
Friday 19 April 2024



Commissioner Cronin address at the National Family Violence Symposium

Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner, Micaela Cronin

I want to begin by thanking Stacie for the incredible welcome to country.

I've seen that presentation before, and I would very cheerfully see it over and over again. The acknowledgement of her heritage, where she comes from and her place on these lands is incredibly important and it's a gift to us to be welcomed in that way.

I want to acknowledge in this conversation the reality that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are appallingly overrepresented in family, domestic and sexual violence. That at the heart of this work we need to acknowledge the impact of colonisation, institutional and systemic racism, the ongoing impact of that, and the ongoing commitment that we all need to make in the closing the gap targets – which we are not doing terribly well at.

Until we tackle the issue of institutional and systemic racism, which is at the heart of many of our institutions, despite the efforts of many of the people in this room, we are not going to close the gap and we are not going to see the achievement of the targets that we are all deeply committed to.

I want to acknowledge the Aboriginal people in the room and the leaders and elders who have been incredibly generous in educating me along the way and supporting me in this role. I was at an event a while ago and as part of this wonderful young woman's acknowledgment, she said that after the Referendum, an acknowledgment is no longer enough, that we also now need to make a commitment. I commit to working in partnership and collaboration with Aboriginal elders and communities as I undertake this role.

I also want to say in opening that I am very pleased and proud to be speaking following three men who have all made deep and personal commitments to ending violence against women and children. I thank you for creating this opportunity Chief Justice, it is groundbreaking to bring together the people who are in this room, and to be listening to, enabling, and creating a space for this conversation.

We know that all our systems can be used and weaponised – and regularly are.

They are regularly used and weaponised against women and children who are escaping family, domestic and sexual violence. Perpetrators – men predominantly, not always, but absolutely predominantly – who use coercive control, who exert power over the women and children in their lives, are very good at weaponising the next new thing, and are often ahead of the game in doing that.

Look at the eSafety Commission and the way that online tools are being weaponised. The work that the Commissioner does, and the leadership that has been seen both in that space, but also in the financial abuse space in tackling that.

I'll never forget how deeply shocked I was when CommBank did the work around recognising that perpetrators were using online payments to make abusive comments. Who would have thought of that when you open a banking app, that even that could be weaponised.

As we undertake reform, we all need to be very mindful of and cognisant, that the changes we make can, and likely will, be used against people. And that the best way to mitigate against that is to have conversations like this. To be listening to the sector, listening to the best available evidence about what is happening on the ground.

Thank you, Kathy Humphries, for the imagery of the knowledge diamond – we need to be listening to what it is that the research tells us, what is it that data tells us and what is it that policy makers and implementers tell us about what's going on.

But they are often things that take years to inform our work. The best current information about what's actually going on is on the ground – it is lived experience.

We must speak to and hear from women and children who have lived experience and listen to what they are telling us about what's happening with the reforms that are underway.

What is the frontline workforce, who are working with those women and children, telling us about how it's going, as we make those reforms?

I am incredibly hopeful; the Attorney General Mark Dreyfus ran through the list of reforms that are underway and it is a phenomenal body of work. And it is very responsive, as he said, to the advocacy of many people in this room about the reform that is needed.

But I would absolutely caution that as we undertake that breadth of reform, that there are risks, and that the way to ameliorate against or mitigate against those risks – is to be deeply listening to the people who are directly affected and to have mechanisms in place to make sure we are hearing those voices rapidly.

What are the changes that are being seen, what are the unforeseen consequences? They're not things that we would have predicted. Mind you, we need to get better at predicting. And I think the example of what we know, in terms of safety by design principles, we need to start there from the beginning.

We need to be asking what are the ways that these tools can be weaponised against the very people that we are all seeking to help?

We need to be challenging ourselves. We have many people from the Court in this room, and this is an opportunity to engage with the people that that seek help, support and engagement with these systems.

Any point of contact is a moment to be thinking about how we prevent further harm, how we intervene early, and where there is a risk of harm consider the appropriate response to ensure safety. And to consider how can we act in ways that will further help and support healing and recovery, which is the antidote to shame.

While we are not talking about the impact of child sexual abuse and the impact of sexual violence today – the Court is not contributing to healing and recovery. We are not preventing the next generation from experience this devastating harm.

We know the impact of trauma and Tarang went through the very heavy weight of what's happened just in the last 10 days – and the two women who were murdered in Western Australia.

We all need to examine what were the moments, what were the drivers that caused and enabled that devastating harm to occur.

We need to be absolutely open to think about what were the things that we could have prevented? What were the things that could have prevented those acts from occurring?

Some of the work that you do in the Court is absolutely preventative. Because the way you do the work you do prevents those things, so that hopefully in the future they will not be seen again.

As Tarang said, Rosie Batty and Tarang, should not have to be here.

If you undertake the work that you do in ways that contributes to healing and recovery, you are contributing to preventing the harms that that each Tarang and Rosie represent in this room for all of us – and the harm that has occurred across the last week, let alone this year.

We won't see, hopefully, the acts of homicide as a result of the approach that you take to you work here in the Family Court, because you will be preventing the intergenerational trauma that often leads further harm. As Judges, you can contribute to intergenerational healing and recovery rather than shaming and further harm which contributes to domestic family and sexual violence.

Conversations like this can contribute to, absolutely, the hope that we can end domestic, family and sexual violence. It is an ambitious task, but it is something that all of us can contribute to.

It is something that I am hopeful we can achieve on the basis of the level of reform that is going on across the Court, the openness to recognising the impact of trauma, and the work that is being done around training the Court on understanding domestic, family and sexual violence.

I am hopeful that we are seeing change.

We all must commit to this work that will reduce – and ultimately end – domestic, family and sexual violence.

Thank you for the work that you do.

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If you or someone you know is experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, domestic, family or sexual violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732, chat online via www.1800RESPECT.org.au, or text 0458 737 732 .

Feeling worried or no good? No shame, no judgement, safe place to yarn. Speak to a 13YARN Crisis Supporter, call 13 92 76. This service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If you are concerned about your behaviour or use of violence, you can contact the Men's Referral Service on 1300 766 491 or visit www.ntv.org.au.