

**The Conversation:**

# Sustaining one's self whilst driving change

Former Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) CEO Fiona McCormack, has been at the forefront of family violence reform and advocacy for over twenty-five years. As Fiona moves into her new role as Victoria's Victims of Crime Commissioner, we spoke to her about how she's sustained personal and professional momentum, health and wellbeing throughout her career.

## **How does the concept of self-care resonate with you?**

Audre Lorde's quote: 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare', resonates with me. I know that means different things to people, depending on your level of privilege. In our sector, it is something we are constantly confronting.

Part of the challenge of self-care for people working in small non-government organisations is they are funded at rates not aligned with self-care. The administrative costs of running an organisation are often not included in funding. I appreciate that money needs to go to service delivery but the reality is, in order to support staff to deliver those objectives, you need a certain amount of administrative capacity. That's one challenge I've found in keeping a work-life balance.

Because our sector is highly gendered, I think historically, there's been an expectation that, as women and carers, we can work until we completely deplete ourselves. I don't think that washes. We've got to care for ourselves.

Personally, self-care has been a real challenge. One thing I'm really proud of is that I'm now at a point where I put my health first and prioritise managing my stress in ways that are conducive to a good night sleep and not putting too much pressure on my body.

## **How have you held the space and care for yourself whilst advocating to end family violence?**

Early in my career I experienced a lot of stress public speaking, doing media and having challenging conversations with politicians and public servants. My anxiety and stress were related to being negatively perceived by others, about making a fool of myself. What helped me manage those stress levels was to think: 'this isn't about me. I have this responsibility to be a voice for women and children who don't have a voice. What would they want me to say on their behalf? What can't they say for themselves?' This would take me out of myself and give me hope and courage to say things I'd never be able to say on my own behalf.

I've also had the honour of working with the most incredible people. The reality is, no one person can achieve anything. We need one another and we need our skills. No one person has the skills and knowledge that's required to effect change.

## **Can you talk to the importance of leadership and organisational culture and values in relation to self-care?**

Organisational values and culture are very important. It's important we advocate and work to challenge violence experienced by women and children. That means we have a responsibility to ensure safe and respectful workplaces where people are supported, where it's safe to fail, where it's safe to learn and where we don't have to be perfect.

What's really critical is that we keep a focus on the responsibility we have to those who experience violence at much higher rates because of the barriers that discriminate beyond gender. We can't do that work externally with credibility, if we're not walking

the talk internally in how we operate and treat one another. So, I think workplace culture is really important. We can't cut corners in that.

I am really proud of the values we carried at DV Vic that's been contributed to by the women that came into the organisation. It's wonderful to have worked in an organisation where you're able to live and embody the values you hold dear.

## **What are the key things you've learnt along the way, in terms of how you care for yourself in this work, that you will bring into your new role?**

I've made a real commitment to be disciplined about my work habits, to maintain my self care. And everything I learnt in my role at DV Vic, about working collaboratively and transparently have all helped me maintain a work-life balance, which means that I keep regular work hours and ensure I'm taking care of myself, of my health, my outside of work, to sustain me so I don't reach the point of exhaustion again. ■

