



# Sexual Assault Services Victoria

Independent panel

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## Re: Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic) welcomes the opportunity to provide a brief submission to the independent panel on the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

SASVic is the peak body for 18 specialist sexual assault and harmful sexual behaviour services (SSAS) in Victoria. We work to promote rights, recovery and respect for victim survivors and other people impacted by sexual violence and harm. We seek to achieve this by working collectively to address the attitudes, systems and structures that enable sexual violence to occur. SASVic members bring over 30 years of feminist practice and specialist expertise to the task of reforming system responses to sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviours.

### Sexual violence, COVID-19, and future crises

We note that the Inquiry will make recommendations to improve response measures in the event of future global pandemics. However, our recommendations are also applicable for future crises, such as bushfires and floods that will become more commonplace due to climate change.<sup>1</sup>

#### Recommendation:

- 1) The Inquiry recommendations are also applied to improve response measures in future crises.**

Research shows that violence against women (VaW) increases during disasters like bushfires. Factors like unsafe or insecure housing, unemployment and reduced supports and services contribute to VaW.<sup>2</sup> Experts considered VaW a 'shadow pandemic' during COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Findings about VaW during disasters are consistent with data about sexual violence during the pandemic when many women in intimate partner relationships reported:

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament of Australia, "Natural disasters and climate risk", accessed November 22, 2023, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BriefingBook47p/NaturalDisastersClimateRisk](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook47p/NaturalDisastersClimateRisk).

<sup>2</sup> Debra Parkinson, "Gender-based violence" in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science*, 24 February 2022, <https://oxfordre.com/naturalhazardscience/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.001.0001/acrefore-9780199389407-e-390>.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Women, "VaW and girls: the shadow pandemic", accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic?fbclid=IwAR1UVfn6nWnKmpa-lupmfJcKlsMtSga3ubpRcn65SeP9SRNoojB0eQt-1Rs>, and Naomi Pfitzner et al., *Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to VaW in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions* (Melbourne: Monash University Monash Gender and Family Violence prevention centre, 2020), [https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/Responding\\_to\\_the\\_shadow\\_pandemic\\_practitioner\\_views\\_on\\_the\\_nature\\_of\\_and\\_responses\\_to\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_in\\_Victoria\\_Australia\\_during\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_restrictions/12433517](https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/Responding_to_the_shadow_pandemic_practitioner_views_on_the_nature_of_and_responses_to_violence_against_women_in_Victoria_Australia_during_the_COVID-19_restrictions/12433517).

- experiencing sexual violence for the first time
- sexual violence had increased in frequency or severity
- not seeking support on at least one occasion due to safety concerns.<sup>4</sup>

Data also shows that women with a restrictive long-term health condition, pregnant women, women experiencing extreme financial stress and younger women (particularly 18- to 24-year-olds) were most at risk of physical and sexual violence and coercive control during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

These figures about sexual violence during COVID-19 are very likely to be underestimates, due to barriers to reporting. Further, most data about the impacts of crises and COVID-19 on sexual violence are subsumed under data about intimate partner sexual violence and specialist family violence responses.<sup>6</sup> While this data is important, gendered intersectional research about the impacts of crises on sexual violence outside of intimate partner relationships, including children and young people who exhibit harmful sexual behaviours, and specialist sexual assault services is also needed.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Recommendation:**

- 2) Invest in gendered intersectional research about the impacts of crises on sexual violence and specialist sexual assault services.**

#### **Future proofing safety**

SASVic was involved in the *Future proofing safety* research project, which examined family violence and COVID-19 in Victoria.<sup>8</sup> This research provides data about sexual violence within and outside of intimate partner relationships and provides a useful foundation to understand the impacts of crises on sexual violence and specialist sexual assault services. Recommendations include:

- addressing the long-term impacts of crises and the ways in which crisis-induced service demand and complexity of client needs can continue to spike well after the crisis is considered over
- greater funding to increase the service capacity of services, including specialist sexual assault services, to meet and support system-wide recovery across a broad range of complex client needs
- increasing funding to services that support the recovery of children and young people who experienced child sexual abuse and exploitation during COVID-19
- supporting coordination and collaboration across sectors, including funding specialist sexual assault services to provide secondary consultations

<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Family, domestic and sexual violence service responses in the time of COVID-19* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2021), <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence-service-respon/summary>.

<sup>5</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited (ANROWS), *Fact sheet: Domestic violence among women from priority populations during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Sydney: ANROWS, 2021), <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/covid-19-fast-facts-prevalence-of-domestic-violence-among-women-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gender and disaster Australia, "First Australian research on gender-based violence in disasters", accessed November 22, 2023, <https://genderanddisaster.com.au/research/>, and Monash University Monash Gender and Family Violence prevention centre, "Gender-based violence and help-seeking behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic", accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.monash.edu/arts/gender-and-family-violence/research-and-projects/covid-19-and-gender-based-violence>.

<sup>7</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color", *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (July 1991): 1241-1299, <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/files/2020/02/1229039.pdf>, and OurWatch, "Change the Story", accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story/>.

<sup>8</sup> Centre for Family Research and Evaluation, "Future-proofing safety: COVID-19 and family violence in Victoria", accessed November 22, 2023, <https://cfre.org.au/future-proofing-safety/>.

- classifying services that conduct forensic medical examinations (FMEs) for victim survivors as an essential service during crises. These services should never be withdrawn during crises.<sup>9</sup>

We refer you to the final report and its recommendations for future crises readiness.

**Recommendation:**

- 3) Implement recommendations from the *Future proofing safety* report in future crises.**

### Image-based sexual abuse

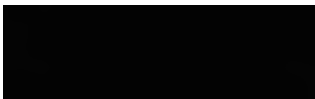
Image-based sexual abuse escalated during COVID-19 lockdowns. Image-based sexual abuse is when someone shares or threatens to share an intimate image or video of a person without their consent.<sup>10</sup> Australia's eSafety Commissioner recorded more than 1 000 reports of image-based sexual abuse between March and May 2020, which is a 210 percent increase on the average weekly number of reports they received in 2019.<sup>11</sup> Preliminary research into technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) during crises points to priority areas for professional development across the service system: working with members of diverse communities who experience technology-facilitated abuse, intervening with perpetrators of TFA, and prevention through community and education settings.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendation:**

- 4) Invest in workforce development and capacity building and community education to address longstanding myths and attitudes towards VaW, sexual violence and image-based sexual abuse.**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry and to work to improve Australia's preparedness for future pandemics and other crises.

Yours Sincerely,



Kathleen Maltzahn  
CEO  
Sexual Assault Services Victoria

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<sup>9</sup> At the outset of the pandemic in Victoria, FMEs for victim survivors were limited to three sites in metropolitan Melbourne and other sites were withdrawn. This created barriers for victim survivors outside those areas to access FMEs after a sexual assault, forcing victim survivors to travel and experience delays. Beth McCann et al, *Future-proofing safety: surfacing inequality and building service capacity for crisis-ready responses* (Melbourne: Family Safety Victoria, 2023), p.141, <https://cfre.org.au/future-proofing-safety/>.

<sup>10</sup> eSafety Commissioner, "Image-based abuse", accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/image-based-abuse>.

<sup>11</sup> Anastasia Powell and Asher Flynn, "Reports of "revenge porn" skyrocketed during lockdown, we must stop blaming victims for it", *The Conversation*, June 3, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/reports-of-revenge-porn-skyrocketed-during-lockdown-we-must-stop-blaming-victims-for-it-139659>.

<sup>12</sup> Asher Flynn et al, *Technology-facilitated abuse: a survey of support services stakeholders* (Sydney: ANROWS, 2021), <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/technology-facilitated-abuse-a-survey-of-support-services-stakeholders/>.