

The missing link in government pledges on domestic violence: Where do the women flee to?

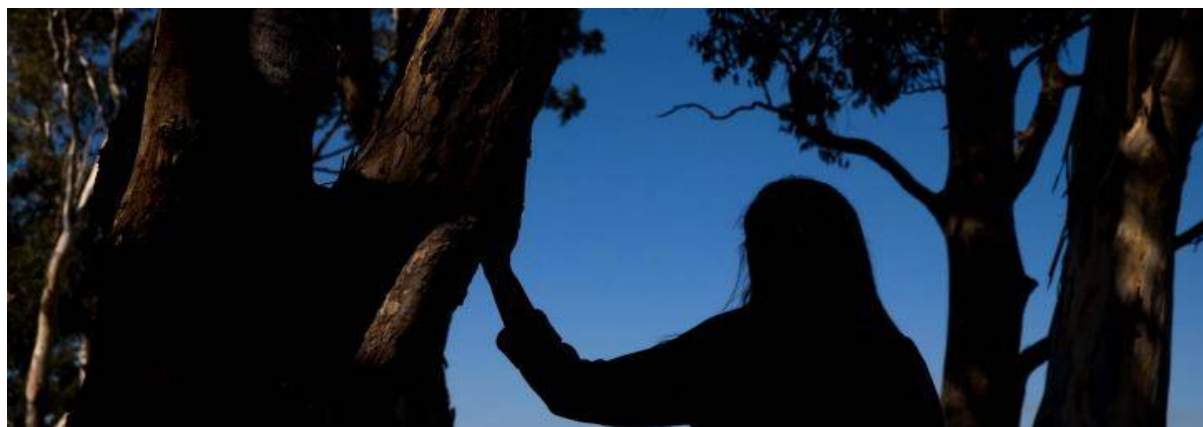
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Domestic violence victim "Layla" in Sydney. Photo: Janie Barrett

Layla has a deadline. She must find a new home for her three daughters and hide before her husband is released from Long Bay jail.

He has broken her neck and broke down the door and threatened to shoot her when she sought shelter at her father's house. He later laughed in court when police mistakenly revealed her – until that moment – secret new address.

Her dilemma gets to the nub of where domestic violence policymaking, despite sincere pledges by governments to protect women from violence, falls short.

Once they flee, where do they go?

If the housing affordability crisis in Sydney is bad for a young generation unable to buy their first home, imagine what it means for Layla*.

A piece of bone from her hip was inserted in her neck to replace the broken vertebrae, fixed with a metal plate and screws.

When the surgeon viewed her neck injuries in hospital, he supposed she had been in a car accident. Layla was warned by her violent husband, standing beside her, not to disclose the truth. He had her daughters at home while she lay in the hospital bed recovering in 2014, and she feared for their safety.

When they finally fled in 2015, after 19 years of marriage, Layla and her girls were dispatched from the neighbourhood in a taxi by a couple they desperately flagged down on the street.

She has no savings, no employment, and survives on a single parenting payment. That deadline.

"I have three children. I know he has my current address. I don't want to be sitting around like just a duck waiting for something to happen. But on the other hand, I just can't afford anywhere. It's just ridiculous," Layla says.

She has been unable to find a place in a women's refuge, which could provide a circuit breaker for her family to find its feet.

SOS Women's Services says women's refuges in metropolitan Sydney are unable to cope with

the "huge demand" for their services.

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"Domestic violence is on the national agenda like never before but services across NSW are stretched to capacity," SOS spokeswoman Roxanne McMurray said.

She said last week's federal budget contained only \$100 million over three years for family violence, which was "extremely disappointing".

SOS has written to NSW politicians ahead of the NSW budget, urging the Baird government to match the big commitment made in Victoria to provide housing and crisis refuges for women after its Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Last year, the Baird government reversed earlier funding cuts and committed to secure funding for women's refuges until 2020. Ms McMurray says it's not enough. Thousands of women continue to be turned away each year.

"The Victorian government has committed more than half a billion dollars – it's a game changer and has raised the bar for all governments in Australia, including NSW," the letter says.

Labor's domestic violence spokeswoman Jenny Aitchison believes the Baird government "needs to step up".

"In 2014 the government merged homelessness funding with funding for domestic violence, and refuges now have to help homeless women as well as domestic violence clients on the same amount of money," she said.

The NSW Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Pru Goward, said the NSW government was spending an extra \$20 million for specialist homelessness services for families affected by domestic violence, on top of \$182 million allocated for homelessness services including women's refuges.

Her office declined to comment on whether that commitment would be expanded in next month's budget.

Layla is articulate and determined. She has gathered 17,000 signatures to an online petition seeking changes to the law to prevent domestic violence offenders from being able to question their victims in open court if they choose to represent themselves, after her own "horrific" experience.

"He called me a liar and he threw pens and paper and threw his chair across the room and they brought in security," she recalls.

She is proud of her eldest daughter, who excelled with top marks in the HSC last year, amid the

turmoil, and is now enrolled in law at university.

However capable, Layla wants the path to escaping violence made simpler for women like her, and says housing is crucial.

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"If there is a concise and straightforward plan for you just to leave your home. If every woman knows of a plan, apart from having to be financially independent ... do you know how many people would go for it?"

"I stayed because I didn't know where to go, who to talk to, what to do. We need so many more refuges. We actually have to make them a top priority and make sure they are readily accessible."

*Not her real name.

Reporting of domestic violence deaths reduced

The Baird government has cut the reporting of domestic violence deaths by an expert team convened by the State Coroner.

The Domestic Violence Death Review Team is a multi-agency group established in 2010 after concern that almost half of domestic violence deaths were not recorded as such in the database used by police.

The team must review every domestic violence death from the previous year and identify trends and highlight systemic weaknesses or failures.

The team, comprised of representatives from NSW Police, family services, health and education, makes policy recommendations and maintains a database of information about the deaths.

But Attorney-General Gabrielle Upton has introduced legislation that will cut its annual reporting requirement to every two years.

The shadow attorney-general Paul Lynch said: "This government claims to be concerned about the issue of domestic violence. That's scarcely believable when they delay the reporting of the Domestic Violence Death Review Team."

The most recent report by the team makes several recommendations, including that Family and Community Services consider a mandatory reporting protocol for staff who suspect social housing tenants may be at risk from domestic violence in the home.

Recommendations made in the team's 2012/13 report are yet to be responded to by the Baird government.

The story The missing link in government pledges on domestic violence: Where do the women flee to? (<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/the-missing-link-in-government-pledges-on-domestic-violence-where-do-the-women-flee-to-20160507-gool76.html>) first appeared on The Sydney Morning Herald (<http://www.smh.com.au/>).

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