



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

LAUNCH OF PREVENTING VIOLENCE TOGETHER 2030

Tuesday 15 August, 2017

The Honourable Marsha Thompson MP, State Member for Footscray representing the Honourable Fiona Richardson MP Minister for Women, and Prevention of Family Violence.

Councillor Sandra Wilson, Mayor of Hobsons Bay City Council and Mayors of other local Councils.

Ms Samantha Merrigan, Chair of Women's Health West

Dr Robyn Gregory, Chief Executive Officer of Women's Health West

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

First, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders past and present and to any elders here with us this morning.

I have the honour to join you this morning to launch this new strategy to prevent violence against women.

I am sorry that I am a little late, but I have the good excuse that I have been fulfilling one of the constitutional duties of the Governor, in chairing the Executive Council.

And so, although inevitably it had to delay me in being here for the start of proceedings, I was still very keen to attend. You are dealing with issues dear to my heart, and with solutions that are equally dear to me.

I started Law very young and so was only 20 when I ventured into my first job in a law firm. From the fortunate perspective of someone who had not seen family violence first (or second) hand, I found it hard to believe the first client who told me that the large crescent shaped scar across her forehead was caused when her husband hit her with a glass bottle.

But I progressively lost my innocence when, as a young lawyer, I heard such stories repeated many times by many different women.

And I lost it further when I became a Children's Court magistrate and gained a deeper understanding of the various pernicious forms of family violence, and the impact on those directly and indirectly affected.

Time as a coroner gave me an overview of the number of women dying at the hands of those who should, by right, have loved and protected them.

Then, across some years as a magistrate in the adult criminal courts, I experienced how the criminal justice system, from police and emergency services through to the courts and probation services, dealt with assaults and threats that had arisen in the family context - or more broadly - against women.

And finally, what I learned of family violence extended in the course of 18 years as a judge in the Family Court of Australia, seeing almost every form of sexual, physical and emotional abuse that could arise in a family context, and almost every sort of fall-out for each family member and the physical, emotional and financial anguish that followed.

Pertinent to today, across 40 years in the law, I also saw the evolution of the community and 'the system's' response to violence against women and children.

It was, for many of my early years in legal practice, what former Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police, Ken Lay AO APM, has referred to as one of the country's 'filthy little secrets.' It was hidden from view.

Women did not report it in great numbers. It is not hard to see why. They were not believed. They were belittled by the questioning of THEM as to why they had not acted sooner, why they had returned to live with the perpetrator or as to whether they were just lying for a strategic advantage in family law proceedings.

Police frequently did not respond fully or quickly to complaints. The courts did not attach the urgency or the gravitas to the cases that they warranted. And in any event, the system was loaded against the victims, being cumbersome and expensive to navigate.

Admittedly, I am talking about the 'olden days'. For many of you here, it was before you were born.

Intervention Orders were a giant step forward. Until then, there had only been the most complex injunction options.

I watched Intervention Orders through various iterations. Improvements were made, for example, to ensure that at least temporary court orders could be taken out by police on behalf of an aggrieved family member. Stalking provisions came in. Specialist courts were set up. Better legal aid funding for victims was arranged (well, sometimes).

I also saw positive changes within the police, the courts and all the agencies that dealt with women who were experiencing violence. The level of knowledge and understanding improved.

The 'filthy little secret' was certainly out of the bag.

But, from my professional perspective, two major things were still missing, or at least thwarting our progress in saving lives and families by conquering the scourge of violence to women.

The first was that there was still not a collective community swell of recognition and commitment to the urgency of its eradication.

I think that young Luke Batty's death, and Rosie's extraordinary courage in speaking out about family violence, went a very long way towards impressing upon the community that it was a big and urgent problem, that it was OUR problem, that we were all diminished by it and that we all had a responsibility to protect our community from it.

The second was this State's Royal Commission into Family Violence that shone a light on what organisations like Women's Health West already knew: that the immensity of the problem could never be dealt with if a silo mentality was maintained.

The only way to make inroads, to keep people safe and to change behaviours is by partnerships between community health services and local governments, with a commitment to gender equity (and of course with fair access to a strong and consistent criminal justice system, including police, and where necessary the courts and legal aid).

I know that others have spoken about the Preventing Violence Together 2030 Strategy this morning.

And so it leaves me only to congratulate all those involved with its conception and realisation, to offer gratitude and support to all those who work in this difficult, emotionally draining and at times dangerous field, and to declare the Preventing Violence Together 2030 Strategy officially launched.