

# Submission to the Australian Government:

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*Issues Paper – A Stronger, More Diverse and Independent Community Sector*



## Acknowledgment of Country

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No to Violence acknowledges First Nations Peoples across these lands; the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters. We pay respect to all Elders, past, present, and emerging. We acknowledge a deep connection with country which has existed over 60,000 years. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and this was and always will be First Nation's land.



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Men's Referral Service – for men concerned about their behaviour

**1300 766 491**

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## About No to Violence

No to Violence (NTV) is Australia's largest national peak body representing organisations and individuals working with men to end family violence. We are guided by the values of accountability, gender equity, leadership, and change.

NTV provides support and advocacy for the work of specialist men's family violence interventions carried out by organisations and individuals. The work undertaken by specialist men's family violence services is diverse and includes but is not limited to Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs), case management, individual counselling, policy development and advocacy, research and evaluation, training, workforce development and capability building.

NTV also provides a range of training for the specialist men's family violence workforce including a Graduate Certificate in partnership with Swinburne University, as well as professional development for workforces who come into contact, directly and indirectly, with men using family violence. NTV is a leading national voice and plays a central role in the development of evidence, policy, and advocacy to support the work of specialist men's family violence nationally.

## About Our Members

NTV represents over 160 members Australia-wide. Our membership structure is inclusive of individuals and organisations ranging from specialist services to individuals and others who have an interest in preventing and responding to men's family violence.

## Our approach to policy analysis and advocacy

No to Violence is the largest peak body in Australia representing the men's family violence sector. This is a sector with a rich and innovative history in Australia, spanning more than 30 years. Our members are practitioners working directly with men who use violence, many of whom are also victim-survivors. The men's family violence sector works across prevention, early intervention, response and recovery and healing. As the peak body, we work on behalf of our members to spotlight their innovative and practice-based knowledge and insights, identify knowledge gaps and the data and frameworks needed to address them, and advocate to shift the burden for men's violence away from women and children towards the men using violence.

In line with our role as the national peak body for the men's family violence sector, our approach to responding to this Issues Paper is to start by asking who bears the brunt of existing policy and how we might design policy that shifts this burden away from the most marginalised members of our community. We make use of our members' practice-based insights and the relevant evidence base to ensure that our assessments are robust and our feedback to government is tangible and compelling.

## Key recommendations

No to Violence recommends the Commonwealth Government invests in the following initiatives to achieve its vision of a stronger, more diverse, and independent community sector:

1. Establish specialist sector peak bodies, including a peak body for the men's family violence sector;
2. Develop a national community service workforce strategy to build a culturally-safe and trauma-informed workforce;
3. Redesign community sector funding so it is tailored to the needs of community-led, grassroots and holistic service organisations.

## Background

The community services sector is inextricably intertwined with historical and ongoing practices of colonisation that have disrupted economic security, connection to place and culture, and access to safety and dignity.<sup>1</sup> Community service sector reforms represent an opportunity to move forward and right historical wrongs by designing a system that centres the needs of services working to disrupt inequality and disadvantage.

As the peak body for the sector working with men to end their use of violence, No to Violence spotlights our members' holistic and community-led approach to end men's use of violence by disrupting intergenerational violence and disadvantage and promoting healing. Our members work across the four domains of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children (2022-2032) - prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing. The holistic nature of our members' work is crucial to the federal government's commitments to upholding and protecting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children, and families to be safe and free from all forms of violence. This includes family, domestic, and sexual violence, racial violence, and institutional violence.<sup>2</sup>

The men's family violence sector and the broader domestic, family, and sexual violence sector are facing significant barriers to achieving their objective – ending male violence. Domestic, family, and sexual violence services, like other community and social welfare services, are profoundly impacted by narrow and siloed funding models, budget rationalisation, and competition for government contracts.<sup>3</sup>

Commitments to community service sector reform must centre federal government commitments to ending institutional violence and name the ways that this violence intersects with other structural and systemic forms of violence, including but not limited to racial violence and family, domestic and sexual violence. No to Violence is committed to working alongside government, on behalf of our members – the men's family violence sector, to realise this bold and necessary vision.

The path towards meaningful community service sector reform that results in a stronger, more diverse sector with an independent voice requires **three key changes** –

1. Establishment of peak bodies, including a peak body for the men's family violence sector, to capture and amplify holistic, community-led and innovative solutions;
2. The development of a national community services sector workforce strategy, outlining the path towards building a culturally safe and trauma informed community services sector workforce including specific steps for supporting community-led providers in sectors such as men's family violence services; and
3. Redesigning community sector funding agreements, grant guidelines and application processes so that these are tailored to the needs of community-led, grassroots and holistic service organisations.

The rationale behind these recommendations, including a summary of No to Violence members' feedback is provided in the sections below.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hunter, Krakouer, and Walter (2024) [The Maintenance of the Dominance of Whiteness in Australian Social Work](#) and Tascón and Gatwiri (2020) [Towards Cultural Humility: Theorising Cultural Competence as Institutionalised Whiteness](#) for an overview of continued investment in colonising practices within social work.

<sup>2</sup> As outlined in the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan](#), 2023–2025.

<sup>3</sup> Seymour, Wendt and Goudie, 2023.

## Feedback

### Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnerships

Our members are concerned that the current community service sector arrangements do not allow opportunities for their concerns to be heard, particularly for sectors that operate from a holistic, grassroots and community-led perspective. The current model for consultation relies on organisations allocating their limited resources to participate in consultation – a model that is tailored to the capacity of large, well-resourced and established mainstream community service organisations. This is a model that ensures that the loudest voices are heard by government and that systems continue to be geared towards their needs, rather than to those most in need.

This stakeholder engagement model hems the flow of information between service providers and decision-makers, impacting on service providers' capacity to prepare for and respond to policy and legislative reforms. We heard from our members that there have been missed opportunities to communicate with and support the sector through recent reforms including minimum qualification standards, providing feedback on new and proposed coercive control laws, and responding to important initiatives such as new affirmative consent laws.

Our sector has identified a need for improved representation to assist with coordination of the men's family violence sector and opportunities for concerns to be heard within reform agendas (and in the course of business-as-usual), within the context of a major overhaul of the current funding and contracts system. At present, service providers are facing uncertainty about how to respond to the implementation of the National Plan reforms. These providers are seeking guidance on how their integrated, trauma-informed and culturally safe practice models fit within a siloed service system and are wanting greater flexibility in their funding contract terms and targets.

The men's family violence sector is made up of diverse providers, many of whom are small and embedded in their communities. It is necessary to **establish a peak body** to work with these providers to translate their concerns directly to decision-makers in order to realise the potential of reform agendas such as the National Plan and others listed above.

### Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links

No to Violence has heard mixed feedback about the potential efficacy of partnerships between large mainstream organisations and smaller community-led providers. Some of our members have formed effective and meaningful partnerships with larger organisations. We heard that, when partnerships are done right, they can facilitate capacity-building for all parties. We also heard that developing meaningful partnerships "doesn't happen overnight" – it takes time to establish genuine relationships between services.

We also hear consistently from our members that there is a dire need for sector coordination, particularly to ensure effective advocacy. As our members most consistently communicate their desire for improved communication and collaboration within the sector and across related sectors, No to Violence recommends that the federal government **establish peak bodies for specialist sectors, including the men's family violence sector**, as a means to building strong partnerships and links to community organisations.

### Providing longer grant agreement terms

The entire community service sector experiences instability accelerated by the short-term nature of funding contracts. This approach impacts on the sector's capacity to recruit and retain skilled staff



and build capacity in future leaders. Practitioners and leaders in the men's family violence sector have told us that they want to see systemic change in service agreements for holistic and community-led services.

At present, our members are self-funding some of their most critical work – the practices required to secure basic safety for their workers, service users, and the victim-survivors whose safety and dignity our sector works to protect. This includes limitations on the availability of culturally appropriate services and programs delivered in language. Current contract provisions do not allow for the most basic requirements to sustain the workforce or to deliver the intrinsic purpose of our sector – keeping men using violence in view of the system to secure victim-survivor safety and dignity.

No to Violence has heard from our members that there is a desperate need for reform that recognises holistic, trauma-informed and culturally-appropriate services as the default service model so that providers working from this approach are able to survive, adequately support their staff and retain a skilled workforce, and provide services that meet the needs of service users.

In response to these concerns, No to Violence recommends the federal government begin work on a **National Workforce Strategy** to capture the key concerns and issues facing the community service workforce identified through the present and other consultation processes. This strategy should aim to support a trauma-informed, holistic and culturally safe model across the entire community service sector with specific initiatives for specialist sectors such as the men's family violence sector.

### **Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services**

No to Violence is heartened to see commitments to reform grants to reflect the cost of delivering services. This is an important step towards addressing long-term funding neglect, where service providers and communities have had to operate with less and less resources while delivering services that address complex and compounded disadvantage and inequality in our communities. This approach has taken a toll on the community service sector workforce, leaders and on service users.

Members have told us that long-term funding neglect has meant that they have been unable to support their workforce without self-funding critical professional development and supervision and wellbeing initiatives. The men's family violence sector comprises a diverse workforce who work from a mixture of formal qualifications, lived experience expertise, cultural knowledge, and practice-based experience. This diverse workforce improves the quality of services for service users, particularly the cultural appropriateness of services. However, it means that the workforce experiences pronounced burnout, distinct to what is experienced in other parts of the community services sector.

The domestic, family and sexual violence workforce has a higher proportion of lived experience than in other community service sectors and are regularly retraumatised and experiencing vicarious trauma. There is a dearth of support for lived experience workforces experiencing trauma in the workplace, as the need for this support is not funded or recognised. In addition, culturally and racially marginalised workers experience higher rates of disadvantage and violence in the workplace and are less likely to have economic security or capacity for economic mobility. Our members tell us that they have put mechanisms in place to ensure that their workplaces are trauma informed and culturally safe so that they can provide quality services and safe workplaces for their staff. However, the resources required to build these mechanisms are not reflected in funding contracts.

No to Violence participated as a key stakeholder in the Australian Research Council funded Discover Project - Strengthening Australia's Domestic and Family Violence Workforce.<sup>4</sup> Early findings from this

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<sup>4</sup> Flinders University overview of the [Strengthening Australia's Domestic and Family Violence Workforce](#) project.

research show that the effects of current policy approaches to funding were especially marked for the domestic, family and sexual violence sector.<sup>5</sup> Here, the workplace was fundamentally shaped by the demands associated with, both, accountability to multiple external stakeholders and the increasingly intensified pace and volume of the work.

Importantly, these pressures were reflected in the high demands placed on the few designated partner-contact workers - invariably women - in perpetrator-focused services. Difficulties associated with attracting and retaining staff were also evident across the DFV sector, linked to a range of factors including the inherently challenging nature of the work and its personal impacts, as well as variable access to professional development opportunities including training and supervision.<sup>6</sup>

Long-term funding neglect has meant that there is also no room for improvement, as the above illustrates it is difficult enough to provide basic safety and dignity in the workplace. There is also no room to improve services to respond to reform agendas and to ensure that they work well for those who need to access a tailored service, outside of mainstream approaches.

Funding approaches must recognise the integrated and holistic nature of many services that are working well. This requires an overhaul of funding agreements and targets as well as the nature of applications so that it is possible for smaller services to gain the funding necessary to maintain their holistic service model approach and expand to deliver more culturally appropriate services which are desperately needed by service users.

No to Violence commends the federal government for committing to strengthening the community services sector and for embedding a specific focus on securing independent voices and sustainable funding for smaller, community-led organisations. We hope to see this commitment result in a **redesign of community service sector funding and contract provisions that are tailored to suit the needs of community-led and holistic services** first. Meeting the needs of these smaller, grassroots organisations will inevitably benefit the rest of the sector, instead of tailoring our system to the needs of large mainstream organisations at the expense of all other providers.

### **Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of CSOs**

No to Violence is glad to see a commitment to ensuring that diverse community service organisations have improved access to funding sources. We suggest that this commitment must go a step further and move towards a reform of the funding system that rewards holistic service models.

Large mainstream service providers can afford to employ grant writing teams and advocacy teams who shape the narrative of which work is funded and which is not. While we acknowledge the important role of these service providers, our members note that mainstream organisations are often ill-equipped to respond to issues that are specific to communities. For example, we have consistently heard from our members that First Nations men do not feel safe accessing mainstream family violence services, and that they are far more likely to engage with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation.

For this reason, care must be taken to ensure that the unique strengths of smaller, community-based service providers are valued, and that they are not unfairly disadvantaged through the grant funding process due to capacity constraints. This requires **re-designing funding processes, applications and agreements to suit the needs of holistic, community-led and grassroots organisations**.

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<sup>5</sup> Seymour, Wendt and Goudie, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Seymour, Wendt and Goudie, 2023.