



23 October 2018

Hon Bill Shorten MP
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By email to: Bill.Shorten.MP@aph.gov.au

To the Hon Bill Shorten MP, leader of the opposition

As you know, given your much-appreciated support for us over the last 11 years, Women's Health West's vision is for equity and justice for women in the west. Our mission is to work together for change by supporting women and their children to lead safe and healthy lives, and by changing the conditions that cause and maintain inequity and injustice.

We are one of Victoria's only organisations that provides services and programs that encompass every level of response to family violence – from primary prevention, to early intervention and response. Our work has actively contributed to improving the health, safety and wellbeing of women and their children in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne since 1988. As such, we ordinarily target our energy and activities towards the western metropolitan region. However, the current crisis on Nauru for asylum seekers and refugees is such that we cannot remain silent.

Our staff and our board of directors believe that the treatment of people seeking refuge in our country defines who we are as a nation. Our children's counsellors point to the existing damning evidence of the impact of detention on the development of children, particularly those who have already experienced trauma. A board director suggested that this will be akin to a next 'stolen generation' report in the future, shaming us throughout history as people who stood back and allowed political slogans like 'stop the boats' to render us inactive.

Many of our clients and staff came to Australia as refugees and asylum seekers themselves, and so have firsthand knowledge of what it is like to be displaced from their homeland by war, natural disasters and resulting poverty. They cannot imagine their life had they not been welcomed to Australia. And we cannot imagine our organisation without staff members like Meriem, our finance manager, who came to Australia as a refugee from the Horn of Africa, and has worked with us for 15 years in the most diligent and ethical manner. Or Phuong, initially a refugee from Vietnam, who has worked here for 20 years supporting migrant and refugee women and children who experience family violence. Or Fadak, a refugee from Iraq, now community lawyer, who leads the western region strategy for the primary prevention of family violence. Fadak's father, a surgeon, made the journey to Australia via boat in the late 1990s and was eventually released from detention to bring his family to Australia. Fadak notes that, today, she and her family would not be able to come to Australia. The list goes on.

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As you will know, the Government of Nauru has asked Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) to leave the country. This is despite MSF's most recent report stating that, in the last 11 months, 78 MSF patients on the island have considered or attempted suicide. This includes the emergence of distressing details over the rapidly deteriorating health of 80 children, some of whom have attempted suicide. In addition, the Chief Medical Officer, paid for by the Australian government, has been arrested and is being deported from Nauru. The consequences of this can only mean chaotic and compromised services to the children and families in Nauru, and would appear to justify MSF's description of the situation as 'beyond desperate'.

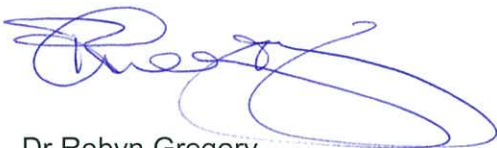
Seeing the detainment of young children and families is directly affecting the mental health and wellbeing of our clients, our staff and the community more broadly, who feel powerless to act to prevent this human rights atrocity. This is all the more pronounced for those in the west with a connection to those in offshore detention centres.

As the leader of the opposition, and quite possibly the next prime minister of Australia, you are not powerless to take action, however. We urge you to stand with the UNHCR in its calls for the end to the Australian offshore detention policy. We implore you to listen to medical experts' recommendations for the immediate evacuation of all asylum seekers and refugees from Nauru.

We ask you to take a strong stance against the detainment of refugees and asylum seekers, as someone who can give voice to those in your electorate who feel silenced and traumatised. We ask for your firm leadership on this matter and we note the ALP's softening of opposition to a travel ban to New Zealand as a first step.

We look forward to your response and encourage you to contact me for further information, or to make a time to come and hear from our staff about their own experiences.

Kind regards



Dr Robyn Gregory
Chief Executive Officer