**Governments across Australia targeting women's services**

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Evidence-based policy may be all the rage, but all the evidence in the world does not protect women’s services, when governments are hell bent on finding cuts.

Community services are required to produce ever more evidence of their effectiveness, but this is no protection against reckless governments, who apparently feel no need to detail their reasons before stripping resources from these essential services. You might think, for example, that a government intending to close the 35-year-old ACT Women’s Information and Referral Centre, which assisted over 12,300 women last year, would first consult widely and provide evidence about why such a drastic move was being considered.

Yet it was only after the closure, and public opposition, that the government finally published an attempt to justify it, claiming the need for a new model of service delivery. It seems that many of the functions that WIRC provided will be stripped back, outsourced and modified. If it is so important to move to a new model of service delivery, why wasn’t this argument made and planning begun before the WIRC shopfront was closed and its staff positions abolished?

Certainly the savings involved do not warrant such haste: the government eventually confirmed that the only saving from the changes would be the $75,000 rent on the Centre’s Civic shopfront. That is the equivalent of 20 cents per year for every ACT resident.

Who are these women, who are apparently such a hideous drain on government? They are us. You might think you will never need a women’s information service, a refuge, or a sexual assault service, but if you are female it is actually pretty likely that at some time in your life you will. And if you are male, or if you have the good fortune to avoid the worst that life has to offer, the chances are your sister, your mother, your neighbour, friend, aunt, daughter or niece will need help. Because women are still being intimidated, assaulted, shamed, isolated from support, burdened with responsibilities and excluded from wealth and security. The statistics are alarming but their repetition only seems to further numb the national consciousness.

We can stigmatise ‘these women’ or try to distance ourselves from the violence, isolation and poverty, but if we do so as a society we are disfiguring ourselves. In a civilised society, it is our responsibility to look beyond our own lives and consider the experiences of others. When we do, it is impossible to justify the kind of cutbacks that women’s services are experiencing.

Services across the country are under attack, in the most hostile political environment seen since the Howard government. In Western Australia, nearly $1 million are to be ripped out of four women’s refuges in the Kimberley and Pilbara. The Victorian government has cut funding to women’s health programs, including some for marginalised refugee and immigrant women. In Queensland, respected organisations like Sisters Inside, which supports women prisoners, have had funding removed. Sisters Inside has pointed out that 98% of female prisoners have experienced physical violence. Meanwhile, the Newman government has also defunded programs such as Breaking the Cycle in Rockhampton, which worked to reduce domestic and family violence.

While Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland have conservative governments, the experience of the ACT shows that women’s services are not safe under Labor governments either. Following reductions in Commonwealth funding to the ACT, many women’s services are being expected by the ACT government to provide the same level of support with 45 per cent less resources. Staff have been laid off and demand for services is, if anything, higher than before.

Governments cutting such services are relying on the weak voices of those affected, to protect themselves from political fallout. Such is the society and the government that we are collectively creating. Women do the bulk of the caring work, and we often put our own needs last. This makes women particularly vulnerable to a whole range of damaging and traumatic experiences. By removing the supports that feminists began establishing decades ago, governments are tacitly saying that this state of affairs is acceptable.

By contrast, services like the former Women’s Information and Referral Centre create safe spaces where women can come together to support each other. In a transient city like Canberra, that kind of social connection is hard to come by and irreplaceable.

Addendum: The NSW government will soon announce the results of its Going Home Staying Home tender process, which some refuge workers are concerned will drastically reduce the number of women-specific homelessness services in the state. This would mean the closure of dozens of women’s refuges, many of which have operated for decades. It is hard to see this loss of capacity and experience as anything but negative, and the onus is on the reform’s proponents to explain how it could be otherwise.

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