

Australia urged to take action amid rising violence against women



Canberra, March 6 (RHC)-- Federal and state women's safety ministers in Australia are meeting in Canberra to discuss the need for major reforms in handling the country's family violence crisis.

At least 80 organisations have signed a letter by the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) and Fair Agenda to call for "urgent and immediate changes to improve women's safety."

The letter outlines five actions that can be implemented immediately, including fully funding women's and children's services and putting children's safety first in the family law system.

The meeting was called in response to the murders of Hannah Clarke and her three children -- Laianah, six, Aaliyah, four, and Trey, three -- by her former partner in Brisbane on February 19. Clarke and her children burned to death when Rowan Baxter poured petrol on their vehicle and set it alight. Baxter later committed suicide on the scene.

Clarke had a police-issued protection order against her ex-partner, and police have confirmed that there was a history of violence in the relationship. It is believed that Baxter ambushed Clarke's car, as she

drove their children to school.

According to Our Watch, a non-governmental organization that campaigns against violence against women and families, one woman a week is killed by a current or former partner. Nine women have been murdered by men in Australia so far in 2020.

"The five interventions [we are calling for] can be implemented quickly and make a real difference within weeks," said Fair Agenda's Executive Director Renee Carr. "There are services that women are reaching out to right now that aren't sufficiently funded, and there are other services facing cuts," Carr told Al Jazeera.

"We're so far from where governments need to be in handling violence against women."

She called for improvements to front-line police services, highlighting "concerning reports" of police mishandling in family violence cases. "Women who have survived domestic violence won't seek police help if they think they will be disbelieved, or exposed to more danger," Waters said in the letter.

Tens of family service providers around Australia are facing funding shortages and closures after repeated budget cuts by federal and state governments. The National Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services Forum (NFVPLS) is one of these organisations.

National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (NFVPLS) is Australia's multi-agency representing Indigenous survivors of family violence. They have been told that their 244,000 Australian dollar (\$161,000) -a-year funding will not be renewed beyond June 2020.

Even in their current position, NFVPLS estimates that up to 40 percent of women contacting them for assistance are turned away due to a lack of capacity to support them.

"We keep hearing calls for innovative solutions to tackling domestic violence," said Joanne Yates, CEO of Domestic Violence NSW. She argues that what is needed is "sustainable resourcing for front-line services", not innovation.

"These are the crucial services that make women and children safe," Yates said. "This for us would be real innovation."

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