

Submission on the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children

1. About Women's Health Grampians

Established in 1991, Women's Health Grampians (WHG) is one of nine regional and three statewide women's health services funded by the Victorian Department of Health. We are a not-for-profit organisation that leads work to improve gender equality and women's health outcomes in the Grampians region of Victoria. The region has a population of approximately 250,000 people and spans more than 48,000 square kilometres and 11 Local Government Areas. The region is made up of three sub-regions of Central Highlands, Grampians Pyrenees and the Wimmera, with a diverse range of communities from major growth urban centres to rural and remote towns. The largest city in the region, Ballarat, has a population of 101,000 people.

WHG tackles complex issues that impact the lives of women across our region, including gender inequality, the prevention of violence against women and access to sexual and reproductive health services. Through our programs and partnerships, we aim to end the disadvantage, discrimination and violence experienced by women in our region and beyond. We work closely with all levels of government, community and business partners to achieve better public policy and services for women, and to address the barriers to achieving gender equality. By addressing gender inequality, we can create stronger families and communities for everyone.¹

2. Outcomes and priorities for the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children (question A3)

This submission is focused solely on the primary prevention of violence against women. WHG notes that many of the questions in the DSS Engage platform relate to early intervention and responses to family, domestic and sexual violence. These are vital questions when interrogating and investigating the effectiveness of the family violence system in Australia, however in a plan to *reduce* violence

¹ For more information on Women's Health Grampians, see www.whg.org.au.

against women and their children, there must be a much stronger focus on prevention, particularly the primary prevention of violence against women.

While not discounting the importance of the other outcomes and priorities listed in question A3, WHG has prioritised the following three, as they relate to reducing and ultimately preventing violence against women and children:

- Communities are safe and free from violence
- Relationships are respectful
- Build on primary prevention initiatives and research to promote safe relationships and build gender equitable values

3. Primary prevention of violence against women and children

Primary prevention describes an upstream, population approach to addressing the underlying causes and drivers of violence, so that it doesn't happen in the first place – it is a vital component in any strategy to reduce violence against women and their children. It is distinct from tertiary prevention – or response work – which supports survivors and holds perpetrators to account after violence has occurred. The prevention of violence against women seeks to change the social norms, practices and structures that allow violence to take place. The pursuit of gender equality lies at the heart of the prevention of violence against women, as gender inequality is the main driver of violence against women and children.

The national framework *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia* provides an evidence-based approach and conceptual model for action on the primary prevention of violence against women.² It sets out the evidence for the drivers of violence against women, and shows how they work at all levels – individual, community, organisational/systems and societal.

Primary prevention is, by its very definition, a long-term approach, requiring long-term commitment and investment. Ensuring a strong focus on primary prevention in the proposed National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children ('the National Plan') could be achieved by including a specific primary prevention stream within the next National Plan that is based on *Change the Story*. This stream should incorporate specific outcomes and indicators developed against the drivers and incorporating the levels at which action can occur. Our Watch's *Counting on Change: a guide to prevention monitoring* is useful in this respect.³ Victoria's Prevention of Family Violence Data Platform also shows the progress that is being made over time.⁴

² Our Watch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth. *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*. Melbourne: Our Watch; 2015. Available at: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story/>.

³ Our Watch. *Counting on Change: a guide to prevention monitoring*. Melbourne: Our Watch; 2017. Available at: [Counting on change – A guide to prevention monitoring \(ourwatch.org.au\)](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/counting-on-change-a-guide-to-prevention-monitoring).

⁴ Prevention of Family Violence Data Platform. Available at: [Microsoft Power BI \(crimestatistics.vic.gov.au\)](https://crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/microsoft-power-bi)

The evidence clearly demonstrates that promoting gender equality is essential for the prevention of violence against women, and structural level change essential for this to occur. In Victoria, there are some useful examples in this respect, including:

- Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy – preventing violence against women through gender equality⁵
- Free from violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence⁶
- Victoria's Gender Equality Act aimed at promoting workplace gender equality in the public sector. This draws on the Workplace Gender Equality Act at federal level,⁷ and has resulted in the establishment of the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector.⁸
- Regional primary prevention partnerships led by women's health services in metropolitan and rural regions of Victoria, discussed in more depth at section 5 below.⁹

These initiatives provide a useful roadmap towards an Australian community where women and children live free from violence, abuse and discrimination.

Recommendation 1: Embed a specific primary prevention stream in the National Plan, accompanied by a long-term funding commitment.

Recommendation 2: Ensure the National Plan addresses the four gendered drivers of violence against women as outlined in *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*.

Recommendation 3: Commit to investment in adequate infrastructure to support effective primary prevention of violence against women, including policy, monitoring and evaluation and the primary prevention workforce itself.

4. An intersectional approach to the National Plan

The prevention of gender-based violence has been enhanced in recent years by a deepening understanding of intersectionality and its impact on gender equality and gender-based violence. Intersectionality acknowledges that gender inequality is compounded by the overlapping effects of other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience due to characteristics such as: race; Aboriginality; religion; ethnicity; disability; age; sexual orientation; rurality and/or; gender identity. Not only that, rates of violence are often higher among these groups of women. For

⁵ Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy – preventing violence against women through gender equality. Available at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/safe-and-strong-victorian-gender-equality>.

⁶ Free from violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence. Available at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/free-violence-victorias-strategy-prevent-family-violence>.

⁷ Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Available at: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/>.

⁸ Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. Available at: <https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/>.

⁹ More information on regional primary prevention partnerships in Victoria available at: https://www.genvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/GV_WHS_Brochure_A4_4pp_V6_WEB.pdf.

example, *Changing the Picture*, Our Watch's national resource for the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, highlights the impacts of colonisation and racism intersecting with gender as the main drivers of violence against Aboriginal women.¹⁰

As noted above, WHG is located in a rural and regional area of Victoria. In more than half the Local Government Areas in the Grampians region, the family violence incidence rates are above the Victorian average.¹¹ Women living in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to experience family violence, and they face additional barriers to reporting and escaping abuse,¹² including: geographic isolation; limited access to services; a lack of anonymity; community members with conservative attitudes; higher levels of gun and weapon ownership; and the experience of natural disasters (e.g. floods, bushfires etc.) which can increase the risk of family violence.¹³

What these examples demonstrate is the importance of taking an intersectional approach to all areas of primary prevention, and indeed, across the entire family violence system, including early intervention and response. Violence is experienced differently and at different rates by diverse communities and thus a one size fits all approach does not work. The following extract, from the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health's *Intersectionality Matters* resource, provides a useful guide to taking an intersectional approach, defined as:

- Going beyond explanations or solutions that use single categories to describe people or issues and acknowledging that we are shaped by many factors interacting together.
- Identifying and transforming systems of power and privilege that negatively shape individual outcomes, building coalitions and working towards social equity.
- Actively reflecting on and addressing our own relationships to power and privilege as bystanders, researchers, workers or advocates.
- Understanding that there is no fixed hierarchy of disadvantage and that we may experience or understand the ways our lives are impacted by power or oppression differently.
- Recognising that people can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously, depending on the specific context or situation.
- Centring marginalised experiences, voices and leadership, wherever possible.¹⁴

Another useful example of the integration of an intersectional approach to primary prevention is found in Victoria's Gender Equality Act. One of the principles of that Act is:

¹⁰ Our Watch. *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*. Melbourne: Our Watch; 2016. Available at: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/changing-the-picture/>.

¹¹ Crime Statistics Agency. *Grampians Region Family Violence Incident Rate per 100,000 Population by Local Government Area: Year ending December 2020*. Crime Statistics Agency; 2020.

¹² Campo M, Tayton S. *Domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote communities: An overview of key issues*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies; 2015.

¹³ Women's Health Grampians. *Communities of Respect and Equality – A plan to prevent violence against women and their children in the Grampians Region 2016-2020*. Ballarat: WHG; 2016.

¹⁴ Multicultural Centre for Women's Health. *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women*. Melbourne: MCWH; 2017. Available at: <https://www.mcwh.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Intersectionality-Matters-Guide-2017.pdf>.

Gender inequality may be compounded by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience on the basis of Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes.

The Act also requires that defined entities take an intersectional approach to meet their Gender Equality Act obligations.¹⁵

Recommendation 4: Embed an intersectional approach across all areas of primary prevention and invest in organisations led by women with intersectional experiences of inequality including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women, and gender diverse and non-binary people.

Recommendation 5: Demonstrate commitment to rural and regional women by investing in prevention infrastructure, initiatives and research across Australia, not just in metropolitan centres.

5. Local approaches to primary prevention to mobilise workplaces and communities

Mutually reinforcing and multi-dimensional approaches to primary prevention are required to shift social norms and catalyse change. Promising practice, as outlined in *Change the Story*, identifies community mobilisation as an effective strategy. This includes addressing social norms and increasing community capability to prevent violence against women in the settings where individuals live, work and play.

In Victoria, work to prevent violence against women is being coordinated through nine Prevention Partnerships. Each regional Prevention Partnership is facilitated and coordinated by their local women's health service. The Prevention Partnerships act as a cohesive primary prevention infrastructure to grow and deliver prevention of violence against women and embed gender equity values into diverse communities and organisations. Strategic coordination enables public messaging and activities to be reinforced, as well as shared and collective evaluation approaches. Localised delivery enable the tailoring and co-designing of activities to ensure the needs of specific communities are met.

5.1 EXAMPLE: The CoRE (Communities of Respect and Equality) Alliance

The regional prevention partnership in the Grampians region of Victoria, led by WHG, is the Communities of Respect and Equality Alliance (CoRE) Alliance. CoRE is a partnership of organisations, businesses, clubs, groups and networks from across the Grampians region that share a vision for safe, equal and respectful communities. Members of CoRE commit to the *CoRE Strategy to Prevent Violence Against Women and their Children in the Grampians*

¹⁵ Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. Available at: <https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/>.

Region.¹⁶ The Strategy guides individual organisations and collective work in fostering communities of respect and equality, and preventing violence against women.

CoRE is based on the evidence that the underlying drivers of violence against women are gendered, culturally embedded and complex. The initiative calls for systemic change to be led by organisations, clubs and networks, and for mutually reinforcing activities to be conducted across the region. Members are encouraged and supported to implement sustainable changes that support the CoRE vision, and to undertake actions that align with their business and sphere of influence. The CoRE initiative is managed by WHG under the guidance of a CoRE Leadership Group. A comprehensive evaluation strategy is in place to support the systematic monitoring and evaluating of CoRE over time.

CoRE was launched in 2016 and has made impressive progress.¹⁷ In July 2021, CoRE had 122 members from a wide range of sectors: 29% - Health Services, Community Health and Social Services, 15% - Sports, 15% - Community Organisations, 11% - Businesses, 10% - State Government Agencies, 9% - Local Government, 7% - Education and Training and 4% - Partnerships. The model is established, membership is growing and most members are undertaking meaningful actions aligned with *Change the Story*.

As membership grows and becomes more diverse, actions by members will create an overlay where community members will be influenced multiple times. This is part of the design of the initiative which promotes mutually reinforcing actions from CoRE members across settings where we live, work and play and is likely to have more impact on individual behaviours than a single dimension of contact. It is also a model that can be scaled up in regions across Australia.

Recommendation 6: Roll-out Victoria’s Regional prevention of violence against women partnership model across Australia, to ensure national capacity to develop and implement evidence based primary prevention practice that is adapted to the local context.

Contact:

Marianne Hendron
Chief Executive Officer
Women’s Health Grampians
728 Barkly Street, Mount Pleasant VIC 3350
03 5322 4100
marianne@whg.org.au

¹⁶ Women’s Health Grampians. CoRE Strategy to prevent violence against women and their children in the Grampians region 2021-2025. Ballarat: WHG; 2021. Available at: <https://whg.org.au/our-work/prevention-violence-women/core/>.

¹⁷ Women’s Health Grampians. CoRE: Promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women in the Grampians Region – the first 4 years 2016-2020. Ballarat: WHG; 2020. Available at: <https://whg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CoRE-4-year-report.pdf>.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendation 1:** Embed a specific primary prevention stream in the National Plan, accompanied by a long-term funding commitment.
- Recommendation 2:** Ensure the National Plan addresses the four gendered drivers of violence against women as outlined in *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*.
- Recommendation 3:** Commit to investment in adequate infrastructure to support effective primary prevention of violence against women, including policy, monitoring and evaluation and the primary prevention workforce itself.
- Recommendation 4:** Embed an intersectional approach across all areas of primary prevention and invest in organisations led by women with intersectional experiences of inequality including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women, and gender diverse and non-binary people.
- Recommendation 5:** Demonstrate commitment to rural and regional women by investing in prevention infrastructure, initiatives and research across Australia, not just in metropolitan centres.
- Recommendation 6:** Roll-out Victoria's Regional prevention of violence against women partnership model across Australia, to ensure national capacity to develop and implement evidence based primary prevention practice that is adapted to the local context.