

Open letter regarding the high cost of some domestic and family violence conferences

By Dr Michael Flood, January 21, 2016

The problem: Very high registration costs for domestic and family violence conferences

A series of recent and forthcoming conferences in Australia on domestic and family violence involve extremely high registration fees.

These events typically are run by for-profit companies with little or no connection to the sector, and they involve registration fees which are three or four times those of community-run events. Here are some examples (focusing on full or standard rates, although concession and other rates are given in the lists further below). An event in Brisbane in April 2016 involves registration fees of \$1,978 for a single day, a two-day event in March-April costs \$1,249 per day, and a two-day event in mid-April costs \$1,484 per day. A range of similarly expensive events have been held in recent years.

On the other hand, there are other recent conferences on domestic violence which have been priced far more reasonably. For example, the ANROWS conference in February (3 days) involves a daily cost which is one-third to one-quarter of those above, with a maximum cost of \$366 per day, while the DVNSW Conference in November 2015 involved a maximum cost of \$275 per day.

I and many of my colleagues in the violence prevention and women's sectors are very troubled by the trend for very expensive conference related to these fields. This trend represents the increasing presence of for-profit organisations in the sector, organisations which see a commercial opportunity in the growing public and policy attention to domestic and family violence. Some in the domestic violence and family violence sector describe such organisations as opportunistic, and some report that these organisations pressure individuals and organisations to participate using persistent selling tactics.

There is a substantial level of disquiet in the sector about the very high cost of participation in such events. High registration costs impose an unreasonable burden on organisations in a sector which is already grossly under-funded and over-stretched. They mean that not-for-profit and smaller organisations are less able to attend, marginalising their voices and experiences from discussion and excluding them from influential networks. I go into more detail on these problems below.

Some individuals have decided not to present at for-profit conferences in future. These are hard choices, and academics, advocates, and service-providers must balance questions of principle with pragmatic concerns about the value of such events notwithstanding their cost. I am not advocating that individuals and organisations must boycott high-cost events. There are good reasons why academics, advocates, and service-providers will choose to participate in and contribute to such events. However, people in the sector, the government, and the wider community should be concerned about the negative impacts of the growing number of very highly priced conferences.

Some individuals and organisations have sought to negotiate with conference organising companies about their rates, for example to have lower rates for members of domestic violence organisations or not-for-profit organisations, but with limited success.

The consequences

High registration fees have a series of negative consequences:

1. High registration fees impose a very significant cost on service providers, in a sector which is already over-stretched and under-funded. Around Australia, many domestic and family violence organisations subsist on budgets so small that sending delegates to such expensive events is an impossible luxury. It also means that managers have to make tough choices about which staff to send and to choose between sector-led and for-profit training opportunities.
2. The for-profit companies organising highly priced conferences make significant profits from a sector which is poorly resourced.
3. Often only large or well-funded organisations can afford to send delegates to such events. The small, grassroots women's organisations which were often the pioneers of this field are excluded from participating. Indeed, even peak bodies for domestic and family violence and related areas in some states have been unable to attend these events because of their cost.
4. In turn, this shapes what voices and agendas are heard and given prominence and which voices or agendas are silenced or marginalised. Input into state and national debates regarding policy, education, and advocacy is dominated by those organisations which can afford it, rather than by a broad range of organisations.
5. In addition, smaller and not-for-profit organisations in effect are excluded from networking and contact with colleagues and decision-makers.

Prices for recent and forthcoming domestic violence conferences in Australia

(All prices listed are for the conference itself, and not also for workshops which complement the conference.)

Breaking the Cycle of Domestic & Family Violence

Dates: 30 March – 1 April 2016

Organiser: Akolade

Duration: 2 days

Standard rate: \$1,999 (cheapest early bird rate) to \$2,499

Discounted Rates for not-for-profit organisations and domestic violence associations: \$999 (cheapest early bird rate) to \$1,499

Effective rate per day (standard rate, non early bird): \$1,250

Ending Domestic & Family Violence 2016

Dates: 12-13 April

Organiser: Criterion

Duration: 2 days

Standard rate (government and corporates): \$2,198.90 (early bird) to \$2,968.90

Not-for-profit rate: \$1,098.90 (early bird) to \$1,868.90

Effective rate per day (standard rate, non early bird): \$1,484

Domestic Violence Summit Brisbane 2016

Dates: 19 April 2016

Organiser: IQPC

Duration: 1 day

Standard rate: \$1,428.90 (early bird) to \$1,978.90

Charities and not-for-profits rate: \$1,098.90

Effective rate per day (standard rate, non early bird): \$1,979

Other, more reasonably priced conferences**Domestic Violence NSW conference**

Dates: 3-4 November 2015

Organiser: DVNSW

Duration: 2 days

Standard rate: \$550

Discounted rate (members): \$250 (Plus complimentary registration for some small organisations)

Effective rate per day (standard rate, non early bird): \$275

Violence Against Women: ANROWS Research to Policy and Practice

Dates: 23-25 February 2016

Organiser: ANROWS

Duration: 3 days

Standard rate: \$1,100

Discounted rate: \$825

Effective rate per day (standard rate, non early bird): \$366

Australian STOP Domestic Violence Conference Canberra

Dates: 7-9 December 2015

Organiser: AST Management

Duration: 2 days (in effect)

Standard rate: \$975

Concession rate: \$575

Effective rate per day (standard rate, non early bird): \$488

2nd Annual National Family & Domestic Violence Summit

Dates: 25-26 February 2016

Organiser: Informa

Duration: 2 days

Standard rate: \$1754.50

Student rate: \$330

Effective rate per day (standard rate, non early bird): \$877