Messages from the Frontline, Grassroots Voices and National Policy: can the ‘advocate-provider’ be part of the policy process?

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Abstract

Although based on Australian research, this paper contributes to a wider discussion about the importance of advocacy for policy making and how contemporary women’s movements and grass roots organisations might influence social policy in the uncertain times of neoliberal and conservative state contexts (Fyall, 2017; Krizsan and Popa, 2015; Charles and MacKay, 2013). Related to that, it reports on and explores the dimensions and outcomes of a research process that sought to overcome the barriers for frontline domestic violence practitioners speaking to policymakers. Specifically, the paper explores the role of grass-roots NGO’s, or ‘advocate-providers’” (Fyall 2017), capacity to influence policy by examining how research can open up a space from which they can speak to policy. In doing so it explores data derived from frontline workers’ and managers’ perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of Australia’s federal and state social policy approaches to reducing and addressing violence against women and their children. The research was designed to create a democratizing opportunity for service providers working on the frontline of domestic violence services to have a voice and be heard about the impact and relevance of Australian federal and state policy responses. It therefore explores what Fyall observed as a gap in third sector research, ‘the potential for influence of non-profit providers on public policy’ (2017: 122).
Introduction
This paper reports on outcomes of research that sought to overcome barriers for frontline domestic violence practitioners speaking to policymakers or to fulfill their ‘advocate-provider’ potential (Lyall 2017). It examines frontline workers’ perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of Australia’s national and state policy approaches to reducing and addressing violence against women and their children. Data reported here is derived from in-depth interviews with 47 frontline workers and managers, and focus groups from a range of organisations across three Australian states participating in The Messages from the Frontline project. Sensitive to the impact of an increasingly competitive environment and its impact of silencing advocacy, the research was a democratizing opportunity for grassroots workers to be heard about the relevance of policy responses. The research was designed to recognise that government contracted services, funded to roll out a policy agenda, are not politically neutral and can bring a well-informed critique and correction to policy, given the opportunity to be recognised as experts in the field, not just as ‘agents for service delivery’ (Fyall, 2017; 122).

Thematic analysis explored the research question: What insights and recommendations can workers provide to policymakers about strategies for preventing and addressing domestic violence in Australia? Participants identified numerous barriers to effective policy implementation, including: lack of consultation with those on the frontline of services in developing policy; systemic silencing via the instrumentalization of grassroots services; the crucial importance of strong leadership and governance supporting implementation of policy into practice; and lack of accountability for perpetrators from a range of state institutions such as the police and the judiciary.

The study reported in this paper ‘Messages from the Frontline’ sought advice from frontline domestic violence workers and managers in grassroots organisations about the impact and relevance of the Australian Government’s policy response to this serious, widespread social problem – the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, 2010-2022 (The National Plan).

Silencing and separating: Tactics of the neoliberal state
In keeping with the widespread transfer of human service delivery to the NGO/not-for-profit sector in Australia, there has been a silencing impact by governmental funding mechanisms. The silencing of advocacy voices is a result of becoming a service delivery instrument and has effectively isolated many women on the frontline of service delivery from any form of policy debate or influence (Helms, 2014; Krizsan and Popa, 2015). This paper draws on Rachel Fyall’s (2017) conceptual framework of how non-profit service providers can contribute to the policy process if recognised as ‘advocate-providers’ in which she contests the view that government funded providers are merely apolitical, passive deliverers (or instruments) that act as agents of government. Fyall further argues that, thus far, third sector studies have not deeply explored this potential policy contribution and via her conceptual framework urges consideration of ‘the unique role of non-profit service providers as simultaneous advocates and discretionary public service implementers’ (2017: 122). In summarising the wider literature related to how non-profit organizations are placed in relation to the government’s policy process and implementation, Fyall demonstrates that a range of approaches within a liberal democracy polity creates opportunities for pluralism in policy making. In these scenarios of ‘interest group liberalism’, non-profits can advocate for specific policy responses and they contribute by ‘sorting through competing ideas for policy solutions’ (2017: 123). In the contemporary Australian context, the government has worked actively to negate specific voices through a punitive funding system that creates competition between service providers and a clear anti advocacy message linked to funding. The Australian government, after predominantly conservative neoliberal governments for two and a half decades, has gradually dismantled any mechanisms (such as community based advisory boards, indigenous self-determination mechanisms, women’s councils, youth councils and so on) that embrace pluralistic contributions to solving policy problems. The pluralism that does exist is dominated by value pluralism, as long as the values concur with neoliberalism’s core objectives of competition and efficiency – hence excluding advocacy for social justice values (Nevile, et al 2018) inherent in feminist services.

Fyall has also demonstrated that previous non-profit research focusing on the role of non-profits in the policy process has focused on how they influence ‘the law-making aspect of the policy process’ and that, despite much research on policy implementation, there has been a great emphasis on how governments fund services rather than how non-profit services could influence policy as advocates and in the delivery of government funded services (2017:
According to Fyall’s model of advocate-providers in the policy process, there are two points of influence, one sphere is from the service providers at the street level to the governmental managers of programs and the second is direct influence from non-profit organizations directly to politicians (2017:131-132). This study suggests that at both points of possible influence suggested in Fyall’s model the political values of the Australian government of the day uses funding as a weapon to support its view that service providers are instruments of the state and should not engage in advocacy. This context was a central prompt for the democratising study reported on below.

The depoliticising positioning of service providers through silencing them and denying their potential as ‘advocate-providers’ (Fyall, 2017) appears to be a global experience for women’s services, irrespective of their government’s political persuasion. For example, Krizsan and Popa (2015) in analysing domestic violence policy in the post-communist, Eastern European states, noted that although there had been tremendous progress on the development of policies advancing women’s rights and protection in the past decade, it was mainly precipitated by the European Union and other international influences, thus divorcing it from grassroots women’s movements’ mobilization and potential ‘advocate-providers’ in those countries. They further observed that this meant that many of the policies were adopted for ‘window dressing purposes and their implementation failed, was oppositional to the initial gender equality intents, thus minimizing their potential for gender transformation’ (Krizsan and Popa, 2015: 2). This uncoupling between stated policies and implementation in many advanced democracies is starkly evident in the social welfare sector, where the women’s sector had previously influenced effective social policies. It is proposed that this is a deliberate imposition of the inherently value laden, anti-pluralist nature of neoliberal governance as the overbearing, hegemonic system of how governments deliver services. It also functions as a bulwark against feminist claims for gender equality and calls to address all forms of violence against women.

In a comparative study that examined the differences in effective policy engagement between grass roots women’s organisations and the countries of Wales and Scotland related to domestic violence policies, Charles and MacKay (2013) found key factors marked the differences between the two contexts. Recognizing that how domestic violence is framed was closely linked to how meanings about domestic violence emerged from the different women’s
movements, they also found that the broad political environment was equally important. In Scotland, where feminist (‘advocate-providers’) influence on domestic violence policy was evident, and where the partial devolution of the UK government gave the Scottish parliament more independence, feminist ministers and other parliamentarians adopted a women’s empowerment centred approach to domestic violence (Charles and MacKay, 2013). This meant that strategies came from the political process to ensure that the voices of the well-supported grassroots women’s movement, which was also ‘professionalised’ through the support it received, were able to facilitate women victims’ priorities being directly represented in both policy and service delivery (Charles and MacKay, 2013). Comparatively, in Wales, where authority had also been devolved from the UK government, domestic violence was conservatively framed as a criminal justice matter, which included a ‘men as victims too’ approach (Charles and MacKay, 2013). This saw a focus on perpetrators and a reduced focus on women’s safety through the lack of funding for refuges and a non-feminist approach by failing to support prevention, gender equality and the facilitation of women’s autonomy.

Charles and MacKay (2013), in comparing the differences between Scottish and Welsh policy responses to domestic violence, found that the ways in which policy responses were framed was central to how the policies were targeted and implemented. They noted ‘resulting institutional contexts in Scotland and Wales’ were linked to ‘the differential incorporation of feminist activists into processes of governance’ (Charles & Mackay, 2013: 610). This finding supports the importance of access and influence of grassroots movements as although the women’s movement organization, Welsh Women’s Aid, contributed to policy development, it had not been given a strategic role in the development of domestic violence policies as was evident in Scotland where women parliamentarians had direct relationships with grassroots women’s groups (Charles & MacKay, 2013: 604). Charles and Mackay found that a key difference related ‘to the strength of feminist organizations and their differential incorporation into processes of governance … different political opportunity structures or ‘devolution effects’… shape and constrain feminist politics and framing contests and, importantly, result in different outcomes for services for women and children escaping domestic abuse’ (2013: 611).

The Welsh elements of the uncoupling from the women’s movement agenda for addressing domestic violence is consistent with findings in the Australian research reported
in this article. The depoliticising or anti-democratizing principles that are evident in the Welsh case are indicative of an alignment with the neoliberal agenda of the UK government and similar to the broad principles of conservative Liberal/National Party Australian governments. There was evidence that a key difference between Scotland and Wales lay in the anti-feminist forces that influenced Welsh policymakers, thus incorporating them into the policy process and excluding feminist groups (Charles and MacKay, 2013: 103). Alternately, political framing of domestic violence in the Scottish National Strategy recognised that most domestic violence was gendered violence against women and that:

... unlike the Scottish strategy, the Welsh strategy neither links domestic violence to gender-based inequalities nor sees it as a human rights issue. Indeed, the definition is so wide that it does not relate specifically to male violence against women and includes any form of assault or abuse that takes place in and around the domestic sphere... These differences can be understood in terms of an equal rights framing which predominates in Wales and a more radical feminist framing in Scotland (Charles and MacKay, 2013: 103).

Different policy processes between Scotland and Wales and the roles of key actors in political access (either domestic violence prevention and support advocates and gender equality feminists or anti-feminist actors supporting a men’s rights backlash) are useful in understanding the Australian context. On the one hand there are significant political motivations for addressing domestic violence given the number of women and their children affected (Cox, 2015), particularly women and children killed by perpetrators of domestic violence in Australia (Bryant & Bricknall, 2017), but on the other hand the political alliances between a conservative government and anti-feminist groups seeking to de-politicise policies becomes evident at the grassroots implementation level of policy.

**Grassroots organisations, social policy and the state**

Although it has always been the case that non-state actors have delivered human services in Australia, the wholesale tendering out of specific sectors of delivery has been a more recent phenomenon (Goodwin and Phillips, 2015). To add to shifting state responsibilities, there has been the gradual saturation of the welfare state by neoliberal economic rationalisation. This has meant that the nature and capacity of services traditionally driven by women’s movement activists, social justice or specifically faith-based missions have now become less feminist, less
social justice oriented, more corporatized and, in some cases, completely generic homelessness services (Heward-Belle, 2019). As mentioned above, there has also been a strong correlation between the entrenchment of conservative governments and the diminution of pluralist policy governance, particularly in relation to ‘women’s’ policy and the non-government sector (Chappell and Costello, 2011; Phillips, 2006b; Goodwin and Phillips, 2015).

Epitomizing the anti-feminist politics of Liberal/National Party (LNP) Coalition governments in Australia, earlier research on the Howard government’s (1996 – 2007) policy and political responses to men’s violence against women showed that there was a clear failure in national leadership on the issue and a direct attack on and opposition to feminism (Phillips, 2006a). It was a period of Australian politics characterized by a political culture that resulted in direct repression of women’s voices in the public sphere supported by a wider backlash against women’s achievements and gender equality measures under the previous, long-term Labour government (Phillips, 2006). The Howard years were also a time of deliberate diminution of support for policy for women, abolishing policy infrastructure and effectively silencing public and media interests in domestic and sexual violence against women (Phillips, 2006a). In contrast, over the last two decades widespread public debate about feminism across all forms of media emerged, giving a public voice to women’s concerns and issues of gender inequality (Phillips and Cree, 2014). At the heart of this public conversation is the issue of domestic violence, due to a growing awareness of high prevalence rates. A survey of 17 000 Australians found that 25 per cent of women had been physically or sexually abused by an intimate partner since age 15 (Cox, 2015). There has also been a widening appreciation of the impact of this crime on women and children. For example, the World Health Organisation identifies domestic violence as the most burdensome risk factor surpassing alcohol and tobacco use contributing to death, disability and illness in 25 to 44 year-old women (Ayre, Lum, Webster, Gourley & Moon, 2016), adding to evidence demonstrating the devastating impact of experiencing domestic violence on children and young people (Holt, Buckley & Whelan, 2008). Unprecedented media attention to the deaths of women and their children at the hands of intimate or ex-intimate partners in Australia has also shaped public debate and pressured politicians to address this crime.

The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2010-2022)
Largely due to women’s activism that has shaped the national conversation, the federal and state governments were forced to prioritize domestic violence as a social problem. However, leadership by three Prime Ministers (Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison) of the LNP government have failed to show sustained interest in the issue, relying instead on The National Plan introduced by a previous Labor government under Australia’s first woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (2010-2013).

Under Gillard the needs of Australian women regained status on the national policy agenda, albeit for a short term of government (2010-2013). The Gillard Government finalised the development and launch of the National Plan - a substantial achievement that relied on collaboration between the Australian and state governments.

The National Plan is based on co-operation and collaboration via the establishment of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence Against Women and Their Children that Reported Back to COAG in April 2016. The COAG’s platform included the following objectives:

- national leadership to challenge gender inequality and transform community attitudes.
- empowering women who experience violence to make informed choices.
- recognising children and young people as victims of violence against women.
- holding perpetrators to account for their actions and supporting them to change.
- providing trauma-informed responses to violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Subsequently and importantly, the Third Action Plan of The National Plan (2016-2019) remained despite a transition to conservative LNP governments under Prime Ministers Abbott, then Turnbull, then Morrison. The National Plan reached its third phase under the Turnbull government and remained as the central national policy response to domestic violence under the next appointed and current Prime Minister, Scott Morrison. The broad administration and implementation of The National Plan has been carried out by a specially established research body, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS). ANROWS has provided detailed implementation plans, research and advice, presenting as an independent, not-for-profit body established as part of The National Plan. It
is funded jointly by the Australian government and all state and territory governments. It is identifiable as a feminist research body, working with and drawing on feminist researcher output and applying core feminist frameworks to its own research.

The National Plan was to be carried out in three different phases, reaffirming a need to address complexities related to domestic violence across Australia. It is therefore significant that the primary national policy came under scrutiny by those working on the frontline of services, especially as domestic violence continued at unacceptable levels across the country. This includes the extreme statistic of women being killed by their intimate or past intimate partner at the rate of at least one per week throughout 2017 (Bryant & Bricknall, 2017), 2018, 2019 and 2020 (Counting Dead Women, 2021).

The main thrust of this research was concerned with giving voice to grassroots organisation workers’ perceptions of The National Plan, but it is important to note that states and territories have their own domestic violence policies and services that are layered below the national policy. Distinctive state-based policy impact was reflected in the research findings, as it included participants from Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. In particular, participants from NSW had significant negative feedback in relation to a homelessness sector reform, called ‘Going Home, Staying Home’ (GHSH). Heward-Belle’s (2019) research with specialist domestic violence workers presents a detailed and critical review of the GHSH reform that provides an excellent example of how rationalization and instrumentalization of grassroots feminist services within a neoliberal context, can silence, divide and alienate frontline workers and their agencies from what was previously a strong feminist alliance. Women’s refuge workers’ distressing experiences of the so-called ‘reform’ offer important insights for policy makers if viewed as ‘advocate-providers’. Indeed, the level of discontent expressed by specialist domestic violence workers in NSW inspired this research, seeking to redress the exclusion of NSW practitioners’ perceptions from authentic consultation in policy development. Specifically, this study was concerned with exploring the broad research question: What insights and recommendations can frontline workers provide to policy makers about strategies for preventing or addressing domestic violence?

**Method**

Framed by a critical feminist perspective (Dodge et al, 2021), the research design ensured that:

- women’s voices were heard
strategies addressing power differentials between researchers and participants implemented
exploitation was reduced
reciprocity and collaboration encouraged
the research aimed to alleviate oppressive societal conditions (Skeggs, 2001).

To facilitate a collaborative process of enquiry with practitioners, participants were seen as co-researchers aiming to advance women’s and children’s safety and wellbeing. The study involved 72 practitioners and/or managers from three Australian states who worked in a range of organisations providing frontline services to families experiencing domestic violence. Two phases established the collaborative framework.

Phase one involved conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with frontline workers recruited through three peak organisations who advertised the study to their members. Phase two was an iterative engagement with two roundtable groups. The purpose of the roundtable was twofold: to provide an additional opportunity for data collection and to enable participants to contribute to the data analysis phase by providing their interpretations of phase one data. There were 25 participants in phase two. Participants were workers or volunteers over the age of 18 years from direct service organisations. Participants consented to participating in the study, which was approved by and complied with all requirements of the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol number 2017/630).

Data Collection and Analysis

In phase one, 47 participants were interviewed. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, which posed potential risks to participants’ job security and organisational funding, particular attention was paid to ensuring the anonymity of workers and their workplaces. As a result, minimal demographic details were collected.

Prior to interview, participants were sent a reference document prepared by the research team, summarizing key elements of The National Plan for reference in the event that they were not familiar with The National Plan policies. Data about participants’ perceptions of The National Plan was collected via qualitative semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Key points were used to guide the interviews: participants’ awareness and understanding of The Plan; beliefs about what the priority areas should be; barriers and facilitators for achieving the
Plan’s goals; and recommendations to policymakers about strategies for eliminating and addressing domestic violence in Australia.

In phase two, two roundtable groups were simultaneously held. One group contained 16 practitioners who had been interviewed in phase one. The second group consisted of nine practitioners who had not been interviewed in phase one but wished to be part of the research process. Prior to the roundtable discussions, participants were sent a summary of the preliminary findings from an analysis of the phase one data to ensure that they could engage in a meaningful way as co-researchers. Researchers facilitated the discussions, beginning with a focus on the preliminary findings. Participants provided views of the preliminary themes identified though thematic data analysis.

The roundtable discussions enabled further data collection, clarification of themes and refinement of ideas through an iterative and collaborative process. Researchers posed several questions to roundtable participants, such as: How important do you think it is to have a National Plan? How useful is having the National Plan “priority areas” for achieving justice and safety for survivors and accountability for people who use violence and control? In addition, specific questions were asked to deepen the understanding of key themes identified in the phase one data, such as:

i. What does accountability mean to you?
ii. What should be the top 3 areas to focus on in relation to holding people who use violence and control to account?
iii. Do you see any ‘unintended consequences’ associated with the turn towards increasing perpetrator accountability?

The qualitative data was transcribed and techniques from thematic analysis, as described by Thomas and Harden (2008) were employed in the analysis phase. Specifically, primary coding occurred whereby researchers repeatedly read each transcript and coded the data line by line. Secondary codes were later developed to capture the essence of the participants’ accounts, resulting in the following thematic codes aligned with the national policy framework: accountability, systemic issues, consultative processes, politicization of domestic violence, language and definitions, attending to diversity, and meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Findings
**Stage 1 Findings**

Forty-one practitioners identified as women and six as men, thirty-three worked in urban settings, fourteen worked in regional settings. Twenty-two were from NSW (18 urban, 4 regional), 14 from Victoria (9 urban, 5 regional), nine from WA (5 urban, 4 regional), one from QLD (urban), and one from Tasmania (regional). They worked in a diverse range of organisations such as specialist DFV services, child and family services, as practitioners, team leaders or more senior managers.

The interviews produced data reflective of the desires of frontline workers to express concerns about the directions domestic violence policy had taken and how it affected grassroots (street-level) service delivery. Many participants pointed to the absence of their input and lack of consultation or capacity to advocate in the interests of service users. The following statements highlight this:

“Yeah, so really we need national leadership. We need national conversations. We need to have a space around domestic violence that's not incredibly high level, but that actually feed again that consults stuff that we're talking about earlier. The need for consultation really highlights I think how they're not doing it and how because of that there's no overarching coordination at all.”

“You really need really good policy that makes sense, that comes straight from the workers in various different ways. Because there's these things that just sort of come from the above, like they're sent down and you're like, ‘What the hell? That's not practical.”’

“There's no mechanism for any input. In relation to the state government's Safer Pathway's response, women of New South Wales were cynically offered one opportunity for community consultation at the City in Campbelltown. Then, they decided they'd have one in Coffs Harbour as well. That's not really fitting consultation I would say. There's no centralised mechanism as they always have in the past for frontline workers to have membership and involvement in the development of policy or programs.”
“I also think that government might be not listening to the right people. They are not hearing. They're not getting the message anyway about the benefits of specialised services.”

The commentary on lack of consultation and ‘not listening’ by politicians, was also supported by direct comments related to systemic depoliticizing and silencing via the instrumentalization of frontline services:

“... I do find there are limitations because we have to comply with our funders and those types of regulations, so there is an element of having to be neutral but advocating. And it is a very politicised area particularly around gender violence and the trends that we’re seeing when new evidence emerges. I mean it’s a controversial space so it’s hard to be neutral in the face of that.”

“And that kind of ties into the activism and advocacy space like you can’t bite the hand that feeds you, but you need to put pressure on a daily basis.”

“In Victoria, there's a lot of scope for systemic advocacy at the moment, and there's a lot of scope within this organisation to ... for workers to ... that workers are encouraged to get in touch with their inner activist.”

Participants’ also pointed to the importance of strong leadership and governance to drive effective domestic violence policy and practice. As noted in a comment above the state of Victoria, having elected a Labor state government in 2014 and again in 2018, had a very different domestic violence policy environment compared to NSW in particular. The Victorian Labor government had made domestic violence a social policy priority by instigating Australia’s first Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2015, which reported back to the Victorian parliament in 2016. The major thrust of the findings of that enquiry was that the system had failed to keep victim survivors safe and 227 recommendations relevant to programs, laws and policies were made and directed toward improving domestic violence policies and services. Importantly the leader of the government, the Premier, made clear commitments to implementing all of the recommendations from the enquiry and listened to ‘advocate-providers’. As a result, Victoria developed its own ten-year plan- Ending Family
Violence: *Victoria’s Plan for Change*, which was released in November 2016 (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2018). The plan resulted in growth in funding to the sector and a great deal of collaboration with grassroots domestic violence support and advocacy organizations, producing a feminist agenda that was embraced systemically by police and gender equality framing by the government. The positivity of the Victorian policy environment was evident through Victorian participant responses.

**Second Stage Findings**

Three major themes emerged from the roundtable discussions in the second stage of the research: practitioners’ perceptions that they were afforded few authentic opportunities to contribute their knowledge to policy formulation; the lack of knowledge/awareness that workers had about the National Plan; and the noxious and persistent nature of the barriers they face when trying to address justice, safety and wellbeing needs of survivors of domestic violence. In relation to the first two themes, roundtables strongly agreed with sentiments expressed in phase one, namely that service providers were afforded few real opportunities to contribute meaningfully to policy formulation, had minimal knowledge of the National Plan and mostly felt that it was very distant from day-to-day practice. Rather, policy knowledge tended to be state based given that policies guiding domestic and family violence prevention and interventions are state government policies.

The third roundtable discussion theme was that problematic issues central to policy and service approaches for many years remain, presenting barriers to effective services and wider social change. For example: poorly trained police; a lack of primary services such as housing and transport; flaws in the capacity to keep women safe, particularly in communities where perpetrators can be from within other agencies (such as police); and the daily gendered affront by men in communities where the frontline workers work. These issues were reported and reaffirmed (by the focus groups) through a rhetoric of disappointment and weariness, reflecting failures to address gender inequalities within local communities, despite decades of a grassroots women’s movement action.

The roundtable participants were also asked to rank, from most important (1) to least important (8), the key priority areas that had been identified in the phase one analysis. The key messages or advocacy positions, from frontline workers to policy decision-makers, in order of importance were:
1. Keep perpetrators accountable across all systems
2. Political leaders should demonstrate an authentic commitment to prevent and address violence against women and their children
3. Intervene early in the life of the problem
4. Consult the right people to develop appropriate policy
5. Establish clear links between the National Plan and state service funding
6. Develop mass media campaigns to prevent violence against women and children that do not represent the issue simplistically
7. Provide funding for early education initiatives
8. Fund advocacy initiatives.

The policy messages are pertinent to the concept of ‘advocate-providers’. The also indicate the extent of failure of the National Plan as a national policy framework, in priority areas of services and support to survivors of domestic violence as well as in the creation of a society that promotes gender equality and discourages domestic violence.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important knowledge about how frontline service providers experience and view a national policy that set out to be central to their work and the women and children they work with. Moreover, they reflect specific misalignments between the National Plan and the knowledge, aspirations and expectations of frontline workers, including: a lack of consultation with those on the frontline of services in policy development; systemic silencing of their advocacy voice via the instrumentalization of grassroots services; the crucial importance of strong leadership to support implementation of policy into practice; and a lack of impetus for accountability for perpetrators and in many state institutions, including police and the judiciary.

It is evident that successful domestic violence practice, advocacy and policy pivots on embedding feminist values, goals and objectives and a concern for advancing the human rights of women and their children. This requires politicians and policy decisionmakers (program managers) to genuinely listen to and recognize the expertise of ‘advocate-providers’ in addressing domestic violence and gender inequality, which underpin the high incidences of assaults and abuse of women.

Although after our research was completed, in 2019 the Morrison government was re-elected. In announcing the 2019 Federal Budget allocation to ‘reduce domestic violence’
the Minister for Social Services linked the announcement to national security, “our plan – to keep Australians safe” (Fletcher 2019). After claiming that the government’s commitment had emerged from widespread consultation and claiming that it recognised domestic violence as a ‘national security problem’ (Fletcher 2019), the government also announced a sum of $10 million dollars to fund services that included counselling and dispute resolution to individuals or couples despite widespread opposition from women’s advocacy groups and expert domestic violence services (Henriques-Gomes, 2019). As stated by the CEO of a family violence charity the Lokhahi Foundation, this type of program is ‘not recommended by any representative specialist domestic and family violence service peak body, practitioner group, or research organisation nationally’ (Henriques-Gomes, 2019). The key objection to this program (that has been typically imposed on couples attending the Family Court) is that it exposes women partners to control and threats to personal safety from their violent partner. She further stated:

> Either way it’s a lose-lose situation, because if we go to those sessions and we are not honest, we’re not going to achieve anything from it...And if we go, and the counsellor says something that leads to us being in any way honest about the state of the relationship, we are completely in danger when we leave that situation (Henriques-Gomes, 2019).

Although a government spokesperson claimed that this commitment will not put women at risk and as it focused on children who witnessed domestic violence (Henriques-Gomes, 2019), the Australian government budget announcement reflected the uncoupled nature of policy and domestic violence and trauma informed service delivery.

Another uncoupled reform, the NSW ‘Going Home, Staying Home’ (GHSH) policy also reflects neoliberal efficiency driven decisions and anti-feminist policy development and responses to domestic violence under a rigid adherence LNP government ideology. The NSW research participants’ comments about the process and outcomes of the reform offered important insights, translated into messages for policy makers from all levels of government – including:

- the practical implications of the gap between federal and state policy imperatives
- the impact of neoliberalism and marketization on the work experiences and practices of community or grassroots-based workers and
the negative impact of the policies on survivors of domestic violence.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to report in detail on each of the messages conveyed about the impact of GHSH by frontline workers in NSW, some major findings do illustrate the broader findings of the current study. For example: the widespread perception that there has been a general silencing about continued gender inequality in policy; the deleterious impact of competitive tendering processes that destroyed interagency collaboration by pitting small services against each other; and the ‘gagging’ of workers thereby reducing their capacity to participate in grassroots advocacy and activism (Anonymous, 2019).

Conclusion

The motivation for this research was twofold, first to demonstrate the important democratising role of a critical feminist research process that opened up an avenue for non-profit ‘provider-advocates’ constrained by ‘marketisation’ or competitive tendering, and wider political silencing to speak back to policy. Second, to review where national domestic violence policy stands as a response to a national social problem and core feminist concerns held by frontline workers. The researchers sought to create an opportunity for service providers, predominantly women, who work closely with survivors of domestic violence to comment and give advice to policy decision-makers regarding the current national social policy approach. The research was developed in the context of a perceived failure of The National Plan to have the desired impact of reducing the incidence of domestic violence.

Feminist informed policy development, since the Whitlam government of the 1970s, emphasised the distinctiveness of women’s needs arising from their subordinated status within patriarchal political, economic and social structures (Summers, 2013). Such policies underpinned the funding and creation of specialist women’s services. In contrast, neoliberal informed policy development emphasises mainstreaming, individualism, and marketized relationships. Policy production in this context has seen the funding and creation of non-specific, non-advocacy oriented, gender-neutral services that do not attend to difference nor gender/power relations, with a reliance on a ‘gender neutral’ criminal justice system. It also fails to recognise very specific cultural and economic needs of groups of women who experience the intersection of racial discrimination and poverty, such as Indigenous women and migrant or refugee women.
Fyall’s (2017) helpful conceptual framework for recognition of the ‘provider-advocate’ in third sector research supports the recognition of service providers as important advocates within the policy process. However, the research reported here demonstrates that ‘advocate providers’ can be excluded from the policy process via direct impositions from a government that is anti-pluralist or relies on value pluralism, where they only listen to advocates on issues aligned to their ideological perspective. The study demonstrates that the values attached to neoliberal governance, marketization, efficiency and competitiveness are deliberately used to silence advocate-providers that support a feminist agenda, this finding supports Fyall’s call to recognise that non-profit organisations are indeed political and are subject to political exclusion from the policy process.

It is important for third sector research to recognise that wider research on policy responses to domestic violence have shown that a lively, vocal grassroots women’s movement, a pluralistic policy development environment, public education that addresses gender inequality from very early in the school system, and high levels of political representation by women as feminist advocates are key ingredients for confronting domestic violence and reforming societal gender/power relations (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, Phillips, 2006a; Anonymous, 2008; Weldon and Htun, 2013; Htun and Weldon, 2018). This list of characteristics highlights the need for researchers to explore and contribute to how the third sector can be key actors with the state to make positive policy change.
References


