

Melton City Council


Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence

May 2015

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To the Royal Commission,

Melton City Council welcomes the opportunity to address the Term of Reference of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. Council has a long standing commitment to address family violence and its causes and commends the Victorian Government for taking this very important step to eliminating family violence.

Local government is an essential partner to build gender equitable communities that prevent violence against women before it occurs, through their role as civic leaders, employers, planners, managers of public environments and providers of recreational and frontline whole-of-life services within their communities.

As the arm of government closest to the community, and given the nature by which Council staff work with individuals, families and community organisations, they are ideally suited to deliver community based responses to promote gender equity and prevent family violence. Council's are also uniquely placed to challenge attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate violence against women within the community.


Melton City Council recognises the causes of men's violence against women as:

- Unequal power relations between men and women.
- Adherence to rigid gender stereotypes.
- Broader cultures of violence.

We welcome the recommendations from this Inquiry and look forward to outcomes that have preventative focus and lead to a long-term, coordinated and resourced approach to eradicating all forms of violence against women and their children.

Please find attached our response to the Issues Paper.

Yours Sincerely



Kel Tori, CEO

TERMINOLOGY

In line with current evidence and best practice approaches to preventing and responding to violence against women, our submission is informed by the following definitions:

Primary prevention: Initiatives that aim to prevent violence before it occurs by addressing the underlying causes such as gender inequity.¹

Early intervention (sometimes referred to as secondary prevention): Action targeting individuals or population sub-groups who are showing early signs of violent behaviour.²

Tertiary response: Initiatives that aim to reduce the effects of violence once it has occurred and prevent its reoccurrence.³

Violence against women: Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.⁴

Family violence: Physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological, and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities.⁵

Gender Equity: Gender equity is an important social justice goal. The concept recognises that within all communities, women and men have different benefits, access to power, resources and responsibilities.⁶ Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men by recognising diversity and disadvantage and directing resources and services towards those most in need to ensure equal outcomes for all. A gender equity approach therefore acknowledges that different strategies are often necessary for women and men.

¹ VicHealth, 2007, *Preventing violence before it occurs: a framework and background prevention of violence against women in Victoria*, VicHealth, Melbourne, Australia.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ United Nations (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, A/RES/48/104, United Nations General Assembly: Geneva, available at: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

⁵ Department of Planning and Community Development (2008) *Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: towards a safer future for Indigenous families and communities 10 year plan*, Victorian Government: Melbourne, available at: http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/images/documents/Aboriginal_Affairs/Strong-Culture-Strong-Peoples-Strong-Families.pdf

⁶ World Health Organisation, *Mainstreaming gender equity in health: the need to move forward*, WHO regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, 2002.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Royal Commission goals are enhanced to include:
 - Foster a gender equitable violence free society.
 - Build respectful interpersonal relationships between men and women.
 - Increase awareness of the cause, types of, extent and effects of family violence.
2. Fund the primary prevention sector, using local government as a key setting to expand work to prevent violence against women.
3. Establish of a State-wide peak body to coordinate and expand primary prevention efforts to redress the causes of violence against women across the sector.
4. Invest in local government, Municipal Association of Victoria and Victorian Local Government Association to enable consistency in sector development and capacity building for greater awareness and understanding and evidence based impacts and innovation in local government.
5. Ensure gender is embedded within all Victorian State Government policies, especially those related to the provision of education, employment, housing, health services, transport, infrastructure and income.
6. Role model gender equity practices including gender balances within parliamentary and departmental functions.
7. Continue to invest in public health campaigns to raise awareness of violence against women, support services and influence community attitudes to not excuse or accept violence.
8. Invest in economic development strategies with a greater focus on Melbourne's West to improve access and opportunities for women's participation in workplaces.
9. Invest in public and social housing options for Melbourne's West.
10. Review housing affordability policies and make provision for more affordable housing options, with a greater focus on Melbourne's west, including assistance with property settlement.
11. Invest in better integration of the service system network in Melbourne's West, especially improving access to Legal Aid services.
12. Monitor and regulate rental and fuel prices to minimise financial stress.
13. Continue to invest and further fund frontline community services. In particular, Community Legal Centres who are well placed within the community and have strong partnerships with Victoria Police, service providers and the private sector.

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the City of Melton

The City of Melton is located in Melbourne's outer west, in one of the fastest growing regions in Australia. The current growth rate is 4.3% and the population is 130,451.⁷ The municipality has a SEIFA rating of 1002, making it the 10th most disadvantaged municipality in metropolitan Melbourne.⁸ The municipality consists of the Melton Township, the Eastern Corridor – which has developed rapidly over the past 10-15 years, a number of isolated townships and rural areas. It has a large culturally and linguistically diverse population that continues to grow.

Prevalence of violence against women

As noted within the Royal Commission's Issues Paper, the prevalence of violence against women in Australia is widespread and the impact of this violence is significant. In addition to the figures outlined within the Issues Paper, a range of other sources highlight the breadth and prevalence of men's violence against women in Australia, including:

- Each week a woman dies at the hands of her current or former partner.⁹
- Of women aged 15 and older:
 - 29% have experienced physical assault.¹⁰
 - 17% have experienced sexual assault.¹¹
 - 25% have experienced emotional abuse.¹²
 - 24% of women have also experienced unwanted sexual touching.¹³
- Women in Australia are three times more likely to experience violence at the hands of their partners than men.¹⁴

The effect of violence on women and the community more broadly is significant and costs Victoria an estimated \$3.4 billion per year.¹⁵ Effects range from acute physical and mental health problems through to increased need for health and support services. More detailed effects of the impacts of men's violence against women include:

- Male partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness for women aged 15 to 44 years, more so than obesity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure.¹⁶

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) Census of Population and Housing, ABS: Canberra, available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dearden, J, & Jones, W (2008). *Homicide in Australia: 2006 – 07 National Homicide Monitoring Program Annual Report*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006). *Personal Safety Survey*. Cat. No. 4906.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics: Canberra

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Office of Women's Policy (2009). *A right to respect: Victoria's plan to prevent violence against women 2010-2020*. Victorian Government: Melbourne.

¹⁶ VicHealth (2004). *The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation: Melbourne.

- Children who witness family violence are found to be at higher risk of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, as well as loneliness, pervasive fear and low self-esteem.¹⁷ Witnessing violence is also found to place children at high risk of impaired social learning and effective functioning.¹⁸
- Violence affects women's ability to attain and keep stable employment; affecting their long terms income and financial security.
- Women currently comprise 66% of clients accessing Victoria government-funded homelessness services, and, of women with children seeking access to supported accommodation, 55% have experience violence.¹⁹

Violence Against Women in the City of Melton

In the North-West Metropolitan Region, during 2011-2012, there were over 15,000 reported family violence incidents. This accounts for 30.8 per cent of the reported family violence incidents for Victoria during this time.²⁰

During the period 2011-2012, the highest rates of family violence for the Western Region were reported in the City of Melton (1,166.1 per 100,000), followed by Brimbank (972.3 per 100,000) and Wyndham (925.1 per 100,000). Notably, these municipalities also reported rates of reported family violence that were higher than the rate for Victoria overall, at 910.3 per 100,000.²¹

To date, the City of Melton has the 7th highest family violence rates in Victoria. In 2012, there were 486 family violence assaults and 613 in 2013. The Melton Police Family Violence unit receives an average of four call outs per day, equating to 120 family violence reports per month.²²

Violence against women occurs across the whole community regardless of age, race or socio-economic status; however certain groups of women experience disproportionately higher rates. These groups include women with disabilities, women from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, women in rural and remote areas, and immigrant and refugee women.

Priority populations for preventing violence against women

Melton City Council identifies women living with a disability as a priority population for preventing violence against women. In 2011, 4,488 people or 4.1% of the population in the City of Melton reported needing assistance due to disability. This equates to approximately, 1,700 women.²³

Women with a disability often experience significant disadvantage and have poorer health outcomes. Research suggests that women with a disability are more likely to live in poverty,

¹⁷ Laing, L. (2000). *Children, young people and domestic violence: Issue Paper 2*. Australian Domestic & Family Violence Review

¹⁸ Flood, M. & Fergus, L. (2008). *An assault on our future: The impact of violence on young people and their relationships*. White Ribbon Foundation: Sydney.

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011). *Government-funded specialist homelessness services: SAAP national data collection annual report 2009-10: Victoria*. Cat No. HOU 241, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.

²⁰ Victoria Police Corporate Statistics, 2010/2011

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) Census of Population and Housing, ABS: Canberra, available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>

have lower workforce and education participation rates, reduced access to appropriate health services, and experience housing insecurity, social exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination and violence.

Melton City Council also identifies women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds as a priority population for preventing violence against women. In 2011, 787 City of Melton residents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.²⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience significantly poorer health outcomes than the non-indigenous population. In general, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a lower life expectancy, higher rates of disability, higher rates of chronic disease and domestic violence.

The poorer health status experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia is largely the result of inequities and unequal access to the resources, opportunities and systems necessary to support optimal health and wellbeing.

Address of Terms of Reference

Question One

Are there other goals the Royal Commission should consider?

The intrinsic causal link between gender equity and violence against women

The prevention of men's violence against women requires acknowledging that violence is gender-based, and that gender is essential to understanding the causes and consequences of men's violence, and how to prevent it.

Research conducted by United Nations Development Fund for Women (commonly known as UNIFEM), demonstrates that countries where a higher level of gender equality has been achieved have lower levels of violence against women. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, societies that value women's participation and representation (measuring factors such as employment, education, income, health, leadership, political participation and representation), have few power differentials between women and men, have lower levels of violence against women.²⁵

²⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) Census of Population and Housing, ABS: Canberra, available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>

²⁵ Fergus, L, 2012, *UN Women Expert Group Meeting, Prevention of violence against women and girls: Background paper*, UN Women, Thailand.

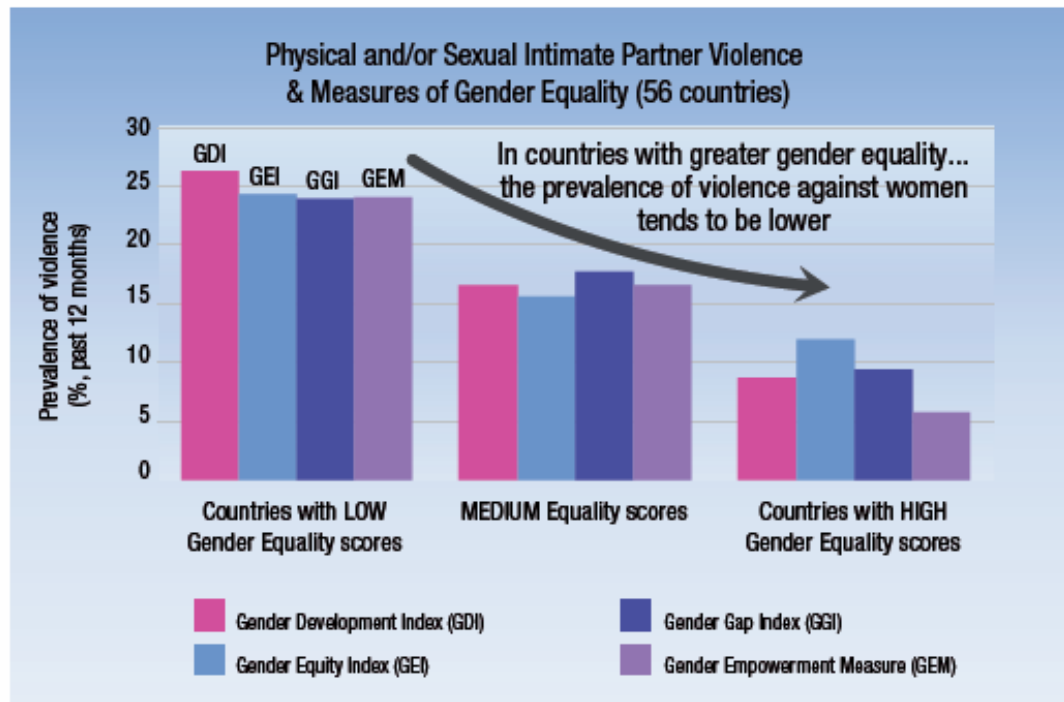


Figure 1: Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence & Measures of Gender Equality²⁶

To adequately address the causes of violence against women, the gendered nature of family violence must be acknowledged.

Interpersonal relationships within settings other than family

Unequal power relations between men and women is a key determinant of violence against women and exists in broader community settings other than family settings alone, including the workplace, sports clubs, friendship circles, places of worship. To create equity between men and women through respectful family relationships, power imbalances in all community settings must be addressed and achieved.

The causes and types of violence against women

Men's violence against women is not the result of one single factor, but a complex interaction of personal, situational and socio-cultural factors; particularly in relation to gender inequality. Research identifies the determinants of violence against women as:

- Unequal power relations between women and men;
- Adherence to rigid gender stereotypes;
- Broader cultures of violence.²⁷

Violence against women exists along a spectrum from sexist jokes, gender based discrimination, street harassment, sexual harassment and assault, family violence, rape and murder. Outlined in the Family Violence Protection Act 2008, it takes many forms including, physical, sexual, financial, spiritual, emotional and psychological.

²⁶ UNIFEM (2010) *Investing in Gender Equality: Ending Violence against Women and Girls*, available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digitallibrary/publications/2010/1/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-unifem-strategyand-information-kit>

²⁷ VicHealth, 2007, *Preventing violence before it occurs: a framework and background prevention of violence against women in Victoria*, VicHealth, Melbourne, Australia.

The relationship between high rates of violence against women and high levels of gender inequity between women and men is well established.²⁸

RECOMMENDATION:

1. The Royal Commission goals are enhanced to include:
 - Foster a **gender equitable** violence free society
 - Build respectful **interpersonal** relationships between men and women
 - Increase awareness of the **cause, types of**, extent and effects of family violence.

Questions Two

The Royal Commission wants to hear about the extent to which recent reforms and developments have improved responses to family violence, and where they need to be expanded or altered.

Primary prevention and increased reporting of family violence

Reported family violence incidents have consistently increased in the Western Metropolitan Region between 2007 and 2012. Within the City of Melton, 1,112 reports of family violence were reported in 2011. This was an increase of 40% on the reports made in 2010.²⁹ While these increases are likely to have been shaped by improvements to reporting systems and work undertaken to increase awareness and help-seeking for experiences of family violence, they also demonstrate that family violence remains a serious and growing concern in the region.

Primary prevention initiatives within communities results in a spike in reported family violence. A corresponding demand for services also increases as women become more aware of their rights and of the support available.³⁰ Current data on increasing service demand clearly demonstrates that governments must be prepared for the increase in demand for services that will initially accompany successfully implemented primary prevention and early intervention initiatives.

Question Three

Which of the reforms to the family violence system introduced in the last ten years do you consider most effective? Why? How could they be improved?

Primary prevention evidence base

Victoria is internationally recognised for developing innovative policy and practice³¹ demonstrated through mutually reinforcing strategies and partnerships between state and local government; local communities; VicHealth; the women's specialist family violence and community health sector.

²⁸ VicHealth (2007) *Preventing violence before it occurs: a framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation: Melbourne.

²⁹ Victoria Police Corporate Statistics, 2010/2011

³⁰ WHW (2012) *Submission to the Action Plan Consultation Framework for Addressing Violence Against Women and their Children*, Women's Health West: Footscray, available at: <http://whwest.org.au/news/policy/submissions/>

³¹ Department of Planning and Community Development (2010) *A Right to Respect 2010-2020*, Victorian Government: Melbourne, available at: http://www.whealth.com.au/documents/health/fv-a_right_to_respect.pdf

This work and reputation has been achieved through an integrated family violence response system and primary prevention efforts which address the underlying causes of violence against women.

Primary prevention efforts to reduce inequalities and strengthen respect between men and women are essential to reduce violence against women. Primary prevention efforts are most likely to be effective when a coordinated range of mutually reinforcing strategies are targeted across levels of influence.³² Local government is well placed to integrate gender based violence primary prevention. Given its planning, service provision and partnerships cutting across the social, economic, environmental and cultural domains of civic life we use a whole of council approach, in partnership with our local community.

The benefits of investing in primary prevention should not be underestimated. Violence has a profound and devastating impact on women, girls and boys, young people, families, entire communities and society as a whole. The social, economic, spiritual, physical and psychological impact can become entrenched across generations.

A peak body for preventing violence against women at a state level is needed to maintain Victoria's role as a leader in this work and coordinate primary prevention action and strategy. This coordination needs to bring together local, regional and state work across the sector. It needs to engage with and expand our partnerships and link up with national organisations such as OurWatch and Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

2. Fund the primary prevention sector, using local government as a key setting to expand work to prevent violence against women.
3. Establish of a State-wide peak body to coordinate and expand primary prevention efforts to redress the causes of violence against women across the sector.

Question Four

If you or your organisation have been involved in programs, campaigns or initiatives about family violence for the general community, tell us what these involved and how they have been evaluated.

Question Five

If you or your organisation have been involved in observing or assessing programs, campaigns or initiatives of this kind, we are interested in your conclusions about their effectiveness in reducing and preventing family violence.

Violence against women is an entrenched problem and a major public health crisis and requires a whole of government public policy response at all levels to support long-term, resourced and evidence-based primary prevention strategies. Policy responses should recognise the evidence base that has been built by VicHealth, community and women's health organisations and local government to address the causes of violence against women and inform prevention practice in the Victorian community.

³² VicHealth (2007) *Preventing violence before it occurs: a framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation: Melbourne.

Promising practice examples

Regional and state-wide action plans and partnerships

Partnerships play an important role in driving social, cultural and behavioural shifts required to eliminate violence against women and their children. State government support for these initiatives is essential to ensuring long-term sustainability and consistency across Victoria.

Melton City Council is a signatory to:

- Preventing Violence Together: the Western Region Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women.
- Action for Equity: A Sexual and Reproductive Health Plan for Melbourne's West.
- Western Region United Project to Prevent Violence against Women.

The Western Region were the first in Victoria to develop a regional strategy and partnership between local governments, community health and women's health, dedicated to preventing violence against women. The Action Plan and governance/ partnership structure provide a promising model to replicate.³³

Since 2007, Melton City Council has taken a leadership role to prevent violence against women and their children through a range of strategies including promoting gender respect and equity. We have worked in partnership with and been guided by many others including:

- Victorian Governments
- VicHealth
- Municipal Association of Victoria
- Women's Health Victoria
- Women's Health West
- Domestic Violence Victoria
- the Western Integrated Family Violence Committee
- Regional Crime Prevention Network
- Western Region Integrated Violence Network

Local action plans and partnerships

As the arm of government closest to the people, local government is well placed to deliver community based responses to family violence. Councils enjoy unrivalled reach and access across their local communities, and are on the frontline of whole-of-life service delivery and are responsible for a range of services and functions. These include roads, parks, waste, land use planning, local laws, urban planning, recreation, community development, health promotion, early years, services for young people, personal and home care, emergency management, building and maintaining assets and advocating for community needs.

Council officers work closely with individuals, families, community organisations, local businesses, sporting clubs, academic institutions and more. This means Council is ideally situated to promote whole-of-community efforts to address the key determinants of violence against women.

To this end, Melton City Council adopted the *Preventing Violence against Women and their Children Strategy and Action Plan* (2013-2016), and *Preventing Violence Against Women and their Children Policy* (2013), to establish Council's vision and strategic direction for a

³³ Preventing Violence Together (2010) *Preventing Violence Together: the Western Region Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women*, PVT: Western Metropolitan Region, Melbourne, available at: <http://whwest.org.au/resource/preventing-violence-together-the-western-region-prevention-of-violence-against-women/>

violence free community. The Strategy and Action Plan identify four (4) preventative strategies:

1. Strong Partnerships
2. Council Services Creating Supportive Environments
3. Council as a Violence Prevention Leader
4. An Informed and Vocal Community

Overall 45 actions are included in the three year action plan and a number of these have been delivered in its first 12 months. A number of actions are ongoing and continue to be embedded in Council practice and service delivery.

Melton City Council also co convenes the Melton Family Violence Network. This network is an important forum for local service providers to discuss service coordination and other practice issues. The network meets monthly and is currently guiding the implementation of key strategies of the *Melton City Council Preventing Violence Against Women and Children Strategy* and prevention initiatives.

The causes and contributing factors of family violence require a whole of government response. As such, all tiers of government need to work towards eliminating the causes of violence, role modelling gender equity practices and ensuring the adequate support services are available and accessible such as housing provision and legal support.

Community awareness campaigns

Melton Says No to Family Violence (2007)

There is good evidence that school-based interventions targeted to young people in secondary school settings are effective in changing attitudes and behaviours associated with violence against women. Such programs target a population understood to be at high risk of perpetrating and experiencing violence at a stage of the cycle when attitudes are being formed. The 'Melton Says NO!' Project was implemented in 2007 with the main aim to work with students from primary and secondary schools to:

- Engage them in dialogue about development of respectful non-violent relationships, and
- Develop a campaign to address the issue of prevention of violence against women by using media and art forms to influence attitudes of the community.

White Ribbon Campaign (2010- present)

Through primary prevention initiatives and an annual campaign, White Ribbon Australia seeks to change the attitudes and behaviours that lead to and perpetuate men's violence against women, by engaging boys and men to lead social change. The White Ribbon Campaign has been promoted by Melton City Council since 2010. In 2014, a White Ribbon Action Team was established at Melton City Council, comprising of 11 members from across all Council services.

The White Ribbon Campaign provides an opportunity for a community response to family violence, and a change in discourse from family violence as a 'private' issue to one in the 'public' domain. This is challenging due to misinformed and patriarchal views about the causes of violence being so dominant and entrenched at a public and societal level. Attitudes and understanding about violence against women and gender inequity in the public sphere directly influences and reinforces attitudes about the vulnerability and objectivity of women and are taken into the home and enacted through personal relationships in the private sphere, which can result in violence against women. Local government's legislative role is to create healthy communities for all and the scope for influencing what happens in the home is limited. By creating safe, equitable and inclusive communities and places

outside the home, these principles will begin to filter into the home. Campaigns like White Ribbon allow local governments to engage in changing prevailing discourse and build awareness about the causes of violence against women.

Workforce development

The VicHealth Indicators Survey found that the City of Melton residents are less prepared to intervene in a situation of family violence, 89.9% as compared to the Victorian average 93.1%.³⁴ Over half of Melton City Council's staff lives within the municipality. To this end, Melton City Council implemented the *Take a Stand against Domestic Violence: It's Everyone's Business* Workplace Training program (2013) to:

- Prevent violence against women using the workplace as the setting by addressing its causes or determinants (including unequal power relations between women and men; adherence to rigid gender stereotypes; and broader cultures of violence)
- Strengthen the organisational capacity of workplaces to promote equal and respectful relationships between women and men; and
- Engage employees in skills development to speak up against attitudes and behaviours that sustain violence in our community.

Take a Stand Training Program Evaluation data showed that the training has had a positive impact on the level of staff knowledge about domestic violence, and the likelihood that staff members would 'take a stand' against domestic violence. A key indicator that the training had a positive impact on participants was the increase to their knowledge about family violence and its causes.

It was hoped that participants would feel better equipped to speak up against violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours, and use new tools and strategies to take a stand against domestic violence. The post-training feedback sheets showed an increase in the likelihood of this occurring. Data collected through the evaluation indicated the training program as being effective in meeting the aim of engaging employees in skills development to take a stand against family violence. Importantly, most participants recognised and valued the investment made by Melton City Council in the program violence.

To support the implementation of Take a Stand Program, Melton City Council adopted a Family Violence Workplace Policy and Procedures (2013). These documents outline a whole of Council workplace commitment to support staff to report family violence (victims or perpetrators) and processes for referral and support.

Investment in workforce development strategies better enable local governments, a large sector within the Australian workforce to understand and engage in primary prevention of violence against women. Systematic ongoing participatory evaluation of these strategies is essential to contribute to the emerging evidence-base and improve systems and structures. To address the causes of violence against women, investment and support for gender equity initiatives across all levels of government is imperative.

³⁴ 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey. Available at vichealth.vic.gov.au. Viewed April 2013

The Australian Human Rights Commission 2010 Gender Equality Blueprint's 15 recommendations provide an important framework for action to redress gender inequity. Strategies include:

- Traineeships and recognition of prior learning as additional pathways for women.
- Initiatives that support women to enter into traditionally male dominated sectors and industries.
- Support and retention of women in leadership roles.
- Improved parental leave opportunities.
- Flexible work options for women and men as part of the workplace culture.
- Increase of government benefits, affordable, accessible and quality child care, carer support and increase and maintenance of the disability insurance scheme (with a gender lens applied).³⁵

The leadership role and mandate of local governments within their communities provides an essential strength for undertaking a whole-of-community approach. Workforce development to achieve greater gender equity and prevent violence against women is necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

4. Invest in local government, Municipal Association of Victoria and Victorian Local Government Association to enable consistency in sector development and capacity building for greater awareness and understanding and evidence based impacts and innovation in local government.

7. Continue to invest in public health campaigns to raise awareness of violence against women, support services and influence community attitudes to not excuse or accept violence.

Question Six

What circumstances, conditions, situations or events, within relationships, families, institutions and whole communities, are associated with the occurrence or persistence of family violence?

A primary prevention approach seeks to prevent men's violence against women and children before it occurs by redressing the causes of violence. Violence against women occurs and is perpetuated across all levels of society:

- Institutional and systemic level
- Organisational and community level
- Individual, family and peer group level.³⁶

³⁵ World Economic Forum (2013) *The global gender gap report*, World Economic Forum: Switzerland, available at:

<http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gapreport-2013>

³⁶ VicHealth, 2007, *Preventing violence before it occurs: a framework and background prevention of violence against women in Victoria*, VicHealth, Melbourne, Australia.

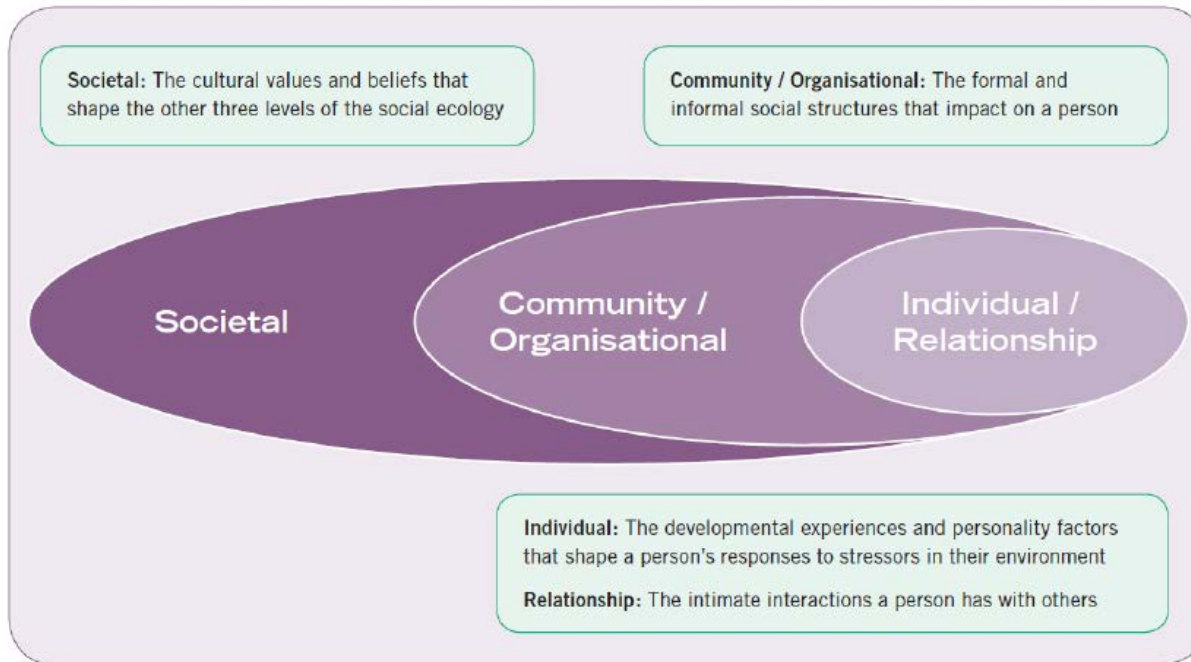


Figure 2 VicHealth (2007) An Ecological Approach to Understanding Violence

Evidence shows that in countries where a higher level of gender equity has been achieved, the level of violence against women is lower. For example, the Global Gender Gap Report identifies Iceland as the most gender equitable country in the world and its rate of violence against women is 19 percent over a lifetime. In comparison, Australia's estimated rate of violence against women is 33 per cent and Australia ranks 25 of 135 countries listed.³⁷

In Australia, gender inequity is evident across a number of significant indicators. The visibility of women in leadership, in both government and non-government settings, is recognised as an important step toward gender equity.

Progressive action in this area also plays a role in challenging gendered stereotypes concerning appropriate roles for women in society. Hence, ensuring equal numbers of women and men in leadership roles is essential for the prevention of violence against women. Yet we continue to see disparity between women and men in senior leadership positions at all levels of government and the private sector. Data from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's (WGEA) Australian Census of Women in Leadership revealed that women:

- Make up only 12 per cent of the boards for ASX 200 companies.
- Make up only 9 per cent of executive key management personnel of the ASX 200 companies.
- Held only 35 per cent of the 3,960 board positions on government boards and bodies.³⁸

³⁷ World Economic Forum (2013) *The global gender gap report*, World Economic Forum: Switzerland, available at:

<http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gapreport-2013>

³⁸ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2012) *Australian Census of Women in Leadership*, Australian Government: Canberra

Equal access to education, employment and income is recognised in international literature as vital to the prevention of violence against women. Gender inequities in employment, pay and working conditions continue to disadvantage Australia women. For example:

- Women in Australia who work full-time earn on average 17 per cent less than their male peers.³⁹
- Women are more likely to engage in part-time and casual work in roles characterised by high demands and little control over conditions. In Australia, women account for over half (55 per cent) of all casual employees, and 43 per cent of women are employed part-time compared to 13 per cent of men.⁴⁰
- Women retire with less than half the average superannuation payouts received by men and 2.8 million women compared to 1.6 million men aged 15 years and over are not covered by superannuation.⁴¹
- Female graduate salaries are only 90 per cent of male graduate salaries.

Women's access to equal employment is partly determined by the inequitable division of domestic labour and caring responsibilities. For example:

- Women undertake more unpaid domestic labour, 35 per cent of women do 15 or more hours per week, compared to 12 per cent of men.
- More women than men undertake unpaid care for a person with a disability.
- Women are more likely than men to undertake unpaid care work for children or relatives who are elderly or who have a disability.
- 82 per cent of Australian single parents are women.⁴²

Actions and communications from institutions such as local and state government, non-government organisations, businesses, academic institutions and so on, set an important precedent for the promotion of gender equity. Actions to prevent violence against women are strengthened through closer attention to the structural factors that reinforce unequal power relations between women and men.

By influencing change at the structural level, such organisations will complement actions to drive cultural change at the community/organisational and individual, family and peer group levels. One clear avenue of government influence at a structural level is in policy and law reform and budgetary processes. For example this may take the form of engaging in gender sensitive planning across all ministerial portfolios in state government.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

5. Ensure gender is embedded within all Victorian State Government policies, especially those related to the provision of education, employment, housing, health services, transport, infrastructure and income.
6. Role model gender equity practices including gender balances within parliamentary and departmental functions.

³⁹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2012) *Australian Census of Women in Leadership*, Australian Government: Canberra.

⁴⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) *Census of Population and Housing*, ABS: Canberra, available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>

⁴¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2012) *Australian Census of Women in Leadership*, Australian Government: Canberra.

⁴² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) *Census of Population and Housing*, ABS: Canberra, available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>

Question Seventeen

Are there specific cultural, social, economic, geographical or other factors in particular groups and communities in Victoria which tend to make family violence more likely to occur, or to exacerbate its effects? If so, what are they?

It is important to differentiate between **causes** and **contributing factors** of domestic violence. The **causes** of violence against women are complex. As previously mentioned, there are often individual, community or societal explanations as to why such violence happens. The key determinants to the perpetration of violence against women are:

- The unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women.
- Adherence to rigidly defined gender roles.
- Broader cultures of violence.

There are also a number of **contributing factors** such as:

- Witnessing or experiencing family violence as a child.
- Income, education and occupation.
- Weak social connections.
- Neighbourhood characteristics, such as service infrastructure, high unemployment rates, poverty.
- The unequal distribution of material resources.

In addition to these contributing factors, there are a number of localised factors which may contribute to the present levels of family violence within the City of Melton. ABS data demonstrates within the City of Melton:

- *Mortgage stress* – 26% of residents experience mortgage stress, this compares to 20% in Victoria.
- *Other financial stress* – residents are also more likely to experience other forms of financial stress such as fuel vulnerability. For example 22% of residents commute for more than 2 hours a day, increasing fuel reliance.
- *New births* – Each week there are 42 babies born in the municipality. After the birth of a child, in particular the first child, traditional gender stereotypes are often reverted back to (a cause of domestic violence), hence increasing the risk of domestic violence.
- *Access to services* – There is a lack of local services, including counselling, legal support, financial hardship, drug and alcohol, housing related or services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As such, women, and men experiencing domestic violence, have minimal access to support services.
- *Police responsiveness* – The existing Melton Police Family Violence Unit is highly utilised and demand continues to rise. The Unit attends an average of four call outs per day.

- *Drug use* – Alcohol and other drug use is increasing. Of particular concern, is the increased use of Ice. Anecdotally, Ice is a contributing factor in some family violence call outs.
- *Isolation* – One appeal of living in the municipality is perceived affordable housing. However, geographical isolation of the municipality often leads to residents experiencing transport limitations (22%), financial stresses (as mentioned above) lack of social networks and limited recreation opportunities. Women are also less likely to have access to a car.⁴³

Question Nineteen

How can responses to family violence in these groups and communities be improved? What approaches have been shown to be most effective?

Australian women have made considerable progress in the area of health and education, and some progress in economic participation. However, there has been very little success and in fact a decrease in women's participation in the political arena. The 2013 Global Gender Gap Report identifies the four pillars that are most relevant to achieving gender equity and reducing violence against women:

- Equal economic participation and opportunity.
- Equal political empowerment.
- Equal education attainment.
- Equal health and survival outcomes.

Locally, positive and proactive policy decisions regarding housing, legal services and women's economic independence are vital. The national public housing shortage is an additional barrier to the safety of women and their children. Many women experiencing domestic violence have no choice but to remain in the house with the perpetrator. Community legal centres are uniquely placed to deliver quality, free legal services to women experiencing family violence, The Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre provides a valuable family violence service however, is experiencing large wait lists. The continued and enhanced provision of legal aid, as well as its promotion, is vital.

In responding to domestic violence via the courts, women in the City of Melton have to leave the municipality and either travel to Bacchus March (approx. 20 mins drive) or Sunshine (approx. 40 mins drive). Bacchus March Court does not have the necessary infrastructure to deal with violence and therefore many women opt to travel to Sunshine. Many women are unrepresented in court which can lead to some decisions that may have been more effective if the benefit of legal advice was available. Further appearances, and more costs can also be incurred.

Evidence shows that women are less likely to be economically independent than men and this disparity is even greater for women in the western region. Thirty six per cent of women residing in the City of Melton are not in the labour force, compared to a lesser 21.9 per cent of men.⁴⁴

⁴³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) *Census of Population and Housing*, ABS: Canberra, available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Approximately 32.6 per cent of women in the City of Melton have a weekly individual income of less than \$300 (compared to 19.4 per cent of men) and 13.7 per cent of men have an individual weekly income of greater than \$1,500, compared to 3.8 per cent of women.⁴⁵ In addition, local employment opportunities are limited within the City of Melton, with the majority of residents leaving the municipality for work.⁴⁶

Given this, it is imperative that appropriate strategies are developed and implemented to strengthen women's access to education, employment and higher income opportunities within the City of Melton and the western region.

Achieving gender equality requires our elected political representatives to drive and champion the policy reforms that are needed to build a stronger, more productive and fairer Australia for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8. Invest in economic development strategies with a greater focus on Melbourne's West.

9. Invest in public and social housing options for Melbourne's West.

10. Review housing affordability policies and make provision for more affordable housing options, with a greater focus on Melbourne's west, including assistance with property settlement.

11. Invest in better integration of the service system network in Melbourne's West, especially improving access to Legal Aid services.

12. Monitor and regulate rental and fuel prices to minimise financial stress.

13. Continue to invest and further fund frontline community services. In particular, Community Legal Centres who are well placed within the community and have strong partnerships with Victoria Police, service providers and the private sector.

The elimination of violence against women requires changes at the structural and society level and subsequently a whole of government approach. The cause of violence against women must be acknowledged and addressed.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.