



Engender
Equality

Submission to the House of Representative Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare
Dependence
18 September 2018

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Introduction

About Engender Equality

Established in 1989, Engender Equality is the leading non-government agency in Tasmania supporting people who have experienced family violence. Engender Equality is a dynamic, evolving, professional organisation, founding our philosophies, practice and resources on current research. Engender Equality has a high level of skill, knowledge and experience working with women, children and families impacted by family violence and abuse.

Engender Equality's core work is in providing therapeutic counselling to people who are currently or have previously experienced family violence, abuse and other violations. Engender Equality provides training on family violence and gender inequality and plays an active role in Tasmania in advocating for systemic change to gender inequality and violence against women and their children.

Engender Equality believes that people have the right:

- To live free from violence and in safety
- To equality and respect
- To recognise their potential
- To make informed choices regarding their lives

Given Engender Equality's specialisation in working with women and families who have experienced family violence, this submission is primarily focused on their specific experiences. People who have experienced abuse are often significantly disempowered, and may not be able to engage in the kind of community participation that is necessary to ensure that their voices are heard and their concerns addressed. The Inquiry's call for submissions is an excellent opportunity for organisations to advocate on their behalf. Therefore, we believe it is our role to address the specific issues that are faced by women and children who are disproportionately disadvantaged because of current and historical family violence and gender inequality.

Our concerns with the terms of reference

The problematic notion of ‘intergenerational welfare dependency’

The Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence was appointed to inquire and report on matters relating to welfare dependence of families and outcomes for children. As an organisation, Engender Equality is committed to social justice and addressing the causes of inequality, particularly gender inequality in our community. We would like to express concern in the underlying assumptions and approach used in the Discussion Paper. Use of terms such as ‘welfare dependence’ and ‘culture of dependency’ are evidence of an underlying reductionist and individualistic approach to understanding entrenched disadvantage. Engender Equality rejects this underlying deficit-oriented approach that attributes blame to individuals for experiences of poverty and unemployment. Engender Equality believes the true issue is not intergenerational welfare dependence, rather, it is *intergenerational disadvantage*. Intergenerational disadvantage is not the fault of individuals, rather it is evidence of Government failure to implement the right policies that address and combat chronic poverty. We strongly advocate that this Inquiry must do more than blame individual members of our community who receive Government support. We urge the Select Committee to adopt workable, evidence-based recommendations to alleviate poverty. To this end, Engender Equality believes Australia must use a structural approach that provides families with additional resources and works to remove structural barriers to opportunity, in particularly gender inequality. We urge the Select Committee to make recommendations to invest in a national support system that sets people up for success and enables all families to flourish.

Family violence has not been included in the terms of reference

Family violence is a complex and serious social problem which affects individuals, families, communities, the workplace and the economy. Engender Equality would like to express disappointment that the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry do not specifically address family violence, or the role of the welfare system within abusive environments. This lack of acknowledgement reduces the complexity in the lives of women and children who are experiencing abuse, and fails to ensure that their specific needs and issues are addressed. The safety of women and children must be a priority, and the safety of women and children who are experiencing family violence requires special consideration by the welfare system and by this Inquiry. It is imperative that the Select Committee includes the issue of family violence as an important consideration in the discussion about intergenerational disadvantage. This Inquiry must take in to consideration the increased risk women and children face in regard to safety, housing, unemployment and health as a result of family violence. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that poverty, unemployment and

low socio-economic status are reinforcing factors in family violence and as such, need to be addressed as a part of any genuine attempt to reduce chronic disadvantage.

Our response: Why family violence is a key consideration in the issue of intergenerational disadvantage

The impact of family violence

Family violence results in significant social, emotional and economic costs to victims, their families and the broader community (Laing & Bobic 2002). The costs to society are significant, ongoing and intergenerational. Family violence has a profound impact on physical and mental health. It can lead directly to serious injury, permanent impairment, disability or death. From an economic point of view, it has been estimated that the cost of violence against women and their children to the Australian economy was \$22 billion for the 2015-16 period (KPMG, 2016).

The intergenerational impact of family violence

The experience of family violence in childhood can have profound negative impacts that resonate not only across the lifespan, but with intergenerational impacts (Courtois, Ford, & Cloitre, M, 2009).

Family violence often has very severe negative impact on the well-being of the whole family. These effects may affect the family for the rest of their lives. Children are very often present during family violence incidents (ABS, 2017). Children's physical health, learning, cognition, social and emotional development can all be severely impaired by experiencing family violence (Chadwick & Morgan, 2009). Exposure to the trauma of family violence can harm children's brain development (Perry, 2001). Secure attachment between a child and their carer can be disrupted. The World Health Organisation highlights the ongoing impact of childhood abuse; *"some children from households where there is intimate partner violence may exhibit increased rates of behavioural and emotional problems that can result in increased difficulties with education and employment, often leading to early school drop-out, youth offending and early pregnancy"* (World Health Organisation, 2010, p.5).

Older children may also have an increase in health-risk behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse and dependence (WHO, 2010). Adolescents who experience violence at home are at risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence in their own dating relationships (Flood & Fergus, 2008).

Attitudes towards violence correlate strongly with exposure to violence and may be transferred across generations via learning processes, schools, the media and experience of violence. Exposure to, and experience of, family violence during childhood may lead to learnt models of behaviour regarding the use of violence. Additionally, absence of parental encouragement in regards to emotional

regulation and self-esteem can lead to a child to respond to emotionally distressing cues with assertion of power and violence or, alternatively, learned helplessness. These responses have impact on their future adult relationships.

Family violence directly impacts parents important role as 'first teacher'

Many women who have experienced family violence describe how they spend an enormous amount of time and energy trying to meet the unrealistic demands of an abusive partner. Very often, women's safety may depend on it. The perpetrator's sense of entitlement and controlling behaviour often impacts on mothers' opportunity to interact with their children in their preferred way. For example, mothers describe their partners acting with jealousy when they express affection and delight with their children. They may then be directly or indirectly prevented from activities such as cuddling the children and reading a bed-time story. For example, a client reported *"when we were at home I wasn't allowed to play with [child] because he wanted to be the favourite parent so if I was trying to spend quality time with [our child], he would say 'isn't there jobs for you to go and do'"* (Engender Equality client, 2016).

Mothers who have experienced family violence express concern that perpetrators place unrealistic demands on the children, such as demanding that a child does not cry or punishing a child if they seek comfort. Mothers also describe using more strict disciplinary styles themselves when the perpetrator is present to try protect the children, such as stopping the kids from playing when their father is due home. Following separation, mothers often report having more positive interactions with the children, for example, *"Every bump in the road was a big deal [when perpetrator lived with us]. Now I don't have to worry about what will happen if the kids don't do their jobs around the house"* (Engender Equality client, 2016).

The impact of welfare in creating disadvantage

Poverty, unemployment, mental health and stress are all known reinforcing factors to the prevalence of family violence. It is imperative in the discussion of welfare, and intergenerational disadvantage that measures should be made to increase rather than reduce resources of families. Reducing resources will directly increase the stress that families in poverty and near poverty already have to endure. Reducing resourcing to families through increased conditionality, or compulsory income management by removing access to cash will increase incidences of violence, the vulnerability of women to the impact of family violence and abuse, as well as increase children's exposure to violence in the home. These effects were reflected by the 2011 Inquiry into Family Violence and Commonwealth Laws, the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) which found that welfare restrictions through income management, undermine efforts to strengthen the self-agency of women

subjected to family violence and can lead to more problems. The ALRC concluded that there is evidence that income management can “fuel violence in families”. In this context, the risks of further disempowerment and loss of independence from compulsory income management are high (ALRC, 2012).

Our recommendations:

Investment in primary prevention of family violence

In order to break the cycles of intergenerational disadvantage, the Federal Government must invest in primary prevention measures that address family violence and associated reinforcing factors. The Federal Government can support the shifts required to eliminate violence against women by using public health approaches that address the individual, family, community and societal factors contributing to family violence.

Essential to working towards a society free of violence is to provide adequate social, financial and emotional support mechanisms to assist men, women and children through times of hardship and transition.

Improvement of the financial capacity and security of families

Australian’s need mechanisms to balance family responsibilities with paid work including flexible work culture, accessible and affordable childcare and paid parental leave in order to enable meaningful engagement in workplaces. The minimum wage and essential Centrelink payments must be sufficient for individuals and families to be able to make pro-social lifestyle choices that enable individuals and families to flourish and meet their potential.

Improvement of women’s economic independence

Engender Equality insists that Australia must adopt policies that can ensure women’s economic security: gender equality legislation, pay equity, as well as protection from workplace harassment and bullying.

Women who are experiencing financial hardship are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of family violence. Lack of financial independence is a powerful barrier for women attempting to leave abusive relationships and may limit the ability of women to care for themselves and their children, to pursue legal matters, and find appropriate accommodation.

It is also imperative that this Inquiry recognises that efforts to escape family violence can have devastating economic impacts. Safety planning often means significant life changes for example moving house and relocating interstate. People in these situations need access to appropriate accommodation, civil legal services and legal representation as well as emotional support and financial assistance.

Better coordinating services between tiers of Government to support families

The Federal Government needs to ensure that there is adequate funding for family violence services, including services that provide longer-term counselling. Engender Equality provides long-term counselling for women who are in, or have been in, abusive relationships and believe that this is a vital service for families recovering from family violence and an important mechanism in restoring families from the adverse intergenerational impacts of abuse and violence.

Improvement of housing support

Family violence is a leading cause of homelessness. In 2015-16, 38 percent of all people requesting assistance from specialist homelessness agencies were escaping family violence. This included 31, 000 children aged under 14 and 66, 000 women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017).

The Federal Government must strengthen the availability of alternative accommodation for women planning to leave abusive relationships, including access to emergency accommodation and affordable rental properties. Women are often forced to choose between whether to stay in an abusive relationship or to become homeless. Risks of homelessness to people facing increased hardship will force women to stay in unsafe environments or go into situations that may be a risk to their safety and wellbeing. Our welfare system must support women and children's opportunity to live a life free of family violence. They must be supported through the availability of suitable public housing and affordable private rental housing.

Improvement of legal support

Without legal support, women can remain impoverished and economically disadvantaged. Victims of family violence need access to information regarding their legal rights. The Federal Government must prioritise funding for services. Budget cuts to legal services will have significant negative impact on victims of family violence seeking legal protection. The Family Law system must address the challenges faced by victims of family violence attempting to establish physically and emotionally safe arrangements for their children.

Conclusion

There is clear and compelling evidence that the adverse effects of family violence contribute to intergenerational disadvantage. In the search for more effective policies to tackle entrenched poverty, we insist that these policies recognise the adverse effects of family violence as well the need for systemic and cultural change to address the drivers of family violence in Australia. Engender Equality urges the Select Committee to reject an individualistic blaming approach that perpetuates further stigmatisation and harm to the most vulnerable in our communities. We urge this Inquiry to adopt policies, informed by a family violence framework that increases structural support for families and children, grounded in evidence and implemented in partnership with communities.

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