

Women's services bear brunt of neoliberal backlash

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Despite increasing recognition about the problem of violence against women, most refuges, community and non-government organisations devoted to helping women and children in crisis, allocate a good deal of their stretched resources to writing submissions for limited funding. This is because both the state and federal governments have a piecemeal, short-term approach to the problem.

Women's refuges were set up by feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The women's refuge movement, as part of the broader women's liberation movement, analysed that physical and sexual violence towards women was based on power, not sex. It ascribed the domination of women in a patriarchal society as the main underlying oppression.

Socialist critiques of women's oppression maintain that women's economic and social oppression underpinned capitalism, with its focus on the nuclear family. Physical and sexual violence towards women was understood as not just relating to an aberration in relationships, or confined to so-called poor or working-class families, but as a social problem connected to the oppression of women under capitalism.

Despite strenuous efforts by feminists to set up, develop and maintain refuges and other services for women, the situation is deteriorating. This is the result of neoliberal funding cut-backs for all services. But given the heightened awareness of, and opposition to, violence against women — the result of decades-long campaigning by feminists — the cuts have had to be accompanied by a conservative anti-feminist ideological campaign, something that hasn't been helped by the decline of the public face of the women's liberation movement.

Governments have sought to "individualise" and depoliticise the reasons for violence against women. Now, funding goes mainly to those services that conform to the view that violence toward women is the outcome of unhealthy relationships, or individual family problems, rather than the result of a broader social problem.

Victorian community organisations were concerned that they would lose funding for gender specific services in the 2005 budget as the Victorian government moved to tender out women's services. And Barbara Kilpatrick of the Manly Warringah Women's Resource Centre confirmed to Green Left Weekly that some smaller women's services would be in trouble if the NSW government introduced tenders.

This neoliberal shift over the past 10-15 years has encouraged those affected to only seek individual solutions, such as therapy or counseling, rather than, as happened in the 1970s, also understand the broader political questions. The emphasis is therefore on making personal changes, often in a short term case-managed environment.

Without discounting the need for individualised support, the reality for women's services under successive Liberal and Labor governments is that the long-term assistance is not addressed. The

social basis of violence against women has been left out of any discussion about long-term solutions.

John McDonald from the University of Ballarat's Centre for Health Research and Practice believes that the shift from focusing on the type of support to individual outcomes is being used by governments to "drive out prevailing models of service delivery and to call into question existing policies and practices". He also believes that the issue of safety, a central concern to women accessing refuges, has been compromised by the ideological shift towards individual outcomes, in particular the push to keep families intact.

Refuges, like all government-funded women's services, have not been able to escape the neoliberal backlash: service providers are now pressuring women to negotiate their own outcome-based "needs". Diagnosing their "problems" and making women responsible for what happens to them allows the underlying oppression of women to go unchallenged.

P.S.

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