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Preventing Gendered Violence: Lessons from the Global South project team

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*QUT Centre for Justice is a think tank for social justice that aims to empower and enable citizens, consumers and communities through solutions-oriented research. Our vision is to democratise justice by improving opportunities for health and well-being and enhancing the inclusiveness of work and education while widening access to justice.*

## Executive summary

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce. The core of our submission addresses Part 2 in Discussion Paper 1: How do other jurisdictions address coercive control (police responses)? Our submission is based on our research into Argentina's unique approach to responding to domestic and family violence through specialist police stations designed explicitly to receive survivors of gender violence. We highlight what can be learned from these stations to improve the policing and prevention of domestic and family violence (DFV) in Queensland. Evidence from two Australian surveys (a Community survey ( $n = 566$ ) and a DFV Workforce survey ( $n = 277$ )) shows support for aspects of how specialist police stations in Argentina operate. Evaluations for Australian co-located service trials involving police also shows support from police, workers and victims/survivors for innovative multidisciplinary responses to DFV. It is our view that the Queensland response to DFV should incorporate key aspects of Argentinian specialist stations to improve women's safety.

### Summary of Key Recommendations

Our submission recommends a trial with specific recommendations addressing station design, practice, evaluation, as well as the education and screening of police chosen to participate in a trial. We also make recommendations to improve the policing of DFV generally including protocols for dealing with victims/survivors of DFV and changes to training. These innovations could address police failings in responding to and protecting victims/survivors of DFV apparent across Queensland, but improvements to policing will not work alone. We make three key additional recommendations:

- a commitment to boost flexible funding packages for those experiencing DFV;
- a commitment to boost funding for social and affordable housing, and emergency accommodation, for victims/survivors of DFV; and
- a commitment to an intersectional approach to policy making.

## Background

In Australia today, domestic violence (DV) is a ‘national emergency’, an ongoing crisis with no remedy in sight (Nancarrow 2019). Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2020) confirms a steep increase in women victims/survivors of DV over the last five years.<sup>1</sup> Domestic homicides of women account for a third of all homicides in Australia (Bricknell 2020: 3). While rates for all other homicide types have been declining over the last three decades, the rate of domestic homicide has remained steady (ABS 2020).

In Queensland, there is extensive evidence of inadequate policing responses to domestic and family violence (DFV) including: ambivalence and lack of empathy toward the survivors of DFV; failure to provide women with adequate information; lack of referral to appropriate support services in emergency and non-emergency situations; victim blaming, reluctance to believe or take complaints seriously; ‘siding with the perpetrator’ and regarding victim’s complaints as ‘too trivial and a waste of police resources’ (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015: 251; Douglas 2018, 2019; Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018; Westera and Powell 2017). A serious issue has been the misidentification of women as perpetrators with the 2016-2017 Queensland death review of DV related deaths finding that almost half (12 out of 27) the women who died that year had been misidentified by police as perpetrators (Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board 2017). Survivors of DFV remain deeply reluctant to report to police, with only 2 out of 10 women reporting to police (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019: 19). For Indigenous women, the proportion is much lower, with only 1 in 10 reporting DV to the police (AIHW 2019: 19).

*Given the overwhelming reluctance of women to seek help from police, in addition to the dissatisfaction with the help they receive, it is timely to reimagine the policing of domestic and family violence.*

Indigenous women are five times more likely to experience DFV, 32 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of that violence and twice as likely to be killed as the result of domestic homicide compared to non-Indigenous women (AIHW 2019: 10). Along with low reporting rates, Indigenous women are also more likely to be misidentified as perpetrators of DFV (Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018; Nancarrow 2019). This is amplified by the fact that policing in Indigenous communities in Australia commonly involves police who do not come from or stay long in remote communities and are ‘not trained nor prepared for policing in these distinct contexts’ (Dwyer et al. 2021: 210), and the overwhelming majority of all police are not Indigenous (less than 2%).

The complexities of DFV policing cannot be underestimated. Such work involves police taking on a joint social work and police role, supporting survivors, mediating conflict and conducting investigation (Maple and Kepple 2020). Responding to DFV is not something police can do alone, and they recognise the importance of partnering with relevant organisations and services for effective response (Reuland et al. 2006; The Police Association of Victoria 2015). Cohesive multidisciplinary work is essential to respond effectively to DFV (Chung et al. 2018; Fine et al. 2000), and a sole focus on criminal justice outcomes may sideline the autonomy and safety of women (Seuffert and Mundy 2021). Research by Women’s Safety New South Wales (Foster et al. 2020) found that 98% of clients agreed that support workers should be co-located at police stations to support those making a report.

The Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce provides an ideal opportunity to present evidence-based proposals for systemic changes to policing in Queensland. The core of our submission addresses Part 2 in Discussion Paper 1:

- How do other jurisdictions address coercive control (police responses)?

We also make recommendations regarding the discussion questions in Discussion Paper 1:

- What improvements could be made to police training to ensure better protections for women and girls who are victims of coercive control?
- What could be done to improve the capacity and capability of the service system to respond to coercive control?

Regardless of decisions in relation to coercive control laws and the establishment of a stand-alone offence of domestic violence, systemic change is required to improve police responses to survivors of DFV.

## Specialist police stations designed to receive survivors of gender violence

When domestic assault and rape in marriage became crimes in countries like Australia, United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK), many saw this as a victory for feminism with the state taking responsibility for violence against women. The theory was that criminalisation of domestic assault, alongside mandatory apprehended violence orders (under civil law), and punishment for breaching those orders (under criminal law), would have a deterrent effect on DFV, although it was supported by limited evidence (Gruba 2020: 67-93). The problem was that its policing was delegated to a masculinised police force and a masculinised judiciary both ill-equipped and/or unable to respond to survivors of DFV (Martin and Jurik 2007; Silvestri 2017).

South America took a different pathway, establishing police stations for women designed specifically to respond to the survivors of gender violence. The first women-led victim centric police stations designed explicitly to receive women experiencing gender violence emerged in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1985 (Nelson 1996; Hautzinger 1997, 2002; 2007; MacDowell Santos 2004, 2005). They were called *Delegacia da Mulher* (Police Stations for Women) (DDM). A study of DDMs in Brazil assessed shifts in female homicide rates in 2074 municipalities from 2004 to 2009, controlling for a number of variables. The presence of a DDM was the main variable. The study found that where DDMs existed the female homicide rate dropped by 17% for all women, but for women aged 15-24 in metropolitan areas the reduction was an astonishing 50% (or 5.57 deaths reduction per 100,000) (Perova and Reynolds 2017: 193-194). On this basis Perova and Reynolds (2017) concluded that 'women's police stations appear to be highly effective among young women living in metropolitan areas' (p. 188).

Variations of the model have spread across other parts of the Global South, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru, Uruguay and India (Amaral et al. 2018; Jubb et al. 2010; Natarajan 2008). They have been particularly successful at attracting more women of ethnically diverse backgrounds into policing (Amaral et al. 2018; Hautzinger 2002, 2016; Jubb and Pasinato 2003; MacDowell Santos 2004; 2005; Miller and Segal 2018; Sardenberg et al. 2010). Critically, they also provide women from poor and vulnerable communities access to a wide range of legal, medical, social and psychological support that enhances their security and strengthens their citizenship (Jubb and Pasinato 2003). This growing body of research suggests women-led police stations enhance women's willingness to

report, preventing further re-victimisation (Hauztinger 2003; Jubb and Pasinato 2003; MacDowell Santos, 2004, 2005; Natarajan 2005; Jubb et al. 2010; Sardenberg et al. 2010; Pasinato 2016; Miller and Segal 2018), while enhancing police legitimacy (Córdova and Kras 2020). Our research specifically explored the Argentinian context, in which the first police station of this kind was established in 1988 in the Province of Buenos Aires.

### How does the Argentinian model respond to gender violence?

Our Australian Research Council funded research team undertook the first study of how specialist police stations in the Province of Buenos Aires (PBA), Argentina, respond to and prevent gender violence. The first *Comisaría de la Mujer* was established in the city of La Plata in 1988 (Carrington et al. 2020: 44-45). Initially called *Comisaría de la Mujer*, which translates into English as Police Stations for Women, they are now called *Comisaría de la Mujer y la Familia* (CMF), which means Police Stations for Women and Families. For simplicity, the term specialist police station or CMF is used throughout this submission. Since 2006, the CMFs employ male officers which make up around 10% of station employees (Carrington et al. 2020). Since 2019, lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer and intersex officers have been employed in La Plata to deal with complainants from sexuality, gender and sex diverse backgrounds.

By the end of 2018, there were 128 stand-alone CMFs and 16 offices co-located within existing government departments in the PBA, employing 2300 officers that work alongside multidisciplinary team members responding to around 250,000 complaints of DFV and 8000 complaints of sexual violence per year. While the CMFs do conduct investigations and process DV ‘denunciations’, this comprises around a third of their work. The CMFs also provide childcare for people attending the stations, offer survivors a gateway to other support beyond criminalisation, and have unique powers of prevention under the *National Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women* (Law No. 26485).<sup>2</sup> This law gives police discretion to engage in a range of prevention responses and activities, which are explained below.

By emphasising community-based prevention over a punitive approach, Argentina’s specialist police stations offer a gateway to a range of supports instead of just funnelling survivors into the criminal justice system. In the process, survivors retain their autonomy from the state, avoiding some of the negative outcomes of mandatory reporting regimes and criminalisation of DV breaches experienced in places such as the US (Goodmark 2018; Gruba 2020; Kim 2018), and especially

among Indigenous women in Australia (Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018; Langton et al. 2020; Nancarrow 2019).

### Stage 1: Discovering how specialist police stations operate

In 2018-2019, we conducted three months of field research interviewing 100 employees from 10 CMFs located in different cities of the PBA across 2500 km, as part of our field research for Stage 1. The main results and method of this study have been published (Carrington et al. 2020). Stage 1 of our research in the PBA investigated these specialist police stations and found they work to attempt to prevent gender-based violence in three main ways. Firstly, by working with women experiencing gender violence to encourage early intervention, prevent re-victimisation and reduce the number of high-risk cases escalating to femicide.<sup>3</sup> They denaturalise gender violence and empower women to break the cycle which reduces re-victimisation. Through their prevention powers they can also refer perpetrators to centres to unlearn their violence (the local equivalent would be male perpetrator programs, see Flood 2019), without having to seek court orders. Second, specialist police stations work in a coordinated fashion through local boards with other municipal and provincial agencies, such as the gender policy units. These units report to both the Ministry of Security and the Ministry of Social Development. A significant benefit of working collaboratively with other agencies and across ministries is the reduction of duplication, the more effective use of scarce resources as well as the sharing of information crucial to timely prevention and intervention. Third, specialist police stations aim to create a large-scale educative influence through their community engagement activities to challenge the norms that sustain violence against women (Carrington et al. 2020). Their primary prevention focus aims to stop gender violence from occurring in the first instance (Carrington et al. 2020: 53-58).

While limited by restrictions on human and material resources, these stations offer several innovative approaches in responding to gender violence. Our study found that these women-centred specialist police stations developed practices and protocols that have a potential to: widen access to justice; empower survivors to liberate themselves from the cycle of DV; and disrupt the patriarchal norms that sustain gender violence at a local level through community facing primary prevention (Carrington et al. 2020: 58-62). All while side-stepping some of the adverse impacts of criminalisation, such as the removal of the agency of the victim/survivor. For more information about this research, see [Final Report of Field Research](#).



## Stage 2: What can Australia (and Queensland) learn from the Argentinian model?

The second stage of our research used the findings from the Argentinian study to design two surveys to explore the potential for alternatives to policing gender violence in Australia. Two surveys assessed the views of the public contrasted with the informed views of workers in the gender violence sector (including police, counsellors, domestic violence workers). The main findings of the two surveys are discussed in relation to recommendations below. These are published in a report (Carrington, Sozzo and Ryan 2020) and forthcoming article (Carrington et al. forthcoming).

The primary research presented in this submission draws upon a Workforce and a Community survey. The Workforce survey used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit information rich respondents who work, research or volunteer in the gender violence sector ( $n=277$ ). Email invitations were distributed to police officers in three states, non-governmental organisations, researchers, and 85 government-funded peak bodies and agencies in sexual and DFV across Australia. All eight of Australia's state and territory police services were formally approached to participate in the research and three agreed to participate: Tasmania Police; Western Australia Police Force; and Australian Capital Territory Policing. For contrast we also conducted a Community survey of randomly self-selected respondents aged 18 and over across Australia recruited through Facebook advertising ( $n=566$ ). The randomised sample was driven by Facebook advertising algorithms (for more information about the survey methodology, see [Carrington, Sozzo and Ryan 2020](#)).

Table 1. Community and Workforce survey demographics compared to Australian Census

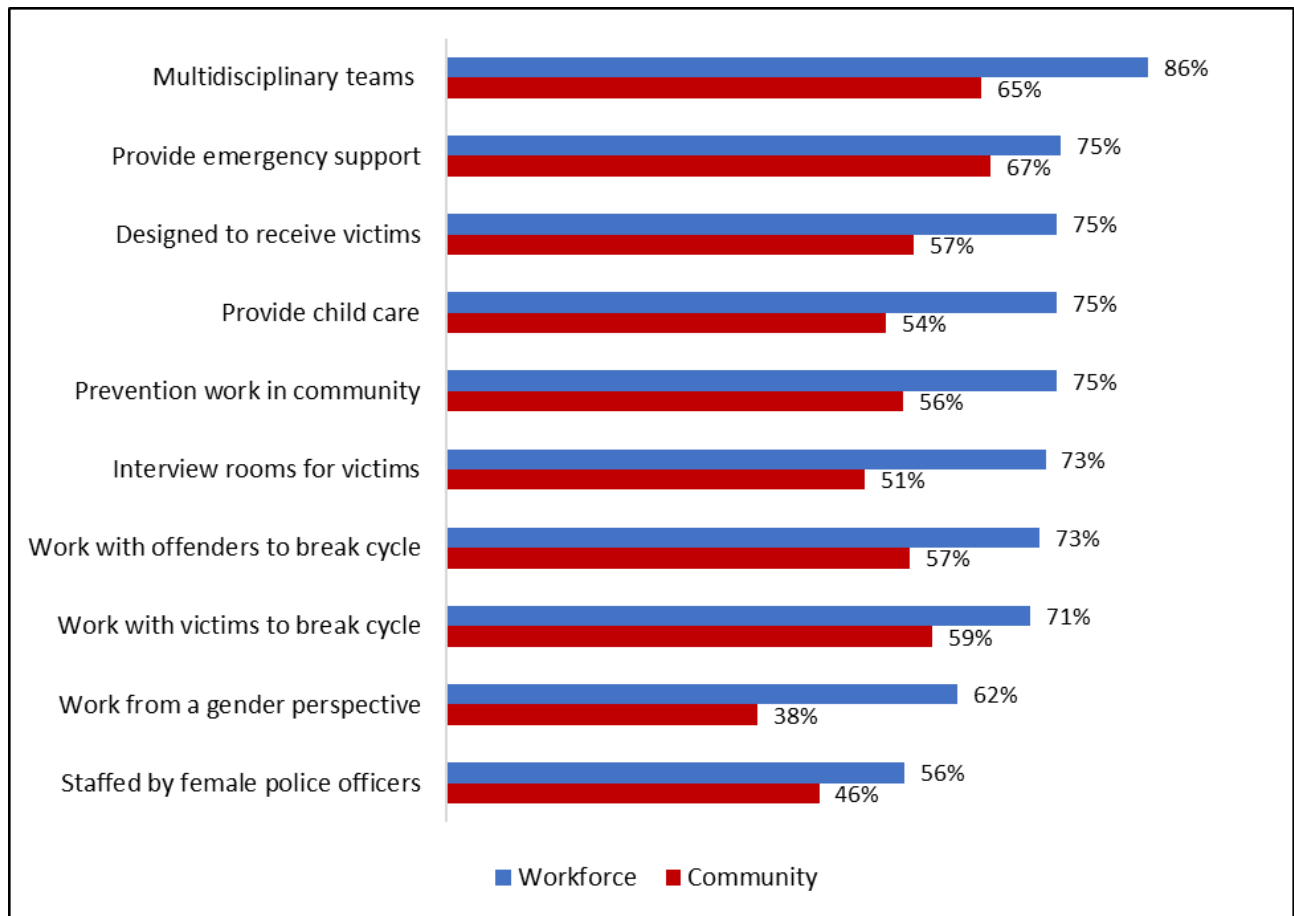
Demographics	Workforce survey		Community survey		ABS Census data June 2019
	n	%	n	%	%
Total	277	100%	566	100%	25,364,307
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	65	24%	222	44%	49.6%
Female	211	76%	310	50%	50.4%
Other	1	0%	34	6%	
<b>Aboriginal &amp;/or Torres Strait Islander background</b>					
Yes	11	4%	45	7%	3.1%
No	266	96%	521	93%	
<b>Australian Residence</b>					
Queensland	82	30%	152	27%	20.1%
New South Wales	57	21%	134	24%	31.9%
Western Australia	53	19%	55	10%	10.3%
Australian Capital Territory	31	11%	30	5%	1.7%
Victoria	23	8%	132	23%	26.0%
Northern Territory	16	6%	13	2%	1.0%
Tasmania	12	4%	15	3%	2.1%
South Australia	3	1%	35	6%	6.9%
<b>Age Group (years)</b>					
18-30	33	12%	193	34%	18.5%
31-40	59	21%	119	21%	14.3%
41-50	83	30%	87	15%	12.9%
51-60	69	25%	103	18%	12.0%
61-70	28	10%	44	8%	10.0%
71+	5	2%	20	4%	10.2%

Source: Carrington, Sozzo and Ryan 2020 and ABS 2019

### Key findings of relevance to the Taskforce

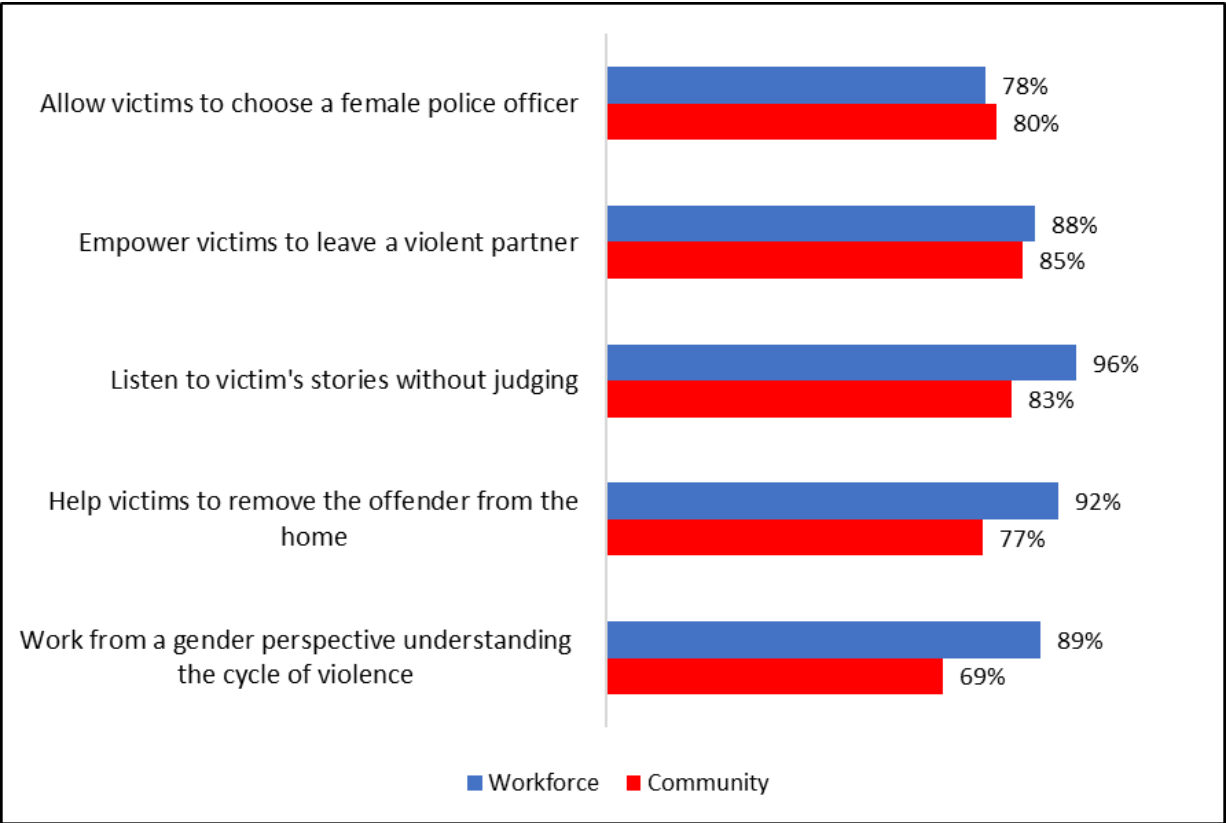
After watching a short informational video about CMFs in Argentina, respondents were asked ‘In your opinion, which aspects of Women's Police Stations could improve how Australian police stations respond to victims of gender violence?’ A total of 12 aspects were provided. Overall, Workforce respondents were more positive than Community respondents, endorsing 11 out of 12 aspects with only one rating below 50% (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Community respondents were less enthusiastic with levels of endorsement varying between 32% and 67%, with three aspects rating below 50% (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, there was still a considerable level of endorsement that nine distinguishing features of Argentinian specialist stations could assist to reimagine DFV policing in Australia.

Figure 1. Which of the following aspects of women's police stations could improve how Australian police stations respond to victims of gender violence?



The second key question in both surveys asked respondents for their perceptions of ideal ways that police should respond to victims of gender violence. Five responses were provided informed by key protocols that we identified as being used in Argentinian specialist stations to respond women experiencing gender violence. The statement ‘Listen to victim’s stories without judging’ was most strongly supported with the vast majority of Workforce (96%) and Community (83%) respondents Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing. Overall, the vast majority of Workforce (92%) and Community (77%) respondents also Strongly Agreed or Agreed with the statement police should ‘Help victims to remove the offender from the home’. The statement should police ‘Work from a gender perspective that understands domestic violence is a cycle’ received very strong (89%) support from the Workforce when combining the responses of Strongly Agree and Agree. However, the majority of Community respondents (69%) also supported working from a gender perspective. A gender perspective fully appreciates that DFV is a cycle of *coercive control*, and not just a one-off incident. This is a fundamental principle that underscores the operation of specialist police stations in Buenos Aires, supported by mandatory training.

Figure 2. Ideally, how should police respond to victims of gender violence?



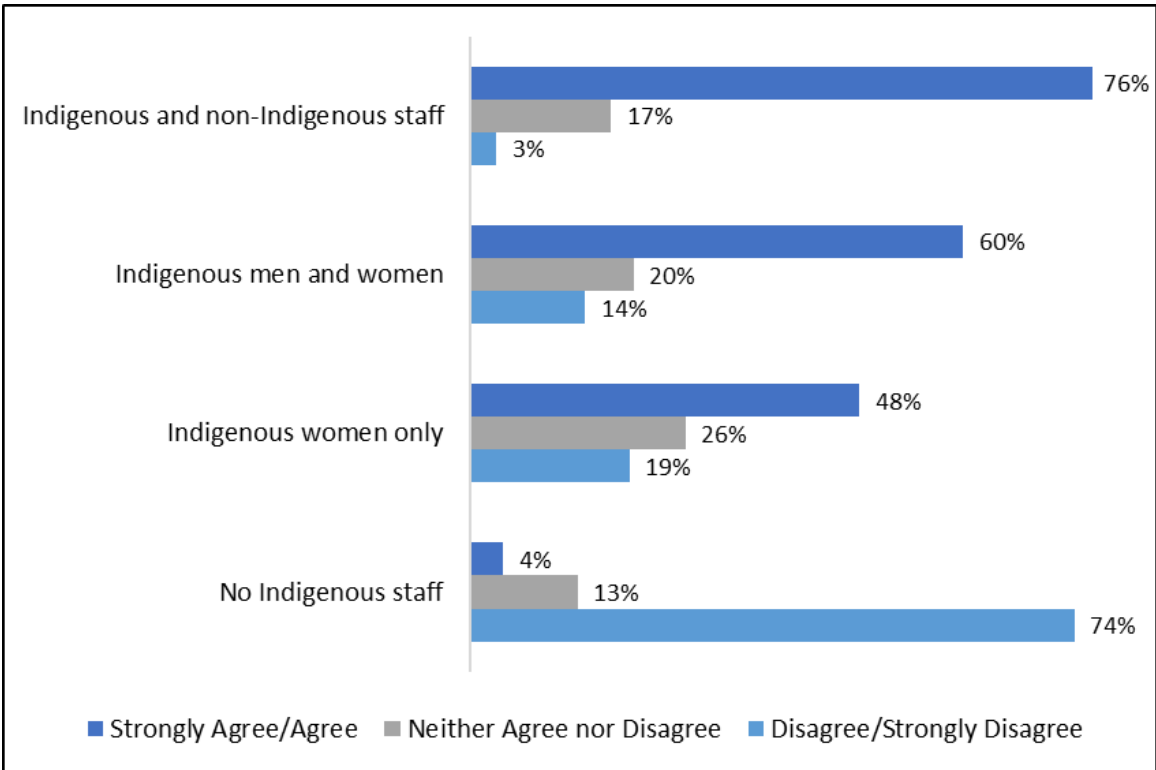
### Could specialist police stations work in Indigenous communities?

There has been extensive and justified criticism of the shortcomings of traditional policing practices in Indigenous communities in Australia (Blagg et al. 2018; Langton et al. 2020; Nancarrow 2019). Domestic violence laws have had particularly adverse consequences, including the removal of children from Indigenous women experiencing DFV, arrest and imprisonment of survivors, and even deaths in custody (Blagg et al. 2018; Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018; Langton et al. 2020; Nancarrow 2019; State Coroner 2016). DFV is the most significant reason for Indigenous children entering into state care (Langton et al. 2020: 13). One of the reforms of the Queensland Government inquiry into DFV (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015) was to introduce terms of imprisonment for breaches of DFV orders. This reform has increased the imprisonment of Indigenous women, who account for 66% of women imprisoned because of a contravention of a Domestic Violence Order, yet Indigenous people comprise only 3% of the population (Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018: 42). Given this and Indigenous women's disproportionate experiences of DFV, it was important for our Australian survey to explore whether any of the CMF protocols could provide any inspiration for reimagining the policing of DFV with Indigenous communities (Carrington et al. forthcoming).

Workforce survey respondents were asked 'Compared to traditional policing models, do you think that Police Stations for Women and Families would respond better to gender violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia, if staffed by the following?' Four options were provided: 1) only Indigenous women; 2) Indigenous men and women; 3) Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff; and 4) no Indigenous staff. Answers were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The Community survey asked respondents, 'If Women's Police Stations were established in Indigenous communities, do you think they should be staffed by?' Five options were provided: 1) only Indigenous women; 2) Indigenous men and women; 3) Indigenous and non-Indigenous men and women; 4) Indigenous and non-Indigenous women only; and 5) No opinion. They also had the option not to respond to this question. Instead of a Likert scale, Community respondents could only select one response. For Community respondents this question was followed by an option to provide written responses, which varied greatly. Just over 80% of those who completed the Workforce survey had worked with Indigenous people, communities or agencies and 4% were Indigenous, compared to 7% of respondents for the Community survey being Indigenous.

Figure 3 shows responses from the Workforce survey combining Strongly Agree and Agree. Just over three quarters of respondents (76%) selected that Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff should work at specialist police stations. A significant majority (60%) thought that specialist police stations for responding to DFV should only be staffed by Indigenous men and women, and almost half (48%) thought that Indigenous women only should staff specialist police stations.

Figure 3. Compared to traditional policing models, do you think that police stations for women and families would respond better to gender violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia, if staffed by?



More than one-third (38%) of Community respondents selected that specialist stations should be staffed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, stating in written responses that it would provide flexibility and encourage intercultural communication. The next favoured option by 26% of respondents was for Indigenous and non-Indigenous women only. The common rationale for staffing this response was that women are more appropriate for dealing with ‘women’s business’.<sup>5</sup>

Female victims of violence may feel safer coming to a station staffed only by women. This is especially important for Indigenous

communities that have strong cultural beliefs about what is men's business versus women's business.

Almost 10% of respondents who answered this question felt that police stations in Indigenous communities would be best staffed by both Indigenous women and men. The main reason offered for this choice related to the concept of cultural safety, that interventions in Indigenous communities should be Indigenous-led. For example:

Only Indigenous people can understand the responses to violence within their community and offer culturally appropriate support.

An almost equal proportion (9%) of respondents felt that Indigenous women only would be the best equipped to deal with women's business and cultural issues relating to DFV, noting that 'Indigenous women are best placed to respond to women's business'; 'Indigenous women only stations would be more empowering for both police and victims'; and that 'Indigenous women need a safe space where people understand the intersecting needs of gender and culture'.

*There has been a long history of violence towards women and children in the Indigenous community and this will only be overcome when women and children feel completely safe in reporting crime and feeling that something can be done to change this history. This trust and feeling of safety can only be brought about by Indigenous women officers.*

As the above comment alludes, due to the long history of police acting as instruments of colonisation, dispossession, forced removal to missions, and the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, Indigenous women are not likely to seek their help (Langton et al, 2020:31). Given this fraught history, we are skeptical that CMF protocols or practices could work in Indigenous communities in Australia, without systemic changes to police culture, training and recruitment that address these historical issues of racialized policing (Dywer, Scott and Staines, 2021, p. 208). Those who have researched this issue in Australia argue that Indigenous women who experience DFV need remedies beyond criminalisation (Langton et al. 2020). They need culturally appropriate services with family violence expertise 'to make initial contact with often highly reluctant victims of violence, to engage and remain involved with them throughout an often lengthy process of escaping from their partners or other perpetrators, while often facing the challenge of dealing with child protection services to have their children returned' (Langton et al.

2020, p. 15). Indigenous male perpetrators also need access to Indigenous led behaviour change services in Indigenous communities (Langton et al. 2020. P. 17), as opposed to punitive law enforcement approaches. However, there are very few Indigenous-led responses to DFV in Australia (State Coroner 2016; Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018; Langton et al 2020; Nancarrow 2019), and Indigenous communities remain over-policed by officers neither trained or prepared for policing in these cultural contexts (Dywer, Scott and Staines, 2021, p. 208).

For further details see the [Report of Community and Workforce Surveys](#)

## Evaluations of co-located models

In what follows we summarise evidence from evaluations of the few trials of co-located models for responding to DFV in Australia. Evaluations of these models have shown positive client outcomes including the prevention of re-victimisation, ease of engagement with the criminal justice system, increased long-term safety, and support towards obtaining long-term outcomes. The Tamworth trial found a more comprehensive understanding of DFV obtained for individual case records across 73% ( $n=68$ ) of cases (Wangmann 2003 in Breckenridge et al. 2016). Sector workers and stakeholders reported co-location with police enabled information and idea sharing, resource sharing and efficiencies, and police learning and increased police accountability. Police reported similar benefits appreciating access and assistance from DFV workers, stating that co-location provided the benefits of information sharing, learning, and improved accountability and transparency. The depth and quality of policing improved due to being able to spend dedicated time to cases, viewing DFV more holistically, and not having to spend time providing emotional support and service referral.

Multidisciplinary centres (MDCs) emerged in Victoria in the late 2000s initially as a response to sexual assault. Currently, there are seven MDCs and three of these have grown to include DFV response (Mikakos 2018; Victoria Police 2017). Led by support services, these centres include sexual assault police teams, family violence police teams, social workers, counsellors, and other support staff and programs. MDCs also undertake primary prevention and work with offenders (The Sexual Assault and Family Violence Centre 2021; Personal communication with former Barwon MDC board member). All services are in the same building with police in the back half, separated by

*Cohesive multidisciplinary work is essential to respond effectively to DFV. Police recognise the benefits of working closely with other experts. They value assistance and learning from DFV workers when working in co-located environments.*



internal doors that police cannot open (Personal communication). Police do not wear uniforms and use unmarked cars (Personal communication). Royal Commission documents indicate that there is broad support from police, police leadership and workers at the MDCs (Barwon Area Integrated Family Violence Committee 2015; Pettett 2015; McWhirter 2015; Naylor 2015; Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016, 158). Evaluations are referenced but these are not publicly available.

## Could increasing the number of women entering mainstream policing improve the police response to domestic and family violence?

One response to improve the policing of DFV has been to increase the number of women who enter policing (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013; Silvestri 2017; Rabe-Hemp and Garcia 2020); however, this has been insufficient to address the complexities of policing in this area (Brown and Silvestri 2020). Policing services globally face difficulty in attracting and retaining women members (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013) and even greater difficulty attracting women officers of Indigenous or ethnic minority backgrounds (Fleming 2020; Waters et al. 2006). An extensive overview of available research by Brown and Silvestri (2020) found that the difference women could contribute to feminising police culture and leadership is yet to be realised in England and Wales even though 30% of sworn officers are women. In Queensland, as of June 2020, 29% of sworn officers are women and women make up 24% of police in senior roles (Queensland Police Service 2020). Consequently, adding women to existing male dominated policing agencies will not necessarily improve responses to survivors of DFV (Carrington et al. forthcoming).

## Recommendations

Regardless of decisions in relation to coercive control laws or the establishment of a stand-alone offence of domestic violence, systemic change is required to improve police responses to victims of DFV. Based on our research, it is vital that Queensland responses to DFV should incorporate key aspects of Argentinian specialist stations to improve policing. Appropriately staffed by officers who reflect the community cultural demographic and are trained to work from both gender and culturally sensitive perspectives, specialist stations have the potential to significantly enhance the policing of DFV across Queensland. Given these significant advantages, the evidence of success of

other co-location approaches in Australia, alongside the unsustainability of continuing with current police practices, we recommend that Queensland adopts the following innovations:

**1. We recommended a trial of a specialist police station, open 24-hours a day, every day of the year, staffed by multidisciplinary teams designed explicitly to receive victims of domestic and family violence.**

Specialist police stations in Argentina are open 24-hours a day, every day of the year to respond to family violence. They are staffed by police, lawyers, social workers and psychologists, acting as a gateway to help address the multidimensional problems typically experienced by those who experience DFV.

Survey responses demonstrated backing for specialised police stations staffed by multidisciplinary teams with 86% of Workforce respondents and 65% of Community respondents supporting the model.

We recommend a trial includes multidisciplinary workers available during weekday day times and family violence crisis workers available 7 days a week. It is critical that the trial include a holistic response, and not a watered-down version of the model financially supported by the precariously funded DFV sector. The below aspects (a-i) are crucial to ensuring this.

**a) Ensure the trial station provides victim friendly interview rooms.**

Most police stations are designed to receive alleged offenders. They are spartan, uncomfortable and unwelcoming spaces, especially for victims and children. Specialist police stations in Argentina are specifically designed to receive victims of DFV and their children. Many are adorned with huge murals painted by victims. They do not receive or detain perpetrators in custody. This ensures victims and perpetrators are separated and do not cross paths in the same police station. Specialist police stations are designed to be welcoming, family friendly and encourage early reporting.

Survey responses demonstrated support for stations designed to receive victims with 75% of Workforce respondents and 57% of Community respondents supportive of this aspect. Victim

friendly interviews rooms was supported by 73% of Workforce respondents and 51% of Community respondents.

We recommend a trial includes the use of a welcoming building and with colourful inviting spaces throughout, including in interview rooms.

### **b) Ensure the trial station includes childcare and emergency support.**

Specialist stations have space for children with toys, games and televisions available. The provision of a space for children is critical to encourage women to come to the station and seek help. A separate space for children is regarded as essential to prevent the re-victimisation of children by having to hear their mothers recount their experiences of DFV. In the Australian context, professional childcare workers will be required.

Often victims leave their houses in emergencies and arrive with nothing. Specialist stations in Argentina have emergency provisions of clothing, bedding, nappies and sanitary products.

Survey responses demonstrated support for stations providing childcare with 75% of Workforce respondents and 54% of Community respondents supporting this. The provision of emergency support by stations was backed by 57% of Workforce respondents and 75% of Community respondents.

We recommend a trial includes child friendly spaces with professional childcare workers available to care for children during day-time hours Monday to Friday.

We recommend a trial includes the provision of emergency supplies.

### **c) Ensure the trial station includes culturally appropriate staffing of police and other workers mirroring the community demographic.**

A history of violence by police against Indigenous people and other people of colour are a key reason for the underreporting of DFV from these groups (Langton et al. 2020: 31; Kim 2015). Other reasons include a lack of understanding by police around cultural concerns and fears by women around

involvement from immigration authorities (Segrave et al. 2021). In the Australian context it is critical that a culturally diverse workforce is employed at the station to provide culturally appropriate support (Langton et al. 2020). In the context of over-policing being a common lived experience of Indigenous communities in Australia (Behrendt et al. 2008: 122-123), we are not suggesting that Indigenous communities need more police. We are sceptical that specialist police stations would work in Indigenous communities in Australia without systemic changes to police culture, training and recruitment that address these historical issues of racialised policing (Dwyer et al. 2021: 208).

Specifically enquiring about Indigenous staff in Indigenous communities, in a question allowing multiple choices, Workforce respondents showed support for Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and men staffing specialist police stations (76%) or staffing by only Indigenous people (60%). Limited to one choice, Community survey respondents (38%) showed the most support for these specialist stations to be staffed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff.

We recommend a trial includes culturally diverse staff across the multidisciplinary workforce that represents the demography of the community where the station is located.

**d) Ensure staff at the trial station engage in community prevention activities to challenge local norms that sustain domestic and family violence.**

Officers from specialist stations in Argentina engage in community facing primary violence prevention work. This includes engaging with a wide range of communities and organisations, such as religious organisations, women’s groups, schools, hospitals, neighbourhood and community groups. The prevention activities are designed to raise consciousness, build local networks, trust and rapport, and turn around norms in the community that continue to underpin and tolerate violence against women. Some examples include social activities for specific days such as International Women’s Day and Children’s Day. Community facing primary prevention work is used as a strategy for familiarising local women and children with their services, again building trust and rapport.

Survey responses demonstrated support for police at stations to engage in community primary prevention activities with 76% of Workforce respondents and 56% of Community respondents supporting this.

We recommend a trial includes police engagement with primary prevention activities, tailored to the local community and co-designed and delivered with local organisations.

#### **e) Ensure staff at the trial station work with victims and offenders to break the cycle of family violence.**

Several of the specialist stations in Argentina run women's support groups, which are supplemented by online chat groups. Convened by station psychologists, support groups empower and support women. These therapeutic groups enable victims to sustain the decision to report or leave relationships, and helps them deal with ambiguous emotions of guilt and shame. Individual support is provided by psychologists, counsellors and other workers may include longer-term education, assistance in identifying personal strengths and networks, and emotional and resilience capacity building to break the cycle of violence. Crisis support is also provided.

Stations accept self-reports from men that seek help to curb their violence toward their partners. They refer these men to support groups established by local authorities to 'unlearn' violent conduct. Separately and together, these three aspects of specialist stations work to break the cycle of violence.

Survey responses demonstrated support for stations to work with victims to break the cycle of violence with 73% from Workforce respondents and 59% support from Community respondents. Similar support was shown for working with offenders to break the cycle of violence with 71% from Workforce respondents and 57% for Community respondents.

We recommend a trial include onsite group programs for women run by psychologists or other family violence workers, in addition to a range of individual support provided by these multidisciplinary workers.

We recommend a trial include program referral for men to unlearn violent behaviour as an alternative to mandatory reporting. There is a need for a pathway for participation in male

perpetrator programs outside of criminal punishment frameworks in cases where program participation is supported by (or even requested) the victim. In Queensland, this will require amendments to the *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* to provide police with the discretion to use this pathway, within reason, instead of mandatory investigation and reporting. Such an option could side-step some of the serious unintended consequences of mandatory reporting by police in circumstances where the victim does not seek or want a civil domestic violence order. This also hands agency back to victims to make their own decisions, rather than having their decisions restrained within pre-determined legal frameworks, which assume a one size fits all solution.

**f) Ensure staff at the trial station includes enough women police to enable victims of men's violence to choose a woman police officer, if they wish to speak to a police officer.**

Several of the specialist stations are staffed by a DFV worker at the front counter. Women who have experienced violence from men always have the choice to engage with a woman police officer. This is standard practice. Victims can also choose not to speak to an officer and instead access other services and supports available at the station. This enables victims to retain autonomy.

There was strong support by 78% of Workforce respondents and 80% of Community respondents for 'Allow[ing] victims of male violence to choose a female police officer to receive their complaint'. Support for multidisciplinary services located at stations has been shown throughout.

We recommend a trial includes staffing by enough women police to enable victims to choose the gender of the officer they speak to if they wish to speak to a police officer.

**g) Ensure police at the trial station have existing domestic and family violence specialisation, qualifications, or are trained by an independent quality educator before employment at the stations.**

Police who work at specialist stations in Argentina undertake mandatory training learning about violence from a gender perspective. This entails learning about the cycle of coercive control, and not treating DFV as discrete incidents.

Out of 78 police officers in the Workforce survey, only 53 (68%) reported that they had training in responding to gender violence. This is particularly concerning as this survey was targeted at those who work in the field of gender violence.

We recommend that police working in the trial station must have existing specialisation or qualifications in DFV or participate in an intensive paid training program by an independent quality educator to learn about the complexities of DFV. It is critical to avoid creating a vacuum of specialist police in other Queensland locations when staffing a trial station. To this end, placement at the station must not be designated (forced) and must not be limited to those with existing specialisation or qualifications in DFV. Opportunities must be available for other police to work at the trial station as long as an additional intensive paid training program is provided.

**h) Ensure police who have a history of domestic and family violence, or complaints from domestic and family violence victims, be screened out from participating in any trial.**

Police in Australia often fail to take action against domestic violence perpetrators in their ranks with the number of officers charged strikingly low given the extent of the violence known among DFV support workers (Gleeson 2020a). Queensland Police Assistant Commissioner, Brian Codd, recently stated that he could not offer ‘a 100% guarantee’ that women seeking help would not encounter abusers in uniform or officers with problematic attitudes (Smee 2021b). Such a guarantee is critical for victims to seek assistance.

We recommend that officers with a history of DFV, whether convicted or are alleged to have committed domestic violence, should not be permitted to work in the trial station.

We recommend that officers with a history of complaints by DFV victims about their treatment should not be permitted to work in the trial station.

**i) Ensure the trial station is funded for evaluation and systems from commencement developed are in line with this.**

Evaluation of a trial station is critical to determine effectiveness in responding to DFV. Improper funding for evaluation is common in government-funded pilot programs often meaning success measures cannot be proven to support replication and continuation (AIHW 2016b). Insufficient

record keeping is also often a barrier to thorough evaluation (Sechrist and Weil 2018). While there are complexities in tracking case outcomes (Mundy and Seuffert 2021), record keeping practices can be developed in line with legal privacy requirements to aid evaluation. To this end, it is critical that evaluation is planned from trial commencement with record-keeping systems for all elements of station operation developed in line with this.

The open publication of key evaluation findings is critical for accountability, police legitimacy, public scrutiny, and future program/policy planning. We understand the importance of anonymity for victims and the sensitivities around collecting and publishing research for this group. Acknowledging this, key evaluation findings must be publicly available. A publicly available version of key evaluation findings can be prepared in a way to leave out qualitative details of victim experiences avoiding risk of identification.

We recommend the trial station be funded for full evaluation entailing a cost/benefit analysis, figures on station attendees and outcomes, details on other station activities, and quantitative and qualitative assessment of experiences from officers, multidisciplinary staff, victims, and others in the DFV sector. We recommend evaluation is planned from trial commencement with record-keeping systems for all elements of station operation developed in line with this. We recommend key findings from the evaluation be publicly available.

## **2. We recommend *all* Queensland police adopt and practice the following protocols relating to the respectful treatment of victims.**

- a. show empathy and respect for victims
- b. listen to victim's stories without judging
- c. help victims remove offenders from their home
- d. support repeat victims who stay in violent relationships
- e. work from a gender perspective understanding the cycle of violence

These key protocols in respectfully responding to DFV victims were developed from our findings of how Argentinian specialist stations operate.



The second key question in both surveys asked respondents for their perceptions of these protocols. Overall, findings indicate more than 90% of Workforce respondents and 75% of Community respondents Strongly Agree or Agree that police ideal responses to victims of family violence should include the above-listed aspects (a-e).

We recommend *all* Queensland police adopt and practice the protocols relating to the respectful treatment of victims.

### **3. We recommend *all* Queensland police be adequately trained with professional skills in responding to domestic and family violence.**

DFV is not limited to one location or demographic, and makes up a significant portion of the policing workload, with frontline police estimates from Victoria stating that DFV accounts for 60 to 70% of police on duty time (The Police Association of Victoria 2015). There have been fatal failures by Queensland Police Service (*ABC News* 2021; Gleeson 2020b; Riga 2021), including systemic misidentification of victims as perpetrators (Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board 2017; Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018; Nancarrow 2019). There are fewer than 90 specialist DFV officers (as of April 2021, Smee 2021a). Considering these factors, it is essential that policing capacity be holistically strengthened.

We recommend Queensland Police Service training around DFV follow the Tasmania Police/University of Tasmania training approach. An approach must be developed in partnership with independent educational providers to ensure high quality and standards of training. First, recruits must undertake a thorough unit on DFV that is centred around a gender perspective and the power and control cycle of DFV. Siloing a complex issue to a single module in recruit training is outright insufficient to understand the complexities of violence and develop the skills to respond adequately. Thus, second, this holistic perspective of DFV must be embedded throughout all police training in every topic, from recruitment onwards. Third, qualifying programs for those moving from Senior Constable to Sergeant must include another unit on DFV, where they consider their role as leaders in responding to DFV, and consider the wider implications of DFV in policing.

**4. We recommend that an independent body be established to receive and investigate complaints by domestic and family violence victims about their treatment by Queensland Police officers.**

There is a significant disconnect between victims' experiences of police assistance and community expectations as to how police should respond to victims of DFV. Inquiries and studies into policing of DFV in Queensland have found that frontline police lack empathy toward victims, blame victims, fail to believe victims or take them seriously, or even side with the perpetrator (Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board 2017; Douglas 2018, 2019; Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018; Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015; Westera and Powell 2017). While Queensland Police Service has an Ethical Standards Command, we argue there is a need for a regulatory framework and body of accountability that is independent of Queensland Police Service to investigate complaints of police handling from victims of DFV. This would assist to strengthen compliance in line with legislation and enhance and restore trust DFV policing.

We recommended that an independent regulatory framework and body of accountability be established to receive and investigate complaints by domestic and family violence victims about their treatment by Queensland Police officers.

**5. We recommend the Queensland Government commit to boost flexible funding packages for those experiencing domestic and family violence.**

Improvements to DFV laws and changes to the criminal justice response alone will not address or improve experiences of DFV. Women who leave violent partners are particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless, entrenched in poverty and thus returning to violent households (AIHW 2016a). Queensland has provided flexible assistance funding initiatives for people experiencing DFV to keep them safe and support them to re-establish in the community away from the perpetrators.

We recommend the Queensland Government's response to DFV included the continuation and boosting of flexible funding packages.

**6. We recommend the Queensland Government commit to boost funding for social and affordable housing, and emergency accommodation, especially for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence.**

Queensland has recently commenced a modest scheme as part of their *Queensland Housing Strategy 2017-2027*. However, this is currently insufficient to meet the needs of women seeking to leave abusive partners. The Queensland Government must urgently commit to boost investment in social and affordable housing, especially for women and children experiencing DFV. Nationally, 7,690 women a year return to violent situations due to no affordable housing options, and approximately 9,120 women a year become homeless after leaving their homes due to DFV (Equity Economics 2021). There is an urgent need for both emergency and long-term accommodation and housing (Duke 2021; Equity Economics 2021; Hughes 2021). There is also a need for refuges to accommodate families with pets and to provide living arrangements that enable social distancing.

We recommend the Queensland Government commit to boost funding for social and affordable housing, and emergency accommodation, to ensure all victims escaping DFV have access to housing, from crisis to transitional to affordable long-term housing.

**7. We recommend an intersectional approach to policy making in criminal justice responses to domestic and family violence.**

Many problems with the current criminal justice response to victims of DFV are related to a lack of intersectionality in policy making (Nancarrow 2019), a one size fits all approach. Queensland's criminal justice response policy requires a fresh approach for responding to the unique barriers faced by diverse cohorts of DFV victims. These groups are also the most reluctant to seek police help, and often most disadvantaged in relation to access to mainstream support services.

These groups include, but are not limited to:

Women with disabilities are 'more likely than other women to experience domestic and family violence [that] is more likely to be serious, experienced differently, and extend for longer periods of time' (Frawley et al. 2015; ABS 2018). The ABS (2018) found that 21% (1.2 million) of people with disabilities in Australia have experienced intimate partner violence since the age of 15. They face

unique challenges in accessing justice or disclosing DV in a context where they may be entirely dependent on an abuser. The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability has recently amplified awareness of the risks for this particularly marginalised group.

Migrant women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities face heightened obstacles in accessing justice, due to ‘cultural, linguistic, economic, and social factors associated with resettlement in a new country’ (Australasian Judicial Administrators 2020). The first national study of migrant and refugee women’s safety and security found that one in three had experienced DFV and around half disclosed to a family member, but did not report it to the police because they considered it a ‘family matter’ (Segrave et al. 2021: 8-9). Of the 33% of respondents who had experienced some form of DFV, only 30% stated that it was rare, leading the authors to conclude that the majority of study participants that had experienced DFV were experiencing coercive control (Segrave et al. 2021: 32-33).

Indigenous Women experience higher rates of hospitalisation, death and harm due to DFV and many are reluctant to engage criminal justice responses given the history of the role of police in child removal, forced removal and racialised patterns of policing (Langton et al. 2020).

Women in regional and rural Australia experience some of the highest rates of domestic violence in the nation, with difficulties in accessing support due to remoteness and regional disadvantage (Owen and Carrington 2015). As Queensland is a regionalised state women in rural and regional areas have difficulty accessing appropriate criminal justice support and would benefit from flexible service delivery, such as teleconferencing court appearances, more use of digital service support, and perhaps mobile specialist police stations that operate from vans.

Women prisoners’ experiences of DFV are poorly understood. Dubbed the forgotten victims, around 70% of women in custody have experienced DFV. There is a complex link between these experiences and their incarceration, but many women in custody simply lack access to the support they need (Day et al. 2018).

We recommended an approach to policy making in criminal justice responses to domestic and family violence that consider the exceptional risks that culminate when forms of marginalisation intersect.

Regardless of decisions in relation to coercive control laws or a stand-alone domestic violence offence in Queensland, systemic change is required to improve policing and criminal justice system responses to victims of DFV. Given the very diverse circumstances in which women and children experience DFV, and unequal access to resources to escape violent partners, there is a strong case for specialist police stations with staff from diverse backgrounds. Specialist police stations designed to receive victims only have the potential to significantly enhance the policing of domestic and family violence across Queensland.

#### *End notes*

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- <sup>1</sup> Terminology in this space is complex and not in the scope of discussion in this submission. We have opted for survivors throughout, except in the recommendations, unless different terminology was used in survey questions or other sources cited.
- <sup>2</sup> The *National Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women* (Law No. 26485) recognises the following types of violence against women: physical, psychological, sexual, obstetric and reproductive, economic, patrimonial and symbolic.
- <sup>3</sup> Argentina has an offence called 'femicide' which carries a more severe punishment than murder.
- <sup>4</sup> Figures have been rounded up or down to nearest whole number throughout.
- <sup>5</sup> Aboriginal cultural groups may segregate some knowledge to specific genders, commonly referred to as 'men's business' and 'women's business', so it may not be appropriate for people to speak with the opposite gender about certain matters (Remote Area Health Corps 2013).

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## About the authors

### Professor Kerry Carrington

Kerry Carrington is a research professor in the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Centre for Justice and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. She is the lead investigator on two current Australian Research Council projects, the first investigating how to prevent gender violence, and the second on how to improve the policing of gender violence.

### Dr Jess Rodgers

Jess Rodgers is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Justice, QUT. Jess has been a research assistant in the School of Justice since 2010, in addition to other schools and institutions. He has undertaken research assistant work in a wide range of topics including policing domestic violence, small town policing, ableism in academia, transgender people in prisons, and creative industries employment.

### Vanessa Ryan

Vanessa Ryan is a Senior Research Associate at the Centre for Justice, QUT. She has undertaken extensive research on the impact of COVID on domestic and family violence services and their clients in Australia, and is a senior researcher on the Preventing Gendered Violence: Lessons from the Global South project.

## About the project

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We acknowledge the local and international project team members. Details on the full project team can be found [here](#).