

ELSIE

CONFERENCE

Reflections

DECEMBER 2024 — BY KRISTINE ZIWICA



Celebrating 50 years of women's refuges in Australia

The Elsie Conference was held on 15 and 16 March 2024 to celebrate 50 years since the establishment of the Elsie Women's Refuge, and the start of the women's refuge movement in Australia.

From industry pioneers to forward-thinking influencers, the conference's program of speakers and panelists represented a fusion of knowledge, insight, and inspiration. Together they:

- shone a light on domestic violence and discussed how it's changing
- explored how we need to respond and reset to meet new challenges
- recognised the special issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, migrant women and other high-risk groups, and
- honoured the work of the thousands of women who have worked in women's refuges and shelters for the past half-century with the 'Elsie Awards'.

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Origins

Fifty years ago a group of Sydney feminists broke into two adjoining vacant houses on Westmoreland Street in the Glebe Estate in Sydney, 'Elsie' and 'Minnie', to establish Australia's very first domestic violence refuge. That day, without knowing it, the group of six women – including Elsie Conference Chair Professor Anne Summers AO – started a movement that would put the issue of domestic and family violence on the map.

Inevitably, big anniversaries prompt deep reflection: how far have we come, and how far do we have yet to go?

Women are still dying. One in four women are still experiencing violence, emotional abuse, or economic abuse by a cohabitating partner. An average of 13 women a day are still being hospitalised due to family and domestic violence. And domestic and family violence is still a leading driver of homelessness for women.

To contemplate these questions, reflect on the legacy of Elsie, the ongoing need for specialist women's services informed by the feminist ethos of Elsie, and, most importantly, consider the challenges that lie ahead as Australia seeks to put a decisive end to this scourge, Summers and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), led by the UTS Business School, convened the Elsie Conference in March 2024.



Shining a light on domestic violence

The Elsie Conference took place at a time when Australia stood at a critical crossroads (one of many over the years) in its now five-decade-long struggle to eradicate men's violence against women.

In 2023, the Albanese government launched the second National Plan to End Violence Against Women [after the first 10-year plan, arguably, failed](#).


Rates of domestic and family violence had remained stable over the life of the plan and rates of sexual violence had increased.

When reflecting on that failure in a 2021 International Women's Day address, Summers offered two interlinked explanations: "political failure and bureaucratic ineptitude".

But when the social services minister Amanda Rishworth launched the [second National Plan](#) in 2022, she promised that this time would be different. This time, she vowed, Australia would end violence against women "within a generation".

It was a bold promise. Was it even possible?

No doubt, the women who broke the windows at 'Elsie' and 'Minnie' all those years ago, a group that has since come to be known as the 'founding mothers', shared similarly ambitious aims. Yet here we are.



When Rishworth made that promise, many experts, service providers and survivor advocates, weary after decades of work on the frontline and in Australia's nascent 'prevention' sector, wondered if it was just spin. Or, if the commitment would – at long last – be backed by the political will, bureaucratic competence and the funding to make it a reality.

If, after five decades of dogged effort, Elsie's 'founding mothers' and those who followed in their footsteps could find themselves here – what lessons must urgently be gleaned from history?

How could we as a nation – by understanding the triumphs and failures of the past five decades of activism and policy alongside a sober assessment of all that we have since learned about the nature of domestic and family violence and how it manifests – ensure that, this time, politicians and policy makers make good on that promise?

These were the central questions that pre-occupied those who attended the Elsie Conference.

As to where 'here' is, in addition to the second National Plan, the Elsie Conference took place against another important backdrop: the devastating escalation in intimate partner homicide rates.

While statistics were yet to confirm what many at the conference feared, there was growing alarm that Australia's intimate partner homicide rate was actually increasing.

For years, the media had been reporting that, on average, one woman a week dies at the hands of a current or former partner. But in the months leading up to the conference, it seemed like there was such a report ever four days. This added to the Elsie Conference's sense of urgency — and the search for answers.

Sadly, those fears would be confirmed just one month later, when the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) released the latest findings from the National Homicide Monitoring Program. It found that the intimate partner homicide rate had increased by 28 per cent in a single year.

28%↑ INTIMATE PARTNER
HOMICIDE RATE

At the time of the conference, 14 women had been allegedly murdered, the majority by a current or former partner, according to Australian Femicide Watch. On 3 December 2024 that number stood at 93.

Midway through the first day of the conference, the weight of that heavy toll featured prominently when there was a pause in the proceedings, an 'interlude', to commemorate the 14 victims of male violence killed thus far in 2024.

Two women from Taree NSW, Leonie McGuire and Rosie Herbert, presided over the interlude entitled *Ghosts of murdered women* as 14 women, all dressed in white, wearing veils, looking ghostlike, walked through the audience to somber music and took their places on stage. Each representing an individual, a woman, not just a statistic, killed by male violence.

As the name of each woman and the brutal circumstances of her alleged murder were read out, McGuire shared:

**ALL TOO OFTEN WE DO NOT ACKNOWLEDGE
THE PAIN THAT THIS VIOLENCE CAUSES IN
OUR COMMUNITIES.**



A 'ghost' commemorating a woman killed by male violence

Just two months after the conference, the Albanese government – alarmed by the escalating femicide rates – would commission a ‘rapid review’ into Australia’s prevention of violence against women.

Thus, as the sector gathered to commemorate and learn lessons from the legacy of Elsie, Australia stood on the precipice of a new chapter of a decades long struggle.

Just a few months later, the expert panel that led the review, whose six members included Summers, delivered a potentially transformative list of 21 recommendations that could – if taken up – result in a step change in Australia’s approach to the prevention of men’s violence against women.



Conference Chair
Professor Anne Summers AO

In her opening remarks at the Conference, Summers alluded to this context and foreshadowed the start of this new chapter. While urging the nation to take lessons from the past she said:

I DO HOPE THAT WE CAN START TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT THE MONSTER WE ARE CONFRONTING, AND I EXPECT THAT WILL LEAD US TO RETHINK MANY OF THE ASSUMPTIONS THAT HAVE DETERMINED OUR RESPONSES IN RECENT YEARS.

She cited Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s remarks at a UN Women International Women’s Day event earlier in the year where he stated that “addressing family violence cannot begin and end with efforts to achieve gender equity or economic equality – we have to go deeper than that”.

“This view runs counter to what many in our sector maintain,” Summers acknowledged. “That we cannot end violence against women until we achieve gender equality.”

“I think it’s the other way around,” she said, “that a decline in violence is an indicator of our progress towards achieving gender equality, and it’s why the fight against violence – in all its new and frightening forms – has taken on a new urgency because it signifies that we are going backwards in our quest for gender equality.”

Reflecting on the actions of the ‘founding mothers’ Anne said:

WE COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED BACK IN 1974 THAT WE’D EVEN STILL BE HERE, LET ALONE FACING SUCH AN INCREASE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.

WE HAVE MUCH TO DO, LET’S GET TO IT”

Radical feminist politics

When Aunty Glendra Stubbs welcomed the Elsie delegates to country, her comments were funny, charming ... and telling. “It’s so nice to be in a room of radical feminists”, she said to everyone’s collective delight and squeals of laughter.

Over the course of the first day conference delegates would repeatedly reflect on the challenges of the women’s refuge movement’s ‘radical feminist’ roots and principles. As the emerging sector sought to secure government funding they were often not so lovingly referred to as a bunch of ‘ratbag’ feminists.

Over time, and depending on the government of the day, those tensions would become more acute. And as refuges became more reliant on government funding (Australian refuges were among the first in the world to receive government funding from a sympathetic, reforming Whitlam government in 1975 just one year after Elsie opened its doors), those tensions would play out in a number of different ways. They still do today.

What’s more, the Elsie Conference was not the first, nor would it be the last, such gathering. And the National Plan was not the first, nor would it be the last, high profile, coordinated national effort to tackle the issue.

There had been countless conferences. The very first national domestic violence conference was organised by the National Institute of Criminology and was held in Canberra in November 1985. Organised at the request of the Attorney General and attended by over 300 delegates, conference proceedings described the event as “the largest and most demanding seminar ever conducted by the Institute”.



Aunty Glendra Stubbs

By 1992, the Keating Labor government had launched the first National Strategy on Violence Against Women, which was strongly influenced by a feminist analysis that saw the root causes of domestic violence in male attitudes and power over women.

By 1994, the Australian Bureau of Statistics had published the first Australian National Crime Statistics on domestic violence.

But as any student of history will tell you, progress can be undone.

Some governments would seek to denude the emerging ‘women’s refuge sector’ of its feminists through the introduction of so-called ‘managerialism’ and the ‘mainstreaming’ of services, thereby de-coupling the issue of domestic and family violence from feminism.

Some would seek to defang the sector's ability to accrue political power and draw upon it in the name of advocacy. And some would seek to make advocacy itself a dirty word, alongside 'radical' and 'feminist'.

Governments inserted clauses into funding agreements that expressly forbade advocacy activities. They also set the government's own charity regulator, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, the national regulator of charities, the task of threatening women's safety organisations with the loss of their 'DGR' status (which allowed them to raise tax-deductible funds) if they engaged in such activities.

Most famously, in 1997 the decidedly anti-feminist government of Prime Minister John Howard cut many services to women, slashed the funding to the Office for Women by 40 per cent, and abandoned any concern for 'women's policy issues'.

Instead of the structural analysis of the drivers of domestic and family violence offered by feminists throughout the 1970's, 80's and early 90's, Howard sought to 'de-gender' the language of domestic violence to suit his 'family values' agenda.

The results were devastating.

Within that context, it is easy to see why Aunty Glendra's Welcome to Country drew such laughter ... and applause.

In expressing her delight at being in the company of 'radical feminists', Aunty Glendra was letting it be known that this would be an event where neither 'radical' nor 'feminist' were dirty words. In fact, feminism and what some may have once considered its more radical principles would be celebrated – and centred, once again – as key to the kind of transformational change that's needed to secure women's financial security and safety.



As Senator Jenny McAllister, at the time Assistant Minister for Climate Change and Energy, said in her welcoming remarks:

THE STORY OF ELSIE AND MINNIE IS A STORY ABOUT A GROUP OF WOMEN WHO WERE SICK AND TIRED OF WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO CHANGE.

She said the Elsie ‘founding mothers’ confronted men’s violence against women “in the most immediate way that they could, and it’s an instinct that, I suspect, many of you understand.”

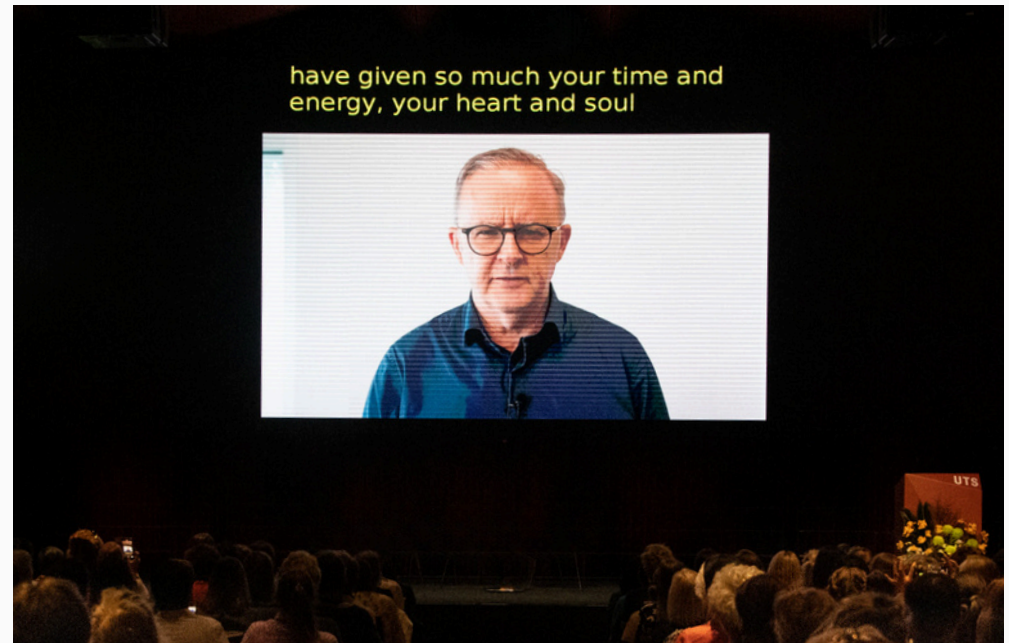
The subtext of that comment posed even more questions for those attending the conference ...

Had something been lost in the intervening five decades as ‘the system’ (as many referred to it) that grew up to respond to and prevent domestic and family violence was built? Had some elements of ‘the system’ lost the directness and immediacy that inspired Elsie’s ‘founding mother’s’ all those years ago? Was it time to return to first principles?

Five decades later after the locks at Elsie were changed, the sector was coming together at the Elsie Conference on a key anniversary. They were seeking lessons from history and vowing to centre once again ‘radical feminism’ and what it asks of us (then and now): full throated advocacy that centres a structural, feminist analysis of the problem, and, most importantly, demands for accountability and action that gets to the roots of the problem.



In a rare appearance from a Prime Minister at a conference of this kind, albeit by video, Anthony Albanese, in his welcoming remarks, seemed to agree, suggesting that the political winds had, once again, shifted in favour of the movement. Noting the efficacy of the sector’s advocacy and crediting that success to the fundamental, feminist founding principles instilled by the ‘founding mothers’, the Prime Minister invited more of the same.



THIS MILESTONE SPEAKS TO 50 YEARS OF WOMEN SHOWING LEADERSHIP, DEDICATION, COMPASSION AND, OF COURSE, COURAGE. LOOK WITH PRIDE AT WHAT YOU HAVE ACHIEVED AND LET US LOOK FORWARD WITH OPTIMISM AND DETERMINATION FOR A BETTER AND SAFER NATION.

The founding mothers: collective action & continued resistance

Elsie was born from collective action; the women's refuge movement was founded in the women's liberation ideals of collectivism. And that is really the only way that anything of substance has ever been – or ever will be – achieved.

In a session devoted to 'The Elsie Story', Summers spoke of the six women who worked tirelessly for six months to make the founding of the Elsie Women's Refuge possible.

Of those six women, four survive, two were present and two were represented by their daughters at the conference. Together, they shared their reflections and paid tribute to each of the 'founding mothers' of Elsie:

Bessie Guthrie was a long-term Glebe resident, a campaigner for the rights of women and girls, a printer, and a bohemian who had organised many a demo outside a home for girls she spent years trying to shut down. Guthrie was 69 when Elsie opened. But despite the great age difference, she was described as being the 'heart and soul' of the group.

Margaret Power was a lecturer in economics at Sydney University who became friendly with Summers through working in adjacent buildings and through their shared determination to write women back into economics in Power's case, and politics in Summers'.

Jennifer Dakers was a publicist for Angus and Robertson who had an impressive range of contacts all around the city. She was a real doer, someone who made things happen.

Carole Baker was a very active member of the North Sydney Council, pushing hard for the politics of 'women's liberation'. She knew a lot of people, including several property developers whom she contacted to demand that they donate a property for a refuge. One of them offered a wreck of a house on Albion Street in Surry Hills, which was met with the following response, "thanks but no thanks."

Lina Clayton worked as an account manager for a publishing company during the day, but on weekends and nights she was "a fierce warrior for women involved in every cause from abortion rights to anti-apartheid."



'Founding mothers' and representatives: Hannah Power, Zoe Baker, Lina Clayton, Anne Summers

And finally, **Summers** was a post-graduate student at Sydney University and working on her first book when she became the sixth member of the eclectic little group.

Over six months they plotted and planned, with the task of finding a property falling to Summers who walked around Glebe after an ABC Four Corners program about the Church of England revealed that the church had dozens of empty houses in that area it intended to sell to the federal government for its social housing plan. She came across the tiny single-story terrace on Westmoreland Street which was in reasonable nick, and the rest is 'herstory'.



On the second day of the Elsie conference, in another incredibly moving, final session, attendees again gathered in the UTS Great Hall to celebrate the many unsung heroines who have kept refuges running, often with limited (or even no) funds. In doing so, they have saved the lives of thousands of women and children over fifty extraordinary years.

The recipients of the 'Elsies' were a diverse group of frontline workers, with around one-third of them First Nation and many other from other diverse backgrounds. Fifty of them, one for each year since the founding of the Elsie Refuge in 1974, received awards. They are by definition not household names. They are the 'unsung heroines' of the movement whose work was finally being acknowledged – and honoured.

The ceremony was presided over by the Hon Virginia Bell AC, SC, who served as a Justice on the High Court of Australia for 12 years and before that acted for many survivors of domestic violence at the Redfern Legal Centre. It was joyful, exuberant, affirming.



Elsie Award winners

The feeling was almost indescribable as so many women, who continue to hold the frontline of this crisis, came together to honor their own. They drew strength from sisterhood and camaraderie that they will take forward as Australia – and the women's refuge sector – marches on, as determined as ever. Bell proclaimed:

FIFTY YEARS AGO WE WERE 'RATBAGS'. WE'RE STILL RATBAGS, AND ALWAYS WILL BE!

At the end of the first day of the conference, one young woman who works in an advocacy role at Full Stop Australia remarked that while those in the sector talk about – and guard against – vicarious trauma, a survivor recently reminded her that there is also "vicarious resilience" in the work. The feeling of the Elsie Awards was "vicarious resilience" personified.

The ongoing, critical role of specialist women's services

*A SEED WAS SOWN,
A SEED OF RESISTANCE AND HOPE.*

That's how Maha Abdo OAM, the CEO of Muslim Women Australia described what the founding of Elsie, and the manner of its founding, represented to the many women who would go on to build Australia's formidable, and increasingly diverse, women's refuge movement. These included the development of dedicated services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and multicultural women's services, which Abdo herself has played a key role in.

Of course, no one at the Elsie conference wished to gloss over the more complicated parts of the refuge movement's history, and whether or not it had always been a welcoming place for diverse women or accommodated their diverse needs. Or whether diverse women's experiences of violence had always been visible, even central, in service provision or advocacy.

"The struggle for acceptance and recognition within mainstream spaces has often been an uphill battle, and it still continues," said Abdo in a panel session dedicated to the history of multicultural women's services.

*OUR EXPERIENCE, OUR VOICES, OUR UNIQUE
NEEDS HAVE TOO OFTEN BEEN MARGINALISED
OR OVERLOOKED.*

"Our journey has not been without its share of setbacks and continued pressure; we've grappled with the burden of constantly having to justify our existence," she continued.



Maha Abdo OAM



Yasmin Khan, Maria Dimopoulos AM & Maha Abdo OAM



Maria Dimopoulos AM



L to R: Joergette Mae, Tasnia Alam Hannan, Fariha Chowdhury and Caroline Khalill



L to R: Angela Lynch, Kristine Ziwica, and Kelly-ann Tansley



L to R: Chantay Link and Dixie Link-Gordon

Nor did anyone wish to gloss over the extent to which stark inequities remain today. For example, it was particularly shocking to hear (on that same panel about multicultural women’s services) that the Bangle Foundation, which runs a domestic abuse support service for women of South Asian heritage, Australia’s largest immigrant group, is still unfunded and entirely run by volunteers – ten years after it was founded in 2014.

By contrast, Elsie received funding from the federal government within one year of its establishment. Yes, it was a different time and different political context. And, yes, frontline services across the country today are collapsing under the weight of demand. They cannot function effectively without enough funding to keep up with demand or to shield their workers from burnout and the moral injury that occurs when the worst happens to a woman who the sector simply has not had the resources to help.

While the Albanese government would announce a ‘historic’ \$4.7 million investment later in the year (September) in response to the Rapid Review, many in the sector, while grateful, voiced concerns that even such a large sum was not enough to meet current and anticipated demand.

Nonetheless, throughout the first day, multiple women from many different backgrounds and many parts of the specialist women’s sector spoke of how Elsie acted as a beacon, an example, an inspiration. They also spoke of how the experience of working in a women’s refuge – or of seeking refuge in a specialist women’s service – literally ‘transformed’ the women who went through them.

Importantly, they also spoke of the ongoing need for specialist women’s services that are informed by the ethos of Elsie, which always had at its core the desire to expose the dark underside of the patriarchy’s attitudes to women. In response, they both gave the survivors of domestic violence the ability to escape their private prisons and sought to overturn the attitudes and the system that had allowed the violence to happen.

The next chapter in the story of Elsie is that ongoing fight to preserve, grow and diversify the specialist women's sector in the face of competitive tendering, mainstreaming and many other forces that have sought to undermine the ideals that informed the unique original model of Elsie. And it has been a story of ongoing resistance and hope.

It wasn't specifically discussed – out loud at least – on the first day but everyone knew that the Elsie we were talking about and celebrating at this conference no longer exists.

We were remembering what used to be, not what is today.

In 2012 the NSW government introduced the Going Home, Staying Home 'reforms' which led to a total upheaval of the refuge sector and, under the tender system that was introduced, large religious or charitable organisations successfully tendered for refuges that had for decades been run by the women's movement. Elsie was one such casualty. It was acquired by the St Vincent de Paul organisation and while Elsie has remained open, it no longer operates as a 24-hour emergency service. Even recently, people have reported ringing Elsie during business hours and getting no reply.

The life-changing – and lifesaving – impact that was the hallmark of the original Elsie was perhaps most clearly articulated in Christine Robinson's powerful keynote on the first day.

Robinson spoke from a deeply personal perspective, that of an Aboriginal woman who first came to Elsie as a child, later returned as an Aboriginal support worker who had her own experience of a violent relationship and, later still, became a member of the management board of Elsie.

Robinson was an 'Elsie kid' who sought refuge with her mother when she was just fourteen years old. Today, in addition to her work at Warringa Baiya, Robinson is a member of the New South Wales Domestic Violence Death Review Team and the First Nations Coercive Control Reference Group.

Elsie had a significant impact on Robinson's life, she said, from her early years till now. "It shaped who I am," she said. Robinson spoke of the transformative power of being surrounded at such a young age by strong women.



FOR ME, AS A YOUNG GIRL, IT WAS EMPOWERING TO SEE SUCH STRONG WOMEN WHO ADVOCATED FOR SAFETY FOR ALL WOMEN, BUT, MORE IMPORTANTLY, THEY ENFORCED A VIEW THAT VIOLENCE WASN'T ACCEPTABLE AND SHOULD NOT BE TOLERATED.

FOR THE FIRST TIME, I ACTUALLY SAW A WORKFORCE OF WOMEN WHO WERE STRONG AND VOCAL ABOUT THAT.

When & how will the violence end?

To conclude the first day of the conference, delegates – armed with the lessons of the past, emboldened by memories of radical agendas, collective action and solidarity – looked to a very challenging future.

The final panel brought together leading experts who truly represented how much we have learned – and how much our efforts to prevent and respond to domestic and family violence have grown and changed over five decades.

Dame Quentin Bryce led a historic 2015 taskforce in Queensland, one of many relatively recent state-based systemic reviews, including the 2016 Victorian Royal Commission, that have made wide-ranging recommendations.

Lauren Callaway currently serves as Assistant Commissioner of Family Violence in Victoria, an indication of just how much police responses have changed from apparent indifference to ‘just a domestic’ to a dedicated, senior role in the police.

Micaela Cronin became Australia’s first, dedicated Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner in 2022 with the task of bringing more oversight, coordination and accountability (let’s just call it ‘bureaucratic competence’) to the National Plan.

Jess Hill, a researcher and award-winning journalist who has dedicated the last decade of her life to telling the story of men’s violence against women, what drives it, and how it can be tackled, represented just how far media interest and understanding of the issue has progressed.



L to R: Virginia Haussegger, Julie Inman Grant, Micaela Cronin, Quentin Bryce, Jess Hill, Antoinette Braybrook and Lauren Callaway



Antoinette Braybrook, the CEO of Djirra, a community-controlled domestic and family violence prevention and response service she helped found 22 years ago, has dedicated her life's work to bringing visibility and voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who experience disproportionate levels of violence. She was among those who lobbied tirelessly for over a decade for a standalone, self-determined National Plan for First Nations Women's Safety, which is currently in development.

And finally, **Julie Inman Grant** is Australia's E-Safety Commissioner, the world's first regulatory agency committed to keeping its citizens safe online. In her role, she works on the frontline of what many have cited as a key, 'emerging' areas of tech facilitated abuse.

This expert panel, moderated by **Virginia Haussegger**, was convened to ponder the most important question of the conference: why does Australia, in 2024, still have epidemic rates of domestic abuse? And what are we going to do about it? The journey of the last 50 years has been one of moving from awareness raising and practical responses like refuges, to the ongoing quest to 'understand the monster'.

Did the panel reach a decisive conclusion? No.

If that was possible, domestic and family violence perhaps might be a thing of the past, a memory alongside the actions of the Elsie 'founding mothers'. But the expertise and experience of each and every participant and their life's work reflected that we are still learning, still grappling with the ever-expanding scale of abuse.

To truly end violence, we cannot simply hide the women away in refuges as if they are in a witness protection program. The scale of the challenge is bigger than any one single 'response', though women's refuges are one critical key to that 'response'.

A key learning from the Elsie conference is that the women's refuge movement has always been about more than response. It has always understood that transformational individual and societal change is necessary to end this scourge, and the sector has remained endlessly curious about the best way to achieve that.

Along the way, our understanding of exactly what men's violence entails, and how it manifests, has grown, and so, too, have our prevention efforts and responses which have become more sophisticated.

And therein lies continued hope for the future.

Watch sessions and explore more photos: elsiconference.com.au



Poster exhibition curated by the Jessie Street National Women's Library showcasing iconic political posters from the 1970s.





Sponsors & supporters

The Elsie Conference was hosted with the support of:

