

16 December 2022

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 1600
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: *FirstNationswomenchildren.sen@aph.gov.au*

Dear Committee Secretary,

Inquiry into missing and murdered First Nations women and children

1. Women's Legal Services Australia thanks the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee for the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry into missing and murdered First Nations women and children (**the Inquiry**). We give permission for this submission to be published.

About WLSA

2. Women's Legal Services Australia (**WLSA**) is a national network of 13 specialist women's legal services in each State and Territory across Australia, specifically developed to improve women's lives through specialist legal representation, support, and advocacy.
3. WLSA members provide high quality free legal services, including representation and law reform activities, to support women's safety, access to rights and entitlements, and gender equality. We seek to promote a legal system that is safe, supportive, non-discriminatory, and responsive to the needs of women. Some of our services have operated for almost 40 years.
4. WLSA members have specialist expertise in safety and risk management, maintaining a holistic and trauma-informed legal practice, providing women additional multidisciplinary supports, including social workers, financial counsellors, trauma counsellors, and cultural safety workers, for long-term safety outcomes.
5. WLSA members approach the legal issues facing women and their experience of the legal system within a broader analysis of systemic gender inequality. We are committed to providing individual services whilst also working towards deeper legal and cultural change to redress power imbalances and address violence against women and gender inequality.

Endorsement of WLSA member submissions

6. WLSA note and have had the opportunity to review the submissions of our members who have made submissions to the Inquiry, being:
 - a. First Nations Women's Legal Service Queensland;
 - b. Women's Legal Service Western Australia; and,

- c. The Northern Territory Women's Legal Services (collectively, the Central Australian Women's Legal Service, Katherine Women's Information and Legal Service, and Top End Women's Legal Service).

7. We endorse these submissions, noting the expertise and lived experience of each respective member's service.

High-level comments

8. Further to our member's submissions, WLSA seeks to make further comment as follows:

- a. We strongly support the establishment of the Inquiry and focus of the national conversation of the violence experienced by First Nations women and children.
- b. We strongly support the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-32, including the references within same to the need for women's legal services, as well as the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan, which will subsequently feed into a First Nations National Plan.
- c. We strongly support the statement that violence against women and girls is a manifestation of inequality and discrimination based on gender, race, and power imbalances, and emphasise that Australia is a member state to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- d. We note the distinctions in our members' submissions regarding definitions of violence, including intimate domestic, family and sexual violence, as well as lateral violence.
- e. We note the complex matrix of social, economic, cultural, institutional and historical causes contributing to the ongoing violence and particular vulnerabilities of First Nations women and children (including housing security, poverty and economic security, workforce participation, education, justice, and health) particularly with respect to the ongoing impacts of colonisation and control of First Nations people, as well as intergenerational trauma and racism.
- f. We strongly support gender-specialist and culturally secure integrated legal services, including by women's legal services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (including Family Violence Prevention Legal Services).

If you require any further information, please contact Caitlin Weatherby-Fell, Chief Executive Officer of the Top End Women's Legal Service at cweatherbyfell@tewls.org.au.

Yours faithfully,



Elena Rosenman
National Chair
Women's Legal Services Australia