

PRIME MINISTER

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**TRANSCRIPT OF ADDRESS TO
THE NATIONAL COUNCIL TO REDUCE VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN
NARRABUNDAH COLLEGE, CANBERRA
29 APRIL 2009**

This is an important day for the nation. It's an important day for families. It's an important day for women. It's an important day for kids. It's an important day for men.

Because we are dealing with a great affliction on the nation. And that is violence. And we're here to do something about it.

I'm pleased to be here this morning to receive the 'Time for Action' report from the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

This is a tough, but vitally important subject for our whole community – for women, for children, and most particularly for men.

And it's a subject on which we must end the silence. End it. Because for too long, silence has been seen as a form of tolerance. And our national resolve must be zero tolerance. Zero tolerance when it comes to violence against women and violence against children.

As the report highlights, the facts are profoundly disturbing.

Nearly one in three Australian women experiences physical violence – and nearly one in five experiences sexual violence – during the course of their lifetime.

This translates to physical violence against approximately 350,000 women and sexual assaults of 126,000 women every year. These are unacceptable figures for

Australians. They are unacceptable figures for any civilised community. They are unacceptable figures for this Australian Government.

The physical, social, emotional and psychological effects on so many women are incalculable.

And the damage done to children growing up in homes where there is violence or the threat of violence is likewise incalculable.

The experience of seeing mum attacked or threatened with violence can leave scars on children that remain for many, many years beyond childhood.

For some, those scars never heal.

Beyond the profound and terrible effects on women and children, there is also an extraordinary economic cost.

Research commissioned by the National Council shows that violence against women costs the nation \$13.6 billion a year.

The research also shows that if we do nothing, things will get worse.

By 2021, the research predicts each year an estimated three quarters of a million Australian women will be victims of violence – at a cost of \$15.6 billion.

In politics, many things are complicated. This one is not. It's simple. It's as simple as this:

One woman who experiences violence is one too many. One child who experiences or witnesses violence is one too many.

One person who thinks it's okay to assault a woman is one too many. One witness who turns a blind eye to such violence is one too many.

One woman turned away when she asks for help is one too many. And one perpetrator who is not held accountable for his violence is one too many.

We cannot allow the silence to continue.

That is why before we came to office we made the commitment that we would lead the development of a national approach to reducing wide violence against women and children. And we intend to honour that commitment.

It is why we established the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, under the leadership of Libby Lloyd, to advise the Government on a plan for the future.

The Council conducted significant research to assess the existing evidence, the operation of legal systems and the economic cost of violence against women.

The Council consulted more than 2,000 Australians.

Time for Action, the name of the report, contains the Council's recommendations for a National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women.

And from today the Government moves to the next stage in the development of the National Plan.

One of the clear messages of the National Council's report is that all governments across Australia need to get our act together in how we respond to violence against women and children.

Responsibility for services relevant to women is spread widely across government agencies and across Commonwealth, State and Territory jurisdictions.

As a result, it's hard to get a coordinated government effort that could help to make real progress.

That's about to change. As Prime Minister, I'm determined to lead that change.

As I said before I came to office, it's time to end the blame game between different levels of government and actually get governments working together.

It's easy to blame someone else. It is so easy to blame a different level of government. But you know something, the Australian people are absolutely fed up with to the back teeth with that approach. They just want it to work. They just want the system to deliver. They want results. They want things to change.

And I believe they will back a plan which offers that real prospect and possibility.

The Government is committed to providing national leadership in reducing violence.

Many of the Council's recommendations require joint effort by the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the community more broadly.

That's why the Government will take *Time for Action* to the Council of Australian Governments.

We will work with the State and Territory Governments to develop the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women for release in 2010.

We will also act immediately to jumpstart a number practical and substantive initiatives identified in the report as urgent priorities.

Today I can confirm that the Government will invest \$42 million on a package of new measures in services, education, community awareness and in the law.

First, we will establish a new national online and 1800 service to provide professional assessment, referral and counselling for victims of violence and their families, at a cost of \$12.5 million over four years.

The current Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Helpline provides only basic advice and referral services.

The new phone line will build on existing services to provide 24 hours a day/ 7 days a week assistance accessible from any place in Australia.

The new service will also offer counselling through an online forum – an important addition for those in rural and remote areas.

The new service will provide appropriately qualified, specialised domestic violence and sexual assault counsellors to assess and address problems directly with victims and their families.

It will also provide backup support to workers dealing with critical incidents and who are isolated from professional supervision. This extra support will help to ensure that their own health and wellbeing is also protected.

Second, the Government will invest \$26 million for primary prevention activities to focus on changing attitudes and behaviours that contribute to violence.

This will include \$9 million to improve the quality and uptake of Respectful Relationships programs for school age young people and \$17 million for a national campaign focused on men and boys.

As I've said before, it is our gender, it is my gender, it is the male gender, that is responsible for this violence against women and children. Therefore, the responsibility to act lies with us.

During this year we will test best practice in Respectful Relationships and promising new programs across 31 school and non-school sites nationally.

It is critical that all people, particularly young people, develop the skills to maintain respectful relationships.

Respectful Relationships programs will be implemented mostly in mainstream school settings and will reach up to 8,000 young people over a period of five years.

Programs will also be implemented in non-school settings and will target vulnerable young people including those with intellectual disability, young people who have left school and young people living in remote communities.

These include:

- 15 Northern Territory schools;
- Nine schools and non-school sites in Victoria, Tasmania, and New South Wales, focused on groups of young people who are particularly vulnerable to violence;
- Four schools also in the ACT – including Narrabundah College;
- Three remote schools in the Kimberley in WA; and
- A pre-elite youth sporting squad for Queensland.

In the three Kimberley schools - at Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Oombulgarri - the Federal and Western Australian Governments will work closely with the local communities to remodel an existing Respectful Relationships program to suit the needs of those communities.

These programs will seek to build the skills of local communities, of men and women - not just relying on school teachers – to assist in providing this education.

We will test these three programs in other remote communities to establish their influence on young people's attitudes and behaviours.

We are also very pleased that the NRL has become a partner in the Respectful Relationships program – in particular, that they have identified pre-elite under 16s and pre-under 18s for the program.

The NRL will identify ex-players and other important role models in the Code to be trained as educators.

We commend the NRL for taking this opportunity to work with young players and to influence their thinking and behaviour about relationships and respect.

We will also evaluate the South Australian model, Keeping Safe, the most far-reaching Respectful Relationships approach currently being delivered in any state education system.

We will also develop a comprehensive social marketing campaign to change community attitudes and behaviours – with an investment of \$17 million over four years.

The campaign will target young men and engage them to help us prevent violence against women.

These activities will provide an alternative way forward for young people who are growing up in and around violence and abuse.

The whole point here is that people can look to role models to inspire them to live their life free of violence.

We have to make sure that the mistakes of the past are not, are not repeated in the future.

That's why Respectful Relationships education will play such an important role in reducing violence against women.

Third, we will drive research and innovation to inform Australian approaches to violence against women, at a cost and an investment of \$3 million over four years.

This research will particularly focus on evaluating best practice in the treatment of perpetrators of violence.

Libby said before, and I say again, the Government is interested and committed to evidence-based policy.

We are interested in one single thing – what works, what changes these behaviours, what brings about a measurable reduction in the statistical data on violence against women and children. That's why research is of such continuing importance.

Fourth, we will support a small expert advisory group to advise the Government on the National Plan.

And fifth, we will implement a series of detailed measures within the legal system to ensure perpetrators are held to account and victims have access to the justice they deserve.

At the recent meeting of the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General, the Commonwealth Attorney-General, Robert McClelland, sought agreement for a working group to develop a national registration scheme for domestic and family violence orders.

The current system requires victims of violence to take steps to register violence orders when moving from one state to another, placing the onus on the vulnerable at a time when they are in need of protection.

The Government is working with the States and Territories to establish a scheme whereby the registration of domestic and family violence orders occurs automatically.

The Standing Committee also agreed to an unprecedented examination of the interaction of Federal, State and Territory laws relating to the safety of women and their children, in particular to examine where the interaction between these laws increases the risks to women and children.

And the Australian Law Reform Commission will conduct this examination working with law reform commissioners across Australia. And I would commend the excellent leadership by the Attorney-General Robert McClelland in these important areas of legal reform.

In developing the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women, we recognise there are many programs and strategies already in place at different levels of government.

In New South Wales, for example, the Staying Home Leaving Violence program aims to ensure the safety of victims and their children. This involves the police removing the violent partner from the home.

In the Northern Territory, the Strong Family, Strong Community, Strong Future program trains and supports people in remote communities to work with families at risk of violence.

In South Australia, the rape and sexual assault service Yarrow Place provides clinical, forensic, medical and counselling support to victims of sexual assault.

In Victoria, the Male Adolescents at Risk project in the Dandenong region works to change the attitudes and behaviour of young adolescent boys and men who have shown aggressive or violent behaviour.

Here in the ACT, the Couch Surfing program provides young homeless people – many of whom would have experienced or witnessed domestic or family violence or sexual assault – with alternative housing options.

These and a range of other initiatives show that there are many people working to both reduce the level of violence perpetrated against women and to minimise the damage caused by such violence.

I commend each of you in the room here today who are engaged in the frontline of this very important work. It's hard work. It's difficult work. And it's necessary work.

But despite these excellent programs, the stark truth is that statistics on the incidence of sexual assault and family violence perpetrated against women and their children remain disturbingly high.

That is why we must work harder and smarter to tackle this challenge.

At the core of the challenge is this reality. There are many causes of violence against women. But there's one main cause. And that is the attitude of men towards women.

As the Council's report says and I quote:

“Violence is never caused or invited by the victim. The choice to use violence always, always rests with the perpetrator.”

I agree.

Our challenge is to change the attitudes of many Australian men, especially young men.

Of course most men are not violent against women, and most find violence repugnant and unacceptable as I do.

But that is how it must be for every Australian man and every Australian boy. Everyone. Every one of us, every one of my gender, every one of the male gender.

Every Australian male.

We know that most physical and sexual assaults are perpetrated by men that the women know and at home, and that the abuse is often repeated.

But what we do not know enough about is what really works in stopping men's violence.

We must address this gap in our knowledge so we can do more for children and women affected by violence within their families.

And to guarantee that we will do more, I am taking the initiative to move toward a national response to this problem.

I will write to my colleagues on the Council of Australian Governments, seeking their agreement to use COAG as a forum to develop a cross-government plan of action to reduce violence against women and children.

I will be asking the Premiers and Chief Ministers to work with me to produce a National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women for 2010.

COAG is the highest decision-making forum of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments.

It's right that this challenge is on the COAG agenda – alongside the big challenges of health, education and building infrastructure for our nation's future.

And the Australian Government's leadership in making a referral to COAG will significantly improve the effectiveness of all our efforts to reduce violence against women and their children in Australia.

Sexual assault and family violence takes a huge toll on Australian families, on Australian communities and in particular on Australian women.

The Australian Government is determined to take action against violence - both by assisting victims and addressing root causes.

With today's announcements, we are taking the first steps in responding to the report from the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

And we look forward to working with State and Territory governments towards this goal.

I urge all Governments and all Australians to join us as we work together to prevent violence against women and children.

I echo Tanya's thanks to all members of the Council – to Libby, Heather, Rachel, Pauline, Lisa, Andrew, Maria, Mel, Dorinda, Vanessa and Moira - thank you for the enormous amount of work you have done to produce the *Time for Action* report. I'm sure there's been some burning of the midnight oil.

And to produce four volumes like that, more than the midnight oil is burnt I suggest.

The Australian Government accepts the challenge you have given us.

And we look forward to working with other Australian governments, with many experts and outstanding individuals working in the community sector, to tackle this blight on our nation, and to build a safer future for Australian women and children.

This is a difficult subject for the nation to discuss. It's a hard subject for the nation to discuss. It's not a happy subject for the nation to discuss.

But none of those factors should prevent us from elevating it to part of our rolling national conversation.

Silence can no longer be tolerated because violence can no longer be tolerated. And violence prospers in the silence.

The challenge for all of us, government at all levels, you in the community sector and each of one of you as the young people and as the future of our nation, lies in this - to act together to make a difference. Personally, socially, institutionally, politically, in all that you do and all that you say.

It may be that when we look back on this gathering, in a school hall, on a cold morning in Canberra in April 2009, that we might just be able to say this – that on this day, we began to turn the corner.

I thank you.

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