



**Joint submission to the
Victorian Royal Commission into Family
Violence from
YWCA Victoria and YWCA Australia**

29 May 2015

YWCA Victoria and YWCA Australia welcome the opportunity to provide this joint submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

For ease, this submission will refer to “the YWCA” collectively for YWCA Victoria and YWCA Australia.

About the YWCA

YWCA Australia

YWCA Australia is the national association of YWCAs in Australia and is part of the World YWCA movement. YWCAs undertake advocacy and deliver services and programs that develop the leadership and collective power of women and girls, support individuals, their families and communities at critical times, and promote gender equality and community strengthening. YWCA Australia applies a human rights-based approach to its work, particularly focusing on the rights to non-discrimination and equality.

YWCAs in Australia are part of an international network providing community services and advocacy for women facing violence. We provide support to women and girls experiencing violence and work with the broader community to promote gender equality and change attitudes around violence. Our services include family violence support, emergency and transitional accommodation, safe and affordable long-term housing, and programs that build self-esteem and healthy relationships. We also work to secure economic justice for women and girls.

YWCA Australia advocates for the implementation of key global human rights commitments on violence against women, young women and girls through United Nations human rights processes including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reporting mechanism and the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). We actively participate in these UN processes.

YWCA Victoria

YWCA Victoria is a member association of YWCA Australia and is part of the World YWCA movement. YWCA Victoria has been in existence for over 132 years and works to deliver services focused on creating opportunities for women facing disadvantage and to be a powerful voice for women’s equality. Services are delivered through three program priority areas – housing, mentoring and community strengthening with a commitment to addressing shelter, safety, security and empowerment. YWCA Victoria is a secular organisation that provides services and works through a gender lens to ensure that programs are delivered to advance equity, opportunity, choice, active participation and empowerment for Victorian women.

YWCA Victoria, through its subsidiary company Social Housing Victoria (SHV), is one of the largest medium to long term housing providers for women in Victoria. SHV currently provides over 100,000 nights of shelter to disadvantaged Victorian women through our owned and operated properties in metropolitan Melbourne and Geelong.

SHV is a regulated housing provider within the Victorian regulatory system and, as such, must meet the applicable performance standards. There has been a concerted effort to integrate all YWCA Victoria community programs within the housing services to ensure that women have access, confidence and knowledge available to participate within the community.

The SHV housing portfolio consists of ten rooming houses with a total of 200 rooms (our largest rooming house in Richmond has 69 rooms) and 41 independent properties. 75 rooms are owned and managed by the organisation and 166 rooms are leased from the Victorian State Government.

Our housing is provided to those women most vulnerable in our community, with 99 per cent of residents relying on Centrelink payments. Many of our residents have accessed our housing due to family violence, homelessness, mental health, drug & alcohol and poverty issues that have affected their lives. A current survey within our properties, with a return rate of 21 per cent at the time of writing, has identified that 48 per cent of those women have experienced family violence.

As discussed in this submission, the provision of affordable housing is essential and a critical part of the response to family violence.

YWCA programs and services

Please see Attachment One for examples of relevant YWCA programs and services.

Introduction

The YWCA recognises violence against women and girls as a pervasive human rights violation that continues to be experienced across the globe, including in all walks of life in Australia. Domestic violence remains the most prevalent form of gender-based violence that affects women of all social strata across the world. We recognise that violence against women stems from historical and structural gender inequality, and that promoting gender equality is essential for addressing the structural and underlying causes of violence against women and girls.

Australia's human rights obligations to eliminate violence against women are outlined in the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979* (CEDAW) and *CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No 12* (General Comment No. 12) and *CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No 19* (General Comment No. 19). In our view, any response to violence against women must be grounded in a human rights framework.

Women and girls who face multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination experience family and domestic violence disproportionately. Affected groups include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disability, women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, women from lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer communities, women who are economically disadvantaged, women in institutions, young women and mature age women. These groups may also face particular barriers in accessing information, services and support. Living in regional, rural and remote areas can

compound vulnerabilities and barriers to services. We emphasise the importance of the Commission consulting and engaging with groups of women who have diverse experiences of violence, or who can be more vulnerable to violence. We would like to refer the Commission to Women with Disabilities Victoria's *Position statement: Violence against women with disabilities*¹, which we support.

It is widely recognised, including in the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* (National Plan), that a holistic approach to ending violence against women is needed – a strategic approach that encompasses a continuum of **primary prevention measures, early intervention measures and specialist frontline services**. It is also widely recognised that all aspects of the response to family violence need **adequate long-term funding** to effectively address the epidemic of violence against women.

Victoria's leadership on ending violence against women

The YWCA welcomes the growing cultural and political will to end violence against women that is evident in Australia. We would like to acknowledge that Victoria has been a nation-leader in the movement to end violence against women. For example, the groundbreaking work of VicHealth has helped to establish the evidence base for the prevalence and impact of violence against women and the effectiveness of responses. We recognise Victoria's continuing leadership with the establishment of this Commission and in the proposed *Victorian Family Violence Index* which will guide future policy development and resource allocation. We also look forward to the release of the National Framework for Prevention of Violence against Women and their Children (National) that Our Watch is developing with VicHealth and Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), which will hopefully also be of assistance to the Commission in its work.

Key points

- Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women and girls of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Domestic violence remains the most prevalent form of gender-based violence that affects women of all social strata across the world.²
- Adequate, long-term funding for crisis lines, women's specialist violence services, family & relationship services, legal advice and assistance, accommodation, housing & homelessness support and women's health services is urgently needed.
- Women and girls who face multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women with disability, are exposed to an increased risk of violence and can face additional challenges in accessing information, services and support. Policy and community responses must involve affected groups in designing and delivering programs that are culturally safe and appropriate.

¹ Available at <http://wdv.org.au/documents/WDV%20Violence%20Position%20Paper%20%28web%20version%29.pdf>

² E/2013/27-E/CN.6/2013/11, United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 57 *Agreed conclusions*, March 2013, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_agreed_conclusions_advance_unedited_version_18_March_2013

- Sustainable funding for prevention and early intervention work, including respectful relationships education from an early age to address gender stereotypes and create healthy relationships, is critical to preventing and responding to violence against women and girls.
- Domestic and family violence is the single most significant cause of homelessness for women and their children in Australia. Policy measures, including national policy interventions, to address housing affordability and homelessness are a necessary corollary to addressing domestic and family violence.
- Economic abuse is often a key component of domestic violence and is used as a way of controlling and manipulating women. Women's financial security and economic independence are key factors in the way in which they respond to experiences of domestic violence, and can be a key determinant in relation to leaving an abusive relationship. Policy measures to improve the economic security of women and their children are necessary corollaries to addressing domestic and family violence.

Frontline services

Frontline services are overwhelmed.

Unprecedented demand for services, without commensurate funding to match this demand, has left family violence and sexual assault services struggling and under incredible pressure. Specialist health, counselling, housing and legal services, critical elements of the response to violence against women, are also experiencing unprecedented demands with inadequate funding and funding uncertainty.

The lack of affordable accommodation where women and their children can be placed when they are seeking to escape violence is a significant problem. At a critical time where women and children need to be somewhere safe and secure, there are often only inappropriate options including unsafe private boarding house accommodation. Many women stay in a violent situation due to the lack of affordable housing options. Accommodation needs across the spectrum from crisis accommodation to transitional and long-term housing need to be addressed.

The YWCA joins with other organisations in calling for adequate, long-term funding for crisis lines, women's specialist services, family & relationship services, legal advice and assistance, accommodation, housing & homelessness support and women's health services to address the epidemic of family violence in our community.

Primary prevention

In our view, violence is ultimately preventable, through long-term actions to address gender inequality and male entitlement. YWCA Australia strongly supports the development of primary prevention programs, such as respectful relationships education.

We note that the *National Plan* states that primary prevention measures in the Plan recognise that violence against women can be prevented by reducing inequalities in power

between men and women and challenging gender stereotypes and violence-supportive attitudes.

Most respectful relationships programs are targeted at teenagers, including some YWCA programs. The YWCA also strongly supports the development of age-appropriate respectful relationships education for children under the age of 12.³ Research shows that violence prevention programs aimed at children and young people are effective⁴ as are school based violence prevention programs⁵. Using a gender analysis is also the key to providing successful violence prevention programs.⁶

We note that in the *Interim Report* released in March 2015, the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee inquiring into *domestic violence in Australia*⁷ called for respectful relationships education to be implemented in all schools through the national curriculum, as a primary prevention measure to end violence against women in the long term. The YWCA strongly supports this recommendation.

Case study: *Respect, Communicate, Choose* program

Developed by the YWCA of Canberra and the YWCA of Adelaide, *Respect, Communicate, Choose* is a primary prevention program delivered in primary schools to children, aged nine to 12.

Respect, Communicate, Choose aims to give young people the tools and support to develop, promote, and perpetuate equal, safe and respectful relationships with the ultimate goal of preventing violence against women and girls. The program is aligned with standards of best practice for primary prevention programs⁸ and national school and curriculum frameworks and could be replicated by YWCAs nationally.

Respect, Communicate, Choose aims to prevent violence by:

- Raising awareness of unequal gender and power relations and options for accessing help.
- Deconstructing attitudes that are based on inequality.
- Building skills to negotiate non-violent and respectful relationships.
- Supporting children to create a respectful school environment.

³NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People 2009, *Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW: The Missing Middle*, Report No. 5/54, 3 September, p.1
http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/854A280C28BE00A8CA25762600226DAE?open&refn_avid=CO5_2

⁴ Flood, Michael; Fergus, Lara & Heenan, Melanie, *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009, p.20.

⁵ Flood et al, as above, pp.10-13.

⁶ World Health Organization and Liverpool John Moores University 2010, *Violence Prevention: The Evidence*, World Health Organization, Geneva, p.80.

⁷http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/Domestic_Violence/Interim_Report

⁸ Carmody, Moira; Evans, Susan; Krogh, Chris; Flood, Michael; Heenan, Melanie & Ovenden, Georgia 2009, *Framing best practice: National Standards for the primary prevention of sexual assault through education*, National Sexual Assault Prevention Education Project for NASASV, University of Western Sydney, Australia, p.23; Flood, Michael; Fergus, Lara & Heenan, Melanie 2009, *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools*, November, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, p.20.

Our experience shows that children are not provided with space to discuss gender anywhere else, with students advising that discussing gender is their favourite part of the program.

Project outcomes

Comprehensive data from the first two years of delivery of *Respect, Communicate, Choose*, as well as the program logic can be provided on request. The following key data was taken from our program delivery in 2013:

- **Gender equitable attitudes:** 61% of participants surveyed at the end of the program displayed attitudes that are very gender equitable.
- **Respect:** 80% of participants surveyed showed a high level of awareness of what respect looks like at the end of the workshop program.
- **Knowledge of how to practice respect in relationships:** At the end of the program, 79% of participants surveyed were very knowledgeable as to how to practice respect in a relationship.
- **Confidence in taking action in response to disrespectful attitudes and actions:** 76% of participants surveyed at the end of the program indicated they 'mostly' or 'always' feel confident to take action.
- **Using the skills learnt during the program:** 61% of students surveyed at the end of the program indicated they had used the skills learnt in the program in other parts of their life.

Economic security

Economic security and independence are imperative to enabling women and girls to leave violent circumstances.

Economic abuse is often a key component of domestic violence and is used as a way of controlling and manipulating women. Women's financial security and economic independence are key factors in the way in which they respond to experiences of domestic violence, and can be a key determinant in relation to leaving an abusive relationship. Policy measures to improve the economic security of women and their children are necessary corollaries to addressing domestic and family violence.

The availability of secure, accessible and affordable housing options, including provision to remain safely in their own homes, is fundamental to the ability of women and girls to escape violence. See **Housing and Homelessness** below.

Housing and Homelessness

The combination of a lack of housing affordability and violence against women forms a vicious cycle.

The lack of appropriate affordable housing decreases the likelihood of women successfully leaving violent relationships and contributes to the high levels of homelessness among women who have experienced violence. The struggle to find suitable accommodation

impacts on the health and wellbeing of women and children already dealing with health and trauma issues arising from violence.

In 20102, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) recommended that Australia develop strategies to prevent homelessness resulting from domestic violence and ensure that women who are victims of domestic and family violence and their children are provided with appropriate ongoing accommodation and integrated support.⁹

With Australian housing affordability in crisis, new solutions to boost affordable rental housing, a comprehensive affordable housing strategy and significant investment are **urgently needed**. In particular, the need for additional affordable housing to meet the needs of disadvantaged women is set to rise and needs to be addressed. Both the Australian Government and state/territory governments need to commit to and fund affordable rental housing.

The YWCA joins with other organisations from the housing, homelessness, legal and family violence sectors in calling for urgent investment in affordable housing and services in Victoria to address the current links between family violence, housing and homelessness across the State. We have endorsed the multi-sector one page submission to the Commission and the recommendations contained in that submission.

For consideration

The YWCA respectfully asks the Commission to consider the following recommendations:

General

- Approach gender-based violence, including family violence, from a human rights perspective and ensure policy uses human rights language.
- Australian and State and Territory Governments implement, adequately resource, evaluate and monitor the National Plan (including the *Second Action Plan*) with participation, engagement and advice from specialist women's services responding to and preventing violence against women.
- Adequate, long-term funding for crisis lines, women's specialist violence services, family & relationship services, legal advice and assistance, accommodation, housing & homelessness support and women's health services.
- Ensure flexibility in funding arrangements for services to employ holistic solutions that are culturally appropriate and effective in responding to women's individual experiences of violence.

⁹ CEDAW /C/AUS/CO/7: CEDAW Committee's *Concluding Observations on Australia*, July 2010, [29], http://www.ywca.org.au/sites/ywca.org.au/files/images/CEDAW-C-AUS-CO-7_0.pdf

Primary prevention measures

- Expand respectful relationships programs, including respectful relationships programs targeting children of primary school age (such as the YWCA *Respect, Communicate, Choose* program).
- Incorporate respectful relationships education into the national curriculum.
- Evaluate primary prevention programs to build on the evidence of programs that work.
- Proactively build the capacity of educational organisations to deliver gender equity and violence prevention curriculum to young people from an early age.
- Ensure that there are a diverse range of primary prevention measures so that targeted and appropriate programs respond to the needs and experiences of women and girls who face multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination.

Housing and homelessness

- Call on the Australian Government to develop a national affordable housing strategy as a matter of priority. This housing strategy must complement the *National Plan* and priority should be given to addressing the housing implications which arise from the National Plan.
- Improve measures to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness for women who can safely stay in their housing, including strengthened programs such as Safe @ Home responses, the Social Housing Advocacy and Support Program, legal representation for women facing eviction, and private rental brokerage schemes.
- Establish a rapid rehousing program to assist women and children escaping family violence to be quickly rehoused with appropriate supports in place.
- Improve affordable housing pathways for perpetrators of family violence to ensure they remain engaged with relevant supports to help prevent the risk of further violence.
- Develop a long-term affordable housing strategy to address the soaring public housing waitlist and increasing unaffordability of private rental for low-income Victorians.
- Provide funding to develop and increase affordable housing stock targeting women and their children escaping family violence.
- Review adequacy of funding to meet demand for homelessness services in the next round of National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness negotiations.
- Ensure that specialist services demonstrating expertise in the diverse housing needs and experiences of women are adequately funded under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness.

Economic justice

- Make paid domestic violence leave a universal workplace entitlement.

Other

- Include the status of being a victim/survivor of domestic and/or family violence as a protected attribute in anti-discrimination laws in all areas of public life.

More information

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. We would be pleased to provide the Commission with further information.

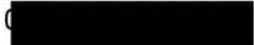
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Attachment One

Relevant YWCA programs and services

All YWCAs work in different ways to promote gender equality and end violence against women and girls in our society. Some specific programs are set out below:

YWCA NSW domestic violence support services

YWCA NSW provides a range of services to women affected by domestic violence. For example, YWCA NSW's Domestic Violence Intervention Service, which runs out of the Nowra Police Station, supports women and children who have experienced domestic violence, providing crisis intervention, access to emergency accommodation, counselling, assistance with the legal system, advocacy and referral to other support agencies.

YWCA of Darwin Palmerston Domestic and Family Violence Centre

The Domestic and Family Violence Centre assists families living in the Palmerston and rural areas who are escaping domestic and family violence. This integrated service provides safe, supported emergency accommodation and support, advocacy, and referrals for women experiencing violence and their children.

YWCA Queensland women's shelter

YWCA Queensland women's shelter provides crisis accommodation and support services for women and children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness due to domestic and family violence. The service is available to all women and specialises in assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children.

Providing safe, affordable and appropriate housing

YWCAs help women and their families to rebuild their lives after violence by delivering safe, affordable and appropriate housing options. Our services range from the YWCA of Darwin and the YWCA of Canberra's safe and supported transitional accommodation to YWCA Queensland, YWCA Victoria and YWCA Canberra's safe and affordable long-term housing, which provide housing solutions for women facing homelessness as part of their response to domestic violence.

YWCA Victoria's *Women@Work*

Women@Work assists women to gain economic security by preparing unemployed women to enter the paid workforce through a gender specific work-readiness program. The activities build their self-esteem, confidence, knowledge and skills to enter or re-enter the workforce.

YWCA *Every Girl*

Every Girl, a national YWCA program, is a strengths-based self esteem program for girls aged 9-14 years from disadvantaged communities. Participants explore community connectedness and change, human rights, personal voice and respectful relationships. The

program aims to address the long-term gender inequality experienced by women in Australia.

YWCA of Adelaide's *Rise Above the Pack* campaign

YWCA of Adelaide's *Rise Above the Pack* campaign is a community awareness campaign promoting the respectful treatment of women.

Rise Above the Pack is a positive bystander intervention project funded through the South Australian Government's Attorney-General's Department and is consistent with growing global campaigns of men's leadership role such as Canada's *Don't Be That Guy*, the White Ribbon Foundation's *Hey Mate* and the United Nations' *He For She*.

YWCA of Canberra's and YWCA of Adelaide's *Respect, Communicate, Choose*

Developed by the YWCA of Canberra and the YWCA of Adelaide, *Respect, Communicate, Choose* is a primary prevention program delivered in primary schools to children aged nine to 12. *Respect, Communicate, Choose* is a comprehensive eight-week program that builds skills and capacity in young people to recognise and behave with respect, and to be active bystanders when aware of disrespectful behaviour.

YWCA Canberra's *Relationship Things*

Relationship Things builds on the *Respect, Communicate, Choose* (RCC) program and is aimed at young people ages 14-18. The program is designed to be facilitated to small groups of young people, and covers topics including consent, safe sex, violence against women, gender equality, communication and more.

YWCA NSW's *Y-B.R.A.V.E*

Y-B.R.A.V.E stands for "Be Respectful and Value Everyone" and is a safe relationship and abuse prevention program for children and young people. It allows students, parents and staff to become aware of the most current laws regarding cybersafety, understand the importance of being safe and dealing with bullying, gain skills in recognising and assessing risk and build respectful relationship skills.

YWCA NSW's *Y-Is Up about Safe Relationships*

Yise Up is about promoting healthy relationships and providing high school students with effective communication strategies which assist them to achieve safe and positive support networks. *Yise Up* workshops specifically address the issues that young people face throughout their formative years, equipping them with understanding that will enable them to make informed decisions about present and future relationships.

Flexibility has been built into each module of the program in order to ensure that content is culturally relevant and age appropriate.