**Public Hearing**

**Senate Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia**

**October 15 2014, Canberra**

**Opening Statement**

Good morning and on behalf of the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this hearing and for accepting our written submission to this Inquiry.

The Australian Women Against Violence Alliance is one of the five National Women’s Alliances funded by the Australian Government. AWAVA brings together women’s organisations and individuals from across Australia to share information, to identify issues and their solutions, and to inform and support Government policy so that we can better respond to and prevent violence against women and their children. Our role is to ensure that women’s voices, particularly marginalised women’s voices, are heard by Government so that appropriate and effective steps can be taken to ensure that all women and children are able to live free from all forms of violence and abuse.

AWAVA commends the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee for holding this inquiry and for focusing specifically on the experiences of women with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who face disproportionality high rates of domestic violence. We would also like to bring the Committee’s attention to the experiences of women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities, who not only face a higher risk of violence but also experience difficulties negotiating Australia’s justice systems and accessing specialised support services.

AWAVA’s work is underpinned by the recognition that male violence against women is both a consequence and cause of gender inequality, and that the intersection between gender inequality and other social inequalities results in women from marginalised communities experiencing a higher risk of violence. Given the structural nature of male violence against women we would like to emphasise the need for policy interventions to focus not only on improving our responses to violence, but also on primary prevention initiatives that address discrimination against women and wider structures of gender inequality.

AWAVA commends the previous Federal Government on the release of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children and the current Federal Government for the release of the Second Action Plan under this National Plan. AWAVA also commends the Coalition of Australian Governments for their support and commitment to these plans. It is encouraging to have bipartisan support for action to address male violence against women, and the fact that we have a national landscape where there is a policy understanding and appreciation of gender-based violence across Federal, and State and Territory jurisdictions is an achievement in itself. Although, we are concerned about the delays in the implementation of the National Plan at both the National and State and Territory levels, and about the lack of independent monitoring and evaluation of the Plan. We would also like to emphasise the need to develop a national primary prevention framework, as recommended by the Time for Action Report.

Domestic Violence, and other forms of male violence against women, do not occur in a vacuum. They are manifestations of patriarchal structures, institutions, instruments and beliefs that persist in our society. Evidence points to the relationship between male violence against women and the degree of gender inequality in society. Therefore, in order to prevent domestic violence, we must address the root causes of this violence. This requires a whole of government approach and sustained long-term investment in primary prevention and early intervention and response services, with specific partnership with specialist women’s services. Further, Primary prevention messaging must focus on gender inequality and its intersection with other social inequalities.

Both traditional and social media are now reporting more on male violence against women and are beginning to represent the issue, accurately, as a national disaster. Yet we can see from VicHealth’s recent National Community Attitudes Survey that disturbing attitudes are still rife in our communities. This suggests that we still haven’t got the messaging right. The focus remains on physical violence or other stressors rather than the root causes of male violence against women. Moving forward we must address the issues of gender inequality resulting from patriarchal social relations if we are to effectively prevent this violence and abuse. Further, our investment must be focused, consistent and sustained.

Key initiatives that must be at the core of this long-term approach are the expansion of respectful relationships programs that focus on gender equality, gender equity and violence prevention curriculum, as well as critical pedagogy at all levels of education that addresses the intersection of gender and other social inequalities. It is also critical to promote appropriate media and reporting standards in relation to violence against women and gender stereotyping more broadly.

Moreover, whilst it is critical to focus on primary prevention as a long term strategy it is equally important in the short term to increase the response capacity of the specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services so that women and children are not, as they currently are, turned away from the appropriate supports and protection due to services working to capacity and refuges being full.

Once again, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this hearing. As the National Women’s Alliance focused on violence against women we look forward to our continued collaboration with the Commonwealth Government, other political parties and the preventing violence against women sector as we work to address the issue of male violence against women. We would welcome any opportunities for further dialogue regarding domestic violence policy reform and implementation.