

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

Shaun Leane MP Member for Eastern Metropolitan Region.

As the Member for the Eastern Metropolitan Region, I write to the Royal Commission on Family Violence requesting that they take into account the submissions from the many and varied organisations in eastern metro.

These organisations work extensively in the community and collaboratively with each other to create the best possible outcomes in an area that we have struggled with as a community for a long time. It is these organisations' belief that, while family violence impacts on everyone, evidence has clearly established family violence as a gendered issue. They know that addressing the primary determinants of men's violence against women – namely gender inequality and adherence to rigidly defined gender roles, will help to prevent all forms of violence against women before it occurs, including family violence. A gender equity focus needs to be central to any efforts aimed at preventing family violence.

The prevention of violence against women is a long term undertaking. Family violence will only stop when community norms and societal structures that perpetuate unequal relations between men and women are changed. As seen in other successful campaigns, such as SunSmart and Road Safety initiatives, changes to attitudes and behaviours require long-term, coordinated action.

One off or short term projects will not prevent family violence. Effective prevention requires a range of mutually reinforcing, evidence based strategies reaching out to the whole of the community. We need both structural and cultural change which result in gender equality in our

- personal relationships – partners, family and friends,
- community – at school, at work, in community groups, faith based groups, sporting clubs, and
- Society – in the media, advertising and popular culture, in those holding positions of leadership / power, including in our governments, and in regulatory or legislative frameworks that support gender equity.

In order for this to occur, active engagement of a range of sectors is required e.g. local government, health, community, education, workplaces, sports, media. Action needs to be planned and coordinated to ensure that the whole community is being reached, strategies are evidence informed, evaluation is occurring and learnings are being documented and shared. Coordination also results in avoidance of duplication and thus enables efficiencies of effort.

“Together for Equality & Respect” is an example of a coordinated approach. This project is an example of regional integrated effort to prevent violence against women. TFER was developed with the input, enthusiasm and commitment of organisations across the 7 local government areas in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne (EMR) - including all Local Governments, Community Health Services, Women's Health, Medicare Locals, Primary Care Partnerships and the Regional Family Violence Partnership. Led by Women's Health East, the Strategy brings together more than 25 agencies working on a shared regional priority to prevent violence against women through an evidence-informed approach. This work has been guided by VicHealth's Framework for Action. The Strategy describes a uniting vision to prevent men's violence against women.

The regional approach promotes the prioritisation, coordination and integration of effort, and supports accountability, efficiency (through shared resources/tools), and consistency in messaging and peer-learning opportunities among Partner organisations.

Examples of local initiatives taking place in the EMR include:

- Gender Equity training being delivered to TFER Partner organisations
- Organisational Gender Audit Tool being utilised by TFER Partners
- Social marketing capacity building – and the use of shared messaging to promote gender equity
- Consultations with Chinese and Indian communities to build knowledge on effective prevention
- Gender equity initiatives focused on specific populations groups eg: early years providers, young women, primary and secondary school children, first time parents, Aboriginal young people and sporting clubs

Why TFER is unique:

- TFER has a focus on rigorous evaluation at a regional level of the impact of TFER to prevent violence against women across a range of settings and population groups.
- This evaluation has been enabled through the development of shared objectives, shared indicators of success and shared evaluation tools.
- It addresses an identified gap in knowledge around the impact of mutually reinforcing primary prevention initiatives within a designated area across multiple settings. A key outcome will be to generate data that captures the impact of an integrated regional Strategy, including barriers and enablers to good practice.

Achievements to date (as identified through a partnership evaluation):

- The prioritisation of the prevention of violence across the region – on everyone's plans, and consistency across plans, giving credibility, strength and backbone to the issue.
- The development of a Regional Strategy, a Regional Action Plan and Evaluation Plan
- Common objectives and evaluation tools.
- A growing momentum, engaging more people as the project moves along.

This evaluation also identified success factors so far. These include:

- The planning work was done within the partnership, freeing organisational resources to focus on implementation.
- The inclusive approach – the partnership is open to any organisations who are interested and the number of partners continues to grow over time.
- Having an organisation (Women's Health East) that is expert and prepared to lead.

This type of work is happening in other regions however we are the only region that is working to shared objective and evaluation tools – so the hope is that at the end of the 4 years we can measure what difference it has made to do a large range of coordinated activities across a range of community settings. The hope then would be that all of these organisations would commit to another 4 years. Women's Health Service's across the State were funded for a 2 year project to undertake the development of regional action plans. These funds run out this year – so it absolutely needs to be a focus for the royal commission to support regional action planning.

Violence against women is a serious human rights abuse, placing an obligation on government and funders to take action to prevent it. An increased focus on prevention is critical to halt the escalating incidence of family violence and to prevent family violence in the future.

The primary prevention of violence needs to be strongly supported by government policy. A whole of government long term commitment is required. This must be matched with a substantially increased and sustained funding allocation in order to effect long term change. The current investment in prevention is vastly inadequate. This increase must be in addition to adequate funding of services which respond to family violence.

Funding needs to include:

- Support for leadership and coordination – Victoria has paved the way in guiding and informing evidence based primary prevention practice. At both government and local levels, should be acknowledged and built upon to further strengthen Victoria’s efforts to prevent family violence. Leadership and coordination of on-the-ground work is essential and requires funding support. A coordinated state-wide response should make use of established plans, networks and infrastructure at the regional and local level. Women’s Health Services in every region of Victoria are leading and coordinating regional action. The role of women’s health services in leading, coordinating and supporting organisations to undertake primary prevention work is resource intensive and requires funding support. Our experience in the East is that bodies such as local government and community health organisations also have important leadership roles and reach at a local level.
- Funds to support local action – while commitment across Victoria to the prevention of violence against women is growing, specific funds to support organisations and others to undertake sustained local action is crucial.
- Investment in evaluation – The prevention of violence against women remains an emerging area of practice. While there is evidence to support the need for action to address the key determinants of violence (gender inequality and adherence to rigid gender roles) and while information is known about some specific interventions, there are still gaps in our knowledge. In particular, the evidence base would benefit from greater investigation of what works with specific population groups and in particular settings. One area where evidence is missing relates to the impacts of undertaking a range of mutually reinforcing activities at a population level. Well evaluated regional action plans have the capacity to add to this gap in evidence.
- Other initiatives such as Safe Futures Foundation satellite school and smart card technology.

Factors such as Aboriginality, class, age, sexuality, ethnicity and disability intersect with gender to shape the experience and risk of family violence, as well as access to appropriate responses. Women’s diverse backgrounds, contexts and life experiences demands a sophisticated, long term commitment to addressing the diverse and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and ensure an approach to both prevention and response that is accessible, inclusive and relevant. One example is a current gap in the evidence base around effective and culturally relevant prevention approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Victoria. This is an area that needs more attention.

Any action to prevent family violence needs to ensure an explicit focus on gender equity. This means paying attention to the important leadership role of women in prevention. Women who have experienced violence have a wealth of knowledge and insight into both the service sector and primary prevention. Women’s voices need to be represented in important conversations about family violence and its prevention. The Eastern Media Advocacy Program is a powerful example of this – see case study below.

The EMAP supports women who have experienced family violence and/or sexual assault to talk with the media and at public speaking engagements about their experience of violence. Advocates

participate in a 3-day training program and are provided with ongoing support to speak out about their stories. The program is led by Women's Health East, in partnership with the Eastern Domestic Violence Service and the Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault.

Through media and public speaking opportunities, the project:

- Ensures that the voices of women who have experienced sexual assault and family violence are heard.
- Seeks to bring about change in community attitudes, systems and legislation in order to prevent violence against women.

EMAP recognises the strong role of the media in effecting change in community attitudes and beliefs and thereby in influencing public policy. Through EMAP, advocates challenge misconceptions and stereotypes around sexual assault and family violence, encouraging responsible reporting and a more informed public discourse.

Critically, the voices of women who have survived violence are powerful. They need to be listened to, heard and acknowledged as part of the important public and political dialogue around this issue.

An independent evaluation of EMAP was conducted in 2013. Findings included that:

- Advocates reported increased self-confidence, enhanced knowledge and skills and a sense of empowerment that has "assisted all advocates to move forward in one way or another on their personal journey". Other positive impacts described by advocates included an increased sense of health and wellbeing, a reduced sense of isolation and an increased feeling of social connectedness.
- Media outlets and organisations who had engaged with the program demonstrated a heightened awareness around the issue of family violence and sexual assault.
- Media produced through the program demonstrated more accurate and sensitive reporting on the issue when compared with responsible reporting guidelines.
- Advocates reported positive experiences when dealing with the local media, using words such as sensitive, helpful and sympathetic when describing their interviews.

The East has been fortunate to have a number of projects funded over the last few years but all have been time limited and this is a long term issue. The concern is that we need to get the momentum going – and we know that short term projects do not work to prevent violence in the long run. As the MLC for this region I would like to point out to the Royal Commission the excellent work these organisations have done in our region and the need to hear their voice is paramount to the success of any strategies that are put in place.