



**AASW**

Australian Association  
of Social Workers

# Human rights, social justice and professional excellence

Submission to the Royal Commission on  
Family Violence

SEPTEMBER 2024

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## About the Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the national professional body representing more than 14,000 social workers throughout Australia. The AASW works to promote the profession of social work including setting the benchmarks for professional education, practice and ethical conduct in social work, while also advocating on matters of human rights to advance social justice.

## Acknowledgements

This submission has been developed in consultation with our members who are working across many service systems throughout various areas of social work practice. Regardless of whether they work in the specialist family or sexual violence services, social workers work with people who have suffered the harm of this violence. Preventing and responding to family and sexual violence is a priority for many members. In our consultations they have provided robust, evidence informed and balanced insights, and made recommendations for the reforms that are necessary for our vision of human rights and social justice for all.

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## Executive Summary

Social workers hold that every human being has a unique and inherent equal worth, and a right to health, wellbeing and to live in safety. Social workers work with people who are vulnerable and marginalized, and who are prevented from enjoying their rights because of discrimination, oppression and violence. Social workers are attuned to the ways that all forms of discrimination, oppression and violence compound each other, creating multi-layered and complex violations of rights. Violence against women, is one of the most widespread and entrenched violations of human rights. It has multiple causes, operating through individuals, cultural and structural forces, which interact in complex ways.<sup>1</sup>

Because they operate at the interface between a person and their environment, social workers observe the harmful consequences of these interactions on people who are already vulnerable. As well as understanding the ways individual, cultural and structural factors can lead to violence, social workers observe that this relationship works in two directions. The risk or presence of violence in a person's life changes their experience of and interactions with other people, cultural influences and institutions.

Social workers are uniquely well placed to observe this dynamic in action. Their position throughout South Australia's (SA's) health and community services provides them with insights about the way SA's service system is responding to the multiple and diverse needs of people experiencing or at risk of family and sexual violence. AASW members have provided instances where elements of the health and community services could be more effective in identifying the [REDACTED] violence, and could intervene to prevent it, interrupt it, limit its harm or maintain the visibility of the perpetrator.

Taken together, the contributions of AASW members point to the need for systemic reforms so [REDACTED] health and community sectors collaborate to end family and sexual violence. To do that it will be necessary to develop tools and frameworks that encapsulate and apply to the whole workforce. Although Continuing Professional Development will be a necessary element of the reform, it will not be sufficient. It will need to be based on a shared [REDACTED] a tool for assessing them. It will also require changes in the procedures within organisations to allow professionals to collaborate across organisations and devise joint case plans. It will also require legislative reform to enable organisations with information about perpetrators of violence to share information that will help women and children safe.

The AASW would welcome an opportunity to attend hearings of the Royal Commission and/or organize practitioners and subject matter expert social workers (from SA or other states and territories) to speak to the Commissioner.

## Recommendations

The AASW recommends:

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<sup>1</sup> (Kuskoff E 2020)

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- That the SA government lead national level advocacy for social work to become a registered profession in all states.
  - That all professional staff in SA's universal and mainstream health and community services be capable of identifying risk factors that someone is experiencing or perpetrating family and sexual violence.
  - That the SA government conduct a systematic assessment of the health and community sectors' workforces to understand their interface with people at risk of, or experiencing, or perpetrating family and sexual violence; and to assess the level of knowledge and competence required by each to identify that risk or experience.
  - That the SA government commission the design of continuing professional development for each section of the above workforces to enable them to identify risk factors for family and sexual violence.
  - That the SA government design a scheme to deliver the above professional development across their workforce.
  - That the continuing professional development for each section of the workforces as identified above, enable professional staff to respond appropriately to the risks and actual family and sexual violence they identify in their roles.
  - That the SA government establish a specialist taskforce to identify changes needed in organizational and systemic procedures to enable staff to better respond to risks and actual family violence they identify.
  - That all specialist family violence professionals in SA be required to attain the same levels of qualifications, post qualification professionals development, and demonstrated competence as does an AASW Accredited Family Violence Social Worker.
  - [REDACTED] establish a specialist taskforce to identify changes needed in the child protection, family violence, and related sectors to enable them to deliver a culturally safe, trauma informed, evidence based response to children in the child protection system.
  - That the SA Government assess existing trials and evaluations of co-responder models in [REDACTED] as and co-design models in SA, including with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- [REDACTED]
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## Context for this submission

The social work profession is based on an abiding respect for the dignity of all persons, and the principles of collective responsibility, social justice and respect for diversity. These are enshrined within our *Code of Ethics and Practice Standards*, to which each member recommits themselves annually.<sup>2</sup> The AASW's collective vision is one of "Wellbeing and Social Justice for All". To fulfill this vision, the AASW works toward a society in which all people can thrive, develop their potential and pursue lives of meaning and purpose. To create such a society, social workers strive for all people to enjoy the fulfillment of all their rights under the International Bill of Rights.<sup>3</sup>

Social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing, and development. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups, and communities. Social workers understand disadvantage, marginalization and vulnerability as the product of an interaction between a person and their environment: and social workers work in both realms to engender positive change. They maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination. Therefore, a commitment to protecting and defending the human rights of every person in Australia is a priority of the AASW.

### The AASW's Position on Family and Sexual Violence

Family violence is a gendered, life-threatening crime with serious physical, psychological and economic effects. Family violence includes not only physical assaults but also an array of power and control tactics used in concert with one another. While it can be perpetuated by any member of a family against another, it is most commonly perpetrated by men against women (predominately by her current or ex-partner) and children. Family violence can occur within any intimate relationship, and does occur among groups of every age, religion, culture and ethnicity.

Like family violence, sexual violence is most commonly perpetrated by men against women and children. LGBTIQ+ people, people living with disability and people experiencing vulnerability and marginalization are also frequently subjected to this form of violence; and it occurs across the same range of ages, cultures, and religions as does family violence. These forms of violence are abuses of human rights which are widely prevalent and completely preventable.

The causes of family and sexual violence are complex and include individual, social, cultural, and structural factors, such as gender inequality and community attitudes towards women. As the fundamental cause of violence against women, gender inequality is reflected across all aspects of a woman's life. Women (and people presenting as female), experience a range of discriminations,

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<sup>2</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2020)

<sup>3</sup> By this term we include: The International Bill of Rights (encompassing: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHHR); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); First Optional Protocol to ICCPR; Second Optional Protocol to ICCPR); Convention on Status Relating to Refugees; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Convention on the Rights of Peoples with a Disability; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination; Convention on the Rights of Older Peoples; and, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

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including lower incomes, poorer mental health, and more unpaid work across the lifespan. Gender related discrimination can be compounded by discrimination that can relate to their culture, religion, racial background, age, ability status, sexual orientation or geographic location. All these forms of discrimination has been widely documented in a range of structural settings. They take a range of forms: such as unequal economic, social, and political power.

The effects of family and sexual violence on children cannot be ignored. Every child whose mother is abused is harmed in some way. A parent who abuses the other parent of their children cannot be considered to be a 'good' parent. Children who are exposed to family violence (including indirectly) are more likely to develop mental, physical and behavioural issues and they are also more likely to continue intergenerational cycles of abuse.

Social workers believe that everyone has a right to live free from fear and violence in their home, and broader society. In their practice, social workers are deeply committed to challenging family and sexual violence at an individual, community, and systemic level, with the twin aims of ending it and of minimising its profound, long-lasting impacts. They are integral to the delivery of support and intervention services for victims and survivors of family and sexual violence. Many work within specialist family and sexual violence organisations, providing counselling and therapeutic supports to victims and survivors, or in the family law and justice systems. Social worker qualifying degrees prepare graduates to identify indicators that a woman, child or young person might be experiencing violence and to respond sensitively and appropriately to ensure their safety.<sup>4</sup>

The AASW's work to highlight and address all forms of family and sexual violence is based on the three values underpinning our Code of Ethics: Respect for Persons, Social Justice and Professional Integrity. It draws on the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

## A National Problem Needs a Nationwide Response

Over the past decade, the AASW has submitted to multiple inquiries about family and sexual violence. Our submissions to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence and for its implementation, these submissions have been aimed at national level policy change, such as the consultations to draft the current National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children. We have also submitted to multiple parliamentary inquiries into the family law system and its capacity to respond fairly to victims of family violence. We made 2 submissions to the Australian Law Reform Commission's Review of the Family Law System, and have participated in follow up work with the federal Attorney General's Department to reform Family Reports. Drawing on the insights of Aboriginal members, we submitted to the consultation for an Aboriginal Action Plan to End Violence Against Women. Better systems for preventing, identifying and responding to family and sexual violence have featured in many others of our submissions, including our national policy platform.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of these we have called for multiple changes in federal policies and programs. Although many of these have been acted

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<sup>4</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2023)

<sup>5</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2022)

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upon, many changes in federal government policies have not yet eventuated. We repeat our call for:

- Income support payments, and parenting payments to be raised to a level that allows a healthy and dignified life.
- Separate funding, governance and accountability structures to allow for place-based initiatives to combat family violence in Aboriginal communities.
- A new Medicare item number for family violence support so that women needing mental health support to cope with violence do not have a label of mental illness applied to them and used against them by the perpetrator in Family Court proceedings.<sup>6</sup>
- Increased spending on affordable and safe housing for women escaping from family violence and their children.
- Regulations that specify that all Family Reports required by the Family Court be prepared by professionals who have attained the level of competence specified for that Victorian Family Violence Capability Framework's Specialist Family Violence workforce. Single Expert Witnesses level should attain the 'Expert' sub-level within level 1.
- Compulsory training for all Family Court report writers and Single Expert Witnesses that equates with the MARAM Comprehensive Risk Assessment and Management course which is recommended for the Specialist Family Violence workforce.
- That social work be a registered profession in Australia.

We believe that these national initiatives are necessary to create the policy environment for effective state level policies and programs to end family and sexual violence in SA.

### Social work and the family violence workforce

The AASW's submission reflects the current situation that social work is not a registered profession in Australia. Although the SA Parliament has passed legislation to establish a registration scheme for social workers to commence on 1 July 2025, many aspects of its implementation are yet to be determined. While this is an important step forward for a profession that is at the forefront of addressing family violence, there are still limitations to a single-state registration scheme.

Even when it is implemented, social workers working in other states will not be covered by the legislation. This can cause complications when service users are in contact with unregistered social workers from interstate. For example: numerous coroner reports have documented instances where family violence and child protection systems have not protected women and children because their perpetrators, who have a history of family violence and abuse in another jurisdictions, have crossed state boundaries. Even where the level of risk they posed was accurately identified by the workers in other states, that information was not fully communicated to the relevant agencies and authorities in SA.

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<sup>6</sup> This would also assist with obtaining data to better track rates of family violence. The AASW's suggestion was endorsed in the following coroner's report: [COR 2019 006497 Form 38-Finding into Death without Inquest. Signed.pdf \(coronerscourt.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/coroner-reports/cor-2019-006497-form-38-finding-into-death-without-inquest-signed.pdf)

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This demonstrates that even though SA family violence systems might undertake reforms, it is still necessary to factor in the workforce and systems from other states and territories. South Australia cannot address complex workforce issues in isolation.

Because social workers are not registered nationally, the AASW is responsible for determining and monitoring professional standards for social workers, including upholding educational, ethical and practice standards. We determine the content and levels of university courses that graduates must meet to qualify as social workers.<sup>7</sup> We set the standards for social work practice.<sup>8</sup> We require all members to abide by our Code of Ethics.<sup>9</sup> The AASW takes this role seriously, however, self-regulation exposes three key gaps with respect to the quality of the family violence workforce:

- Firstly, the majority of social workers sit outside any regulatory system. This is because membership of the AASW is not compulsory for social workers; and only one third of all social workers in Australia are members of the AASW. This means that the majority of social workers practicing in Australia do not have a relationship with the AASW, are not accountable to a social work-specific code of ethics, may not have access to resources and CPD opportunities, and are not subject to the AASW's compliance regime with respect to ethical practice.
- Secondly, unsafe social workers can continue to practice in Australia. If a complaint about an AASW member is upheld, and the AASW terminates that membership, the social worker can continue to practice as a non-AASW member. The AASW's process does not have the power to determine fitness to practice or prevent expelled members from continuing their work practice; nor can the details of serious misconduct or the name and actions of the social workers be made available in the public domain, all of which mean a greater unintended risk to the public.
- Thirdly, people without a social work qualification can claim to be a social worker. Unlike jurisdictions in countries where social work is registered, the AASW has no jurisdiction over misuse of the social work title. This is pertinent to the family violence sector which lacks guidance on qualifications and competencies that are required for different roles. The AASW's review of Coroners' reports has uncovered many instances of social workers assuming unqualified responsibilities beyond the capacity of their qualifications.

Registering social workers nationally will enable clarity about the scope of social work practice and the competencies social workers will demonstrate across all states and territories. National registration of social workers would support workforce mobility across all states and territories. This was one of the reasons the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) was established. It is the position of the AASW that social workers should be included in the NRAS. We understand that the South Australian Social Worker Registration Scheme is being established in a way that anticipates possible inclusion of social work in the NRAS over time.

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<sup>7</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2023)

<sup>8</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2023)

<sup>9</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2020)

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**Recommendation:**

- That the SA government lead national level advocacy for social work to become a registered profession in all states.

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## Responses to the Terms of Reference

- **Prevention** - How South Australia can facilitate widespread change in the underlying social drivers of domestic, family and sexual violence.

The 2024 Report card from Our Watch shows that Australia is making slow progress towards eliminating violence against women.<sup>10</sup> Over the last 10 years, fewer Australians admit to attitudes that support violence against women and that more Australians express support for gender equality.<sup>11</sup> The evidence about actual violence against women is less clear. The same report demonstrates a decrease in the number of women murdered by an intimate partner between 1990 and 2022.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the data about all forms of violence against women is more complex. For example: in 2024, there has been a sharp increase in the number of women who were murdered by someone who was not an intimate partner, and the incidence of sexual violence did not change significantly between 2016 and 2021.<sup>13</sup> Sexual violence still threatens many women.

Therefore, it is not surprising that questions about the most effective approach to prevention remain a topic for national debate.<sup>14</sup> Added to this is the insight that the underlying drivers of violence against First Nations women and girls are different from those of non-indigenous women and girls, and that this needs to be incorporated into national prevention policy.<sup>15</sup> The AASW is not qualified to make a judgement about the implications of this debate for SA's policy approach. On the other hand, we draw on the insights of social workers across SA into the instances of effective programs and areas and where services and procedures should be improved. In [REDACTED] died the reports of many Australian coroners into the deaths of women who were known to family violence services. The impression from these reports is that attitudinal change alone will not be sufficient to end the violent actions of men against women.

[REDACTED] te, and these coroners' reports reinforce the finding of the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team, and the team led by Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon, which both conclude that the men who perpetrate violence against, and murder women are often known to systems before they commit the violence.<sup>16</sup> In nearly all instances, the women and their children [REDACTED] re known to systems which should have protected them.<sup>17</sup> The AASW, is more qualified to comment on the failure of our existing systems to prevent violence than on population wide prevention.

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<sup>10</sup> (Our Watch 2024)

<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> ibid

<sup>14</sup> See for example the different approaches between the following: Campbell E 2024; Kuskoff E 2020; Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) 2023.

<sup>15</sup> (Moore J 2022)

<sup>16</sup> (Fitz-Gibbon K. Walklate S 2024) (NSW Domestic Violence Death review Team 2024)

<sup>17</sup> (Fitz-Gibbon K. Walklate S 2024)

- **Early intervention** - How South Australia can improve effective early intervention through identification and support of individuals who are at high risk of experiencing or perpetrating domestic, family and sexual violence.

As discussed above, AASW members and internal research have considered the instances where existing services and procedures have failed to keep women and children safe. Because these people are already in contact with health, community and justice services - which are under state jurisdiction - we believe that it is in early intervention by these services that SA can make the most significant and productive reforms.

### **A whole of sector responsibility**

There are many reasons that the family violence service system cannot be the sole source of interventions to keep women safe from nor respond to family and sexual violence. These reasons are to do with perpetrators, women and the service system itself. For example: perpetrators of violence use a variety of methods to enforce isolation of their victims from social supports that could intervene; women living in violence are reluctant to make contact with services because of shame and fear of making their situation worse; and when they do seek help, the waiting lists are so long that only people in immediate danger are assisted.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, the entire health and community sector has a responsibility to identify people at risk of experiencing family and sexual violence; and to intervene early to keep people safe, to protect people from the harm of family and sexual and to prevent people from using violence.

Within the whole health and community services systems, it is the universal and mainstream services which have a critically important role in this regard. Universal services which apply to all families, such as maternal and infant health, hospitals, and the education sector are important because their broad reach into the whole population means that they encounter people who otherwise avoid contact with community health and welfare professionals. Social workers in schools and hospitals commonly discover that they are the only professional with whom a family or individual has contact, even though they might have multiple needs.

There are many reasons for people avoiding services. In some instances, it can be connected to people's previous unsuccessful encounters with culturally inappropriate responses, or the fear of such a response. In other instances, the reason is more closely related to the presence of violence and control within a relationship. In other words, universal services which are either compulsory or needed in a crisis can be the only opportunities for the system to identify some people either experiencing or perpetrating violence.

Mainstream services, such as community and mental health, alcohol and other drug services, and gambling addiction services can similarly play a significant role. Although people using these services are obviously not avoiding services altogether, they may nevertheless be unlikely or unwilling to approach a specialist violence service. For many of these people, a mainstream service will be the best avenue for receiving any service. As part of offering the funded service,

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<sup>18</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2022) (Australian Association of Social Workers 2021).

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workers are required to undertake needs assessments, and so, if appropriately skilled, could identify risk factors for violence alongside other needs.

Universal and mainstream services also have the advantage that they can maintain continuing relationships with people at risk, without those people having to self-identify as either potential perpetrators or potential victim survivors, and without endangering the safety of women who are already experiencing violence. This will be discussed under TOR C.

### **Whole of sector professional development**

The critical role of universal and mainstream services means that staff in these areas need a level of competence to identify that someone is at risk of experiencing or perpetrating family violence. We recognise that this workforce is not currently prepared for this role. The pre-service qualifications for these roles have not usually prepared their staff for this work, having concentrated instead on the skills needed for their headline profession. Therefore, many staff will need professional development to convince them of the importance of this work, introduce them to foundational knowledge and equip them with skills.

The AASW is not arguing that every member of staff in these services needs to be capable of specialist family violence work: only that frontline staff should be able to identify indicators that a person is at risk, and to respond appropriately within the context of their on-going relationship with that person. Nevertheless, a broad base of staff in the universal and mainstream services will need to acquire and use new skills.

████████████████████ a huge task, it has been attempted before in Victoria, and SA can benefit from that state's experience. The conclusion of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence was that professional development was needed for staff across the whole service system. To implement all its system wide recommendations, the implementation team needed a ████████████████████ between different sections of the workforce and for analysing the nature and extent of the knowledge and skills that workers needed. The result is the Victorian Family violence Capability Framework.<sup>19</sup>

████████████████████ knowledge and competencies that apply across the whole workforce, albeit to different extents. It differentiates four tiers of the workforce according to the level of generality or specificity to family violence services. The fourth tier is the specialist family violence services workforce. The first tier is the universal services as described above. Having drawn these distinctions, the framework guides decisions on the level of knowledge and competencies required for each tier. For example, workers in the fourth tier require extensive knowledge and highly sophisticated skills, while workers in universal services need foundational knowledge and skills. The AASW believes that this approach would greatly assist the sector in SA improve its early intervention capacity.

AASW members were involved in the rollout of the professional development in the dual roles of trainers and trainees. Their experience has been that the training led to immediate and valuable improvements in the capacity of the entire sector. Unfortunately, this improvement did not endure: as there is a high turnover of staff throughout the health and community services, the professional development needs to be repeated to keep up with turnover of staff.

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<sup>19</sup> (Victorian Family Violence Capability Framework 2019

They also reported a more serious challenge. This was that the increased capacity to identify the need for services, demonstrated that there was a need to improve the processes by which they could refer victim survivors to appropriate, culturally safe services.. This will be discussed in a later section.

### Recommendations:

- That the SA government conduct a systematic assessment of the health and community sectors' workforces to understand their interface with people at risk of, or experiencing, or perpetrating family and sexual violence; and to assess the level of knowledge and competence required by each to identify that risk or experience.
  - That the SA government commission the design of continuing professional development for each section of the above workforces to enable them to identify risk factors for family and sexual violence.
  - That the SA government design a scheme to deliver the above professional development across their workforce.
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- **Response** - How South Australia can ensure best practice responses to family, domestic and sexual violence through the provision of services and supports.

### Responses from all levels of the service sector

In the same way that the whole service sector has a role in the early identification of violence, the whole sector has a role in responding to it. Again, it is the universal and mainstream services which can be effective in this regard, because of their reach into the community and their capacity to maintain a continuing relationship with victim survivors who are not ready for a referral or who and many services have a long waiting list. Therefore, it is important that staff working outside the specialist family and sexual violence services have competencies to respond to people they have identified as being at risk of, or already experiencing violence.

Raising the knowledge and skills of individual workers in mainstream services can only be achieved with a significant commitment from the management of organisations in the health and community services sector. That commitment depends on management recognizing that the shared responsibility of the community extends to their organisation, and dedicating staff time and money to make the changes that task requires.

The first step is professional development that extends from identifying family and sexual violence, as described above, and covers the response required of workers. The Victorian Capability Framework described above is also relevant to this task. As well as identifying family violence, it indicates the knowledge and competencies that are needed to respond in a way that keeps women and children safe, minimizes harm and holds the perpetrator accountable.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> (Victorian Family Violence Capability Framework 2019

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Again, the magnitude and complexity of this task is not as huge as might be imagined, because the framework has differentiated between sections in the workforce and codified the extent and level of skills required for each section of the workforce.

### **Social workers in mainstream services**

With our unwavering dedication to human rights and to protecting vulnerable people, the social work profession has a particular responsibility in this work, which extends to individual social workers wherever they are working. For this reason, identifying and responding to family violence is a compulsory element in all social work qualification courses.<sup>21</sup> Many social workers in mainstream services have already been making efforts to incorporate this element into their practice.<sup>22</sup> Understanding the significance of their role as the 'first contact' with the service system, many social workers have routinely made referrals to practical and psychological support services.<sup>23</sup>

Although some social workers have also been able to intensify their support for the victim survivor while collaborating with specialist family violence services to ensure their safety, this is not yet a universal practice. In some cases, this is due to the level of skill of the individual worker, but in others, this is due to the constraints imposed by organizational structures and procedures. This is not surprising, given that these social workers are employed in mainstream and universal services.<sup>24</sup>

This demonstrates the extent of the change that is therefore needed to create effective early intervention. It demonstrates that the relevant competencies of individual workers are necessary for transformation. Services across the whole of the health and community sector need to change their procedures and adapt their policies to enable this to happen. The change will be needed in organizational procedures at all levels: from the practical aspects of communicating with other workers and attending case planning meetings, to the complex matters of inter-agency agreements on clinical governance and accountability for case outcomes.<sup>25</sup> These changes will need the support of the SA Government and other funding sources, which will need to accept the demands on organisations' time and resources. While a complex and long-term reform, the AASW is confident that it is achievable and would welcome support to its implementation.

### **AASW Advanced Family Violence Professionals**

The AASW is aware that many social workers are employed in specialist family violence and sexual violence services. As the regulating body for social work profession in Australia, the AASW takes its responsibility for professional standards seriously. The AASW has instituted an advanced credential denoting that a member is an Accredited Family Violence Social Worker (MAASW AFVSW). Accredited Family Violence Social Workers are experts and leaders in the field. A member attains this credential by demonstrating that they meet a number of criteria, including that they have undertaken significant Continuous Professional Development related to family

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<sup>21</sup> (Australian Association of Social Workers 2023)

<sup>22</sup> (Manadara M 2021)

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

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violence.<sup>26</sup> Although the AASW does not provide a unified training course which ensures a member attains this accreditation, being accredited in this way indicates that the member has attained specialist expertise in identifying, assessing and responding to family violence. Ideally, this is the standard at which the AASW believes that all specialist family violence professionals should attain.

### Co-responder models

Co-responder models are being trialed and rolled out across Australia. For example, the Queensland Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce made recommendations to improve police responses to family and sexual violence.<sup>27</sup> The recommendation also referred to the need for a focus on meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim/survivors and perpetrators of family violence. As a result, the Queensland Government committed to trial and evaluate co-responder models between the police and domestic and family violence specialists. There are numerous benefits to this form of response, including reducing the misidentification of the perpetrator, improved access and referrals to culturally appropriate supports and services, and enhanced psychosocial risk assessments and safety planning. AASW members should be included in the evaluation and design of these models.

### Recommendations

- That the continuing professional development for each section of the workforces as identified above, enable professional staff to respond appropriately to the risks and actual family and sexual violence they identify in their roles.
  - That the SA Government establish a specialist taskforce to identify changes needed in organizational and systemic procedures to enable staff to better respond to risks and actual family violence they have identified.
  - That all specialist family violence professionals in SA be required to attain the same levels of qualifications, post-qualification professionals development, and demonstrated competence as does an AASW Accredited Family Violence Social Worker.
  - That the SA Government assess existing trials and evaluations of co-responder models in Australia and overseas and co-design models in SA, including with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- **Recovery and healing** - How South Australia can embed an approach that supports recovery and healing through reducing the risk of re-traumatisation and supporting victim-survivors to be safe and healthy.

### Greater Collaboration with the Child Protection System

The AASW welcomes the acknowledgement in national policy of the multiple ways in which family and sexual violence harms children. All violence represents an abuse of children's right to live safely, in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. Even when they are not directly victimized, being in a family in which there is violence harms a child. Similarly, every child who is dependent on or in the care of a victim of sexual violence is also harmed as a consequence of that violence. For the AASW, preventing violence is one of society's fundamental duties to children. Where

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<sup>26</sup> (Australian Association of social Workers n.d.)

<sup>27</sup> (Queensland Government n.d.)

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violence has occurred in a child's life, our responsibility is to respond in a culturally safe, trauma informed, evidence based manner.

Social workers know that there is a very high crossover of families within the family violence system and the child protection system, and that family violence is present in the lives of many of the children who have been referred to child protection. Social workers have been grappling with its implications of this for decades: by documenting its harmful consequences, and attempting to reform both systems.<sup>28</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members report that many women are afraid to report family violence or seek help because of their fear that doing so will lead to a child protection intervention and the removal of their children. And yet, those members know of many instances where the child's family and community are the sources of the most effective recovery and healing, once the perpetrator of that violence has been removed. The AASW has included recommendations to respond to this and similar anomalies in its submission towards the Aboriginal Action Plan on Family Violence.

Social workers have led initiatives to improve our care of children, featuring information sharing, combined case planning, warm referrals and shared case conferences.<sup>29</sup> The literature shows that combined case conferences which share information are effective in identifying tailored case plans and finding services that respond to the needs of particular women and their children. They are also more effective at accurately identifying the level of risk posed by the perpetrator.<sup>30</sup>

As this work has progressed, the range of services which have been included in the scope of the attempted reforms has also increased. This reflects recognition that families and family members have complex needs related to the multi-dimensional nature of their identities and circumstances (more lately referred to as intersectionality). Family members may be in contact with culturally specific services, refugee and resettlement services, and mental health and drug and alcohol services. More complex dynamics arise when family members are also involved in the family court, and the justice and corrections system.<sup>31</sup>

Social workers are acutely aware that children and families with complex needs need tailored, refined assistance, from highly skilled and culturally safe workers and organisations. For example: it is critically important that mental health professionals understand the underlying dynamics of family and sexual violence derive from the use of force, and violation of autonomy; and that they avoid practices that replicate this dynamic and add to the trauma of the victim survivor.

There have been many instances of successful co-operation between professionals across systems to ensure that women and children can be kept safe, can maintain family life and community contact in ways that support all their needs, while holding perpetrators accountable for violence and abuse. These have been documented in the social work literature. For example, social workers in SA's child protection system collaborated with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to build culturally safe response store the complex needs of Aboriginal families.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> (Healey L 2017)

<sup>29</sup> (Bastian C 2022)

<sup>30</sup> (Bastian C 2022)

<sup>31</sup> (Bastian C 2022) (Healey L 2017)

<sup>32</sup> (Moore J 2022)

Nevertheless, creating permanent structural change has proven difficult.<sup>33</sup> Although there have been many successful trials and projects, permanent improvement depends on structural change within these services and in the systems surrounding them. For example successful collaboration depends on formal governance arrangements, accountability structures and complementary policies on information sharing, risk assessments and monitoring of progress.<sup>34</sup>

For the AASW the cross sector reforms that are needed to ensure that the whole community service system are delivering the culturally safe, trauma informed, evidence based responses to children, mirrors the reforms that have already been described for women in the family and sexual violence sectors. The AASW would be happy to work with the government of SA to institute the reforms needed.

### Recommendation:

- That the SA government establish a specialist taskforce to identify changes needed in the child protection, family violence, and related sectors to enable them to deliver culturally safe, trauma informed, evidence based response to children in the child protection system.
- **Co-ordination - How government agencies, non-government organisations and communities can better integrate and coordinate efforts across the spectrum of prevention, intervention, response and recovery.**

### **Mandated, consistent, assessment of risk**

This submission has already described the comprehensive, differentiated professional development required for the health and community services sector to undertake early intervention. We have already cited the Victorian example which drew on an underlying framework which described the knowledge base as well as the competencies that all workers needed.

There is a third element that increases the effectiveness of sector-wide reforms: a shared set of criteria for assessing the level of someone's risk of experiencing or using violence. The Multi Agency Risk Assessment and Management framework (MARAM) filled this function in Victoria, and workers across the sector undertook professional development in using it to undertake risk assessments. Many AASW members completed this training, and contributed to its assessment. They reported significant variations in its quality due to the short timetable that was imposed on developing the tool and implementing it across the service system.

Nevertheless, the AASW is convinced that a common, widely understood and broadly applicable tool by which workers in many settings can identify people who are at risk of experiencing or using violence is a necessary element in increasing the capacity of the service system. As well as establishing the basis for identifying risk, it guides effective responses. The sources of risk can inform decision making on the urgent and necessary steps to keep women and children safe. Indeed, the experience of members has been that the shared risk assessment framework was a critical factor in developing the collaboration between professionals in different organisations. It

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<sup>33</sup> (Healey L 2017)

<sup>34</sup> (Healey L 2017)



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professionals still mistakenly believed that conforming with this scheme would breach either their legal or ethical requirements under privacy legislation, or their organisation's policies, and have not co-operated.

Members of the AASW observe that a reform of this nature and magnitude requires significant investments of time and resources to ensure that they lead to system wide change.

### **The value of accurate information for holding men accountable.**

As well as serving their original purpose to keep workers informed about the risk that perpetrators present, a secondary benefit has emerged from having this information available. Workers in men's behaviour change programs use these assessments for a realistic assessment of the level of harm by perpetrators in contrast to the perpetrators' own inaccurate, trivializing and victim blaming accounts. This has enabled them to more effectively hold violent men to account for their behaviour.

## Conclusion

We commend the South Australian Government for launching this Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.

The Royal Commission website states that: "Domestic, family and sexual violence is a whole of government responsibility; It is a whole of community responsibility; It is **our** responsibility."

The social work profession and the AASW share this responsibility and strongly support the important work of the Royal Commission. Social work is a profession that is uniquely well-placed to inform the design, and play a key role in the delivery, of improved systems that will break systemic cycles of domestic, family and sexual violence. This will uphold human rights, promote social justice and ultimately change lives.

In the view of the AASW, workforce development and improvements of professional practice and capability are critical considerations for the work of the Royal Commission. These considerations are outlined in our submission.

We have also identified a number of systems and models have been developed in other Australian states and territories which the Royal Commission should assess for relevance within the context of South Australia. Importantly, all recommendations should be developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and must be culturally safe, appropriate and empowering.

We look forward to future opportunities to support the Royal Commission.

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