

Formal Submission: Informing Direction for the Second Action Plan

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

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This submission seeks to inform Priority Area 1 (victim-survivors) with a focus on victim-centred police responses to family and sexual violence. We agree with the current priority areas outlined in the consultation paper and we hope that our submission helps to reaffirm and extend the priority areas for the Second Action Plan.

Our submission draws on an Australian Research Council funded project entitled, "Sexual Offence Interviewing: Towards Victim-Survivor Well-Being and Justice" (DE240100109: Discovery Early Career Researcher Award). This project examines adult victim-survivors' experiences and perceptions of police interviews in sexual offence cases in Australia in the last five years (2019 onwards). The project has included in-depth interviews with 26 adult victim-survivors of sexual violence across Australia and a survey of 285 Australian adult victim-survivors of sexual violence (occurring both within and outside of intimate relationships). In this submission, we highlight 4 key recommendations that have consistently been raised by victim-survivors to improve experiences of police responses and reduce re-traumatisation.

1. Urgently improve interview room environments.
2. Demonstrate belief in a victim-survivor's account.
3. Victim-survivors want police to have specialist training. Reports should be taken by specialised police not generalist police.
4. Establish multidisciplinary teams of police, support people, and mental health professionals.

Recommendation 1: Urgently improve police interview room environments.

Victim-survivors of sexual violence in Australia consistently report being interviewed by police in problematic environments. Victim-survivors recall harsh fluorescent lighting, the smell of urine, sitting on hard uncomfortable chairs for several hours, and describe interview rooms as, “clinical, stark, daunting, intimidating, scary, creepy, uninviting, inhospitable, and like a cupboard.” The negative interview room environments within police stations are often not conducive to victim-survivors feeling safe, relaxed, and comfortable speaking about sexual assault. As one victim-survivor described,

“It's almost like an interview room for a perpetrator, but it was in an office. I think it needs to be a more relaxed kind of setting where you feel safe because you feel like you're going in as a perpetrator, and you're going in to probably have one of the hardest conversations of your life, and it's a very clinical, cold kind of environment that doesn't help”.

Some participants reflected on more positive experiences and welcoming environments, which included couches, cushions, warmer lighting, artwork, and a fridge with water and snacks. Victim-survivors also suggested that the addition of sensory tools like fidget spinners or playdough would be an excellent way for interviewees to keep their hands occupied and relieve some anxiety while talking about difficult details. Other suggestions included the addition of plants, heat packs, weighted blankets, and diffusers with pleasant smells to help create a more comfortable and sensory-friendly interview environment when reporting sexual violence. Overall, ‘conducting the interview in a private and comfortable setting’ was rated as the *most important* police interview technique by 285 victim-survivors of sexual violence in Australia (Hamilton & Gerryts, 2026; Hamilton & Woodley, 2026).

Recommendation 2: Demonstrate belief in a victim-survivor's account.

Victim-survivors in Australia (and also internationally) consistently raise the importance of feeling believed when they report sexual violence to police (Hamilton & Gerryts, 2025, 2026). This is core to victim-survivors' sense of well-being and justice, even if the sexual offence case does not progress to prosecution or conviction (Hamilton et al., 2026). Unfortunately, many victim-survivors in Australia experience responses from police that dismiss or invalidate their accounts. As one migrant victim-survivor recounted,

“I felt they don't believe me... The police say that the evidence is not anything; they say it can be interpreted in another way. I just feel humiliated by them. I thought they should be protecting the victim but I feel like most of the time they are protecting the perpetrator. They made me feel really hopeless.”

Police need clearer policy to indicate that ‘belief’ and validation is core to a victim-centred approach that can improve victim engagement, reduce traumatisation and attrition rates, strengthen sexual offence cases, and promote victim-survivors' sense of well-being and justice. Our research that is informed by current police policies, legislation, and the expertise of defence lawyers in Victoria indicates that police can make expressions of belief to victim-survivors during sexual assault investigations without compromising the case (Hamilton et al., 2025). Police need reassurance that expressions of belief will be treated as a supportive statement to the complainant, rather than an inducement that impacts the credibility of the evidence.

Police also need continued training to combat misconceptions about sexual violence (Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020). Such training needs to educate police on how to demonstrate genuine belief or avoid a climate of disbelief by (1) avoiding victim-blaming and accusatory questions, (2) active listening and note-taking throughout the interview (3) avoid warning about false allegations early in the process, (4) show commitment and thorough investigative effort, (5) use non-sceptical language (e.g., ‘your account’ instead of ‘your version’), and (6) maintain contact and follow-up with victim-survivors to show the case is being taken seriously (Hamilton et al., 2025).

Recommendation 3: Victim-survivors want police to have specialist training. Reports should be taken by specialised police not generalist police.

Our survey research indicated that most victim-survivor participants preferred to have a specialist detective from a sexual assault team conduct an investigative interview ($n = 141$; 50.9%). Only 1.1% of the survey sample ($n = 3$) indicated that they would prefer to have a general duties police officer conduct a sexual offence interview (Hamilton & Stevens, 2026). As one participant commented, “specialist squads definitely make the process easier.”

The open-text survey responses also clearly indicated that victim-survivors want investigative interviewers to have specialist training, both in the nature of sexual offending and trauma-informed practice (e.g., having a stronger understanding of how trauma impacts memory and behaviour). The type of training commonly described by participants included deeper understandings about sexual, domestic and family violence, as well as less ‘obvious forms of abuse’ (e.g., psychological, emotional, financial).

National and international research indicates that specialised sexual assault police training can have a positive impact on victim engagement and trauma-informed investigative practices (Bennett et al., 2025; Campbell et al., 2026; Lapsey et al., 2024; McQueen & Murphy-Oikonen, 2025; Mourtgos et al., 2021; Tidmarsh et al., 2020). For example, a recent systematic review of 31 evaluations found that sexual assault training had a significant and positive overall impact on police knowledge, perceptions, and behaviours (e.g., knowledge and demonstration of trauma-informed investigative techniques), with sustained effects over time (Lapsey et al. 2024). These findings suggest that specialised sexual assault training has the potential to improve police responses.

Recommendation 4: Establish multidisciplinary teams of police, support people, and mental health professionals.

Victim-survivors in our research commonly emphasised the need for qualified mental health professionals to work alongside police during sexual offence investigations. Victim-survivors felt that social workers and psychologists are better trained and equipped to understand trauma and the impacts on memory, and how to adequately address trauma responses during investigative interviews. For example, current police interview protocols in Australia instruct police to conduct a guided memory exercise to help victim-survivors recall memories of sexual violence for their evidence, however, victim-survivors have concerns that such an exercise would likely be triggering and unsafe for police to conduct. Victim-survivors emphasised that the exercise should be conducted by a qualified therapist or at least have a mental health professional present to assist with any trauma responses and reduce re-traumatisation (Hamilton & Gerrits, 2025).

Coordinated police and social-service responses are currently being used in Victoria for cases of high-risk and recidivist family violence. Such responses have garnered support from victim-survivors, who have reported that embedded social workers helped to connect them and/or their family to a range of support services and reduce family violence in their lives (Hamilton & Chessier, 2026). There is mounting evidence that specialist social workers are an effective addition to police units responding to family violence. Such coordinated responses should also be trialled in sexual offence cases to help connect victim-survivors with therapeutic support while they navigate the criminal justice process.

Victim-survivors also valued the option of having a support person present during their report of sexual violence. Victims explained that support people often made the interview process feel less isolating and intimidating. Yet Australian victim-survivors in our research were not consistently offered the option of a support person, and many had trouble knowing who could be in this role. Police need to consistently discuss options with victim-survivors before the interview commences. Our research indicated that victim-survivors had varied preferences for support people including friends, family members, psychologists, social workers, community elders, legal representatives, and a peer-based support person with lived experience of sexual violence (Hamilton & Stevens, 2026; Hamilton & Woodley, 2026). Some victim-led organisations appear to be developing peer-based advocacy services where victim-survivors can support fellow victims in police interviews (e.g., see Roberts, 2024). Such work should be further explored and prioritised in the Second Action Plan.

Conclusion

Overall, the above recommendations align with the key opportunities for the Second Action Plan outlined in the consultation paper, including:

- Improve experiences of policing and justice responses to reduce re-traumatisation, strengthen trust, and ensure equitable access to protection and accountability for all victim-survivors.
- Build on progress towards whole of system support, response, healing and recovery to ensure victim-survivors are empowered to make informed choices, access support that meets their need over their life course and receive improved outcomes.

The 4 recommendations are feasible and underpinned by our robust body of research. They would make a substantial difference to victim-survivors' sense of safety and well-being during the police response to sexual violence.

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