

Questions for Candidates for Shoalhaven City Council Elections re Violence Against Women

Name: Debbie Killian

1. What is your understanding of what constitutes violence against women:

a. In the community?

Violence against Women in the community occurs across a range of settings. There would be few women in our community who have not experienced some level of violence. It may occur in their homes where they are most in need of safety and peaceful repose, in the streets and public places where they have every right to expect to go about their business without fear of abuse or assault, or in their workplaces.

Violence towards women in the community takes many forms from verbal abuse and shaming to coercive control, physical and sexual assault and far, far too often - murder. All these are damaging and at different stages of our lives we might become especially vulnerable. Very young women and girls are particularly vulnerable to partner or peer group violence and to stranger violence in the form of “catcalling” and street stalking. Throughout our lives we are likely to encounter domestic violence including coercive control and are especially vulnerable to this when children are young and care for them is primary in our priorities. As we become older we become vulnerable again as our dependence on partners or family increases.

b. In workplaces such as local government?

Violence against women has been endemic in Australian workplaces and will only be addressed when both policy and the culture of its acceptance are changed. There are particular issues in workforces which are traditionally male dominated. Some sections of Councils fit this category and need special focus to ensure women find jobs and experience a safe workplace.

Unfortunately, since culture and what is accepted as the norm is so important in creating a safer workplace for women, the poor example set “at the top” is a factor in creating what can only be a highly unsafe workplace for women. I have listened to Council meeting recordings and have been shocked by what I have heard.

I am referring to the behaviour of some of the male councillors in the chamber and especially the violence and toxic disrespect that is directed towards our Mayor, Amanda Findley as she tries to run an appropriate and professional meeting and towards other councillors. It is clear that special vehemence is directed at the female councillors.

I cannot imagine that any woman working in or associated with the Shoalhaven Council can hear that and feel that they are safe in that workplace. I fear that men hearing it may get the message that respect for women is entirely optional depending on whether you agree with or like what a woman is saying.

2. If you are elected as a Councillor on 4 September, what would you perceive to be your role in mitigating the incidence of violence against women:

a. In the community?

-Council has a particular role in creating safe public spaces which support women and everyone in the community to come out and enjoy the amenities and environment of our community.

-Council also has a role in supporting those services which assist women escaping from violence. Unfortunately since State and Federal governments have been failing so badly in what should be their role to resource these service, Council has appropriately stepped in to assist where it can. I would see that role continuing and would also continue a voice to other levels of government to call for them to improve.

-Council can also take a role, especially with regards to young women, in promoting and supporting positive action to build confidence, strength and solidarity among women to protect themselves and change culture.

b. In workplaces such as local government?

- The first thing needed in Shoalhaven Council is to stop the appalling violence by some male councillors in the chamber. This has been carried over, I assume, by older councillors from the last century and it must be stopped. I would hope that we will have enough councillors of any persuasion who believe in decency and who will support this change. Such a change would be an important step in sending new messages to all staff and in supporting the efforts of the CEO and senior staff who I would expect to be carrying out training and policy review around creating safe workplace for women.

3. Are there instances in your life or career where you have become aware of, and taken action to mitigate the incidence of violence against women? If so, could you please describe these instances?

My work was in teaching, youth work and community work early in my career and young women were central to my focus in building resilient communities. As a teacher and then a youth worker with young women and girls in South western Sydney during the 1980s and early 90s I initially ran a program in a high school called "Life Options for Girls" (not my title!) which aimed over several months to encourage girls to consider work and life choices which would broaden their options and foster their independence. In a community

where most families were socially disadvantaged and many were migrants or refugees, a very high proportion of the girls started with the idea that they would be financially dependent on a husband for most of their lives. I suspect that this is the case regardless of background. These attitudes were leading girls towards vulnerability and widening their horizons was a very positive step for them. Supporting women and girls to be strong, confident and independent became a cornerstone of my approach to youth work and whenever I worked with boys I aimed to challenge their learned stereotypes and give them the opportunity to hear the voices of strong, equal girls.

Later I went on to management positions in health services and the community services area of local government and there too, keeping the needs of women and girls central to the work of strengthening community. In both Councils and Health there are many instances where services, spaces and approaches must take into account the experiences women have had with violence and address their needs in ways which build trust and confidence.

As a manager I saw it as my responsibility to act decisively on any issue of violence against women in the workplace and to do everything I could to get supportive policies in place and to foster a culture which rejects violence and expects respect. Where female staff (or anyone) needed assistance or protection from a violent situation I saw it as my role to provide it.

Like every woman, I have feared for my safety in the streets, curtailed my activity at times because I did not feel safe, and faced real assault. The anger and the fear are part of my life but I do not- never will- accept them.

And, like most women I have at times known women - friends, family members, workmates and at times virtual strangers – who have needed help to escape violence or to re-establish a life after violence. I have personally reached out to share my safety and resources where I can, and I always will.

4. How could the Shoalhaven City Council Strategic Plan better address the issue of violence against women in the Shoalhaven local government area?

Generally the Council's Strategic Plan, as a broad document, has a good set of principles and priorities which allow for appropriate focus on women's safety. Within the current review process there is room for some improvement.

Within the Strategic Plan women's safety in the community is dealt with under Theme 1 Resilient, safe and Inclusive Communities; Priority 1.1 Build inclusive, safe and connected communities. While this provides a framework to include women's safety programs, this level of plan does not contain the

detail to outline them. Where further development of an approach to women's safety should be dealt with is at the action plan level.

Workplace women's safety is covered within theme 4: Responsible Governance; it is Priority 3: Provide advocacy and transparent leadership through effective governance and administration. The policy framework and review process, along with staff cultural survey could be part of this and area and measurement could reasonably be expected to include measures related to staff as well as community.