

Submission from Reclaim the Night Melbourne to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

1. Introduction

The Organising Committee for Reclaim the Night in Melbourne (RTN) have prepared this submission for consideration by the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV).

We hope that these insights, gained through our involvement in organising RTN since 2012, will assist the Commission in its work. Our submission broadly relates to Questions 4, 5 and 6 in the RCFV Issues Paper.

2. About Reclaim the Night

The annual Reclaim the Night march in Melbourne is part of the long-running, global RTN (or Take Back the Night) marches that protest gendered harassment and violence towards women. While part of a long-running global movement, RTN is not a homogenous group or organisation. Rather, it is essentially a grassroots movement that is constantly evolving.

2014 marked the 35th anniversary of RTN in Melbourne and it was the third year the march took place in Sydney Road, Brunswick.

In Melbourne, RTN is a forum for direct action that protests the specific forms of harassment, victim blaming, sexual assault and violence experienced by women and their children, including family violence. We also seek to raise awareness and discussion within the community about these issues using social media, particularly Facebook. Based on our experience, we do not believe that the incidences of family violence can be reduced without addressing broader attitudes towards women in society.

In 2012, as well as changing the location of the march, men were also invited to participate for the first time. In the lead up to the march, we received feedback from many women who wanted their male partners to join them, but we also had traditionalists who stridently believe in maintaining women-only spaces. Ultimately a compromise was reached, which saw the women leading the march, with men invited to join a mixed group at the back.

While not uncontroversial, this decision has been successful in attracting a broader range of participants at the marches. Since 2012 RTN has also introduced a 'Safer Spaces Policy' to make the march as diverse and inclusive as possible; as well as using it to guide our approach to managing the Facebook page.

It is important to note, that while RTN Melbourne invites men to march with us and we believe everyone has a role to play in ending gender based violence, we believe women must continue to take the lead in this, as well as in driving broader social and institutional reforms.

3. Insights from Social Media

While the number of people who attend RTN marches in Melbourne varies from year to year, what has been relatively consistent is the engagement with a broader audience through social media.

It was initially a conversation among friends on Facebook about Clementine Ford's article on victim blaming in the wake of Jill Meagher's rape and murder, that was the impetus for holding Reclaim the Night on Sydney Road.

In 2012 Facebook was the primary means by which we organised and publicised the march, which attracted some 8000 people. Since then, we have maintained a strong Facebook presence almost exclusively through organic reach (not paid advertising).

Our Facebook Page, which can be seen here <https://www.facebook.com/RTNsyrdrd>, has over 9,800 'likes' with posts reaching an average of 3,000 Facebook users. However, posts about more controversial issues or stories related to violence against women in the media typically reach anywhere between 10-20K users.

For example, a recent post about the Federal Budget and cuts to services related to family violence reached 10K usersⁱ. As did another recent post about 'victim blaming' after a man who raped his former partner, who had asked for rougher sex, walked free from courtⁱⁱ. Posts about the murder of Stephanie Scott reached over 19K usersⁱⁱⁱ, while news about Rosie Batty being made Australian of the Year in 2015 reached over 20K users^{iv}.

However, perhaps one of the most insightful posts this year was about a post on Reddit that received over 21,000 comments in one day. On our Facebook page alone an article about it reached over 7K users^v.

The women were responding to a question posted on the popular social networking and news site Reddit which asked 'Women of Reddit, when did you first notice that men were looking at you in a sexual way? How old were you and how did it make you feel?'

The question went viral, attracting more than 21,000 comments within a day.^{vi}

In addition to promoting the RTN marches and providing a forum for people to share their views about gender based violence, our Facebook page also been integral in building support for community events and protests. Perhaps the most notable of these was the 'Take Down Julien Blanc' protest in late 2014. This showed not only

the positive role social media can play in organising events in the real world, but also the negative attitudes and risks that go with it.

The following is an account from one of the organisers about the incident and the response from police.

In November 2014, American self-styled "pick up artist" Julien Blanc visited Australia to conduct seminars instructing young men on how to "pick up women".

Online videos of Mr Blanc revealed his techniques to include things like choking women, demeaning their looks and other tactics designed to essentially coerce a woman into having sex with them.

A number of feminists organised a protest outside the meeting point for one of his free seminars. On our social media event page we received many comments from young men ranging from saying the seminars were harmless for clueless guys to learn how to approach women to threatening.

One man posted a photo of an assault rifle with comments to imply he would come down from his home in Ballarat to assault us (Appendix 1).

He was subsequently warned we would contact police and he deleted his post. However we kept screenshots and PDF copy of the threat along with links to his profile and his name and sent this to Ballarat Police requesting them visit the man to remind him about threats and the Communications Act.

Despite numerous emails and phone calls, the Ballarat Police did nothing. One more senior police officer (female) did indicate she would visit the man in question but upon subsequent follow up contact, we later learnt yet again we had been fobbed off.

The fact is women's safety is not taken into consideration if we are threatened and harassed online. This yet again pervades community attitudes of "boys being boys" and entitlement attitudes towards women. Police expect us to contact them if we are in trouble but they won't take threats seriously.

This is a huge problem and one many women have expressed openly on the RTN Facebook page or via private messaging, that they don't trust the police. This is especially true if they are transgender, a sex worker or Indigenous, those three groups are the most distrustful of police.

4. Conclusion

The organisers of RTN would be happy to share further statistical data from our Facebook page, or other information to assist the RCFV if that will assist the Commission with its work. However, our overwhelming experience is that family violence cannot be neatly separated from the broader issues of gender based violence and harassment. It is these issues, often seen as harmless “casual sexism” that give rise to a culture of silence and acceptance of what is now the leading contributor to death, disability and illness of women in Victoria aged 15 to 44 years.