

Independent. Bold. A Voice for Women and Girls.

**Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees**  
**PO Box 6100**  
**Parliament House**  
**Canberra ACT 2600**

Dear Committees,

Gender inequalities permeate every corner of our modern society in subtle and problematic ways. Violence against women is just one manifestation of the many problems which gender inequalities create. Men who love and respect the women around them do not hurt them. That is because the acceptance of equality in relationships between women and men is premised on mutual respect and being supportive of each other's life journeys. Violence and subjugation coexists with attitudes of oppression, control and dominance where relationships between men and women are unequal.

So if we want to see reductions in violence towards women and children, we must confront and change the sexist attitudes and behaviours that work against equality.

From 1987- 1997, the grants given by The Victorian Women's Benevolent Trust (VWBT) to domestic violence organisations were particularly focused on projects highlighting survival, rape and women murdered as a result of domestic violence. Since then, the Trust has continually worked towards building gender equity and increasing the opportunities available to women and girls in Australia.

In our submission, we discuss our framework and experience in addressing domestic violence and the social and gendered attitudes which perpetuate it. Our initiatives such as *Be The Hero! Rosie Respect* and *Club Respect* all focus on teaching young Australians to respect those around them, critically question gender stereotypes and build their own resilience as positive members of our society.

Our submission also indicates research which problematises current attitudes towards gender inequality and gender stereotypes.

Lastly, our submission calls for men to be at the front and centre to reduce domestic violence and gender inequality. Problematising these issues is one thing, but making concrete and meaningful steps to reduce gender inequality in every aspect of their lives in the current challenge that we put to men in Australia.

We believe men have the compassion, resources and capacity to make sure that domestic violence and gender inequality is eliminated from our society.

Regards,

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*“Equality is not a concept. It's not something we should be striving for. It's a necessity. Equality is like gravity. We need it to stand on this earth as men and women, and the misogyny that is in every culture is not a true part of the human condition. It is life out of balance, and that imbalance is sucking something out of the soul of every man and woman who's confronted with it. We need equality. Kinda now.”* – Joss Whedon, US writer and composer

## **Our Context Framework and Experience**

The Victorian Women’s Trust (the Trust) has a long history of addressing domestic violence through our advocacy and grants. In 1993, our grant-making entity, the VWBT granted \$19,000 to the Women’s Coalition Against Violence to research, write and publish the book, *Blood on Whose Hands?*, the first public account of intimate partner homicides in Victoria, exposing the private nature of the public’s response to domestic violence.

In 2009 the Trust designed and launched an innovative, web-based violence prevention program for boys and young men – *Be the Hero!* The project was rolled out in partnership with YWCA Victoria from 2009 to 2012. The project drew a great deal of its inspiration from the work of globally-respected anti violence campaigner, Dr. Jackson Katz and his “bystander” model that encourages boys and young men to build their lives to be free of violence. In this approach, men play the crucial leadership role in violence prevention. They challenge the beliefs and attitudes of their male peers and foster the critical self-examination that triggers changes in behaviour.

*Rosie Respect*, launched in 2014, is our harm prevention initiative that seeks to build the capacity, strength, empowerment, education and resilience of young girls with support from the National Australia Bank and the United States Department of State. *Rosie* has a particular focus on healthy and respectful relationships with resources such as the video ‘Is Your Relationship Healthy?’, information on what an abusive relationship looks like as well introducing girls to issues around consent, sexuality and gender.

The Trust supported the 2015 documentary *Call Me Dad*, a film following the journey of violent men who were participants in a behaviour-change program.

In May 2015, the Trust made a submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence reflecting on ways in which violence against women is gendered, socially condoned and a generally accepted part of our social fabric in Australia.

In February 2016, we were awarded a \$360,000 grant from the William Buckland Foundation to roll out our new initiative *Club Respect* to assist sporting clubs across Victoria and beyond to challenge, erode and marginalise violent attitudes and violent behaviours. Our program *Club Respect* will deliver strategic educational tools, helping sporting clubs to embed a culture of respect and harm prevention in all their practices to tackle the root causes of violent attitudes, especially towards women.

**a. the role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence;**

**Gender Inequalities**

Gender inequalities are created through the myriad of power structures and relationships that shape all our human interactions. Michael Flood, the Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Wollongong, reminds us that gender inequalities exist everywhere:

*‘Our world is a deeply unequal one. Systemic inequalities which disadvantage women and advantage men are visible around the globe. Whether one looks at political power and authority, economic resources and decision-making, sexual and family relations, or media and culture, one finds gender inequalities.’[i]*

More implicitly, the underlying assumption informing these inequalities is that ‘all societies tend to confer a higher social value on men than women’ which then flow into institutionalised power and societal structures which privilege men. [ii] Gender inequalities can sometimes be difficult to detect unless they are explicitly addressed because they permeate all areas of our lives in subtle yet potent ways.

**Power inequalities in intimate relationships and domestic violence**

In intimate relationships, the domain of domestic violence, beliefs in the different roles of men and women are a key factor in the perpetuation of gender inequality.

The 2013 Victorian Health Promotion Foundation’s (*VicHealth*) survey on young people’s attitudes found that while participants generally did not support inequality in roles between men and women, ‘substantial percentages support gender inequality in the distribution of decision-making power in relationships.’[iii] More than 1 in 5 young people believe that ‘men should take control in

relationships (22 per cent) while over a third (35 per cent) agreed that ‘women prefer a man to be in charge of a relationship.’[iv]

Cultural myths which excuse or ignore these power inequalities that sustain domestic violence include the assumption that domestic violence occurs only in the scenario where physical injury is sustained. *VicHealth’s* survey on young people’s attitudes towards violence against women found that some young people had a problematic cultural understanding of domestic violence.

The survey found that young people can easily identify physical forms of violence as constituting violence against women such as slapping, pushing and forced sex.[v]

However, when it came to non-physical forms of control such as repeated criticism, control of a partner’s social life, economic abuse or harassment by phone or email, survey respondents were less able to identify these behaviours as constituting violence.[vi] It is often these more subtle behaviours reinforcing power inequalities within relationships which precede physical violence. Physical violence or death is often the last manifestation of a long history of non-physical abuse (psychological, financial or social) in which the male partner exerts his control over his partner (and sometimes children) based on gendered power structures.

*VicHealth* survey participant’s inability to identify non-physical forms of control as violence reflects broader social and community attitudes which justify, trivialise and defend violence against women and supports men’s “rights” within their most intimate relationships.

### **Attitudes towards violence against women**

In the Trust’s 2015 submission to the Victorian Royal Commission on Family Violence, we reflected on the ways in which violent and disrespectful attitudes towards women are fostered, *“They are shaped by our society, learning from our cultural script, adopting stances that are legitimated and socially condoned.”[vii]*

The *VicHealth* survey found that young people are willing to justify and excuse violence as shown below:

- One in 10 young people (10%) agree that domestic violence can be excused if the offender is affected by alcohol, and that a man is less responsible for rape if drunk or affected by drugs.
- 11% believe that violence can be excused if the violent person is affected by stress.

- One-quarter believe that violence can be excused if it is due to a temporary loss of control (24%).
- One-quarter agree that violence can be excused if the violent person is regretful afterward (26%).<sup>[viii]</sup>

The *VicHealth* survey also looked at participants' view of women's role in domestic violence. The survey found participants were willing to criticise and trivialise women's experiences of domestic violence with 6 in 10 agreeing that 'it's hard to understand why women stay in violent relationships'.<sup>[ix]</sup> More than 6 in 10 respondents agreed that 'most women could leave a violent relationship if they wanted to.'<sup>[x]</sup>

Here we can see a stark contrast in the attitudes towards men's behaviour in domestic violence (support) and women's (condemnation). These attitudes clearly indicate to us the gendered ways in which men and women are valued by society which closely reinforces both gender inequality and gender stereotypes.

**b. the role of gender stereotypes in contributing to cultural conditions which support domestic violence, including, but not limited to, messages conveyed to children and young people**

**Gender stereotypes in marketing to children and young people**

Stereotypes that reinforce gender defined roles and inequalities are socially taught from birth and reinforced by broader society as we grow up. Gender stereotypes reinforce the power disparities between men and women which is a central cause of violence against women.

Children and young people are constantly absorbing gender stereotypes from their everyday surroundings: through the gendered marketing of toys and other products as well as the explicit gender roles presented in the entertainment industry and advertising. The gender inequalities embedded in modern consumerism are reflective of the wider inequalities present in our society, reinforced through music, film, television and other products. Their influence is not going to disappear any time soon, in fact, it is only expanding. We are being socially programmed from childhood to adopt attitudes which view men as being more powerful than women.

## **Young people's attitudes towards sex and relationships**

Gender stereotypes can become harmful if they are uncritically adopted by young people in their intimate relationships with others. For example, in the 2016 survey on sexual education undertaken by the University of South Australia, Victorian and South Australian student participants were asked what sex education topics they wanted further information on. The results are distinctly gendered and show clear power differentials between genders.

Female participants wanted to know more about 'gender diversity', 'violent relationships', 'staying safe online' and 'ending a relationship.'<sup>[xi]</sup> Male participants wanted to know more about 'how to have sex', 'masturbation', 'pleasure', 'different sexual acts' and 'pornography'.<sup>[xii]</sup>

The fact that young women are most concerned about keeping themselves safe while young men are more concerned with deriving pleasure from their intimate relationships shows that gender inequalities and the power differentials between genders are already internalised by the time individuals reach their teenage years.

While not all the survey participants will go on to have violent intimate relationships, the scene is set for allowing men to use their gendered privilege to hurt those closest to them. Therefore, it is vital that all children and young people are adequately educated to be critical of gendered stereotypes presented to them through marketing and other sources. Further, that they are empowered to question those gender stereotypes and inequalities which promote violence and against women.

## **Not just gender stereotypes**

*VicHealth's* report on young people's attitudes towards violence against women pointed out that attitudes and behaviours towards violence against women have many factors. Besides gendered attitudes and gender identities, acceptance and exposure to violence and discrimination; intersecting factors such as age, ethnicity, or disability; and contextual factors such as limited education or neighbourhood disadvantage. <sup>[xiii]</sup> The report noted that these three broad categories of factors, 'may intersect with gender to shape particular attitudes towards violence against women or increase the likelihood of violence-supportive attitudes'.<sup>[xiv]</sup>

Gendered violence researchers Rachel Jewkes, Michael Flood and James Lang also point out that universal, blanket interventions are unlikely to lead to violence prevention because men who commit the most serious violence against women consider themselves unbound by social norms, have serious victimisation histories or an exaggerated sense of entitlement. <sup>[xv]</sup>

Therefore, we need to be very careful when looking at gendered violence to ensure that we capture the nuances and experiences of different individuals who perpetrate violence against their partners.

**c. the role of government initiatives at every level in addressing the underlying causes of domestic violence, including the commitments under, or related to, the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.**

**Educating young people about respectful relationships**

Young people need support to ensure that all their intimate relationships are based on equality, dignity, and respect rather than gendered stereotypes which fuel inequality and violence. Surveys like the one undertaken by the University of South Australia are an indication of young people's desire to learn and be better informed about how to conduct their intimate relationships. However, the existing education about relationships and sex taught to children and young people is inadequate.

The Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG) recently conducted a national survey of women aged 16-21 who had attended school in Australia asking about their sexuality and respectful relationships education. The survey found that 63% of young women and girls were not taught about consent, and only 37% of respondents agreed that sex education had made them feel confident in their understanding of relationships. [xvi] By not grasping a proper understanding of consent through education, young people are developing a skewed interpretation of respectful relationships and behaviour which may continue well into adulthood.

As part of the *Rosie Respect* project initiated by the Trust we are communicating with and publishing the writing of teenage girls, in order to accurately represent their views. In January, we published a piece titled *When Will Feminism Be Part of Our Education?* written by 17-year-old Victorian, Rosie Stock. Here are some quotes from Rosie's article:

*"Other than a few sporadic instances in school, I don't really remember ever being taught about equality – specifically in regards to gender."*

*“As young adults, gender equality is one of the most important life lessons, but still it’s not being covered in class – instead we’re having to learn about it the hard way.”*

*“If young people aren’t taught about gender equality, their ignorance may pass into adulthood and manifest into even more fixed mindsets.”*

*“Sexism isn’t born, it’s learnt. So, let’s start from the root of the problem and enact lasting social change.”*

Young people are yearning for a proper education and society has a responsibility to adequately equip them with the tools they need to conduct healthy and non-violent relationships. It is vital that gender equity becomes a part of Australian education so that young men are conditioned to respect women, and young women are conditioned to expect respect.

### **Encouraging men’s leadership on gendered attitudes which lead to violence**

We think men’s leadership can make *the* difference in producing the profound change across Australia that reduces violence against women and children, but how can this be achieved?

For us, the breakthrough moment occurred in 2009 when our organization, the Victorian Women’s Trust, designed and launched an innovative, web-based violence prevention program for boys and young men – *Be the Hero!*

In the space of only a couple of years, the experience of the *Be the Hero!* program shows that this shift can be quite remarkable. Our partner organisation, Melbourne Storm Rugby League Club, can attest to the significant and practical value of such an approach years on from the time their young men were trained and supported in applying the *Be The Hero!* approach to life off the field.

We have received the following feedback from a group of boys at a south-eastern Melbourne high school who had participated in a *Be-The Hero!* training session.

*“This program really made me realise what a bystander can do to help and what they can do to let the situation get out of hand, thank you for teaching us how to be a better person in the world.”*

*“this program was exactly what we needed there is far too many violent people and it needs to stop. I also really enjoyed that we were talked to about being respectful to other sexualities and promoting equality. thank you so much.”*



*“I really enjoyed the ' Be the Hero' program because it helped me understand more about what happens to women and men in some relationships. It also helped me see what I could do if I were to be a person close by and how to change habits. I would definitely recommend this program to many people as I think it is very helpful.”*

Recent initiatives similar to our *Be The Hero!* model such as the *Male Champions of Change* are crucial to such community based solutions in problematising violent-supportive attitudes and ensuring they filter down into violent individual’s familial, social and community interactions. Once individuals are surrounded by people who do not practice their own violent and disrespectful attitudes, will they be influenced to change those attitudes.

### **The next step: Men must be encouraged to support gender equality in concrete and meaningful ways**

The reduction of domestic violence and gender inequalities which reinforce gender stereotypes rely heavily on men proactively supporting women in all aspects of their life that goes beyond being an ‘ally’ or a ‘feminist’ or saying that ‘violence against women is wrong.’

Domestic violence has become increasingly a part of the national conversation in Australia and we have seen an increase in the number of men speaking out against violence against women.

However, if men do not take the steps to meaningfully adopt attitudes and practices in their own lives which reverse and counter the many gender inequalities in our society, superficial support will only increase, with no real change. For example, in 2009-2010 the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) a quantitative household survey, carried out with over 8,000 men aged 18-59. 87 to 90 per cent of men from Brazil, Chile, Croatia, Mexico and Rwanda agreed that ‘men do not lose out when women’s rights are promoted’.[xvii] However, when asked if they supported quotas and other concrete affirmative action policies for women to increase their participation in politics, education and the workplace, men’s support dropped to the range of 40-74 per cent.[xviii]

In summary, it is clear that the Government’s support in reducing violence against women does not stop with condemning violence against women. It means improving gender equity and reducing inequalities between genders in all aspects of civil life. Initiatives which are short-lived and underfunded reinforce superficial support for gender inequality.

- [i] Flood, M 2015, 'Chapter One: Men and Gender Inequality' in R Howson (ed.), *Men and Gender Inequality*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne., p. 1.
- [ii] Jewkes, R, Flood, M, & Lang, J 2014, 'From Working With Men and Boys to Changing Social Norms and Reducing Inequities in Gender Relations: A paradigm shift in prevention of violence against women and girls.' *The Lancet*, p. 1581.
- [iii] Harris, A, Honey, N, Webster, K, Diemer K & Politoff, V 2015, *Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women: Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents 16–24 years*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia, p. 44.
- [iv] Ibid., p. 44.
- [v] Ibid., p. 30.
- [vi] Ibid., 30.
- [vii] Proud, G & Crooks, M 2015, 'Reflections on gendered violence', Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission on Family Violence, viewed online 31 March 2016, <<http://www.rcfv.com.au/getattachment/FFCF50A6-DEB1-41BA-8441-D1F5C024146D/Proud,-Georgie>.
- [viii] Harris, A, Honey, N, Webster, K, Diemer K & Politoff, V 2015, *Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women: Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents 16–24 years*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia, p. 44.
- [ix] Ibid., p. 38.
- [x] Ibid., p. 38.
- [xi] Johnson, B, Harrison, L, Ollis, D, Flentje, J, Arnold, P, & Bartholomaeus, C.(2016) '*It is not all about sex': Young people's views about sexuality and relationships education*. Report of Stage 1 of the Engaging Young People in Sexuality Education Research Project. Adelaide: University of South Australia, p. 5.
- [xii] Ibid., p. 5.
- [xiii] Harris, A, Honey, N, Webster, K, Diemer K & Politoff, V 2015, *Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women: Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents 16–24 years*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia, p. 25.
- [xiv] Ibid., p.25.
- [xv] Jewkes, R, Flood, M, and Lang, J 2014. 'From Working With Men and Boys to Changing Social Norms and Reducing Inequities in Gender Relations: A paradigm shift in prevention of violence against women and girls.' *The Lancet*, p. 1583.
- [xvi] Equality Right's Alliance Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG) 2015, 'Let's talk: young women's views on sex education', *Equality Rights Alliance*, Canberra, viewed online 7 March 2016, <[http://equalityrightsalliance.org.au/sites/equalityrightsalliance.org.au/files/images/lets\\_talk\\_final\\_report\\_2016.pdf](http://equalityrightsalliance.org.au/sites/equalityrightsalliance.org.au/files/images/lets_talk_final_report_2016.pdf)>.
- [xvii] Flood, M 2015, 'Chapter One: Men and Gender Inequality' in R Howson (ed.), *Men and Gender Inequality*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne., p. 14.
- [xviii] Ibid., p. 14.