

# Improving Safety for Women in Rural, Remote and Regional Locations

*NRWC/AWAVA Interactive Webinar:  
Consultation for the Second National Plan*



## List of Acronyms

AWAVA	Australian Women Against Violence Alliance
AVO	Apprehended Domestic/Personal Violence Order
CALD	People who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
LGBTQI+	People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, non-binary
NRWC	National Rural Women's Coalition
RRR	Rural, Regional and Remote
SAMs	Safety Action Meetings

### About National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC)

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is the largest organisation in Australia advocating for rural, regional and remote women and their communities. With grassroots engagement we work to improve the lives of women through capacity building activities and influencing government through dissemination of information and advocacy. The NRWC highlights the wonderful diversity that is rural, regional and remote women and works to ensure that rural, regional and remote women are positioned to be in all levels of decision making and leadership. The NRWC is committed to reducing the access gap that rural people experience due to lack of services to improve health and wellbeing, education, telecommunication, financial security, work participation and safety.

### About Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA)

Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) is one of the six National Women's Alliances funded by the Australian Government to bring together women's organisations and individuals across Australia to share information, identify issues and contribute to solutions.

AWAVA's focus is on responding to and preventing violence against women and their children. AWAVA's role is to ensure that women's voices and particularly marginalised women's voices are heard by Government, and to amplify the work of its member organisations and Friends and Supporters. AWAVA's members include organisations from every State and Territory in Australia, representing domestic and family violence services, sexual assault services, services for women in the sex industry and women's legal services, as well as organisations representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, young women, women educators and other groups. AWAVA's contract manager is the Women's Services Network (WESNET).

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## Introduction

As part of the preparations for the Second National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children (hereafter referred to as the Second National Plan), the Office for Women commissioned the National Rural Women's Coalition to undertake consultations with women from Rural, Regional and Remote Australia in the first half of 2021.

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) partnered with the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) to assist with the consultation process to gain insight into the experiences of rural women's frontline services and understand what policy priorities they believe should underpin the Second National Plan. The consultation took place through a 90-minute interactive webinar on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2021.

Both AWAVA and NRWC advertised the webinar broadly, using our full contact and member lists, social media, newsletters, weekly roundups and websites to ensure the consultation reached a range of RRR women's frontline services and stakeholders. A total of 54 women registered from a range of professional backgrounds, such as legal aid, crisis support services and government.

We are very grateful to all of the women who participated in the webinar and shared their experiences, knowledge and concerns, as well as Tina Dixson (former Program Manager of AWAVA) for facilitating and hosting the event.

This report provides a record of the interactive webinar and the main points raised by the participants.

## Agenda

1. Welcome
2. Acknowledgement of Country
3. Overview of the priorities to achieve women's safety
4. Breakout sessions:
  - a. Practicing intersectionality in preventing and responding to all forms of violence against women
  - b. Addressing all forms of violence against women
  - c. Improving services and system responses
5. Report back and overview of each breakout room
6. Ways forward, Wishlist for the Second National Plan and summary
7. Close and thanks

## Aim/Objective

The aim of the interactive webinar was advertised as "to reach out to services working with victims/survivors of violence from every state and territory with a particular focus on the rural, regional and remote (RRR) locations in order to gain their feedback on what policy priorities should underpin the second National Plan."

Attendees were invited to engage with a provided position on the priority areas for the National plan by engaging with one topic out of three presented to the participants.

## Topics for discussion

After preparatory meetings between staff from NRWC and AWAVA three topics for discussion were proposed for the breakout discussions with participants. These were:

1. Practicing intersectionality in prevention and responses to all forms of violence against women
2. Addressing all forms of violence against women
3. Improving services or systems responses

The sessions were facilitated by the former Program Manager of AWAVA, Ms Tina Dixson. Break out groups were facilitated by members of AWAVA with notetakers from AWAVA and NRWC.

## Opening remarks and setting the scene

Ms Tina Dixson opened the interactive webinar by acknowledging country and welcoming the participants. She introduced the session's purpose and provided an overview of the background and purpose of the interactive session. Tina also outlined the three topics for discussion. Please see Attachment One for an overview of the opening presentation.

## Breakout Sessions

The three breakout rooms provided the space for participants to deep dive into critical areas regarding violence against women in RRR locations. These included addressing all forms of violence against women in RRR communities, practicing intersectionality in tackling gendered violence and addressing gaps in systems and services in RRR locations. Please see Attachment Two for the breakout room slides.

## Topic One: Addressing all forms of Violence Against Women

Guiding questions for this Topic were:

1. How does living in a RRR location complicate the experiences of violence?
2. Are there forms of violence that are not being addressed?
3. How can we a) raise awareness and b) prevent and address non-physical forms of violence?
4. How can prevention and responses efforts be inclusive of all forms of violence against women?

Summary of discussions and contributions

Unfortunately, due to time constraints the final question in this breakout room was not answered during the discussion.

### 1. How does living in a RRR location complicate the experiences of gendered violence?

#### Geographical Location

Geographical and social isolation was raised as a key issue facing women in RRR locations. Participants reported that women are discouraged from leaving abusive environments due to the chronic shortage of formal intervention and services in RRR locations. This is primarily due to the vast geographical distances that exist between women's homes and crisis support services, legal aid and social welfare services such as Centrelink – all of which are crucial for ensuring women are financially and socially empowered to leave abusive environments. Participants additionally stressed the chronic lack of social

and affordable housing in RRR locations and identified older women living in RRR nursing homes as a particularly isolated and vulnerable group.

Whilst the participants reported that women in RRR locations may use non-formal, personal resources, such as family and friends for support in reporting and leaving violence, this option is often not afforded to women living on remote and inaccessible properties, who experience heightened levels of social isolation.

Participants additionally noted that geographical distance is used as a form of coercive control by perpetrators to prevent victim-survivors from reporting or escaping violence:

*“Often perpetrators will say things like ‘look no one’s going to come out here, it’ll take one hour for police to get here, I’m mates with the police officer and he’ll take my side’ as a way of preventing women from seeking help”. – Participant*

### **Small communities, shame and stigma**

Participants emphasised that issues such as community stigma, a lack of privacy in small towns and views that domestic violence is a ‘private’ rather than a ‘public’ issue, majorly reduce women’s willingness to report violence in RRR locations.

Participants identified that rural social life is “starkly gendered”. They discussed how social networks were often facilitated through the husband’s relationships in the community and highlighted how this reduced women’s willingness to lean on social networks for support. Additionally, stigma surrounding divorce and disharmony within the family unit is especially potent in rural social structures. This paired with ideals surrounding ‘country people’ as inherently “stoic and resilient” often prevents women from reporting violence for fear of being blamed or having their experiences minimised by authorities and/or community members.

According to participants, these ideologies paired with the fact that “everyone knows everyone” in small rural towns is a highly effective mechanism for silencing victim-survivors in RRR locations:

*“The thought of seeing someone you know on the way to a domestic violence service is often enough to deter women from accessing formal support”. – Participant*

Lastly, the small size of rural communities means that perpetrators often know the location of safe houses - reducing the safety, anonymity and the overall willingness of women in these communities to access such services.

### **Women experiencing lower levels of financial independence in RRR communities**

Discussions during this breakout session additionally underlined that women in RRR locations are more likely to be marginalised in employment, have less access to inheritance, experience heightened barriers to childcare and have their education interrupted by family responsibilities, ultimately

increasing their financial dependence on perpetrators who control the family income and reducing their options for leaving abusive relationships.

### **Natural disasters and violence against women**

One participant highlighted that natural disasters also complicate and worsen the experiences of violence for women in RRR communities. Discussions in this breakout room aligned with research that highlights women and children are more vulnerable to family violence after natural disasters such as bushfires, droughts, floods and most recently, pandemics.

## **2. Are there diverse forms of violence that are not being addressed?**

Participants in this breakout room discussed various forms of violence that take place in RRR communities. These included:

- **Migration and visa abuse.** This was identified as a form of abuse used to control and prevent victim-survivors from leaving. Participants identified that often migration and visa abuse escalated to instances of extreme physical abuse, highlighting reports of stabbings, rape and strangulation.
- **Psychological abuse:**
  - This was identified as being common among older women in RRR locations. According to participants, older women experience psychological abuse perpetrated by landlords and neighbours. In RRR areas, there are limited specialist services that these women can be referred to and most that are somewhat relevant have long waiting lists.
  - High rates of gun ownership in RRR communities is also used as a form of psychological control that makes threats of violence more legitimate.
- **Financial abuse:**
  - Withholding money from women is a primary tactic used to maintain control and prevent victim-survivors from leaving.
  - Financial abuse was highlighted as a significant problem for older women. According to participants, older women can be coerced into giving money to their children and grandchildren and are unwilling to seek help and report family members to authorities.
- **Technology abuse:** Although identified as a common form of abuse in RRR communities, participants highlighted that there needs to be recognition of the challenges that large geographical distances present for addressing technology-facilitated abuse. This includes a lack of understanding and training for service providers regarding technology abuse.
- **Coercive control:** ‘Love bombing’ was raised as a particular type of coercive control used by perpetrators in RRR communities.
- **Institutional and sexual abuse of older women**

## **3. How can we a) raise awareness and b) prevent and address non-physical forms of violence?**

All participants during this discussion agreed action is needed to educate people in rural communities on the various and diverse forms of physical and non-physical gendered violence. Participants argued

that raising awareness of the various forms of violence will prompt a flow on effect to improve court, police and system responses. According to participants these education initiatives must target:

- Misunderstandings as to what constitutes coercive control and complex forms of violence. This education must target both perpetrators and victim-survivors to be able to identify when they are experiencing violence and what avenues of support are available in their local communities.
- Education that breaks down traditional and sexist gender roles, stereotypes and norms that remain prevalent in RRR communities.
- Men's behaviour programs that draw on male peer facilitated models to challenge attitudes and values that tolerate aggression and condone violence and disrespect towards women.
- Education and awareness raising initiatives must be led by specialists working on the ground with perpetrators and victim-survivors.

Participants also identified that awareness raising initiatives must be matched with increased funding for specialist women's services. This is in line with previous findings from OurWatch, that predict demand for frontline and support services is likely to increase as primary prevention agendas raise community awareness, challenge violence condoning attitudes and encourage reporting of violence in homes and institutions.<sup>1</sup> Hence, whilst primary prevention is critical, frontline services must continue to play a key role in responding to rising demand and should be supported to maintain good service models.

Participants highlighted the need for a whole of system response to increase women's economic empowerment and financial independence in RRR communities. They additionally called to ensure natural disaster responses are integrated with gender violence response models and that adequate funding is allocated to ensure services are not pushed to breaking point during a natural disaster or pandemic.

## Topic Two: Practicing Intersectionality in prevention and responses to all forms of violence against women

The concept of 'intersectionality' describes how certain social categories, such as race, class, gender, dis/ability, geographical location, age and sexuality, overlap to enhance the oppression of a given individual or group. Intersectionality emphasises that "while women share similar experiences of violence and discrimination, not all women are equally disadvantaged or have equal access to resources, power and privilege".<sup>2</sup> This is certainly the case for women living in rural, remote and regional (RRR) locations, who are more likely to experience gendered violence and face extra barriers to accessing justice, support and safety than women in urban settings.

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<sup>1</sup> Our Watch. 2017. Counting on Change: A Guide to Prevention Monitoring. [https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/27043538/OurWatch\\_Counting-on-Change\\_AA.pdf](https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/27043538/OurWatch_Counting-on-Change_AA.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV). 2018. *Guiding Principle 1: An Intersectional Feminist Approach*. [https://www.dvrcv.org.au/sites/default/files/DVRCV\\_Guiding\\_Principle\\_1.pdf](https://www.dvrcv.org.au/sites/default/files/DVRCV_Guiding_Principle_1.pdf).

Guiding questions for this Topic were:

1. How can we practice intersectional approaches in prevention and responses to all forms of violence against women?
2. What needs to change?
3. What has been working well?

Unfortunately, the final question was not answered by participants due to time constraints.

### How can we practice intersectional approaches in prevention and responses to all forms of violence against women?

Participants confirmed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in RRR locations face higher levels of violence and increased barriers to accessing support, including discrimination and a lack of culturally appropriate services.

In particular, participants identified that Elder abuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is not clearly understood by either the community or service providers and often goes unreported due to shame and fear. Adding to this, a participant highlighted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women consistently face discrimination from service providers, such as police and health workers, and as a result are often not referred to the correct services. She gave an example of an Indigenous woman who received brain injuries from family and domestic violence yet was mistaken for being 'intoxicated' and therefore arrested rather than protected and supported. Ultimately, to practice intersectional approaches in prevention and responses to violence against women in RRR communities, participants agreed that a better understanding of the diverse forms of violence facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is needed.

According to participants this includes equipping all service providers with a better understanding of family violence through the context of continued colonialism, dispossession of land, forced child removal and subsequent intergenerational trauma that has stemmed from systemic racism and discrimination.

CALD women, women on temporary visas and women with disability were also identified by participants as vulnerable groups in RRR communities. In particular, participants highlighted that a lack of interpreters and cultural training for service providers means services are unable to cater for the diverse needs of women from CALD backgrounds. In addition, materials provided to help women navigate support pathways in RRR communities are often not applicable to a range of different languages and cultural backgrounds and do not cover diverse forms of violence experienced by women in these communities. Further, participants noted that the high cost of service provision in non-urban areas disproportionately impacts upon women from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Participants suggested that advertisements regarding support pathways for victim-survivors should be displayed in shopping centres and medical centres whilst stickers should be designed to identify safe places for women escaping violence. Such advertisements must be inclusive and accessible to women from diverse communities in a culturally sensitive way.

## What needs to change?

Participants collectively highlighted that primary prevention strategies need to be more intersectional. Such efforts must not only target sexist attitudes and norms but additionally be tailored to the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, CALD women and women with disability.

## Topic Three: Improving Services and System Responses

This consultation sought insight from RRR frontline women's services into the current barriers facing services and systems and how these may be overcome through the Second National Plan.

Guiding questions for this session were:

1. How does the availability of services look like in RRR locations? What are the critical gaps?
2. How can we ensure that systems (law, health, police, social security, migration etc) are playing their role in responses to VAW?

## What does the availability of services look like in RRR locations? What are the critical gaps?

### Inaccessible services

Participants in this breakout room identified that frontline, legal and women's services in RRR locations were significantly less accessible to women than services in urban areas, oftentimes requiring women to travel over two hours to access support. In addition, participants noted that while more RRR support services were employing technology as a solution for bridging geographical distances, many of these services were not assisting women in RRR communities to understand how to use this technology to their benefit.

### Inadequate police responses

The issue of police was raised in all three breakout rooms. Participants highlighted that victim-survivors in RRR locations report having had negative experiences with police, who were described as "dismissive", "intimidating" and "insensitive". In addition, according to participants, victim-survivors often report police offering confusing and/or conflicting advice, failing to provide information regarding their case and court proceedings and taking control over and above the victim-survivor's wishes. For instance, examples were given of police implementing AVO's to be seen to be "managing risk", against the wishes of victim-survivors, resulting in many women regretting going to the police in the first place.

Discussions also surrounded the willingness of police to dismiss "minor" breaches of AVOs, for various reasons, including having personal relations with victim-survivors and perpetrators.

Participant's highlighted that police responses to gendered violence in RRR locations are often not trauma-informed nor victim-survivor centred, and many rural police services experience extensive backlogs on investigations into gendered violence. This is due to a lack of training and resourcing that leaves police overwhelmed with growing instances of violence in these areas. Geographical distance also means that victim-survivors often have to travel extensive distances to lodge a police report.

### **Inadequate court responses**

Court responses were also identified as being inadequate and unsympathetic to victim-survivors. This includes courts failing to hold perpetrators accountable, especially in regard to AVO and intervention order breaches, and a continual indifference to the safety of mothers and children, particularly in relation to relocation due to violence. Participants argued that these inadequate court responses not only discourage women from accessing justice and safety but also discourage police and community members from adequately addressing and preventing abuse, sustaining the silencing and invisibility of gendered violence in RRR locations.

In addition, it was noted that courts in RRR areas often do not have adequate facilities to ensure the safety and well-being of women and children throughout justice processes. This includes having only one elevator or one set of stairs, forcing victim-survivors to encounter their perpetrators upon entrance, as well as a lack of safe rooms.

### **Lack of funding**

Calls for more funding for specialist women's services were also reiterated throughout each breakout room. There was a particular emphasis on increasing funding for crisis response services, where there is currently "no response and no capacity for response" in some RRR locations. Sexual assault services were also described as experiencing "huge waitlists" and whilst support workers try to triage emergencies, there remains a chronic lack of specialist trauma counselling for victim-survivors.

### **How can we ensure that systems (law, health, police, social security, migration etc) are playing their role in responses to VAW?**

#### **Improve court and police responses**

Participants highlighted that funding is needed to improve justice responses through reducing discrimination and increasing the resources and capacity of rural, remote and regional court systems. In addition, participants highlighted the need to establish domestic, family and sexual violence police task forces who are specially trained in trauma-informed and victim-survivor centred responses to violence in RRR communities.

#### **Community based and whole of system responses (e.g., safety action meetings)**

To meet rising demand for specialist and violence services in RRR communities, participants highlighted the need to strengthen relationships between specialist services and generalist services such as mental health and alcohol and drug support. Safety Action Meetings (SAMs) in rural NSW were raised as a good example of community based and whole of system responses to violence. These meetings produce targeted information sharing between service providers on each victim-survivor's situation and ensure efforts to protect women are synergised rather than duplicated or overlooked. Participant's reported that these Safety Action Meetings are working extremely well in RRR communities to ensure women's safety and reduce breaches of protection orders.

Participants noted that whole-of-system and community-based responses must be well-coordinated and use the same language. They claimed efforts to address and prevent violence must target the lack of consistency in terms, laws and infrastructure regarding violence against women that currently exists across state borders that confuse and weaken service responses. In particular, participants highlighted the need to establish a consistent framework, tailored to RRR communities that helps both specialist and generalist services better **recognise** and **respond** to violence and **refer** victim-survivors to appropriate support.

## Summary Session

Following the breakout sessions, the group came back together to report back to the remaining participants.

Notetakers then provided the following summation of the main points raised by the interactive consultation on behalf of the group.

- Recognition of rates of all forms of violence in RRR communities, and the unique challenges faced by the women and children, and services.
- Much stronger funding required for RRR specialist and generalist services to meet rising demand. This funding should ensure services cover all forms of violence against women and enables capacity for long-term planning and resourcing.
- Infrastructure support is urgently required. In particular, infrastructure must support safe and affordable social housing for women and children escaping violence in RRR locations and assist in reducing long waiting times for specialist services.
- Generalist service workers such as police, health professionals and social welfare workers must be appropriately trained to Recognise, Respond and Refer perpetrators and victim-survivors to the appropriate services.
- Implement systems and programs to protect older women and in particular tackle violence against older women in RRR nursing homes.
- Measures must address the lack of consistency in terms, laws and infrastructures that relate to violence against women across states and territories.
- Efforts to construct multi-disciplinary teams are crucial in RRR settings. Tackling gendered violence can be enhanced through forming diverse networks.
- Recognition must be given to increases in brain injury trauma for victim-survivors and the role of violence and drugs in RRR communities.
- Emergency natural disaster and pandemic management and responses must be integrated with efforts to respond to violence against women. There must be a long-term resourcing and response model established to ensure that currently established violence services are not pushed to breaking point during a natural disaster or pandemic.
- Specialist workers should accompany police during domestic, family and sexual violence callouts.

## Limitations

Whilst most participants during this consultation had experience working with RRR communities, many were based in urban centres or RRR locations across New South Wales and Victoria. This was a notable limitation. For future consultations and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of RRR frontline women's services, it is essential to ensure a diversity of participants from rural areas across *all* Australian states.

## Conclusion

This interactive webinar, and in particular the three individual breakout rooms, fostered constructive and open discussion between service providers. These discussions confirmed numerous issues and barriers facing women and children who experience violence in RRR locations and highlighted what work is needed to eliminate such barriers according to the women and services who participated in the forum.

Ultimately, this consultation confirmed that to effectively address and prevent violence against women and children in RRR areas it is vital to ensure efforts are intersectional, address all forms of gendered violence and tackle gaps and inequalities in service and system provision. This feedback should be used to ensure the needs of women and services in RRR communities remain a key focus area throughout the development of the Second National Plan.

## How to Improve Safety for Women in Rural, Regional & Remote Australia

26 May 2021

### Welcome!



Discussions from this webinar will help us to understand what policy priorities should underpin the Second National Plan to better assist rural, remote and regional (RRR) frontline women's services assisting victim-survivors of gendered violence.

As a result, this webinar is only targeting frontline services working with victim-survivors in RRR locations around Australia. We hope that in targeting this specific audience we are creating a safe space for services to openly share their insights and experiences.

If you are not a RRR frontline women's service you can have your say on the Second National Plan via the DSS Survey available at:

<https://engage.dss.gov.au/developing-the-next-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children/have-your-say/>.

Thank you!

## Towards the next National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children

1. Approaches to end violence against women;
2. Addressing violence against diverse groups of women;
3. Addressing different types of violence against women;
4. Strengthening systems;
5. Strengthening services; and
6. Improving coordination and governance.

## Breakout rooms



- 1 Practicing intersectionality in prevention and responses to all forms of violence against women (with a focus on RRR locations)
- 2 Addressing all forms of violence against women
- 3 Improving services or systems responses, especially in RRR locations



Tina Dixson, she-her Ngunnawal land

Join a breakout room

Share Screen Record Breakout Rooms Reactions

Breakout Rooms - In Progress	
Intersectionality	0
Services	0
Forms of VAW	0



## All forms of violence against women

- 1 How does living in a RRR location complicate the experiences of violence?
- 2 Are there forms of violence that are not being addressed?
- 3 How can we:  
a) raise awareness and;  
b) prevent and address non-physical forms of violence?
- 4 How can prevention and response efforts be inclusive of all forms of violence against women?



## Promoting intersectionality

- 1 How can we practice intersectional approaches in prevention and responses to all forms of VAW?
- 2 What has been working well?
- 3 What needs to change?
- 4 How does living in a RRR location complicate the experiences of violence?



## Services and systems

- 1 **What does the availability of services look like in RRR locations?  
What are the critical gaps?**
- 2 **How can we ensure that systems (law, health, police, social security, migration etc) are playing their role in responses to VAW?**