

Rethinking our response to gender-based violence

A speech presented by Alina Thomas, CEO of Engender Equality to staff of Home Base Hobart to celebrate International Women's Day, 2026

I acknowledge the Palawa and Pakana people, their elders past and present. Sovereignty was never ceded, and this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Balancing the Scales is the theme for International Women's Day 2026. It's a really great conundrum for us to be talking about.

I invite you to call out words that you associate with patriarchy (or masculinity).

Patriarchy is a system of thinking and behaving. It is a dominant ideology that shapes our laws, our institutions, our policies, our relationships and even our definitions of fairness and justice.

It privileges hierarchy, status, dominance, control, competition, and punishment. It elevates procedural fairness over lived experience. It demands evidence before belief. It places a burden of proof before a right to safety.

We design solutions to intimate partner violence within that framework — legalistic, criminalised, adversarial, carceral — we should not be surprised when those systems fail to deliver safety for women and children.

What happens is that patriarchal systems often replicates the dynamics of abuse they attempt to address: control, surveillance, disbelief, entitlement, punishment.

Some examples include:

- Intimate partner violence is a pattern of a behavior and an attitudinal style – but we have Police looking for distinct incidents.
- Research indicates that up to 20–40% of male Police officers report using violence in their own relationships, and yet Police remain our primary response to intimate partner violence.



Engender
Equality

- Procedural fairness is prioritised over trust - victim-survivors have to meet high evidentiary thresholds and withstand scrutiny, while the person using violence benefits from institutional caution and delay.
- Child safety systems treat “failure to protect” as equivalent to perpetrating harm. Mothers are punished rather than the person using violence.
- Family law prioritises parental contact, over safety concerns.
- Workplaces demand formal complaints before acting on known risks - organisational liability is protected ahead of staff wellbeing.
- Funding bodies fail to fund services for victim-survivors leaving women and children in diabolically unsafe and tenuous situations, as if this is a mere inconvenience.

Patriarchal solutions do not work when patriarchy is the problem. If we are serious about ending gender-based violence, we must be serious about creating non-patriarchal solutions.

What might that look like?

- Non-patriarchal systems would be relational rather than adversarial.
- They would be accountable rather than defensive.
- They would be transparent rather than opaque.
- They would value freedom of choice and access to support.
- They would recognise that gendered violence is not simply a criminal justice issue and will not be resolved through criminal justice responses.

Every victim-survivor knows, violence against women is a power issue.

Addressing power requires us to reshape culture and institutions so that they uphold the rights, dignity, and safety of women and children.

That means acknowledging how men's power, privilege, and entitlement are embedded in laws, policies, and practices — and how these structures are misused to control, isolate, and silence victim-survivors.

It means applying a gendered lens consistently, as a core analytic tool.

And it means valuing feminised attributes:

- Care
- Relationality
- Collaboration
- Empathy
- Transparency.

These qualities have been devalued historically because they are associated with femininity. Yet they are the qualities that quietly hold our communities and families together.

At the same time, we must critique and actively de-centre masculinised attributes that dominate institutional culture: competition, hierarchy, emotional detachment, and punitive reflexes.

Violence against women doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is sustained by norms that privilege male dominance and female compliance. And when those norms are embedded in our institutions, reform initiatives are tokenistic not transformative.

In Tasmania, we must confront this honestly. We need to actively and curiously interrogate structures.

Moving forward....

Firstly, we need research to understand the nature and impact of systems abuse in our own context. We need to examine how institutional responses can perpetuate harm — not just anecdotal accounts, but rigorous, coordinated evidence.



Engender
Equality

Secondly, we must adopt coordinated approaches to data collection and reporting. If we cannot see the patterns, we cannot change them. And victim-survivor expertise must be reflected in every review, every report, and every reform process.

This must start with believing women and believing victim-survivors.

Thirdly, we must work alongside self-determining victim-survivor groups and networks to audit and reform the very systems that are meant to protect. Their knowledge should shape training for every government employee, from frontline services to executive leadership.

Finally, we must implement family violence impact audits across all services. Every policy. Every funding decision. Every procedural change should be examined through the lens of safety, gender equity, and dignity.

Imagine if we treated gendered harm the way we treat financial or legal risk — systematically assessed, mitigated, and monitored.

Imagine if institutional reform was measured not only by compliance, but by reductions in violence abuse and harassment.

We need a State that upholds dignity and actively reduces harm for all people impacted by violence and abuse.

To do this we should look beyond the individual perpetrator or person using violence and examine the ecosystem that enables and condones violence.

From now on, I encourage you that when we talk about men who use violence, let's also name the systems that enable that violence.

Let's admit that that neutrality does not exist in a context of inequality.

If we want different outcomes, we must be willing to design different systems.

Not systems built solely on punishment, but systems built on accountability.

Not systems driven solely by adversarial logic, but systems grounded in relational safety.

Not systems that demand women adapt to harm, but systems that adapt to protect women and children.

It is about who is believed, who is funded, who is prioritised.

It is about whether we are willing to imagine solutions that are not confined by patriarchal logic.

So today, I invite you to look beyond the individual incident and examine the whole system that produces harm.

Ask:

- Whose interests are centred?
- Who benefits?
- Whose voice is amplified?
- Whose success is prioritised?

And most importantly, what would this system look like if dignity, equity, and relational accountability were its starting points? Let's honour the experience of victim-survivor communities in Tasmania.

Let's follow their leadership and commit to transforming the structures that shape our collective response to violence.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for being here.

Please continue this conversation in your networks, your organisations, and your spheres of influence — because building non-patriarchal solutions is collective work.



Engender
Equality