

**Introduction and acknowledgements**

I would like to start by acknowledging that we meet here today on Kurna land, and I pay respect to the resilience and strength of Ancestors and Elders past, present and those emerging. My deep respect and gratitude also goes to any and all those holding cultural authority in the room today.

I acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded, and I am sorry and ashamed that the ongoing effects of colonialism continue to harm the First Nations peoples of Australia on land that was stolen from them. Let's pay the rent – and keep paying it.

Today I also acknowledge victims and survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence. In particular, I'd like to dedicate my words today to the lived experience advocates from Voices for Change SA, who I've had the great honour of working with over the past few years in my role with Embolden as the statewide peak for domestic, family and sexual violence services. I owe you all a great deal, although not gonna lie – it feels pretty weird that I'm the one up here talking instead of cheering you on. I hope I do you proud.

Thanks to today's event organisers – Gillian, Cintra and the whole Adelaide White Ribbon Breakfast Committee, and my thanks and acknowledgements to my fellow speaker, Assistant Commissioner Ian Parrott. Thank you to Isaac for a beautiful and powerful Welcome to Country. Finally, I promise -- thanks to all of you for being here.

The theme of today's White Ribbon Breakfast is the impact of COVID-19 on domestic and family violence, and the impact of DFV on women and children every day.

I also want to talk about some of the *lessons* from COVID that we can apply to violence against women. I'll touch on 3 of them. And they are – that change is *necessary*. Change is *possible*. And that change is *up to us*.

So we'll start with how change is necessary. And I'd like to kick this off by telling you a little about how I start my work day, and what I also come back to when I think about change in the context of gender-based violence and the role I have to play in addressing it.

So as I sit at my desk each morning, I look up to read two picture quotes I've pinned to the wall above my computer. On the left hand side is a phrase borrowed from a plaque President Barack Obama had on his desk in the White House, that says -- 'Hard things are hard'. On the other side, advice from author, poet and activist Toni Morrison – 'All important things are hard'.

Although as I'm explaining this out loud really for the first time, and I can see these might together be the most anti-inspirational inspirational quotes of all time, what I get from this, how they help me keep going, is that if the work to bring about change seems hard, it's because it is. Deal with it. Next is understanding that it is hard because it is important. It is *necessary*. Change is hard. And change is necessary.

### Change is *necessary*

When COVID came onto Australia's shores, it didn't take long for the penny to drop that changes would be required of all of us in order to deal with this threat. Masks. Zoom calls. Lockdowns. Seismic shifts in health, public policy and economic responses. All of these changes and more were hard, some harder than others, but they were necessary to save lives and reduce the burden. It also didn't take long for frontline DFV workers to start raising the alarm that the pandemic was having an effect on the prevalence and severity of DFV, while at the same time making it harder for people to seek help.

What we now know is that globally, domestic violence rose by 25 to 33% in 2020 *alone*, with the pandemic intensifying factors that contribute to intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic and family abuse. In Australia, one in ten women in a relationship experienced domestic violence in just the early stages of the COVID crisis. For those who were already experiencing violence in their relationships, many were subjected to more frequent and severe incidences of abuse. One in three experienced non-physical forms of abuse such as emotional abuse and harassment from an intimate partner.

But COVID didn't CAUSE VAW to happen. It shone a spotlight on what was already there. It presented a twisted new tool or strategy for abusers, and different opportunistic types of abuse. But gender-based violence has been the "shadow pandemic" for far longer than COVID has been around, and at the rate we're going, without taking steps to change it, it will be around far longer still.

Change is hard. It is important. More than that, it's necessary, so let's get on with it.

## Change is possible

Seeing what was necessary made change possible when it came to COVID. We adapted to lockdowns and other huge changes in our lives. COVID also showed us how quickly change and support can happen – emergency payments, wage supplements, WFH changes... Some of these changes were not only possible, they were also positive! Raising support payments so that people could live above the poverty line, able to afford fresh food, life changing medication. Fewer barriers to accessing emergency funding so that in some cases, women and their children found it easier to escape violence. Working from home becoming normalised in ways that could play a part in levelling the playing field for working mothers, and people with disabilities.

Change is possible, but like everything else in life, it isn't free. Systemic solutions for systemic problems like domestic and family violence come with a cost. Luckily, as the nation was able to find money to support its citizens through the worst of COVID, so we have the resources to prevent and respond to DFV. What we do need is the political will to pull the levers that need to be pulled to make this happen.

The fact is that the Stage 3 tax cuts will cost over 93% of the cost of DFV over the next decade, and that that money will be funnelled largely back to high-income earning men, literally at the expense of those who will pay by that money not going into the tax base to help pay for necessary services. That exposes the choices that are available. What if we could say – what could we do with \$253bn over ten years to prevent and respond to DFV, and see the reduction in that \$26bn/yr cost as dividends to reinvest? What if we saw the

whole picture? Prevention, including primary prevention, is an investment. Housing. Closing the Gap. Pay equity. All investments. Equipping specialist women's led DFSV services with the resources they need to support those in need = investment. For-purpose justice and legal processes and outcomes, co-designed with survivors, so families don't have to continue to live in fear. An investment in our future. In ourselves.

If survivors have the grit to endure the abuse they've been subjected to –whether or not they leave, to survive means to change, to adapt, and they made that possible for themselves – we owe it to them to find the courage to fight for them. To listen to them when they tell us what change is needed, and work alongside them to make it happen.

So again yes, change is hard. Change is important. And change is possible.

## Change is up to us

In order to even begin to manage the pandemic, we had to learn to work together in new ways, even while we were physically apart. COVID showed us that we all had a part to play, whether we personally got sick or not, whether we had family members who were vulnerable or got sick, whether we were giving daily press conferences or caring for small children at home or on the health frontlines or cancelling weddings or missing our friends or dropping care packages around our neighbourhoods. It didn't affect us all equally, but it did affect all of us, and we didn't expect those who were the most vulnerable to the virus to bear the brunt of prevention, response and recovery.

I want to be very clear that when we talk about violence against women, and forms of gender-based abuse like domestic, family and sexual violence – that we have to acknowledge who is most affected. First Nations women, children and communities. Women, children and others with disabilities. Migrant, refugee and CALD women and children. LGBTQ+ people. Incarcerated and institutionalised women. Others who experience multiple forms of oppression, marginalisation and abuse that intersect with expressions of gender-based violence. We have to fight this fight together, and we have to collectively ensure that those who are most at risk, who are most affected, are also not expected to do this work alone.

As with any public health crisis, we know that what's needed to address violence against women is an evidence-based approach across the board, from prevention all the way through to response and recovery. And we need to have shared understanding and messages to our communities to help prevent violence before it starts, call it out when we see it, and support those affected by it.

There's no vaccine for violence against women – but that doesn't mean there's no hope. We all have a part to play in creating a safer Australia for women and their children. We can help increase our immunity against violence and be safer, together. By committing to change, because it's important, although it's hard, by seeing what is necessary in order to make it possible.

Change is hard, change is important, and change is *up to us*.

Thank you.

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