

November 2023

Submission in response to the Community Services Issues Paper



Our Watch

Contents

Acknowledgement of Country	3
About Our Watch	3
About this submission	3
Introduction	4
Area of focus 1: Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership	4

Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Indigenous organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is not an 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problem.' As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes and social structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national frameworks, *Change the story (2nd ed 2021)*¹, *Changing the picture (2018)*² and *Changing the landscape (2022)*,³ we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched, underlying drivers of violence against women. We work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

About this submission

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission in response to the Issues Paper released by the Australian Government, *A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector*.

This submission responds to *Area of focus 1* and broadly emphasises the importance of maintaining the independence of civil society organisations. Our Watch supports reforms to community sector grant funding that enable strong working partnerships with independent non-government organisations, provides the certainty of long-term funding and reduces administrative burden.

Our Watch would value the opportunity to provide further advice in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, Amanda Alford at amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au.

Introduction

Our Watch commends the Australian Governments' stated commitment to supporting and strengthening the sustainability of the community sector.

Our Watch is an independent, not for profit organisation, but is in the unique position of having all Australian governments as members of Our Watch. We work closely with a wide range of community organisations across gender equality and gender-based violence and acknowledge the vital work these organisations, as well as broader community services organisations, play in Australia.

Area of focus 1: Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership

The important role of civil society

Civil society organisations play an important role in tackling contemporary social and economic challenges and are vital to the functioning of a healthy democratic society. Civil society organisations are uniquely placed to provide thought leadership, make valuable contributions to public and community discourse, advocate for and contribute to social change, monitor government policies and actions, and hold governments accountable. Civil society organisations also help to build evidence and share practice knowledge to support policy and legislative reform.

In the area of Our Watch's expertise, it is clear that supporting and affirming the value of civil society is an important component of a national approach to the prevention of violence against women. There is evidence that political and civil society leadership has been effective in increasing the visibility of gender inequality and violence against women in Australian political discourse over the past decade.⁴ There is an important opportunity to ensure that the legislative, regulatory and policy environment enables civil society to continue this important work.

Balancing independence with accountability

The independence of civil society organisations ensures they can make valuable contributions to public discourse and have flexibility to deliver outcomes through a range of innovative and adaptive methodologies. In our view, it is important to strike the right balance between preserving the independence of non-government organisations while maintaining accountability for expenditure of any public funds and working with governments to deliver shared outcomes. This balance can be supported through approaches that ensure non-government organisations are meaningfully involved in contributing to decision-making processes, including for example by establishing mechanisms for collaboration on the design, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of activity associated with grant agreements.

Our Watch works closely with governments across Australia and reflects on the importance of developing and maintaining trusting and transparent relationships with government which recognise and respect the expertise of non-government organisations like Our Watch.

The benefit of strong working partnerships

Everybody has a role to play in preventing violence against women, but stakeholders have different responsibilities and resources, bring different skills and expertise, and can achieve different levels of reach and impact. Whether at a local, state or national level, it is critical that partnerships for prevention involve participants with specialist expertise in violence against women. This can be supported through engagement, partnership and co-design structures and processes that draw on this knowledge and expertise to inform evidence based policy and decision making.

The relationship between Commonwealth, state and territory governments and Our Watch is an example of effective collaboration with independent civil society organisations. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch and draw on Our Watch to provide trusted evidence-based expert policy advice. There is benefit in Our Watch's ability as an independent not-for-profit organisation to provide evidence-based guidance to government and non-government stakeholders, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, the private sector, civil society and communities on how to lead, coordinate, resource and support effective prevention efforts across Australia.

Valuing subject matter expertise

Strong partnerships that include women's organisations, specialist services and community-controlled organisations who are working on gender equality, women's health, and domestic, family and sexual violence ensure that prevention efforts are informed by a well-developed understanding of the complex dynamics of violence against women, gender and other social inequalities, and draw on existing prevention expertise. These organisations have a depth of expertise on the issue of violence against women and have gender lens and gender analysis tools necessary to advise on policies and their impacts on women. Our Watch supports ways to ensure that governance and funding arrangements recognise and support the development and preservation of independent subject matter expertise including place-based knowledge and practice wisdom.

Partnering with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations

Community ownership, community control and self-determination are repeatedly identified as key principles for many kinds of initiatives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and a key indicator of success⁵. Where programs and services are specifically aimed at or provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, these should, wherever possible, be delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations. These organisations have the unique capacity to provide culturally safe services and are able to develop localised, specifically designed solutions that have community support.⁶ Where there is no such organisation in place, the priority approach should be training and capacity building of existing community-controlled organisations to extend their reach or activities. Where this approach is not

possible, non-Indigenous providers should partner with existing community-controlled organisations.

In a practical sense, Our Watch considers that are opportunities to consider the ways in which this partnering might be strengthened through funding and grant arrangements, including for example:

- recognising and making provision for appropriate time to develop, nurture and maintain relationships with key people, organisations and communities through longer-term funding and co-design of project timelines and phasing
- ensuring grant agreements recognise and protect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, and data sovereignty.
- making provision for appropriate and culturally safe evaluation of prevention activities and projects undertaken in relation to violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Funding for long term sustainability

Our Watch acknowledges the Australian Governments' commitment to streamline and improve community sector grant funding, including by moving some programs to longer-term (5-year) funding agreements. Longer-term funding bring numerous benefits includes organisational and sector sustainability, workforce retention and the preservation of valuable corporate knowledge, and the certainty required to develop long term strategic plans and resource allocation to address complex problems spanning across budget, policy, and political cycles. Achieving ambitious social change, such as the Australian Government's long-term vision to end violence against women, requires a commitment to long term funding. Strengthening security of the sector through long-term grant funding arrangements enables the meaningful and sustainable engagement of civil society actors, networks, alliances and organisations in advocacy, leadership, awareness-raising, and community education, and is critical to the success of prevention activity in Australia.

Reducing administrative burden

The Issues Paper acknowledges that administrative and resourcing burden on non-government organisations can impact their ability to provide quality service delivery and deliver on government outcomes. Our Watch are broadly supportive of reform to reduce administrative burden, which should include reducing the administration relating to grant reporting requirements and applying realistic and targeted risk management controls, as needed and appropriate.

¹ Our Watch (2021). Change the story. Retrieved from: [Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia \(2nd ed.\)](https://ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story). (ourwatch.org.au)

² Our Watch (2018). Changing the picture. Retrieved from: [Changing the picture](https://ourwatch.org.au/changing-the-picture) (ourwatch.org.au)

³ Our Watch (2022). Changing the landscape. Retrieved from: <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/01135647/Changing-the-landscape-AA.pdf>

⁴ Our Watch. (2020). Tracking progress in prevention, p. 14.

⁵ Our Watch (2018). Changing the picture. Retrieved from: [Changing the picture](https://ourwatch.org.au/changing-the-picture) (ourwatch.org.au), p.39

⁶ Change the Record Coalition (2015), p. 6.