

Joint statement: Enough is enough

We should all be safe to live, work and learn free from violence.

But for too long, a culture of male entitlement, gender inequality and disrespect has enabled men to perpetrate horrific gendered violence against women and girls across their life span. And for many, this injustice is compounded by intersecting discriminations.

Young women's recent brave advocacy for a safer future has focused national attention on the urgent need for systemic action. Brittany Higgins has come forward with an allegation that she was raped in Parliament House. Friends of a woman who has now died have spoken out about rape allegations against our country's Attorney-General. Dhanya Mani has spoken up for a safer future and prioritising survivors after the woeful response to her allegation of indecent assault. Chanel Contos has called out rape culture in schools. Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, has spoken out about coverup culture and abuse of power.

Every single day survivors disclose violence to a system that doesn't care enough to bring them justice.

Enough is enough.

Rape and other acts of gendered violence have profound, life-long consequences for survivors, often including physical disabilities and mental health conditions. Yet our prevention infrastructure and support services are not resourced to adequately support survivors' safety. And systems too often fail to hold perpetrators to account.

We deserve better.

Our parliamentary leaders must treat all forms of gendered violence as seriously as other threats to community safety.

Political leaders must take decisive action to make parliaments a safe place for everyone. Including improving the rules governing political staffers and party members to prevent abuse, addressing inequality, providing accessible independent reporting avenues, and ensuring real accountability for misconduct. But action in this moment must extend beyond our parliaments.

There is also a crisis in our communities. Horrific violence is being perpetrated and enabled across the country - the result of a wider cultural and systemic problem that manifests in schools, workplaces, institutions and homes. For many, these drivers of violence are further enabled by intersecting power dynamics that increase barriers to a safer future. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, resisting the ongoing impacts of colonisation and racism is inseparable from gender justice. Intersecting systems of power and oppression also increase barriers to safety for

women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women with disabilities, younger women, older women, women in institutional care, women in prison, women in insecure work, and trans and gender diverse people as they strive for safety and justice. Too often, impunity is the outcome.

It is the responsibility of governments to intervene in the systems that continue to enable violence. Survivors and community leaders are already working for a safer future - it's time governments properly supported solutions, particularly the leadership and self-determination of First Nations communities.

There are clear pathways to a safer future. We demand the action from leaders needed to make it happen.

This must also include:

Prevention: Implement the full spectrum of long-term systemic prevention initiatives that can address the underlying causes of gendered violence, including sexism and intersecting forms of discrimination. Starting with comprehensive whole-of-school education programs.

Resourcing services and accountability mechanisms: Properly resource the specialist services that victim-survivors of gendered violence rely on to report, be safe and recover. Resource the mechanisms needed to hold perpetrators to account.

Law reform: Improve access to justice for victim-survivors of sexual assault through substantive and procedural law reform, and educate the workforce so responses are appropriate and trauma-informed.

Addressing workplace sexual harassment: Action all recommendations of last year's Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report.

Anything else falls short, and is a decision to leave women in danger.

We must believe, support and listen to survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, and properly resource solutions to prevent gendered violence from occurring in the first place.

Signed,

Australian Women's Health Network
Marie Stopes Australia
Violence Prevention Australia
End Rape on Campus Australia
Working Women's Centre SA Inc
Women's Community Shelters

Domestic Violence NSW
Women's Legal Service Qld
Embolden SA Inc
Our Choice WA
YWCA Australia
Equality Rights Alliance
Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change
National Council of Single Mothers & their Children Inc
Democracy in Colour
South Australian Abortion Action Coalition (saaac)

More information (drop down) - linked from website / background for media, but not formally part of sign on

Review the rules governing political staffers and party members

Staffers and members of political parties need to be able to safely make reports and seek action and support for their safety; without threats to their career.

As Brittany Higgins has said: “everyone should feel safe to report sexual assault without fear of losing their job.”

To prevent abuse action also needs to be taken to address gender inequalities in parliament and parties, and to challenge harmful cultures.

When men are taught that they deserve to be in charge; and that aggression, violence and disrespect are acceptable -- it feeds into a culture that enables sexual assault, and undermines women’s safety and freedom from violence.

Resource and roll out long-term systemic prevention work to address the underlying causes of gendered violence, including comprehensive school-based education programs.

All governments need to invest in fully implementing the national prevention framework *Change the story and The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022*.

This includes resourcing evidence-based respectful relationships and comprehensive sexuality education curriculum that addresses all of the drivers of violence, including sexism and the intersecting forms of discrimination, and provides professional development for teachers and non-teaching school staff.

As Chanel Contos, who started the viral petition for better consent education in schools, has said: "I have lived in three different countries and I have never spoken to anyone who has experienced rape culture the way me and my friends had growing up in Sydney amongst private schools... students need to be taught about consent to keep them safe during and soon after school".

But for too long, a culture of male entitlement, gender inequality, disrespect and racism, has enabled men to perpetrate horrific gendered violence against women and girls across their life span. Prevention must also include a focus on challenging all of the power imbalances that contribute to violence.

From the time of colonisation to today, First Nations girls and women continue to pay the price of gendered violence. While people from around the world have settled in this nation, there are still too many victim-survivors from marginalised communities whose voices for equality and safety have been ignored. Even older women are not immune from this violence, with the Royal Commission into Aged Care highlighting the fact that 50 sexual assault cases taking place every week.

Prevention must encompass the entire spectrum, and include institutions which house women with disability and older women.

Properly resource initiatives that victim-survivors rely on to report and recover; and the mechanisms needed to hold perpetrators to account.

We need a government that treats gendered violence as seriously as other risks to the safety of our community, and prioritises and resources responses appropriately.

That includes holding institutions to account for the behaviour they enable – whether they are workplaces, or educational institutions like universities or residences.

As well as making sure victim-survivors of gendered violence are able to access appropriate support, have multiple appropriate pathways to report, and aren't left without the specialist services they need to be safe, including investing in public/social housing so survivors can access shelter.

Action the Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report recommendations

Last year the Sex Discrimination Commissioner released a landmark report into workplace sexual harassment, with 55 recommendations to improve safety at work.

It made clear the current legal and regulatory system is no longer fit for purpose. We need governments to implement the new recommended model; and shift from the current reactive model that requires complaints from individuals to a more proactive approach that requires positive actions from employers.

Improve access to justice for victim-survivors of sexual assault

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey 2016 found that 200,500 Australians reported experiencing sexual assault in the 12 months preceding the survey. Yet, due to widespread distrust in legal systems response to sexual violence, just 17% (34,085) of the total number of these experiences were reported to police, and an even fewer proportion of cases were reported for marginalised communities, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTIQ+ individuals, people with disabilities and people from migrant and refugee communities. In 2018-19, only 7,642 prosecutions were finalised (according to ABS Criminal Courts, Australia data), and only 40% of these prosecutions resulted in conviction.

The legal system does not encourage victim-survivors to report their experiences of sexual violence. It is extremely difficult for women to navigate the legal system, especially for those who face barriers due to financial constraints, level of literacy, access to information technology and physical distance from service providers. And the experience is often re-traumatising.

Evidence shows that victim-survivors who do try to pursue recourse through the legal system do not feel that they are afforded 'justice' and some are even further punished through the loss of employment, familial relationships and custody of their children. The experience of giving evidence at trial as been described as a further rape, compounding trauma.

We must review the legal and institutional frameworks and processes to improve access to justice for victim-survivors of sexual assault. This includes: reforming sexual consent law with a focus on affirmative consent; reviewing policies, procedures and guidelines relating to the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault matters; considering legislated jury directions; providing a specialist response; and ensuring everyone working within the criminal justice system and supporting victim-survivors of sexual assault has ongoing training and professional development in trauma informed practice, an understanding of: complex trauma, cultural competency, the experiences of LGBTIQ+ communities, and survivors with disability so that they are able to respond appropriately in all sexual assault matters.

Objective:

- Unite key groups / feminist sector behind asks - so there is a clear benchmark against which public expectations of action are set
- Provide actions that can be easily listed/quoted in media
- Provide compelling values based language to hook people in and feel this issue is relevant beyond the Canberra bubble
- give the public a sense that there are solutions and alternatives to this problem, that we can change the status quo

Tone:

- The expectation should be equality and it's unacceptable that anything falls short
- This should already be happening and it's inconceivable that this be allowed to continue
- This is a critical issue for the govt and our collective pressure won't go away until the govt takes genuine steps to address this problem