

3 AUGUST 2026



Sex worker collectives

Second Action Plan consultation report



Purpose of the session

This consultation was part of the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DHSV) Commission's consultation work to inform the Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*. In collaboration with Scarlet Alliance, the HSV Commission heard from sex worker peer advocates about issues and priorities to be considered in the Second Action Plan.

Executive summary

Participants emphasised the need for sex workers to be explicitly recognised as a priority population within domestic, family and sexual violence policy and service responses. There was strong support for sex worker organisations to be recognised as specialist services and for peer-led expertise to be embedded throughout policy development, service design, implementation and evaluation. Participants highlighted that sex worker-led organisations are often the first point of contact for people experiencing violence and are uniquely positioned to deliver trusted, accessible and effective support.

A significant issue was the impact of criminalisation, and corresponding stigma and discrimination on the safety and wellbeing of sex workers and other marginalised communities. Participants described how laws, policing practices, media reporting, judicial processes and institutional attitudes can increase vulnerability to violence, deter help-seeking and reduce access to justice. Particular concern was raised about the experiences of migrant sex workers, SisterGirls, people who use drugs and temporary migrants, who often face multiple and intersecting barriers to support. Participants argued that addressing stigma and discrimination must be a central component of violence prevention efforts.

Participants also called for stronger accountability, transparency and system reform across governments, justice systems and service sectors. Concerns were raised about violence prevention funding being directed away from frontline and specialist services, a lack of transparency regarding investment decisions, and persistent barriers to justice for victim-survivors. Participants advocated for law reform, improved police and court responses, stronger anti-discrimination protections, better data collection and greater oversight of how governments implement and evaluate commitments under the National Plan.

Participants highlighted the importance of sustained investment in peer-led services, workforce development and violence prevention initiatives. While several examples of successful peer-led programs were identified, participants noted that many of these initiatives are undermined by short-term funding arrangements despite demonstrating strong outcomes for service users and service systems. There was broad agreement that long-term investment in community-led organisations, peer education, workforce capability and prevention initiatives is essential to improving safety, reducing isolation and strengthening responses to domestic, family and sexual violence.

What we heard

Note: Individual participants have not been identified in this summary.

Recognition, Inclusion and Leadership of Sex Workers

What participants told us

- Participants advocated for greater recognition of the leadership role played by sex worker organisations in building community connections, reducing isolation, supporting disclosures of violence and facilitating access to justice and support services.
- Participants noted that peer educators are already responding to disclosures of domestic, family and sexual violence and argued that their role should be formally recognised, supported and resourced through dedicated training and funding.
- Participants emphasised that sex worker-led organisations possess unique knowledge of the barriers faced by sex workers, including stigma, discrimination, criminalisation and experiences of violence, making their involvement essential to the development of effective policy and service responses.
- There was a strong view that violence prevention efforts will be more effective when sex workers are recognised as leaders in designing, delivering and evaluating responses affecting their communities, rather than being treated solely as service users or consultation participants
- Several participants described successful peer-led programs that supported sex workers experiencing violence and provided training to mainstream services, demonstrating the value of sex worker leadership and expertise in improving service accessibility and safety.
- Participants argued that frontline service users and peer-led organisations are well placed to provide evidence about whether government investments are resulting in meaningful outcomes and should therefore be included in accountability processes.

What participants said needs to change

- Participants proposed that sex worker organisations should play a formal role in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of government action plans and funding commitments, particularly where those initiatives affect sex workers.
- Participants would like to see a greater emphasis on interventions that partner with sex worker organisations to drive cultural change in organisations providing support to sex workers.

Criminalisation, Stigma and Discrimination as Drivers of Harm

What participants told us

- Participants identified criminalisation in South Australia as a major barrier to safety and justice, stating that criminalised legal frameworks make it significantly more difficult for sex workers to access justice and seek redress when violence occurs.
- Several participants noted that criminalisation contributes directly to violence by limiting sex workers' ability to connect with one another, organise collectively and access support. Some participants noted that in jurisdictions such as Western Australia and Tasmania, laws can force sex workers to work in isolation, increasing vulnerability to violence and reducing opportunities for peer support and safety planning.
- Participants described decriminalisation as an important violence prevention measure, arguing that allowing sex workers to work collectively and build stronger community connections reduces vulnerability and improves safety.
- Participants also highlighted the impact of policing practices on migrant sex workers, noting that raids on homes and workplaces create fear, discourage help-seeking and push workers into more precarious and unsafe working arrangements. Participants argued that these enforcement activities can themselves be experienced as forms of violence.
- Participants noted that stigma and discrimination create significant barriers to reporting violence and crime. Many sex workers avoid engaging with police due to fears of discrimination and poor treatment, limiting access to justice and protection.
- Participants noted that despite decriminalisation in most jurisdictions, stigma and discrimination against sex workers remain widespread and are reinforced through social attitudes, institutions and media reporting. This stigmatisation contributes to an environment where violence against sex workers is more readily tolerated.
- Some discussion focused on the role of the media, including the observation that sensationalist or discriminatory reporting perpetuates vilification of sex workers. This vilification empowers perpetrators by legitimising negative attitudes toward sex workers and reducing public empathy for victims.
- One jurisdiction raised concerns about the treatment of sex workers in court proceedings, describing instances where defence counsel engage in "slut shaming" of sex workers and women reporting sexual violence. It was further argued that these practices reinforce stigma and that subsequent media reporting can amplify harmful narratives.

What participants said needs to change

- Stronger regulation of court conduct and media reporting is required, to reduce discrimination and stigma against sex workers.
- Media reporting should be addressed to tackle broader social attitudes that diminish the seriousness of violence against sex workers.
- Decriminalisation and addressing harmful regulatory enforcement would reduce the risk of harm to sex workers, and ensure they could confidently seek help when it is required.

Accountability, Justice and System Reform

What participants told us

- Some participants expressed concern that governments are not sufficiently accountable for implementing commitments under the National Plan and related frameworks. One participant argued that there should be stronger transparency regarding how funding is allocated and spent, and that implementation should be evaluated, including from the perspective of sex worker organisations.
- Participants generally agreed that accountability and system reform need to extend beyond policing and criminal justice responses to include funding decisions, service systems, anti-discrimination protections, data collection, legal processes, accommodation systems and government oversight mechanisms.
- Some participants shared concerns about governments redirecting funding intended for domestic, family and sexual violence responses into policing rather than frontline services, arguing that stronger accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure transparency of funding.
- Participants noted that current police responses continue as a significant barrier to justice, noting that fear of stigma and discrimination discourages many sex workers from reporting crime or seeking assistance from law enforcement.
- Participants highlighted significant gaps in data collection and reporting regarding violence against sex workers, including violence committed by intimate partners, workplace violence and homicide. There was a strong view that better data is necessary to understand perpetration patterns, measure outcomes and drive system accountability.
- Related to the point above, some participants noted that governments and justice systems need to be more willing to confront and publicly report on violence against sex workers, noting concerns about acquittals and inadequate sentencing outcomes in some cases involving violence against sex workers.
- Some participants highlighted systemic barriers within accommodation, correctional and support service systems, particularly for SisterGirls and other marginalised groups, noting that existing systems are often not designed to meet their needs and can expose people to further harm.
- All participants agreed that justice and system reforms should be more transparent, informed by lived expertise, and responsive to the experiences of sex workers and other marginalised communities affected by violence.

What participants said needs to change

- Improved police training focused on stigma, discrimination and the experiences of sex workers to improve access to justice and trust in services.
- Stronger accountability mechanisms governing legal practitioners, including mandatory processes or reforms to prevent discriminatory treatment of victim-survivors during court proceedings.
- Stronger anti-discrimination protections and human rights frameworks, to improve outcomes for women, children, victim-survivors and sex workers experiencing violence.

Opportunities for Sustainable Investment in Peer-Led Services and Violence Prevention

What participants told us

- Participants emphasised that sex worker organisations should be recognised as specialist services within the domestic, family and sexual violence sector because they provide expertise and support that mainstream services are often unable to deliver.
- Participants noted the need for dedicated funding for sex worker organisations, with participants noting that much of their current violence prevention and support work is undertaken through limited funding streams intended for other purposes, such as sexual health programs.
- Participants argued that peer-led organisations should receive funding not only to provide direct support but also to undertake workforce development, referral coordination, community education and violence prevention activities.
- Participants noted that while governments and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) play an important role, there needs to be greater recognition of situations where specialist sex worker organisations are best placed to lead or contribute to service delivery.
- Participants argued that community-controlled organisations should be supported to identify gaps in expertise and partner with sex worker organisations where appropriate, rather than assuming all services can effectively respond to sex worker-specific issues.
- Participants highlighted the critical role of peer workers and peer-led organisations as trusted first points of contact for people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence.

What participants said needs to change

- Increased and dedicated funding to support peer collectives' engagement in referral, early intervention and education programs to support organisations and individuals to assist sex workers experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence.
- Sustained and sustainable funding of sex worker organisations which reflects their role as specialist organisations.
- Support for marginalised community groups to work collectively to define and drive community-based responses to DFSV.

Prevention messaging

What participants told us

- One participant raised pornography as a prevention issue, highlighting work being undertaken in other jurisdictions on pornography literacy education for parents and young people.
- One participant suggested that pornography literacy should form part of a broader violence prevention approach, helping young people and families critically engage with online sexual content and understand healthy relationships, consent and respectful behaviours.
- Germany was cited as an example of a jurisdiction where work on pornography literacy was being undertaken, with further information to be provided to the Commission.
- Participants noted that pornography literacy fits within a broader prevention framework that focused on addressing the social and cultural factors that contribute to violence, including improving community education, challenging harmful attitudes and strengthening understanding of consent and respectful relationships.
- One participant raised concerns about “age-gating” online platforms, noting that restrictions designed to limit young people’s access to online content may inadvertently prevent them from accessing critical information and support services.

What participants said needs to change

- A greater nuance is required in education and prevention on pornography.

We sincerely thank everyone who generously shared their time and insights with us.

