Grace leads push for progress

By Sharmila Nagar
Vice President

The Australian Trade Union Institute late last year hosted a pre-recorded address by 2021 Australian of the Year Grace Tame as a special online event to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

The event marked the first day of 16 days of action against gendered violence and was part of the Australian Council of Trade Union's We Won't Wait campaign to win 10 days of paid family and domestic violence leave and fight for women's safety at home, in the workplace and in the community.

During the online event we were reminded of the current federal government's dragging of feet when it came to dealing with violence against women.

It was also highlighted that the Australian government had not ratified the International Labour Organisation's Convention 190 – which aims to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work.

The Australian Government has ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) but implementation has been slow, according to the Australian Human Rights Commission, and a deadline last month to establish a federated model of National Preventive Mechanisms was not met.

Grace, a courageous and outspoken advocate for survivors of sexual assault, spoke about her trauma and the impact it had on her life. She reminded us that it is a great privilege not to be able to relate to trauma.

Grace outlined her Pillars of Progress:

1. Hope. Trust in the infinite possibility from the universe. A good example is the #letherspeak campaign in Tasmania which led to reforms to abolish sexual victim gag-laws. "My pain has brought a once-taboo subject to the forefront," Grace said.
2. Action driven by our fear of doing nothing.
3. Acceptance. Owning the past as truth.
4. Taking one step at a time. Break things down into smaller chunks, so as to not get overwhelmed.
5. Communication. Play your part in helping for this change to happen. Reflect, research and rally. Every single voice, every cent and signature counts!

There are further steps that need to be taken on a national level. We need to eradicate child trauma. One in 10 children will experience sexual abuse, and it takes a survivor about 23 years to disclose their story.

There needs to be a standard set of definitions for sexual consent, grooming, etc. Currently the Commonwealth has nine jurisdictions of different definitions of consent. Language is very important, and this ambiguity is a serious concern.

These set of legal definitions then need to be taught in a national and uniform approach.

On a side note the federal government released the draft of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 in mid-January this year, but only gave the public an initial two-week period for consultation and feedback.

It prompted widespread criticism that this was not long enough, especially for a draft that took nine months to prepare and will cover the next decade of action to prevent violence against women and children in our country.

"Breathtakingly disrespectful," tweeted Brittany Higgins.

Grace responded to Brittany's tweet by adding: "A perfect example of the Govt's consistent approach to dire issues."

"I'm tired of being told we shouldn't complain because 'at least they're making a plan.' Rubbish," she continued.

“Dig deeper and there’s nothing there. No genuine commitment, no legitimate action, just hollow words.”

Jane Caro mused in her own tweet: “Australian Women. A 2 week consultation period for a national plan to stop violence against women & children is derisory! A home renovation would get 4!”

The consultation period was ultimately extended to 25 February but this is an example of the challenges we face to remove this scourge from our communities.

At the time of writing this column the Australian Parliament had publicly acknowledged and apologised to the victims of sexual assault, harassment and bullying within Parliament.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Parliament would implement the 28 recommendations from the Jenkins review.

Brittany Higgins was present for the apology. Grace Tame called for action, not just words, tweeting: “How about some proactive, preventative measures and not just these performative, last-minute bandaid electioneering stunts?”

Let us continue to call out for justice and lobby for change. Grace’s example has shown us the power of making our individual and collective voices heard and not accepting the status quo any longer.

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