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THE GOVERNMENT PROCLAIMS TO BE COMMITTED TO ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE BUT THEY HAVE FORGOTTEN ABOUT CHILDREN

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When National Cabinet met last week to discuss the crisis of gender-based violence, the press release from the Prime Minister proclaimed a commitment to a *'shared goal of ending violence against women and children'*. Yet, nowhere in the political announcements and promises which follow, are children as victim-survivors in their own right considered. They are invisible. Their experiences silenced and ignored. Yet, we know that ending gender-based violence in one generation, the stated goal of the government's own National Plan, necessitates a focus on children and young people.

Just last year the landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that experiences of child maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect are widespread among the Australian population. Yet here we are, in the second year of delivery of the National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032, and children remain the ignored victims of this national crisis.

This Plan includes, for the first time, an important acknowledgement of children and young people as victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence in their own right.

Two years in, it is unclear what actions have been taken – if any - to realise this acknowledgement. What child-centred service supports have been put in place in each state and territory to meet the safety needs of children and young people escaping violence with or without a protective parent? What crisis housing services for unaccompanied children and young people have been delivered to ensure children are not choosing between a violent home and homelessness? And critically, where is the much-needed expansion of recovery and healing services tailored to the unique needs of children and young people? It should not be enough for children to merely survive a childhood of violence, we have a responsibility to support their recovery and healing.

A large body of evidence shows that experiences of adult-perpetrated harm in childhood is one of the biggest contributors to use of violence at home or in their intimate relationships

by young people. Beyond the intergenerational transmission of violence such experiences are also key drivers of our youth offending and youth suicide rates. Surely the aim is for all Australian children and young people to thrive, particularly as support for recovery and healing is also about reducing the risk of domestic and family violence and other adverse outcomes for future generations.

National Cabinet's announcement of the Leaving Violence payment program is a clear example of children falling off the agenda and out of political minds. Children are not eligible for the national payment. It only applies to adult leaving an abusive intimate partner relationship. There are many scenarios to ponder here – none of which were clearly in the minds of Australian politicians at the table. What if you are a young person leaving a violent family home and need access to funding to support safety planning? What if you are a single mum with two teenage children and are wanting to leave your abuser? You will have access to one single payment to cover you and your children. As Anne Summers so clearly pointed out in recent years, it is decisions such as these that force women and children to choose between a life of abuse or a life of poverty.

Yet again, in our efforts to tackle domestic, family and sexual violence, National Cabinet missed an important opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to improving the safety and lives of children and young people impacted by this crisis. What has changed eight years on from Victoria's Royal commission, that identified children as the 'silent victims' of family violence?

And let us remember that many of the women killed allegedly by men's violence, for whom Australians have rallied the streets in thousands, were mothers whose children are left behind. This includes mother of four Erica Hay, mother of one Molly Ticehurst, mother of one Tara Marie Morrison, we could go on. And children, too, are killed, often in attempts to exert the ultimate punishment on their mother. The high-profile cases involving Luke Batty, Jack and Jennifer Edwards, and Aaliyah, Laianah and Trey Clarke are only the tip of the iceberg of children killed in the context of domestic and family violence.

For too long system responses to domestic and family violence in Australia have seen children only as extensions of their primary carer. Repeatedly governments have failed to recognise and adequately respond to the unique safety, support and recovery needs of the individual child. The *Now you have heard us, what will you do?* report led by the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner concluded the voices of children and young people are all too often missing from decisions that impact upon their lives. It appears that National Cabinet has continued this tradition by repeating this mistake.

Ending gender-based violence in one generation necessitates a transformational focus on delivering improved outcomes for the next generation. Children and young people cannot be agents of generational change, as described in the National Plan, without meaningful investment in healing and recovery supports that see them as victim survivors in their own right. They cannot embody such hope without the support of governments across Australia.

If we are serious about eliminating violence against women, we need to stop violence experienced by children and we need to deliver real actions to support their safety and recovery needs.

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