



# Women's Services Network WESNET Inc

Australia's peak women's organisation working to eliminate domestic and family violence

7 July 2004

The Hon. Prime Minister John Howard  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT

Dear Prime Minister

We are writing to you on behalf of the WESNET members to pass on the concerns they have been raising across the country about the "Australia says No" campaign. On the one hand, workers in the field have identified many times over many years, the need for a national campaign that sends a strong message "violence against women must stop". In the need for these messages the Domestic Violence service sector, the Sexual Assault service sector and your government are in accord. However, the current campaign raises many issues.

Although never launched, the original "No respect/No relationship" campaign was eagerly awaited, because during the years of research and development for this campaign, representatives of the service sector were consulted for their input. This campaign, targeted at educating young people came about as a result of your government's PADV research and the practice wisdom and advice from the field. However, the current campaign did not use this expertise. This, coupled with the perception of the waste of public money has caused a negative reception and raised many concerns.

## **Concerns about the establishment of a National phone line**

The National Hotline established solely for the duration of the campaign without reference to or contact with the long established Statewide 1800 numbers represents an extra layer and/or duplication of already existing services. Each State/Territory Domestic Violence line has well established networks with the services within its State/Territory. Staff in these organisations are specialists in Domestic Violence issues and have a wide knowledge of the Domestic Violence Services, Refuges and Shelters, Sexual Assault and Women's Services, child protection services, and the transport and accommodation options that exist within each State and Territory. They are trained and knowledgeable about the particular laws and legislations of their State/Territory. Even something as simple as knowing the location of cities, towns and communities in each area can make the difference between a helpful and not helpful response. A meeting with Lifeline in Sydney has not engendered confidence in their ability or knowledge at this point. Again reports are circulating in the field about women being told by Hotline phone workers that there were no services in a particular region, when the reality was that there is very well established women's services in that region. Clearly an example of a women's safety being compromised.

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### **WESNET National Secretariat**

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We believe that the National Hotline will still have to refer to the State/Territory lines to find out what services are available and which refuges have current vacancies. There are already examples of women in crisis who have been given 2 or 3 phone numbers to call to access the services they need. This is a concern as it will further compromise women's safety. It is obvious that this should not be an outcome of a women's safety campaign.

The development of the National Hotline has added another layer on to the existing service system response. Women are reporting feeling baffled by the appearance of another number to ring. What strategies are being envisioned for the time after the campaign when the service system will return to its previous state?

**We call upon the National Hotline to begin to form links and networks with the State/Territories existing 1800 lines to develop clear partnership protocols.** This is vital as the National Hotline workers will need considerable time and training to ensure that they 'know' and thoroughly understand the service sector in each State/Territory.

**Furthermore, because of the short term nature of the National Hotline, we ask for information about what strategies you have for the closure of the line and the conclusion of the campaign and urge you to consider collaboration with the field who will be continuing to provide services.**

#### **Concerns about the counselling response**

In the 1960 and 1970s women's groups brought the issue of violence against women out into the open and for the last 25 or more years, governments have responded to this serious issue with a range of funding streams. Over all this time the practice wisdom backed up by extensive research has consistently demonstrated that violence against women – domestic violence in all its forms and rape and sexual assault are not 'relationship' issues. The victim of the violence is never the cause of the violence and the perpetrator of the violence is wholly responsible for their (often) criminal acts. The whole service sector dealing with violence against women, do not prioritise the relationship but instead prioritises safety of the victims. The relationship counselling and mediation sectors, quite rightly have developed policies and practices that guide them to refer on, when violence is a presenting problem. The current hotline organisation seems to have been chosen so that they can 'counsel' the victims and perpetrators who call in. When Lifeline had a meeting with WESNET and NASASV (National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence) representatives it was clear from the training program discussed that the content would not prepare 'counsellors' to deal appropriately with domestic violence issues. There is no gender analysis or understanding of violence as an issue of power and control, and it lacks crucial information in relation to ATSI (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander), NESB (non-English speaking background) issues, and same sex violence.

We recommend that the expertise in the service sector is engaged to provide training to ensure that the workers on the National Hotline phone line understand every aspect of violence against women to enable them to meet minimum practice standards in their service provision.

**We call on you to advise the field about monitoring and accountability processes that have been put in place.** For example what guarantees or guidelines ensure that the 'counsellors' do in fact, refer clients on to the appropriate services in the region/area that the caller is from? Is there a monitoring process to

ensure that Lifeline Sydney does not just refer their callers to Lifeline volunteer phone lines in various locations across Australia? In fact will there be transparency about how many of the \$100 payments go to Lifeline branches and how many will be paid to community based domestic violence and sexual assault services. Also will data be collected that will demonstrate numbers of callers, the categories of callers, the outcomes provided to callers and caller satisfaction? Will safety be a criterion for a good outcome for example?

### **Concerns about monitoring and accountability**

Each State and Territory funding body, along with its service sector, has developed Best Practice guidelines that inform service delivery. These guidelines articulate ethical standards, in keeping with the professional bodies such as the Australian Association of Social Workers, and the Australian Institute of Social and Community Welfare, etc. They ensure compliance with workplace health and safety requirements and privacy legislation. They also set out principles around issues such as prevention, safety, coordination and service environment.

**We call on the National Hotline, to be transparent about which best practice guidelines inform their work.** We have had women report that they have terminated a call about sexual assault issues as the phone has been answered by a male.

Here in Australia we have a very fledgling response to perpetrators of domestic violence. There are very few funded services and little development of Australian programs or content. However there has been clear best practice standard guidelines developed in some States/Territories. It is vital that the work with perpetrators be guided, professional and cautious because of the very nature of the acts of domestic violence characterised by denial, blame and the avoidance of understanding or responsibility.

**We ask that the National Hotline consult and take advice from those engaged in this work across Australia, (not just metropolitan areas), to exchange knowledge and skills to help build an effective response to the stopping of violence and prevention of future violence.**

### **Concerns about the letterbox brochure**

The information in the brochure does play an educative and awareness raising role. However the content of the brochure demonstrates domestic violence and sexual assault from a relationship perspective. This can be confusing for women living with domestic violence who are in fear of their lives, and who have been repeatedly told that the violence is their fault. The booklet does not highlight the reality of injury and death faced by victims. There are no references to a legal response such as a protection order or information about places of safety such as women's refuges. There is no mention of specialist sexual assault services. The messages in the advertising campaign and the brochure about violence are useful, but the potential to ensure safety and to educate the community about the realities of domestic violence and sexual assault and about the far reaching effects the violence has on the victims, the costs to the community and to bring the community together to actively work on stopping violence, has been missed.

**We recommend that this campaign be followed up by a further campaign that presents information about the roots of violence against women and education on how we can work towards stopping the violence that impinges on the safety**

**of women and children and on their human rights. We ask that this further campaign have a collaborative consultative process.**

Should you wish to discuss these concerns further, please contact myself on 0408 896 774 or my colleague, Pauline Woodbridge (Secretary) on (07) 4721 2888.

Yours sincerely  
Maria Hagias  
WESNET Chairperson

cc: The Hon. PM John Howard, Mr Mark Latham MP, The Hon. Kay Patterson, Senator Trish Crossin, Ms Nicola Roxon MP, Ms Kerry Flanagan, State Premiers, Territory Chief Ministers, and State/Territory Ministers for Women's Affairs.