

***Building a Strong Foundation* for the National Plan requires active participation, strong leadership, adequate funding and independent monitoring**

The release on 25 September 2012 of the first of four Implementation Plans of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (National Plan) is an important and welcome step towards eliminating gender-based violence. This follows the endorsement by all Australian governments of the National Plan 2010-2022 in February 2011. With one in three Australian women experiencing physical violence in their lifetime and one in five experiencing sexual violence, violence against women is one of the greatest human rights abuses in Australia.

The first Implementation Plan (2010-2013) entitled *Building a Strong Foundation* focuses on:

- building primary prevention capacity;
- enhancing service delivery;
- strengthening justice responses; and
- building the evidence base.

The emphasis on improving the levels of understanding about the dynamics of family violence among professionals working in the family law system through multidisciplinary training is significant. The establishment of the National Centre of Excellence, though yet to happen, is also important to progress a research agenda. The recognition of the impact of domestic violence on employment for women is a positive. However, more needs to be done in this area – for example, the status of being a victim/survivor of domestic violence should be included as a ground of discrimination in the new Equality Act.

An implementation plan is important for outlining clear timeframes in which to achieve specific and practical actions. Clear indicators of success are also essential. With only 9 months remaining on the first three-year Implementation Plan, it has been released very late. The indicators of success are also vague and seem difficult to measure, including, for example, ‘increased intolerance of violence against women’ which will be measured through a survey. More specific indicators of success are required for future Implementation Plans.

While the first National Implementation Plan has been released, at the time of writing in early November 2012, most states and territories are yet to publish their jurisdictional implementation plans. This is problematic as the success of the National Plan is dependent upon the leadership and commitment of *all* governments as well as the active participation of civil society. Disappointingly, while all governments had the opportunity to provide input into the first Implementation Plan, to our knowledge, there was little, if any, participation even by key non-government organisations. This is despite the fact that the Implementation Plan states that ‘involving all governments and the wider community is pivotal to reducing violence’. To turn this rhetoric into action, civil society which includes those NGOs working at a grassroots level, must be able to actively participate in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all future implementation plans and be adequately resourced to do so. It is encouraging to see this occurring in the development of some of the state and territory plans. Given the second National Implementation Plan commences in July 2013 it is imperative that NGOs are meaningfully engaged in the development of the next National Implementation Plan.

Transparency and accountability are important elements of good governance and will be essential to the success of the National Plan. Both the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women during Australia’s review in 2010 and the United Nations Human Rights Council during Australia’s Universal Periodic Review in 2011 emphasised the need for adequate funding for the implementation of the National Plan, including for an independent monitoring mechanism. No new funding beyond the previously committed \$86 million by the Commonwealth Government was announced at the time of the release of the first Implementation Plan. Furthermore, while governments and their ‘community partners’ were expected to agree on an evaluation framework by June 2012, at the time of writing, discussions with community partners are just commencing.

Monitoring and evaluation of the National Plan must be genuinely independent. Given NGO representatives on the National Plan Implementation Panel (NPIP) have been required to sign confidentiality agreements limiting what they can share with the NGO sector, another body should play this role. As a matter of urgency independent monitoring and evaluation must be addressed.

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