



Commissioner Cronin Ending Coercive Control & Family Violence Conference NSW speech

July 2026

Keynote Address

I want to begin by acknowledging that we're on Gadigal land today, the land of the Eora Nation, and to acknowledge the deep expertise in this room. I've been here for most of the day, listening to Cecilia and Christine on the panel, and to the wisdom in practice that fills this room and informs our work. Someone spoke about the richness of culture and joy, and Jess, your point about everything we have to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture — about child-rearing, and so much more — really stayed with me. There is a reason that Aboriginal; and Torres Strait Islander cultures have lasted the longest in the world, and we should never forget that.

I experienced a lovely Welcome to Country this morning at one of the roundtables, from Uncle Alan. There's a groundedness to a proper welcome — I feel like I breathe better afterwards. So, it's genuinely lovely to be here today.

I also want to acknowledge two other things. First, the lived experience in this room — the advocates and the expertise they bring. I particularly want to acknowledge Amani, who sits on our Lived Experience Advisory Council and brings extraordinary wisdom to those conversations, constantly helping shape what the Commission does since we were founded. Thank you, Amani, for being here today. There are other advocates in the room too, and I only caught the tail end of your speech this morning Sheree, but thank you — it was powerful, and people were visibly moved. That's what grounds us in this work and reminds us why we're here.

Today I want to talk about the National Plan, how the context has changed over time, and where things stand with the Second Action Plan.

Listening to the panel discussions today, I found myself reflecting on my own start in this sector — in a women's refuge and the state wide telephone referral service, now known as Safe Steps, in Victoria. I was in my early twenties, a long time ago now. I learned so much from the women who called us, and looking back, I can see how much that shaped who I am, how I think about this work, and how much courage it takes — and how unprepared our systems were, and often still are, to meet what people actually need.

What has changed

I want to start with what's changed for Australia, from my perspective. We're now into our second National Plan, and we are developing the Second Action Plan to drive implementation. I think one of the biggest changes we'd all point to — and it's a large part of why we're here today — is the growing recognition over the last decade that domestic, family and sexual violence are best often understood as patterns of behaviour, which we now describe as coercive control.

I'll admit something: after several years working overseas in international development, when I came back to Australia, I felt embarrassed that I didn't recognise some of the language people were using — everyone was talking about "coercive control," and I wasn't immediately familiar with the term. But I



absolutely knew what it described. That's exactly what we talked to women about on the phone, all the time — patterns of controlling behaviour. We just didn't have accessible language for it yet.

I agree with what was said on the earlier panel about the importance of shifting language and understanding, and with Angela Lynch's point about the importance of shifting laws alongside language. Both matter for how people come to understand what's happening in their own relationships and families. We have seen meaningful change, but not at the pace, or to the extent, that our systems need to actually recognise and respond to patterns of behaviour.

Fundamentally, our service system is still incident-based. It responds to a specific incident — a rape, a sexual assault — rather than a pattern. Even our sexual assault services aren't well set up to deal with grooming, recurrence, or ongoing patterns of child sexual abuse, even at their best. Someone in this room today — I think it was Kat — made this point, and it's true: most of our system is funded for incident-based response.

That's not a criticism of the people doing the work — everyone here tries incredibly hard to do everything else that's needed alongside what you're funded to do: thinking from the first conversation about someone's healing and recovery, being respectful and empowering in a way that supports what will be a long journey. But the system itself remains incident-based, and we haven't given services — police least of all, but also health systems, mental health systems, and schools — the tools to identify, respond and intervene in patterns.

The other fundamental design flaw is that our systems are built as though domestic and family violence and child abuse happen to a small number of people, somewhere else — not our community, not our street. That isn't the reality — you all know the statistics. It affects at least half, if not the majority, of our population over a lifetime. Yet our child protection system is designed to respond to around three per cent of the population in any given year, as if abuse were a small, contained problem. We have fundamental challenges in how our systems are designed, and all of you are working around that every day.

What have we seen change? Over the last decade or more, there has been significant investment, changes to laws, and the establishment of major institutions — ANROWS being one — to help build the evidence base needed to drive real change.

What we haven't seen is our systems become ready to recognise patterns rather than incidents. We're catching up, because so many of you have pushed hard, in every job and every way you can, to make sure police, educators and the judiciary get the training they need. But it remains a process of catching up.

The other fundamental problem is that we haven't designed our systems for the people who are most overrepresented in their experiences of domestic and family violence — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+ people, for instance — who are disproportionately affected, usually over-policed, definitely under-served, and often overlooked entirely.

Most of the groups identified in the National Plan as priority cohorts — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTIQ+ people, migrant and multicultural people children and young people, people with disability, older women — are too often overlooked in our data and often not counted effectively. We don't know enough about how they're actually impacted. This is work that ANROWS in particular has shown real leadership on: making sure people's experiences are seen and counted in the data, so we can properly measure impact.

At the moment — and this came up again while I was Co-Chairing the Rapid Review, which Jess Hill was a panel member of — we can't demonstrate the impact of the very significant investment that has gone



into this sector, because we can't measure it properly. And even where we can see progress, we're still not funding services enough to meet current demand, let alone the demand we'll face as we're successful in getting more people come forward to report the harm they're experiencing.

The Second Action Plan consultation process

I've just come from a roundtable this morning as part of the Second Action Plan consultation process. I hope everyone in this room is aware of — and has had, or will have — the opportunity to speak at a roundtable or make a submission, because there is genuine listening and engagement happening.

I've personally taken part in more than forty consultations so far. We've taken real responsibility for making sure lived experience engagement is threaded through all of these consultations, as well as run as a standalone process. We had a lived-experience roundtable yesterday, another this week, and our lived Experience Advisory Council is doing dedicated work on co-design. Throughout, we've focused on making sure the voices that aren't always heard are heard clearly in the Second Action Plan.

Something that's stood out to me — and I've been doing this work for over thirty-five years — is how much I still learn from almost every one of these conversations, even when what I learn is simply how consistent the themes are.

One theme in particular stands out: specificity matters. Jade, your point about every letter in "LGBTIQA+ is different" — and even within each of those letters — people's experiences are specific and need specific responses. Our current definitions don't always capture that. A woman with disability might be in an intimate relationship where she's being harmed, but if the relationship isn't sexual, it doesn't neatly fit the National Plan's definition. The same is true for migrant and refugee women, where existing definitions often don't fit their experience either.

For children and young people, during one of our consultations Shona from MCC reinforced the point that our systems still assume every child is accompanied by a protective parent, and that's not always true. Most children do want support delivered in the context of their families, and they want their mothers to get the support they need too — but their needs are also distinct, and our systems don't always accommodate that.

Designing for safety from the outset

Another area where we've improved, but still have a long way to go, is designing for safety from the very outset. We know — largely through the courage, resilience and persistence of lived experience advocates — where systems have failed. Sometimes people have advocated for decades before real change happens: child support payments, the harms advocates have raised that are occurring in the family law system, and the ways government and banking systems can be weaponised because they weren't designed with the input of people who could have told us immediately how a program would cause harm.

Listening to communities about how they describe the problem — which may be very different from how other populations describe it — needs to happen at the very outset of designing any system, government or otherwise.

We now have the first-ever Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standalone National Plan, Our Ways, Strong Ways, Our Voices. One thing that stood out to me from being a member of the steering committee throughout that process is that, across those consultations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence was consistently described as not fitting neatly within the national framework. Colonisation and institutional racism are core to that experience. Gender matters, but without addressing colonisation and its ongoing impacts, and



systemic and institutional racism, our response won't be adequate. Those communities need to define the problem themselves — not other experts, not me — and we need to keep listening.

Transparency and accountability

Regardless of how well-intentioned a policy or systems change is, the people who will know earliest that it isn't working the way we hoped are the people who use — or can't safely access — those services. Those are the voices we need throughout implementation, evaluation and redesign.

I agree with Jess Hill's point earlier about the importance of transparency, and that we're not doing a good job of it — particularly transparency about where funding actually goes. In our annual report to Parliament last year, we wrote about exactly this. Holly, from our lived Experience Advisory Council, made the point clearly: you have to listen to the people using services and the workforces delivering them, because funding often takes a circuitous route — from the Commonwealth, through partnerships with state governments, and finally to organisations on the ground — and it isn't always clear or accurate where it ends up. We changed our recommendation as a result of her input, and we're now talking with government and services about how to better track and report where that funding actually goes. That's one example of where we need much greater transparency in this sector.

National priority and accountability

Two years ago, Australia experienced two National Cabinet meeting focused on Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence in the space of one year. In response to the first, a Rapid Review into Prevention Responses was commissioned and a panel appointed. In response to the second, Domestic, Family and Sexual violence became one of the six priorities of National Cabinet. Someone said to me earlier today that this sounds bureaucratic and possibly meaningless — it isn't. It means governments have to report to National Cabinet on progress, work is getting done.

As several people on today's panels noted, when things start being counted — when people have to report on what's being done about a recommendation — it doesn't guarantee we get exactly where we need to be, but it does mean progress is being monitored. We need far more robust transparency and accountability than we currently have, and that will be a key theme in our submission to the Second Action Plan process.

We've made sure we're genuinely listening — to rooms full of people like this one, where specificity matters, and where the system needs to be redesigned around the people who are most overrepresented, least served and least visible, because we're not counting them, and because they are so often over-policed by the very systems meant to help them — overrepresented in child protection and removal, and subject to misidentification. In those cases, the system itself becomes coercive, controlling, and harmful.

We have a long way to go. But the conversations we're having now are genuinely different from the ones we were having even two or three years ago. We now have infrastructure in government that didn't exist before, largely because of the advocacy so many of you have driven — for new leave entitlements, for coercive control law reform, and for bigger systemic reforms.

The government isn't always the best at this, but it is trying to get better, and it is listening. I've sat in the room with Minister Plibersek and Assistant Minister Kearney as part of the Second Action Plan process, and one thing they're genuinely working to address is the fact that we have a siloed system — different portfolios that don't join up, even though people's lives cross those boundaries constantly. Whether it's an Attorney-General's Department program, a Home Affairs visa issue that can be weaponised against someone, or something else entirely — DSS cannot solve this alone, and no single portfolio can.



At the moment we have five action plans being reviewed in parallel: the Second Action Plan under the National Plan; the first Action Plan under Our Ways, Strong Ways, Our Voices; two children's plans under Safe and Supported, including the Aboriginal standalone Safe and Supported Plan; and the Attorney-General's National Plan on preventing child sexual exploitation, modern slavery and family law reform. There are genuine efforts underway to bring that work together and drive meaningful alignment.

Watching the leadership on this — Attorney-General Rowland and Minister Plibersek, taking detailed notes, asking good questions and genuinely listening — gives me hope. Jess made the point earlier that we're often speaking to the converted, and the audience that really matters next is Treasury. We need to keep backing the people who are championing this work in Cabinet, so Cabinet can make the best possible decisions, because on our own we will only get so far.

Looking ahead

The Second Action Plan won't be perfect, and it won't answer everything raised in this room or any other. But it will move us further forward, and it will give all of us a pathway to keep pushing for the changes we know are still needed.

I want to thank and acknowledge the work you do every day — the work that's often off the side of your desk, unfunded, unreported, not written into your contract, but that you know needs to happen to keep the people you serve safer and support them on a long healing and recovery journey — one that isn't linear, and that people need support to return to again and again.

I'll finish by saying I hold both feelings at once: a sense of wanting to tear down parts of the system, and genuine hope that we're getting there. We now have frameworks that help us understand and explain this complexity better than we ever have, and we have leadership genuinely listening to your voices. Thank you again for the work that you do.