been retained, which we believe is still inadequate for a city the size of Sydney.

There is some concern among providers of women's services that faith-based organisations don't routinely provide non-judgemental advice about sexual and reproductive health. That's a large part of the reason independent women's refuges were established more than 40 years ago. There has also been concerns expressed from client groups about the faith-based organisations historical practices which have impacted women and children. Feedback from clients and former clients indicates there will be women who will avoid seeking help and place themselves in further danger or they may end up homeless.

The closure of independent women's refuges could put women's lives at risk, affect child safety, place pressure on police and increase hospital admissions. It has also dismantled decades of expertise and specialisation.

It costs on average \$10-15 each day to care for a woman in a specialist women's refuge. If women do not access the support they need at the time it is needed, their crises can escalate and higher costs can be incurred for hospitalisation or to deal with other ramifications. For example, a mental health patient will incur costs of around \$750 a day, it costs \$1700 for someone admitted to hospital by ambulance or more than \$200 a day for a person in prison.

### **Recommendation**

*We will be seeking to have women and girls-only refuges quarantined from future competitive tendering processes and dealt with through an alternative procurement process. Competitive tendering has advantaged large organisations at the expense of the many clients requiring smaller, specialist organisations, resulting in the loss of access and specialist expertise built up over decades.*

## Effect on the ability of women to escape domestic violence

The GSH reforms have created a chaotic situation in NSW with many refuges closing down or being taken over by large, often faith-based, organisations, either as lead agencies or as influential partners in consortia. While we applaud the good work undertaken by these organisations over a long period of time, several of them have not demonstrated expertise in domestic violence or the same type of service - particularly with the reforms introducing generalist services that will cater to women, men and families.

Most women fleeing domestic violence will not go to a service where men are present and they should not be expected to. The NSW Government says women and men will not be housed in the same buildings, but the outcomes are yet to be seen as many services are still being established under the new model, and by the Government's own admission there are less women-only services.

Police play a major frontline role in assisting victims of domestic violence and are often their first point of contact. Police may find it difficult to find an appropriate refuge if a woman refuses to go to a generalist services due to the fear of men being present.

Under the GSH reforms, many refuges have had their funding reduced and successful tenderers are reporting they will no longer offer a 24/7 service. Although it is early in the set up phase, it is appearing likely that in some areas if police receive a phone call at 1am they will not be able to easily access safe accommodation through a refuge and women and children could end up at police stations until a refuge opens in the morning.

Currently, some of the new services are only operating with answering machines which refer people to the Domestic Violence hotline and the new Link2Home phone line, which are lacking up to date information on availability. One domestic violence victim in southern NSW was asked if she could go to a refuge in Darwin. Another new refuge is currently asking women to apply for placements in their refuge by email.

Closures, or refuges that women will not go to, will create considerable gaps in terms of distance meaning the next closest refuge is hours away, creating an additional burden on police.

Most refuges tell us they have extremely good relationships with local police built up over a long period of time. This network is now being dismantled and it is likely to take years to build up this level of trust with new providers.

Some police in NSW have expressed concern both publicly and privately about these changes and the NSW Police Association is looking into the effect of the reforms.

## Recommendation

***That all new providers under the GSH reforms be required to provide full time staffing by female specialist workers and 24/7 services for women escaping domestic violence with either an on-site or on-call staff member available at all times.***

- 1 *Trends and patterns in domestic violence assaults*, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2011.
- 2 *NSW recorded Crime Statistics: March 2014 quarterly report* NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, June 2014.
- 3 *Reporting Violence to Police: A survey of victims attending domestic violence services*, Emma Birdsey and Lucy Snowball Issues Paper no 91, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research Oct 2013

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