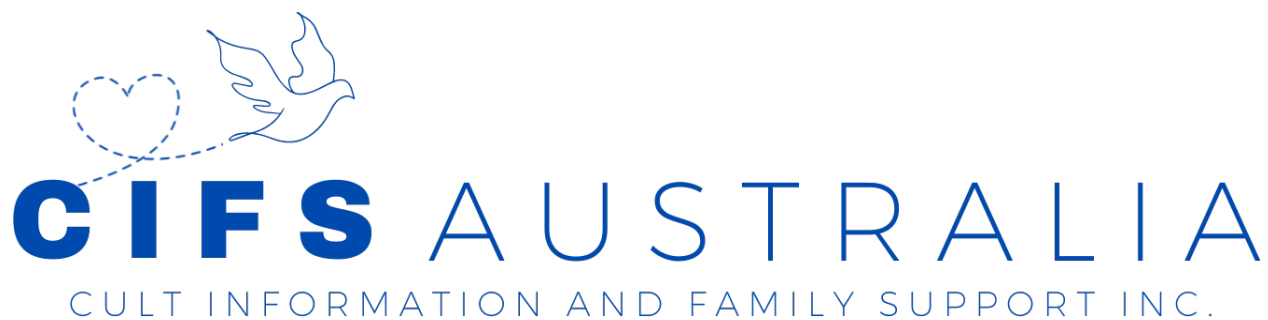




Supporting families and individuals affected by high-control groups since 1996

Submission to the Consultation on the Second Action Plan

National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

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1. Introduction

CIFS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. CIFS is a national, non-profit network supporting people affected by high-control groups and cults, including their family members. Our casework, spanning three decades, brings a perspective to this consultation that the current Consultation Paper does not address: the compounding relationship between coercive control exercised by a high-control group and coercive control or domestic violence experienced within an intimate partnership inside that same group.

The Consultation Paper's five priority areas, and its supporting evidence assessment, do not mention cults, high-control groups, or high-demand religious and ideological movements. We raise this not as a criticism, but as a gap consistent with the pattern CIFS has identified in other current reviews: because existing legal definitions, monitoring frameworks and data collections are not built to capture this context, it remains structurally invisible even when the Consultation Paper explicitly seeks “current or emerging issues” in coercive control and asks where “gaps remain” for diverse communities.

2. The double vulnerability: coercive control within coercive control

CIFS's casework consistently shows a compounding pattern that we believe warrants the Second Action Plan's attention. Many of the women we support did not simply experience domestic violence, and separately, group-based coercive control. They experienced domestic violence inside a marriage or partnership that was itself arranged, sanctioned, or actively protected by the group's leadership — meaning two coercive systems reinforced one another rather than operating independently.

This compounding takes several recurring forms:

- group leadership using spiritual or ideological authority to discourage a woman from leaving an abusive partner, framing separation or divorce as sin, betrayal, or spiritual failure;
- group structures that isolate members from outside family, friends, and services, so that a woman experiencing partner violence has no independent support network to turn to;
- group leaders acting as informal, unqualified arbiters of marital disputes, routinely favouring the male partner and reframing the abuse as the woman's own spiritual, emotional or behavioural failing;
- financial structures in which income, assets, or independent earning capacity are controlled by the group or its leader, removing the practical means to leave; and
- the reality that leaving the relationship and leaving the group are frequently the same act, so that a woman facing partner violence must simultaneously exit her entire social, spiritual, and material world in order to be safe.

For these women, existing domestic violence risk assessment and safety planning tools — which do not ask about group context — will systematically understate risk and miss the compounding barriers to leaving. The same applies to the broader evidence base: because no national data collection currently flags group or cult context, these women's experiences are absorbed into general domestic violence statistics without their compounding vulnerability ever being visible.

3. Response to specific priority areas

Priority Area 1: Victim-Survivors

In response to the consultation question on current or emerging issues the Second Action Plan should address in relation to coercive control: CIFS recommends the Second Action Plan explicitly recognise coercive control exercised through a high-control group or ideological movement as a distinct and compounding risk factor when it co-occurs with intimate partner violence, and that this be reflected in future national data collection and risk assessment guidance.

In response to the question on gaps remaining for diverse communities: survivors of domestic violence within high-control group settings are, in CIFS's assessment, an unrecognised population in current monitoring frameworks, for the same structural reason CIFS has raised in submissions to

other current reviews — the relevant legal and administrative categories do not capture the group context, so no data point is ever generated to evidence the compounding harm.

Priority Area 5: System Integration and Workforce

Specialist and universal DFSV workforces are not currently equipped to recognise coercive control exercised through group or organisational structures, or to understand why a woman's path out of an abusive relationship may be blocked by a religious or ideological authority rather than, or in addition to, her partner. Referral pathways can inadvertently cause harm where a worker, unaware of the group context, refers a woman back to a “trusted community elder” or “pastoral support” who is in fact part of the controlling structure.

CIFS recommends the Second Action Plan build specialist and non-specialist workforce capability to recognise high-control group dynamics as a compounding context for domestic and family violence, and formalise collaboration pathways between mainstream DFSV services and specialist organisations, such as CIFS, with direct expertise in high-control group dynamics and safe exit support.

Priority Area 2: Prevention and Early Intervention

CIFS notes that respectful relationships education and community prevention efforts rarely address how high-control groups can arrange, sanction, or pressure members into relationships, and can subsequently enforce compliance within them. We recommend prevention resources and curricula be developed, in consultation with specialist organisations, to help both universal services and affected communities recognise these dynamics earlier.

4. Summary of recommendations

1. Explicitly recognise high-control group or cult context as a distinct, compounding risk factor for coercive control and domestic violence within the Second Action Plan's evidence base and future monitoring frameworks.
2. Commission dedicated research into the prevalence and dynamics of domestic and family violence occurring within high-control group settings, including its compounding effect on victim-survivors' capacity to leave.
3. Build specialist and universal workforce capability to identify coercive control exercised through group or organisational structures, and to avoid unsafe referrals back into the controlling structure.
4. Establish formal collaboration pathways between mainstream DFSV services and specialist organisations, such as CIFS, with expertise in high-control group dynamics.
5. Ensure any future extension of legal definitions of coercive control — including those currently under consideration in state-based reviews — is reflected in the data and workforce standards developed under the Second Action Plan.

5. Conclusion

Women experiencing domestic violence within a high-control group are, in our experience, among the most isolated and hardest to reach victim-survivors in Australia — not because their harm is less severe, but because it is compounded by a second, reinforcing system of control that current frameworks are not built to see. CIFS thanks the Department for the opportunity to raise this gap and welcomes further engagement as the Second Action Plan is developed.



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