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## Preventing violence against women and children

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*NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women*  
Illawarra/Shoalhaven Domestic Violence Conference

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Thank you for this opportunity to address your conference here in the lovely Illawarra/Shoalhaven region.

Today - on the day before White Ribbon Day - I am pleased to have an opportunity to talk to you about violence against women and children - an issue which touches - and damages - the lives of too many Australian women and children.

I am honoured to be able to address all of you here today who work at the coalface - trying to prevent and assist those who have been victims of domestic and family abuse.

As you know, the most recent survey conducted in 2005 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates, conservatively, that one in five women experienced domestic violence or sexual assault in the last year. But over their lifetime as many as 57 per cent of women reported experiencing at least one incident of physical or sexual violence.

Violence against women knows no barriers - it crosses age, culture, suburb and class. We know that it happens from Nowra to Newcastle and Bankstown to Bronte.

Violence throughout our community is a problem: the Cronulla riots shocked many; older Australians fear assault or robbery; even road rage is on the increase. Both men and women are the victims of violence, but there is a difference in where and how that violence usually happens. Men most often experience assault by a stranger rather than a loved one. Women are more likely to be assaulted by their partner, friend or relative.

We should be making an effort through out the community to reduce violent crime, but a crime prevention and policing approach is not enough when we're dealing with domestic violence and sexual assault. The unique relationships between victims and perpetrators of domestic violence demand an approach specific to the problem. It requires an understanding of gender relationships and power imbalances. Most of the time violence against women happens in the home and is perpetrated by men against

women whom they have an intimate relationship with. And many times it happens in families where there are children who witness the violence.

It is shocking to think that one quarter of our young people have witnessed violence against their mother or stepmother.

It is no wonder that the government's own research shows that domestic violence alone costs Australians \$8 billion each year. It is the largest preventable contributor to the disease burden for women between 18 - 44 years. It poses a greater health risk to women of this age group than blood pressure, smoking and obesity.

Violence against women is a crime and should never be tolerated or excused. The men who perpetrate these crimes need to take responsibility for them. Other men have to speak up and say that domestic violence and sexual assault are never acceptable.

Individual need to take responsibility for their actions, but government also needs to lead. We need a Federal government with a long-term vision, a sustained commitment and a practical approach. We need a government that will be courageous.

### Howard's record

The community sector and the feminist movement have been working for decades on these issues. The Hawke and Keating governments picked up on those efforts in the 1980s.

Since coming into office the Howard government has dismantled the social infrastructure that was built to tackle violence against women and children.

It began defunding women's organisations like the Women's Electoral Lobby, which had led the charge to provide vital services to women and children escaping violence.

It wound up its own Partnerships Against Domestic Violence Program in 2005 despite it being a very successful funding program that provided money for much needed research and innovative pilot programs.

In 2002, the Prime Minister removed \$10 million from women's programs to pay for the Government's 'Be Alert Not Alarmed' fridge magnet campaign. It was only returned after much public outcry.

Then in 2003, the Prime Minister abruptly cancelled a \$12 million *No Respect, No Relationship* preventative anti-violence campaign, despite international recognition of the quality of the campaign and two years of research and development it was based on.

More than six months later, *Violence Against Women, Australia Says No* was released. Instead of focusing on prevention and sending a strong message

that men who use violence must take responsibility for their actions, the revised campaign focussed on offering victims of violence a telephone number to call after assault has occurred.

In the 2005-06 Budget the Australian Government announced the Women's Safety Agenda (committing \$75.7 million over four years). It includes the *Violence Against Women, Australia Says No* campaign, a grants program and funding to Mensline.

Over the last few years a number of complaints have been made about the *Violence Against Women, Australia Says No* 1800 Helpline. A domestic violence worker who tested the service reported being told that if she'd suffered broken ribs that 'perhaps you ought to wear thicker clothing'. This is not a criticism of Lifeline, not the workers who staff the phone line, but answering the phone to someone who has been sexually assaulted or has experienced domestic violence requires a high degree of training and experience.

For the same money, or less, the government could have funded a national 1-300 number which would have directed callers to 24-hour emergency phone-lines in their own states which have the experience and local knowledge to provide the best service.

The Howard government is the biggest advertiser in the country - it outspends Coca Cola on advertising - so if the government is serious about prevention it spend some of its advertising dollars on an effective community awareness campaign.

We all know that a key part of keeping women and children safe is the provision of emergency accommodation. Yet last year when the latest Supported Accommodation Assistance Program 5 year agreement was signed, the Commonwealth actually *reduced* base federal funding to services.

This is despite its own evaluation in 2004, which said that a 15 per cent increase was needed just for services to stay viable and an increase of 40 per cent was needed to meet unmet demand. One quarter of all female Supported Accommodation Assistance Program clients escaping violence in 2003-04 were Indigenous.

We don't need an evaluation to know that when half of all women and two-thirds of all their children escaping violence are turned away from refuges each night that there is a problem. Women will return to violent homes rather than make their children homeless, or they will live in fear in caravan parks or other inappropriate accommodation with inadequate support.

So while the Government is happy to put out a glossy ad campaign about violence against women it doesn't have the guts or grit to provide proper funding to protect women and children.

The Women's Safety Agenda has no long-term vision. In its ad campaign it doesn't call violence against women a crime it talks about it being a *problem*.

Well it's a problem, a big problem, an \$8 billion problem in fact, but it's a crime too. Reported rates of violence against women have gone up during the term of the Howard government, especially for middle-aged women. The 2005 ABS Personal Safety Survey showed that the rates of women over 35 who experienced physical violence in the last year has risen by 2% over the last decade.

A recently released Victorian Government survey, *Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women* showed that community attitudes towards violence against women have not significantly shifted: violence against women and children continues to be trivialised and condoned by many Australians.

Like the rest of the Government's attempts to tackle violence against women the Women's Safety Agenda is just another example of a piecemeal approach to this serious and costly issue.

On one hand the Government is happy to fund a multi-million dollar advertising campaign, but on the other, they refuse to acknowledge the flow-on effects and increased demands on emergency services that this increased awareness may have.

### Beazley's vision

Prevention of violence against women requires a clear vision and strong leadership.

About half an hour ago in Brisbane, the Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, who is a White Ribbon Ambassador, guaranteed that a Federal Labor Government will offer a strong and sustained commitment to end violence against women and children.

Instead of the piecemeal approach of the Howard government, in which programs are funded then abandoned, advertising campaigns started then scrapped and community groups all around the country struggle on their own, re-inventing the wheel, we will develop a National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children.

This National Plan will set out a coherent national vision for the prevention of violence against women and children. It will include domestic and family violence, sexual assault, child sexual assault and other forms of violence against children.

I want violence against children included in my plan to prevent violence against women because international studies now show that child abuse and domestic violence go hand-in-hand: in 30-60% of families affected by

domestic violence child abuse is also occurring and children witnessing domestic violence should also be considered victims of domestic violence.

Sadly, sexual assault and domestic violence also go hand in hand. Gone are the days when we debated whether rape was possible within marriage. We now know that partners and former partners are often the perpetrators of sexual assault against women.

The National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children will be long term. It will be accountable. It will set out responsibilities *across* Government departments and *throughout* all levels of Government.

To direct the implementation of the plan Labor will establish a National Council on Violence Against Women. It will be a national peak and comprise of experts from Government, academia and the community and NGO sectors. It will include survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault and law enforcement agencies.

The National Council's role will be to steer our National Plan, and to report to the Cabinet twice a year, explaining what's working and what progress we're making. Without accountability there is no progress.

We will work state and territory governments to improve access to crisis accommodation, and to secure, long term affordable housing.

I also want to make sure the family law system is able to protect children and parents from violence and abuse. As we flagged at the time of the debate over the family law changes, children's safety should be prioritised over parent rights. By adopting a 'safety first' position in relation to Family Law a Beazley Labor government will ensure that all parties, particularly women and children, are protected from violence *after* separation.

We will continue to review the operation of the Family Relationship Centres to ensure that they are adequately taking account of safety concerns. We will continue to monitor staffing issues at the FRCs, including issues of accreditation, policies and procedures and training and will amend the Family Law Act to introduce a cooling off period for parents entering into parenting plans.

We will review the definition of family violence in the Family Law Act to make sure it is adequate and we will change the exception provisions so that parents should not have to attend Family Dispute Resolution if they have a **subjective** fear of the other party.

Kim Beazley's National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children will use a public-health framework. That's not to say domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse aren't crimes: of course they are, and when they occur they have to be met with the full weight of the law. But it will take more than just increased policing and efficient courts to stop violence happening in the first place.

Because most of this violence takes place in private, behind closed doors, and is often not reported to police, we need to focus more effectively on prevention than we have.

The World Health Organisation believes that treating violence prevention as a public health issue like drink driving allows us to reduce the incidence of violence more effectively than policing alone.

A public health model places emphasis on *preventing* disease or injury from occurring or reoccurring, rather than on just treating consequences.

Best of all, a public health approach is science-based. Everything - from identifying the problem and its causes, to planning, testing and evaluating responses - must be based on sound research and informed by the best evidence.

A public health framework lends itself to working in partnership with a range of disciplines and experts - from medicine, epidemiology and psychology to sociology, criminology, education and economics.

The public health approach does not replace criminal justice and human rights responses to violence; rather, it complements these activities. It allows us to grab experts from a range of disciplines to work on ending violence against women and children.

Drink driving is a good illustration: we campaign and educate and legislate; we introduce random breath testing to reduce the incidence; and then we come down like a tonne of bricks on people who do it.

As I said, the current response is sporadic. It is short term. It is unpredictable. Worst of all, successful projects end because their pilot funding has run out, and there are no ongoing sources of funding available. Communities are consulted over and over again. A few years later the same community starts from scratch, developing a new program to keep women and kids safe. Or a program that works well is a virtual secret, so communities continually re-invent the wheel.

I want to talk about what works and why; I want the knowledge of successful programs to spread so they can be replicated in appropriate circumstances. I want to acknowledge the amazing work of so many people in this room and I want to endorse and support you when you are successful.

There are a lot of sad stories in sexual assault, domestic violence and child sexual assault. But there are stories of defiance and healing too, individuals whose strength is beyond anything I have had to endure, and programs that have helped heal them. We have to talk about those stories too.

I want to promote projects like the extraordinary *Safe at Home* Program in Tasmania or the *Staying Home Leaving Violence* project run so successfully down in Bega.

We could all learn from models like Queensland's Indigenous Family Violence Workers forum - where Aboriginal workers who work on family violence are invited to come together once a year - in yarning circles - to share information and figure out the best ways to tackle the alarming rates of violence in Indigenous communities. They support each other and they get strength to go back to the front line, to their communities doing some of the hardest jobs in the country - trying to stop family violence.

I want the National Council on Violence Against Women to tell all of my Cabinet colleagues about the innovative and successful *Religion and Family Harmony project* in Parramatta where religious community leaders from the Muslim, Sikh, Baha'i, Hindu and Jewish communities agreed to work together to encourage and facilitate family harmony and prevent violence. Where Sheikhs and Rabbis proudly undertook domestic violence training and - in a culturally sensitive way - are promoting anti-violence.

I want other States to know about this wonderful website for Victorian teenagers - *Bursting The Bubble* - where young people can read or chat about what its like to be living with family violence; where they can get info on safety planning and other resources that can help them.

And I want places like Brisbane, Newcastle and Geelong to think about replicating an innovative, best practice service based at the Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service in Victoria where staff offer mother/child support and therapeutic intervention where infants have been involved in family violence. This project is based on the best available evidence from international early childhood research looking at brain development and the impact of violence on infants - babies and toddlers - and how to work to undo the damage that has been done by family violence.

A National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children will mean that these innovative, evidence-based projects are promoted and hopefully shared between the States. It will mean that we will all be working together, from the same page and for the long haul.

It will mean we won't reinvent the wheel because frankly this issue is so serious that we don't have the time.

*Ends.*