HOBSONS BAY CITY COUNCIL

Hobsons Bay City Council Submission Royal Commission into Family Violence

Hobsons Bay City Council is a diverse and unique municipality within Melbourne's western metropolitan region. As seen through Council's Gender Equity Policy Statement 2014, Hobsons Bay City Council is committed to a safe and just community, where every girl, boy, woman, man and gender diverse person is included and valued – where equal and respectful relationships and opportunities for meaningful participation are supported and celebrated.

While the definition of family violence refers to violence involving any family members, partners (including same sex partners), siblings, parents, children and people that are related in other ways, it is well documented that of the men who have experienced violence, only four per cent of assaults have been by a female current or former partner. The majority of perpetrators of family violence are men with around 80 per cent of all violent assaults (including sexual assaults) being carried out by some men against other men and women.[1]

Family violence, specifically men's violence against women, is the biggest contributor to ill health and premature death in women aged 15 to 44.[2] It is understood that the adherence to rigid gender stereotypes and an unequal balance of power between men and women can result in men experiencing greater elements of control, both physical and psychological, which in turn can lead to men's violence against women.[3] Given this, it is critical that the royal commission acknowledge the elements within family violence and apply a strong gender lens throughout the review to ensure solutions, strategies and supporting evidence is gender specific to the perpetrators and victim survivors, giving priority to the greatest area of need for change.

Violence against women is prevalent and serious but it is also preventable. Violence against women is seen as the worst outcome of gender inequity. Research shows that the most significant determinants of violence against women are:

- the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women
- an adherence to rigidly defined gender roles[4]

The level of family violence within the community is largely hidden. This can be due to a range of reasons such as awareness and understanding of types of violence, access to services (including appropriateness and knowledge/navigation of service system),

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[1] White Ribbon 2014 http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/
[2] VicHealth, *Preventing Violence Against Women* webpage, https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/our-work/preventing-violence-against-women, accessed 16/4/15.
[3] VicHealth Framework for Preventing Violence Against Women https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-and-projects/vichealth-framework-for-preventing-violence-against-women
[4] VicHealth Framework for Preventing Violence Against Women https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-and-projects/vichealth-framework-for-preventing-violence-against-women

confidence in the service system, fear for safety, cultural norms, and dependency on partner (e.g. income, housing).

There has been much work progressed in the family violence space, most of which has been led by Victoria. Key elements that have aided local government to strengthen and support victim survivors of violence and the prevention of violence has been through having a clear state direction, such as *A Right to Respect 2010-20*. This plan supported the development of a regional western metropolitan plan, *Preventing Violence Together: Western Region Action Plan to Prevent Violence Together*. Through regional planning councils, community health and women's health have been able to collaborate, share and build on opportunities to prevent men's violence against women.

Other key initiatives that have greatly impacted Council's work in gender equity and the prevention of family violence include the introduction of family violence clauses in Council's Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, documents such as the *Local Government Women's Charter* by the Victorian Local Governments Association and the *Ten Ways Local Government can Advance Gender Equity* by the Gender Equity in Local Government Partnership, and VicHealth's work in this space (unfortunately VicHealth's new strategic plan, *VicHealth Action Agenda for Health Promotion 2013-23*, no longer identifies prevention of violence against women as a priority).

In relation to the goals of the royal commission, in order to address family violence, a holistic approach needs to be implemented across the continuum of health promotion inclusive of acute services, treatment, prevention, and population health. Currently the goals are heavily focused on early intervention which, on its own, will not create long term sustainable change to prevent violence before it occurs. In order to do this the goals need to be inclusive of a commitment to the investment of prevention. In addition the goals need to articulate and acknowledge the link between family violence and gender inequity, highlighting gender equity as a key priority for prevention.

Practical changes and strategies that can be implemented across the health promotion continuum to prevent family violence include:

Service system
- Systems: having systems that are able to link to each other and share data is key e.g. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Justice, Maternal and Child Health, hospital emergency departments etc. This would assist families in getting the appropriate services as well as service providers having an understanding of what other services and strategies are in place for clients.

- Access to services: age, ability, ethnicity, cultural and religious background, socio economic status and literacy all impact people's ability to access and use services. Women and men may experience different barriers and constraints with regard to accessing services. A gender and diversity lens is crucial for designing services so that they meet the needs of all individuals in our community and promote inclusion and equity.

- **Integrated support services**: supporting ongoing safety and wellbeing of people affected by family violence needs to include effective, integrated supports including access to affordable and secure housing, income support, employment support, legal support, and capacity building/exit strategies to ensure people impacted by family violence are able to be in control of their own decisions and be as independent as possible.

Population health

Family violence often occurs within the home, where local governments have little direct impact. All levels of governments are well placed to prevent family violence within the public realm. Key areas and supporting strategies include:

- **Gender analysis**: undertaking a gender analysis provides a mechanism to support governments to analyse, research, evaluate and understand the different needs, capacities and experiences of women and men in their municipality and therefore support sound decision-making, policy development and project/service needs.

- **Community infrastructure**: the provision, design and maintenance of infrastructure within communities have a significant impact on the way they are used and who uses them. Planning and designing community infrastructure that is responsive to and respectful of the needs of women, girls, men, boys and gender diverse people means analysing how public spaces are used and creating ways to make them more inclusive. Good infrastructure and operational management including operating hours, available programs, posters and advertising increases and enables community interactions, social connections, and opportunities to share and learn new skills.

- **Land use planning and design**: planning and design have a big impact on the activation and access to spaces and places. This includes elements such as good street design, lighting, public transport and set backs. The Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design – Safer Design Guidelines for Victoria provide advice for this. Land use planning also plays a key role in planning for location and accumulation of packaged liquor outlets and gambling venues, both of which can be contributors to family violence. Gaming and liquor venues are increasing in density across the western region, with local government having little control over locations and management operations. State government need to intervene to ensure liquor and gambling applications are not being approved within areas of high disadvantage or where they may increase the risk of family violence. Both the State Planning Scheme and Plan Melbourne should reference and involve strategies that aim to prevent family violence through land use planning.

- Housing: the availability of appropriate, safe and secure accommodation is a central factor in many people's decisions about whether or not to leave a violent situation. People experiencing violence need to have the choice to be able to remain safely within their own homes or, if preferred, seek alternate housing. For people choosing to leave their homes they need to have access to safe, secure and affordable housing, including social and rental housing. In particular for women with children these decisions can be more complex, with changes to school and childcare arrangements as well as loss of connection to local community and support networks. This complexity can mean that the most appropriate housing for some is to remain within their own homes. In these situations safety and support to stay in the home needs to be available. The State Planning Policy discusses the need for councils to provide affordable and social housing but there needs to be state government commitment and will and clearer directions in the scheme. In most cases diversity is considered to address affordability but this is not always the case.

- Promoting women in leadership: increasing the representation of women in leadership positions and decrease the gender pay gap will help challenge and shift cultural norms, provide women and girls with inspiration, motivation, and a greater capacity to participate. Women and girl's voices and perspectives need to be sought and respected in the development and implementation of legislation, policies and services that affect their lives. In order to achieve this, processes that are specifically designed to increase women and girls' involvement in decision-making need to be put in place.

- Sports and recreation: there are still low rates of participation of women and girls in all aspects of sport including coaching, officiating and leadership. Increasing the involvement of women and girls in sporting clubs and recreation activities positively challenges gender norms, encourages leadership, and assists cultural change. Equity in sport and recreation needs to occur at the national and state level as well as within local sporting clubs.

- Media: media play a significant role in influencing community perception of family violence as well as promoting gender equity. It is important that the media have the skills and commitment to prioritise quality equitable reporting. This will not only challenge misinformation and damaging stereotypes but also promote positive role models of women, girls, men and boys.

- Behaviour change and social norms: state government need to continue to invest in preventing family violence before it occurs through promoting equal and respectful relationships between men and women, and challenging rigid gender stereotypes. These programs need to work across settings (e.g. education facilities, workplaces, arts and culture, sport and recreation, media and health) as well as levels of community (individuals, relationships, organisational, community, societal). Examples of successful programs include Baby Makes 3, Generating Equality and Respect Program, Be the Hero and gender equity in sport.

Diversity

Over 30 per cent of Hobsons Bay residents were born overseas, of which 23 per cent are from non-english speaking countries. Family violence within Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities is often situated within different social and cultural norms. These are still not well understood or integrated within mainstream services and prevention programs. This issue has attracted recent attention through various service provider forums[5] and is the planned theme for the 2015 Victorian Local Government Multicultural Issues Network Forum.

In addition to culture, 17 per cent of residents within Hobsons Bay have a disability. Women with disability often experience significant disadvantage and have poorer health outcomes than the overall Australian population and often are more disadvantaged than men with disabilities in similar circumstances. Research suggests that women with disabilities face particular disadvantages in the areas of education, work and employment, family and reproductive rights, health, violence and abuse.

In addition, people with disability may be unable to obtain equal benefit and protection of the law because they do not receive supports to enable them to take action to protect their interests, and no one else may do so on their behalf. For example, some people with disability cannot obtain a personal violence order unless supported to do so. This is further compounded for people that are newly arrived or of a CALD background, navigating an often complex system. This needs to be reviewed to ensure all people can access the justice system. This could include establishing principles to determine the level and type of support a person may require to exercise his or her capacity before the law.

Men's violence against women is preventable. Victoria is currently a leader in the primary prevention of men's violence against women and it is hoped that this will continue to strengthen. The state government is currently developing the next Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan. This is the ideal opportunity to prioritise gender equity, the determinants of family violence and the social determinants of health, working across the continuum of health promotion and in turn addressing family violence.

Hobsons Bay City Council looks forward to the outcomes of the royal commission and working with the state government to create the much needed changes.

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[5] VicHealth Community of Practice Forums held in October 2014, see VicHealth, *Community of Practice reflections* webpage, https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/community-of-practice-reflections, accessed 16/4/15