

Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce
Legislating against coercive control and the creation of
a standalone domestic violence offence
Discussion Paper 1

Relationships Australia Queensland (RAQ) has been a provider of family and relationship support services for more than 70 years. We witness firsthand the devastating impact of high rates of domestic, family and sexual violence in communities across Queensland. We know violence perpetrated against women and their children occurs regardless of age, race, culture, social or demographic background, with some groups of women still experiencing increased risk and severity of violence and limited access to services.

RAQ firmly believes that violence, coercion, control and inequality are unacceptable in family relationships, and we respect the rights of all people, in all their diversity, to live with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships. We support a broad interpretation of family violence that captures all forms of an individual's intimidating and oppressive behaviour that is directed towards a family member(s), including coercive control.

Freedom from violence in the family is a human right and RAQ supports a legal framework that responds to inequality, coercion and control, and the use of violence in families, including amendments to better protect victims and survivors. However, legislative changes must be considered within the broader system and implemented through a mix of training, collaboration and common policies and procedures across sectors, supported by community awareness raising. The success of any reform is dependent on there being sufficient resources to adequately train and build capacity of front-line, family law and judicial services.

We recognise there is no single approach to eliminating violence against women and their children. Individuals and families are unique, communities are diverse and contributing factors are complex. Importantly, legislative changes to better protect victims and survivors need the support of early intervention and prevention strategies along with broader community education – areas that are chronically underfunded despite ever increasing demand.

Demand on DFV services continues to surge as community attitudes shift, and in direct response to potential legislative changes such as around coercive control. We fully support changes that deliver better outcomes for women and their children, but equally expect frontline services to be supported as they respond to growing and changing client needs.

Critically, it must be noted that much of the domestic and family violence and family law sector is under pressure because of perpetual funding shortfalls, leaving the sector struggling to keep pace with increasing service demand and client complexity, as well as the impact of digital disruption. Family law services, family relationship services and community legal centres are all at the forefront of such legislative changes. In some communities, services are plagued with workforce shortages and an overall lack of other support services. The presence of multiple-risk factors in remote communities increases vulnerability to domestic and family violence and increases the complexity of delivering services locally.

It cannot be overstated that family and domestic violence is a complex, multi-faceted, and intergenerational issue that requires a holistic, flexible and innovative approach that considers the presenting needs of the entire family within cultural and community context. Victims, survivors and perpetrators require integrated, cross sector, multi-disciplinary responses that prioritise the safety of women and their children. With an appreciation of the complexity of underlying and co-occurring psycho and social factors, we believe that with the right support, people have the potential to change their behaviour.

First Nations People

Current domestic and family violence funding does not recognise that Australia's First Nations people have a right to utilise culture as a protective factor that supports families to be free of violence through community-led, local strategies that ensure culturally safe responses. We recognise that preceding the impact of historical colonial violence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had a powerful narrative of laws including men's and women's roles in maintaining social harmony.

Integrated Service Response

The Not Now, Not Ever taskforce highlighted the need for an integrated service response, and we recognise the importance of working closely with frontline responders such as police and courts to raise awareness and promote service access and inclusion. DFV services have limited to no funding to engage with stakeholders and raise community awareness, particularly in some of our most vulnerable communities. Integration approaches such as CHaRRT in Rockhampton, consistently achieve favourable outcomes for community yet remain unrecognised in service agreements.

Women's Advocate and Men's Behaviour Change Program

Programs such as Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCP) play an important role within the wider system and contribute to preventing further violence in our communities. MBCPs are resource intensive, requiring rigorous adherence to evidence-based best practice, specialist facilitation skills for working with perpetrators and time to shift deeply entrenched problematic behaviours. MBCPs remain one of the most effective interventions we have for holding perpetrators to account and changing behaviours. However, the critical role of the **Women's Advocate** in supporting the safety needs of partners, future partners, ex-partners and their children is largely unseen and desperately underfunded.

The role of **Women's Advocate** supports those in our community who are at greatest risk of domestic and family violence – the victims and survivors of perpetrators in contact with the criminal justice system.

As stated, we fully support any legal changes that contribute to improved safety and outcomes for women and their children who experience violence, including coercive control. However, the introduction of any changes must consider sector-wide implications and how to ensure services can continue to respond to the unique, systemic and complex needs of communities and families, in all their diversity. We support better funding for a sector under strain, funding in ways that promote innovative approaches to service delivery that can respond to current and future demand, to deliver sustainable client outcomes, and ensure smart allocation of finite resources.

We thank the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, and we are available to discuss our submission in more detail if of assistance.



Dr Ian LAW

Chief Executive Officer

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