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19th August, 2022

Re: Draft National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children

I would like to seek one further opportunity to raise an issue currently missing from the current (revised) Draft National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (The Draft National Plan). This is namely the **lack of attention to the issue of substance use**.

I would like to make the point that the current Draft National Plan seems to be ‘stuck in the past’ on this issue. Currently, there appears to be almost no mention of alcohol and other drugs. Alcohol is mentioned as only a part of one bullet point undermining pro-social behaviour. The approach from the DFV sector for many decades has been that because alcohol and other drugs does not cause the violence and abuse of women and children, and that it is only ever an excuse means that it is therefore not relevant as a significant issue to be addressed.

This approach underplays 30 years of research that shows that the **severity of violence towards women increases significantly when it occurs in the context of substance use**¹. While in the past, this has related to the extent of physical and sexual violence that women experience, more recently research and practice has shifted to identify the ways in which substance use is used as an integrated, fear inducing aspect of the **tactics of abuse and coercive control**².

There are now more than a 1000 practitioners across Australia who have been trained in the Safe & Together Model which highlights the need to pivot to the perpetrator, partner with non-offending parents (usually women), focus on children and address the intersections with other areas such as mental health, alcohol and other drugs. The training and research in this area is demonstrating perpetrators use substance use coercion (using alcohol and other drugs in their tactics of abuse) in ways that promote or ‘cause’ the victim survivor to use substances to anaesthetise the pain of DFV, to exacerbate the victim survivors’ use of substances (e.g. introducing women to substance use and then controlling them and victimising them further through this process), and sabotaging their recovery from substance use in the tactics of violence and abuse used against them (Healey et al, 2020)³.

¹ Humphreys, C., Regan, L., Rivers, D. and Thiara, R.K (2005) Domestic violence and substance misuse: tackling complexity’, *British Journal of Social Work* 35 (7) 1303-1320.

² Heward-Belle, S., Kertesz, M., Humphreys, C., Tsantefski, M. & Isobe, J. (2022). Participatory practice guideline development at the intersections of domestic and family violence, mental distress and/or parental substance use. *Advances in Dual Diagnosis*, 15, 51-65
<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ADD-12-2021-0017/full/html>

³ Healey, L., Heward-Belle, S., Humphreys, C., Isobe, J., Tsantefski, M. & Young, A. (2020). Working at the intersections of domestic and family violence, parental substance misuse and/or mental health

We note that **children are substantially impacted when DFV occurs in the context of substance use**. The numbers of children coming into out of home care are increasing year on year, with 46,000 children in out of home care in 2020⁴. Rarely are children taken into care due to domestic violence alone, but most frequently when domestic violence occurs in the context of substance use and/or mental health problems⁵. The lack of attention to this crucial issue suggests that children living with domestic violence and the issues which impact upon them are being overlooked in the current Draft National Plan.

We also note that when identifying relevant national plans that relate to the plan to End Violence Against Women and Children, that there is **no mention or either the National Drug Strategy (2017-2026) or National Alcohol Strategy (2019-2028)**. Both these Plans identify domestic violence as relevant, the Alcohol strategy more so than the Drug Strategy. We will continue the disconnect between these siloed service systems unless these are mentioned in the current Draft National Plan.

On a more basic level, children are terrified when they hear their father come home drunk and abusive. They go to their bedrooms and hide. A man who has used alcohol in the context of his violence and abuse, only has to threaten with reaching for a bottle of beer to engender fear in his partner. **Alcohol and other drugs are an integral part of coercive control and the tactics of abuse**. The current Draft National Plan will contribute to the lack of a holistic response and siloed services which fragment the lives of children, women and men unless some recognition is given to this issue.

Possible areas for inclusion of this issue could include:


- Identifying the National Drug Strategy and National Alcohol Strategy in the reports of relevance
- Mentioning in the homicide data that drug and alcohol was present in 44% of domestic murders (AIC)
- In the section on children (p65) mention the co-occurrence of DV with AOD and MH as a factor for children being removed from the care of their parents
- In the section on ‘Focus on Perpetration’ mention the need for MBC programs and AOD services to respond to substance use coercion.
- In the section on Coercive Control the way perpetrators use either their own or the victim survivors use of alcohol and other drugs in their tactics of abuse
- In the Priority Areas for Action (p64) Mental Health intervention is mentioned, but a bullet point could also include the need for Alcohol and Other Drug treatment services to attend to substance use coercion in relation to victim survivors (women’s use) of substances, or to men’s use of substances as part of tactics of abuse and coercive control.
- In the section on Recovery – women’s use of substances in the context of abuse needs to be addressed.

issues. Research report of the STACY Project: Safe & Together Addressing ComplexitY. Melbourne, University of Melbourne. <https://violenceagainstwomenandchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/STACY-working-with-complexity-Final-Report.pdf>

⁴ AIHW (2021). Child protection in Australia, 2019-2020. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2019-20/summary>

⁵ Conley Wright, A., Metcalfe, L., Heward-Belle, S., Collings, S., & Barrett, E. (2021). Critical interpretive synthesis: Child protection involvement for families with domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug issues, and mental health issues (Research report, 06/2021). ANROWS.

I appreciate that there are many issues to consider in the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children. However, I believe it is a significant gap in the current Draft National Plan not to mention this issue. I am not alone in my concern, but have the backing of a number of peak bodies and community sector organisations who are also concerned.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "C. F. Humphreys". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered within a light grey rectangular box.

Cathy Humphreys
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