25 August 2026

Response to reforms to good character references

The Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing welcomes the WA Government's announcement to limit the use of good character references in sentencing for criminal offences.

This reform is particularly significant for victim-survivors of sexual violence and family and domestic violence. The harm caused by these offences can be life-long. An offender's public profile, job or reputation doesn't mitigate that harm, so should not mitigate the sentence.

Sentencing decisions should be based on the offence committed, the harm caused and reliable evidence before the court, not subjective accounts from friends, family members, colleagues or community members.

Character references reinforce harmful stereotypes about who perpetrates sexual and family and domestic violence and obscures the reality that perpetrators may present as respected or well-connected members of the community, while causing significant harm. In sexual offending, grooming often extends beyond the victim to the broader community, making character references particularly inappropriate and unreliable.

The use of character references in sentencing is a retraumatising element of the court process for sexual violence survivors; many of whom report they find it incredibly painful to hear reviews of their offender's 'good character', despite the harm their offending has caused.

Sentencing considerations, including assessing the prospects of offender rehabilitation and likelihood of reoffending, should only be based on expert assessment and evidence, not the subjective views of an offender's friends, family or colleagues. Sentencing is not only about the harm that has been found to have been inflicted, but also the long-term safety of the community at large. All such considerations must be based on expertise and evidence.

We welcome the Government's commitment to consulting widely on these reforms. The specialist sexual violence sector and lived-experience experts stand ready to take part in these consultations. Consultation with those expert voices is critical to ensure the reforms have their intended impact in protecting victim-survivors of sexual violence and ensuring sentencing decisions are based on expert evidence and assessment.

Quotes attributable to Dr Alison Evans, CEO, Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing:

"The justice process should not ask victim-survivors to sit through praise for the person who has harmed them."

"A person's public reputation has very little to do with their propensity to use sexual and family and domestic violence. We have seen time and time again, people in positions of power, in

respected positions, who appear to be a dedicated community leader or a loving parent, being found to use violence and inflict horrendous harm. . The subjective views of an offender's family, friends and colleagues are not evidence-based and should not be treated as such in these offences."

"Victim-survivors deserve sentencing processes that are fair, evidence-based and informed by the realities of sexual and family and domestic violence, including the ways perpetrators can appear well respected while causing serious harm."

"For victim-survivors, hearing a perpetrator's 'good character' in court is seriously retraumatising and deepens the sense that their harm is being minimised or dismissed."

"We welcome the announcement of a thorough independent review into workplace safety at Western Power, which will be undertaken by two reputable experts, Kate Jenkins and Natasha da Silva. Sexual violence in workplace settings must be examined with a clear focus on accountability, workplace culture and the safety of victim-survivors. This is an important step toward ensuring people who come forward are heard and believed and that organisations take meaningful action to prevent further harm.

Ends.

Media enquiries
Jessica Murray
0478 214 619