

Conclusion: “Despair is not an option”

The *Home Truths* conference was a significant event for the domestic violence and sexual assault sectors in marking the collaborative effort on the part of women (and some men) to come together with the aim of finding better ways to progress the work they do and to manage the challenges they jointly face. In this Issues Paper, ACSSA has sought to draw together or, perhaps more accurately, tease out some of the “Home Truths” that were given particular prominence.

That violence against women and children is overwhelmingly perpetrated against them by family members in their own homes, and that it is a profound and undeniable violation of their human rights were amongst the first “Home Truths” explored. We outlined statistics that continue to demonstrate the prevalence of intimate partner and family violence, both in Australia and internationally, and to expose its effects on the health and wellbeing of millions of women, children and men around the globe. We explored the issue of male partner rape in some detail, drawing in particular on the presentations given by key note speakers, who highlighted the continuing reluctance of service sectors, governments and the wider community to adequately address the specific issue of intimate partner sexual violence.

Few delegates will not have felt deeply challenged by the voices of survivors that punctuated the various sessions throughout the conference. Few delegates will not have felt inspired and enraged, even confronted by, or perhaps complicit in, having somehow muted the voices of “those who know”. Mostly, we saw delegates motionless. Listening. And it was the listening that was critical. Survivors spoke to us through the details of their experiences of sexual and physical violence; they spoke to us through detailing their agendas for change or reform; they described for us in practical terms, what worked for them therapeutically, and they detailed where they had been most let down by the systems that were meant to help and support them – legally, socially, financially, and emotionally.

Importantly survivors questioned, individually and collectively, whether their words still counted. In particular, some women questioned the extent to which the sector has moved away from feminist approaches to service-delivery, where the experiential – the lived experience of women – is not afforded the same legitimacy or authority it once had when it came to debates around the policy table or in discussions about what constitutes good practice.

“Mainstreaming” and its effects on the future of specialist sexual assault and domestic violence services was the subject of the fourth “Home Truth” considered in this paper. Presenters noted the attempts being made to dispose of “the language of gender” to understand and respond to what overwhelmingly remain gender-based crimes. In particular they feared a return to generic service delivery approaches, where the traditional health and welfare response had resulted in women’s and children’s safety being compromised, individualised, misunderstood, or worse, where they were blamed or chastened for compromising the family unit. However, emphasis was also given to how the notion of “mainstreaming” carries with it particular implications for Indigenous women, for women with disabilities, and for immigrant and refugee women. Losing gender as a primary level of analysis or as informing the basic structure of frameworks for service delivery must not, as was powerfully cautioned through the words of many presenters, again be privileged over and above the historically and socially specific conditions that variously effect and impact on the lives of women in all their diversities.

Nonetheless, as reported by many of the conference delegates, there was a nostalgic sense of the conference providing a forum where feminist analyses and much more collaborative approaches to understanding domestic violence and sexual assaults were being openly discussed and debated (Home Truths Five and Six). Despite the “backlash”, of which mainstreaming was identified as just one aspect, there were discussions about consolidating across sectors, that were insistent on inclusiveness, on listening to difference, on contemplating “the processes”, not just “the outcomes” in advocating for social change. In the closing moments of the conference, the performance skills of the Melbourne group “Playback Theatre” were used to interpret the comments made by many of the participants about “rediscovering feminism”. The demise of “the backlash” performed hilariously through the interpretation of the Playback Theatre was warmly appreciated by the conference delegates as the remaining actors grew louder and more insistent that feminists, in all their shapes and colours, had plenty to offer yet.

The conference brought to the fore all that we as researchers, as service providers, as survivors, as advocates have to offer: commitment, skills and knowledge. Conference participants shared and reflected on their understandings of how violence against women and children operates, drawing on both research and on personal and professional experience. They also shared ideas on how to end the violence, their strategies for education and prevention, and their models for effective crisis response.

Ideas and commitment were in abundance: what was lacking, participants noted, was the money to implement them. Under-resourcing was identified by services, consistently and unanimously, as hamstringing their responses to domestic violence and sexual assault. Kate Gilmore of Amnesty International pointed out that governments have an international human rights obligation to fund services so that they are available, accessible, acceptable and of appropriate quality, yet services indicated that these obligations were

not being met. Funding allocated to domestic violence appears to be lower than that allocated to health problems which contribute substantially less to the “disease burden” in women. Such under-resourcing can mean that many women, particularly Indigenous women, women from non-English-speaking backgrounds, women with disabilities and women living in remote or regional areas, have nowhere to go to escape violence, to consider their options and to receive support.

The final “Home Truth” saw presenters calling for resistance and persistence in describing how the law and its practice continued to fail women and children who call on the police and the courts to intervene to keep them safe. Its potential to dehumanise, to re-traumatise, to deliver back into the hands of the abuser was disturbingly captured in many of the papers delivered by presenters. The particular issue of male partner rape was also highlighted amidst systems that seem to equally ignore the violence of sexual assault (or its likelihood in the context of domestic violence), neglect to find pathways that will recognise the effects of both domestic violence and sexual assault, or disregard women’s reluctance to name it in the first place.

In spite of this seemingly irreconcilable difference between women’s experiences of violence, and the law’s ambivalence or indifference to it, at least some victim/survivors spoke optimistically of the need to remain resilient. Women representing the survivors’ activist group VOICES, put it this way:

“We want to witness significant changes to the legal system so that an offender protecting culture no longer exists . . . We want the legal sector to

Violence against women and children is overwhelmingly perpetrated against them by family members in their own homes, and that it is a profound and undeniable violation of their human rights.

identify, acknowledge and take responsibility for their problematic attitude to, and handling of, sexual assault crimes and the manner in which they deal with sexual assault survivors. We want the legal system to be held accountable for the fact that it achieves less than 2 per cent conviction of reported perpetrators of sexual assault. Further, we want the legal system to genuinely be receptive to feminist suggestions of change. Indeed, where sexual assault is concerned, we want a feminist legal system to replace the unworkable patriarchal one.”

Undoubtedly the words of Christine Nixon, Victoria’s first woman police Chief Commissioner, were an indication to delegates that change is possible. At the podium during the opening plenary session, Chief Commissioner Nixon said she had abandoned much of what she had planned to say. “More importantly”, she said, “I suppose I really wanted to just give you my support for the kind of work that you all do.” She also acknowledged the responsibility that the police must themselves take for better responding to issues of both domestic and family violence and sexual assault, and how important it was that the police take advice on that from community, from service providers, and from those working on the “front line”:

“We’re going to try the best we can, to work through our own attitudes and our own issues, and be able to work forward. I think that as we learn the ways and means to do it better – and as long as people do it with us, help us, complain about us when we don’t do it properly, look to provide us ways and means of support – then we’ll do much better.”

Kate Gilmore also reminded us in the closing moments of her workshop that: “The challenge lies ahead of us, not behind us, to bring change to the lives of *every* woman: women of Mexico, of Darfur and of Iraq.” She said: “This struggle needs a shared vision of individual, collective and global solidarity.” More importantly, amidst all of the “Home Truths” we shared over the three days, amidst all that for many presenters remained beyond reach in imagining “something better”, Kate, with almost precision timing, reminded us that “despair is simply not an option”. Indeed, Kate challenged where we position ourselves amidst a struggle that both Kate and Kersti Yllö suggest is undeniably global:

“Our battle against violence against women is of this binding quality: Amnesty International’s membership worldwide has finally taken up the cause. Across more than 90 countries around the world we’re taking to the streets, to say stop violence against women in all its forms, in all its manifestations, no matter where it occurs. Stop violence against women because it is eroding economy, because it is eroding family, because it is eroding human potential, because it is eroding human rights.”

Further, she asked us to look into the eyes of the women in Darfur, a photo that depicted women, shielding themselves from the hot sand, brandishing scarves of the brightest colours. She asked us to look at them closely – they had gathered to tell their stories of rape and of being brutalised by the militia groups. They had gathered, bravely, determinedly to protest what had happened to them. They were women organising, resisting – as women do all over the world – in holding conferences, in participating in protest marches, by gathering in secret to give their testimonies of human rights abuses – women sharing their collective histories, traditions and their demands for justice. Kate asked whether we recognised ourselves. We looked carefully. We thought we did.