



## **Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence Consultation response, February 2024**

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### **1. Drive down family and sexual violence**

#### **a) What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government (VG) take to build a community-wide approach to preventing family and sexual violence?**

Women's Health Grampian's (WHG) leads best practice health promotion and primary prevention work aimed at systemic change to improve women's health and wellbeing in the Grampians region of Western Victoria. WHG leads the Communities of Respect and Equality Alliance (CoRE) - a regional primary partnership of more than 120 organisations, businesses, sporting clubs, groups and networks from across the Grampians Region that share a vision for safe, equal and respectful communities. Members are supported through training and capacity building to implement sustainable changes. We draw on this expertise in our response to this consultation.

Local level primary prevention work is critically important in reaching and tailoring efforts to a range of communities. The existing infrastructure of regional primary prevention partnerships led by local women's health services contributes to the building of a community-wide approach to preventing family and sexual violence. 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, 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. Local regional primary prevention partnerships, such as WHG's CoRE, understand this context and can support workplaces, clubs and networks to prevent violence against women.

The pursuit of gender equality lies at the heart of the prevention of violence against women - this is clearly demonstrated by the evidence (*Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*). The recent National Community Attitudes Survey data continues to show how this link can be difficult to grasp (ANROWS 2023). Victorian Government campaigns and initiatives could consider innovative ways to articulate this clearly and prioritise communicating the link between gender inequality and violence against women and gender diverse people.

For community-building to endure, the primary prevention workforce must be supported and primary prevention practitioners valued and remunerated adequately, particularly in rural areas with workforce shortages. A shift away from short-term contracts and funding would be welcomed. At present, 85% of the primary prevention workforce in Victoria identify as female, yet it is tasked with addressing the drivers of violence against women and shifting deeply entrenched gendered social norms among men, and across the entire population. Men must also be engaged in change, including as practitioners. It is of critical importance, however, that male practitioners demonstrate an understanding of the way in which patriarchy works, how complicity reproduces it and must draw on the primary prevention evidence base. Men should be encouraged to work in this sector - providing they engage in feminist analysis and are accountable to feminist organisations. Men (and others) need to actively reflect on and addressing their own relationships to power and privilege as bystanders, researchers, workers and advocates.

**Recommendation 1:**

Recognise, acknowledge and fund the important role that women's health services have in coordinating and driving local place-based action through their regional primary prevention strategies and partnerships, such as CoRE.

**Recommendation 2:**

Continue to focus on and support efforts to educate the broader community about the gendered and intersectional nature of violence through diverse, meaningful, place-based initiatives in a variety of settings, reiterating the link between gender inequality and violence against women.

**Recommendation 3:**

Recognise that small rural local councils and other organisations in rural areas have less capacity to take action and need to work in partnership with others to achieve goals. In the Grampians region, the majority of local councils do not have dedicated/stand-alone staffing to work on primary prevention or gender equality. Local women's health services play an important capacity building role in this respect.

**Recommendation 5:**

Extend the Action Plan, with allocated budget, beyond the ten-year horizon as efforts to prevent and eliminate family and sexual violence must be long-term.

**Recommendation 6:**

Consider specific efforts to recruit men into primary prevention work, providing they engage in feminist analysis and are accountable to feminist organisations.

**b) What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government to take to support Aboriginal-led prevention?**

As an intersectional feminist organisation, WHG is committed to continuous listening, learning and working in partnership with First Nations people. WHG values First Nations women's voices and connection to Country, and it is our obligation to ensure First Nations women's voices are central to the work we do. WHG do this by actively engaging with First Nations-led initiatives designed to:

- highlight the impacts of racism and support self-determined approaches to deconstructing the oppressive structures of colonisation that exacerbate gender inequality;
- prevent, reduce, and respond to family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the region, and;
- highlight the intersectional nature of violence, ensuring the voices of women from diverse backgrounds are heard.

One example of WHG’s work in this space is the Yarning Garden. The Yarning Garden project, created on Wadawurrung Land, is co-designed, developed and run by First Nations women in partnership with WHG and Food is Free Inc. Guided by WHG’s First Nations team, the garden creates a site of connection, empowerment, knowledge sharing and learning for the women involved, and a place for the whole community to learn more about First Nations culture. Information about gender equality, preventing violence against women, and local services are also shared with the women that take part in the Yarning Garden. More information: <https://whg.org.au/yarning-garden/>

**Recommendation 1:**

Embed self-determination and co-design principles in all First Nations-led program and policy responses (see above examples).

**Recommendation 2:**

Sustain a deep commitment to First Nations led prevention through long-term funding to allow time for local partnership activity to develop and to deepen work within a self-determination framework.

**Recommendation 3:**

Ensure that the intersectional nature of Aboriginal populations is recognised in the funding, design, delivery, and evaluation of prevention programs.

**c) What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to engage men and boys to change attitudes and behaviours that can lead to violence?**

WHG has worked with men to change attitudes and behaviours for many years. WHG’s CoRE Alliance engages individuals including men in workplaces and organisations such as sporting clubs to create safe, equal and respectful communities across the Grampians region. Active bystander training is a key element of CoRE membership. Some insights from the CoRE 2023 evaluation are:

- Training participants reported being more likely to act to address sexist or discriminatory behaviours
- Feedback showed that sessions were effective in raising awareness of gender equality and in deepening understandings of related-issues
- 86% of respondents indicated the training had helped them understand the role they can play in creating a culture of respect, free from sexism and discrimination

What we have found over time, however, is that more intentional efforts are required to engage men in primary prevention - particularly in rural areas where there are limited to no organisations working in this space, despite higher rates of violence against women. There is a growing evidence base that demonstrates the need for primary prevention strategies that challenge traditional notions of masculinity which keep gender inequalities alive. Initiatives that support the development of healthy masculinities and challenge dominant forms of gender stereotypes at an individual, relationship, peer, organisational and institutional level are vital. For that reason, WHG has developed two key programs - one aimed at majority male industries and one aimed at rural men.

### 1. WHG Men's Initiative

The WHG Men's Initiative builds the capacity of men in rural communities to identify and call out gender inequality, sexism and discrimination, with a particular focus on the Wimmera. Working with the WHG Gender Equality Advisor - Masculinities, small groups of men are recruited to participate in a multi-pronged ally model (training; group community project; participation in an accountability panel) which aims to:

- Build greater understanding and awareness by men of gender inequality and harmful masculine norms
- Improve men's attitudes associated with healthier masculinities
- Increase action to improve gender equality in a rural setting, delivered by men, including greater bystander action against sexism and discrimination

Engaging men at a local level is a critical part of this project - and again, change takes time. This program is currently in delivery phase and requires further funding to continue to trial and evaluate its impact. Funding will cease in June 2024.

### 2. See What You Can Be and Act On Site

Funded by the Australian Government until June 2024, See What You Can Be and Act On Site are part of one project aimed at increasing the recruitment and retention of women in majority men industries. See What You Can Be supports women in male-dominated industries to become leaders and advocates, and connects with careers, education and training professionals. Act on Site is a free, organisation-wide program tailored to support organisations in trades industries within the Grampians region to recruit and retain more female and gender-diverse apprentices and employees in non-traditional roles.

Act On Site has a specific focus on working with majority men workplaces to create more inclusive organisational culture, and to call out sexism, harassment and discrimination. To date, 14 workplace training sessions on *Creating Safe, Respectful and Equal Workplaces* have been delivered to a total of 200 staff and management across three companies. Recruitment practices, policies and communications have also been addressed. We have observed that it is difficult for companies to do this work alone. The ability to work intensively with gender equality experts, such as WHG's Act On Site Consultant, is central to success. In addition, funding feminist organisations such as WHG means that programs are grounded in the evidence, and that sexist and harmful attitudes and behaviours are challenged not colluded with - all vital for change.

More information is available here: <https://whg.org.au/our-work/projects/women-in-trades/>

#### **Recommendation 1:**

Fund and expand efforts to engage men in a regional and rural settings in violence prevention and gender equality efforts (see above examples), particularly those led by feminist organisations drawing on the primary prevention evidence base.

#### **Recommendation 3:**

Fund programs to undertake intersectional work with men and boys from diverse communities.

## 2. Focus on children and young people

**a) What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to engage children and young people to create generational change?**

The Respectful Relationships education in Victorian primary and secondary schools is a good example of a multi-component, whole-of-school approach, with long-lasting group work components<sup>2</sup> where group work or curriculum activities focus on social skills training.<sup>3</sup> Women's health services are well placed to support Respectful Relationships implementation, for example, through other evidence informed violence prevention efforts with young people such as interactive and participatory group work tools that are effective for younger age groups; teacher workforce capacity building; and campaign development. For example, the Department of Education (Central Highlands) is a member of WHG's CoRE Alliance and we have supported them to work with schools to draw the link between gender inequality and preventing violence against women, broader discussions about primary prevention, and with active bystander skills development.

In addition, WHG suggests a specific focus on boys, specifically, engaging boys in shifting the dial on attitudes and behaviours that support sexism, harassment and use of violence. Skilling up teachers in responding to violence supportive attitudes and behaviours is needed, so that these beliefs can be challenged effectively from an early age, whenever and wherever they are encountered. Active bystander training for teachers is one example of how this could be done.

**Recommendation 1:**

Invest in education models that focus on understanding and responding to the needs of young people in place-based settings, such as Respectful Relationships, particularly boys.

**Recommendation 2:**

Commit to the provision of long-term prevention funding to test models for diverse cohorts in a variety of community settings to build a stronger evidence base that seeks to address harmful attitudes and behaviours.

**Recommendation 3:**

Ensure young people with disabilities have access to Respectful Relationships Education programs, delivered accessibly and inclusively as part of a whole school approach.

**3. Strengthen support for victim survivors**

**a) What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to provide all Victorians who experience family or sexual violence with the support they need when they need it?**

As an organisation run by women, for women, WHG's focus, like all women's health services, has always been on elevating women's voices and experiences as experts in their own lives. As a sector, we have advocated for and role-modelled the centring of women's voices across all our work, creating research, co-design and engagement models, and policy and programmatic guidance on best practice approaches to centring women's voices.<sup>1</sup> We work to elevate the voices of those who experience additional societal barriers to being heard due to racism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, and other forms of discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Women's voices and lived experiences must inform policy, practice, and program design through robust co-design.

In primary prevention, in addition to the voices of victim survivors of family and sexual violence, the voices of women who have experienced sexism, gender inequality and discrimination (drivers of violence against women) must also be included, particularly women with intersectional experience. WHG's Equality for All program is a useful example in this respect, with current funding due to cease in July 2024. Equality for All continues to strengthen the CoRE Alliance while raising awareness of diversity and empowering local women. Nine women from diverse backgrounds have been employed to champion change across the Grampians region. Equality Advocates have been trained to share their lived experiences so CoRE members can:

- listen and learn;
- develop a deeper understanding of all forms of discrimination and inequality;
- reflect on current attitudes;
- take meaningful action to break down structural barriers;
- work towards advancing diversity, inclusion, and equality for all women.

More information is available here: <https://whg.org.au/our-work/projects/equalityforall/>

There is a strong correlation between traditional masculine ideals (and associated attitudes and behaviours), and violence against women, gender diverse people and people from LGBTIQ+ communities. For this reason, the Victorian Government should activate strategies that support and expand the understanding and acceptance of different gender identities and actively challenge heterosexism, traditional notions of gender and harmful stereotypes, all of which contribute to inequality, discrimination and oppression.

Overall, in relation to prevention, greater long-term investment in primary prevention to address the gendered drivers of violence is needed. Provision of funding to long-term, place-based programs that are evidence based and evidence building is essential. Short-term investment do not allow the time needed to build this evidence, or retain workforce, particularly in rural areas.

Other issues that have been raised within the Grampians region include:

- Adequate access to support and outreach services for victim survivors is an issue in rural areas such as the Grampians region. Family violence services including the Orange Door can be inaccessible in rural areas.
- An accessibility audit of refuges is required. Access to equipment required for independence needs to be provided quickly for those women with a disability seeking refuge.
- Ensure information regarding gender-based violence response services are communicated in an accessible manner.

**Recommendation 1:**

Adopt co-design approaches to ensure centring women's voices and lived experiences inform policy, practice, and program design, including in relation to primary prevention and the drivers of violence against women.

**Recommendation 2:**

Activate strategies that support and expand the understanding and acceptance of different gender identities.

**Recommendation 3:**

Provide greater, long-term investment in primary prevention - provision of funding to long-term, place-based programs that support longitudinal testing and evidence building is essential.

**Recommendation 4:**

Address issues of access to support and outreach services for victim survivors in rural areas.

**Recommendation 5:**

Fund services to conduct an accessibility audit of refuges, and implement recommendations.

**Recommendation 6:**

Ensure information regarding gender-based violence response services are communicated in an accessible manner.

**4. Respond to Change**

**a) What steps would you recommend for the Victorian Government to take to reduce and respond to risk of family violence during times of crises?**

The current climatic crisis is threatening natural systems, social structures, human health and wellbeing, and built environments in ways that have not been experienced before. The Grampians region has already become warmer and drier.<sup>1</sup> In Victoria, Horsham and Hindmarsh are forecast to be in the top ten localities to be most affected by climate change by 2100 in terms of flooding, property values, and soil subsidence during drought.<sup>2</sup> Halls Gap was rated the top locality for bushfire risk in Australia in 2019, and the local reservoirs are already no longer viable due to lower rainfall in areas of the Pyrenees Shire and the Wimmera, instead some communities are dependent upon groundwater;<sup>3</sup> the Wimmera Southern Mallee is in the top three areas of Victoria expected to have the highest economic impact from heatwaves.<sup>4</sup>

Due to gender inequality and rigid gender norms in society, women are disproportionately affected by the impacts of the climate crisis.<sup>5</sup> Increasing costs-of-living such as food, water, petrol and gas (associated with climate change) mean that women are more vulnerable due to overall earning less income, are less likely to work full time due to care giving responsibilities, and have less superannuation.<sup>6</sup> Women are also more likely to live in housing that is not sufficiently climate proofed (rentals and social housing), more likely to be living with chronic illness or disability that renders them more vulnerable to heatwaves<sup>7</sup> and more likely to be victims of gendered and sexual violence which can increase during heatwaves and after disasters such as bushfires, floods and other extreme weather events related to the climate crisis.<sup>8</sup>

This highlights the importance of applying an intersectional gender lens to emergency and disaster planning, response and recovery, and the importance of women in leadership roles. Strengthening women's participation in leadership and in key efforts to manage change will reduce the gendered effects of change and lead to better outcomes for all communities in adapting to a changing society. Investment in women's health services and organisations such as Gender and Disaster Australia is needed to ensure that this happens at a local level. Regional women's health services can also work closely with majority men organisations, like Country Fire Authorities, to assist in workplace culture change and active bystander training.

<sup>1</sup>Victoria State Government. Climate-Ready Victoria. [https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/60741/Grampians.pdf](https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/60741/Grampians.pdf)

<sup>2,3,4</sup> Adapt Grampians. Grampians Region Climate Adaptation Strategy 2021-2025. [https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0042/549798/Grampians\\_Regional\\_Climate\\_Adaptation\\_Strategy.pdf](https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0042/549798/Grampians_Regional_Climate_Adaptation_Strategy.pdf)

<sup>5,6,8</sup> Women's Health East. Changing the Climate. <https://whe.org.au/changing-the-climate/>

<sup>7</sup>Women's Health Victoria. Preventative Health Strategy submission. [https://womenshealthvic.com.au/resources/WHV\\_Publications/Submission\\_2020.09.28\\_National-Preventive-Health-Strategy-2021-2030\\_\(Fulltext-PDF\).pdf](https://womenshealthvic.com.au/resources/WHV_Publications/Submission_2020.09.28_National-Preventive-Health-Strategy-2021-2030_(Fulltext-PDF).pdf)

## **Recommendation 1:**

Recognise and continue to invest in existing infrastructure, such as women's health services' regional primary prevention partnerships, to ensure climate change and disaster planning, response and recovery is gendered and intersectional.

### **5. Understand and demonstrate our impact**

#### **a) What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government to take to strengthen how we measure impact?**

Women's health services have a long history of implementing primary prevention programs, drawing on the evidence and feminist ways of thinking. This includes leading the way in coordinated regional primary prevention partnerships and strategies; piloting the first Australian whole-of-organisation prevention programs in workplaces, schools and other settings; nation-leading work on gender and natural disasters; innovative models for health literacy for migrant and refugee women; and developing the country's first accredited gender equality training. As part of this work, we have produced research and evaluation to inform the wider evidence base, as well as training and other capacity-building resources for the primary prevention workforce and contributors and to assist in meeting commitments and obligations under the government's violence prevention and gender equality strategies and *Gender Equality Act*.<sup>1</sup>

Measuring impact is long term work and requires skill and investment. The women's health services' two-year uplift funding enabled support for stronger evaluation across individual organisations and to begin evaluating collective impact across the state. Capacity to apply these processes across new and emerging focus areas would be welcomed.

<sup>1</sup> Women's Health Services Network. (2023). *Small Change, Big Impact: Women's Health Services Network Collective Impact Report*. Melbourne, Australia: Women's Health Services Network

Data that is disaggregated by gender and a range of other intersectional characteristics, as well as geography, is vital to understand the impact of initiatives. Policies, programs and services need to respond to the influences of sex and gender, and for that, data is needed. Current and comprehensive data also provides us with the ability to measure changes in progress towards gender equality, determine new priorities, targets and areas for action as well as the opportunity to inform the broader community on both the need for and the value of this work.

Policy changes are needed now to ensure this data is collected and made available to the public and researchers. The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data sets out some important steps that could be resourced in order to build the evidence base and assess progress, including:



- Establish a commitment to centring the voices of individuals at the greatest risk of marginalisation or discrimination in all aspects of data systems and practice. This means accepting that lived experience is a valid form of evidence of inequality or discrimination.
- Promote equity across the entire data value chain.
- Ensure that institutional data systems are inclusive and safe.
- Engage data to increase context awareness and reduce inequality. Intersectional approaches to data should be adopted by governments and organisations to improve the quality of life of people who have been affected by intersecting inequality.
- Build inclusive data institutions. High priority should be placed on diversity and inclusion in the workforce, and analysts should critically assess how elements of their own identity shapes the data they collect, analyse and use.

More information:

[https://www.data4sdgs.org/sites/default/files/file\\_uploads/JN\\_1286\\_IDC\\_KP\\_WhitePaper\\_24pp\\_A4.pdf](https://www.data4sdgs.org/sites/default/files/file_uploads/JN_1286_IDC_KP_WhitePaper_24pp_A4.pdf)

**Recommendation 1:**

Invest in longitudinal initiatives to effectively measure impact. Maintain funding for evaluation processes to facilitate the showcasing and disseminating of program outcomes and best practices.

**Recommendation 2:**

Embed co-design into initiatives by prioritising the value of lived experience and building it into all programs design models.

**Recommendation 3:**

Fund organisations to remunerate people for contributing their lived knowledge and expertise.

**Recommendation 4:**

From the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data:

- Establish a commitment to centring the voices of individuals at the greatest risk of marginalisation or discrimination in all aspects of data systems and practice. This means accepting that lived experience is a valid form of evidence of inequality or discrimination.
- Promote equity across the entire data value chain.
- Ensure that institutional data systems are inclusive and safe.
- Engage data to increase context awareness and reduce inequality. Intersectional approaches to data should be adopted by governments and organisations to improve the quality of life of people who have been affected by intersecting inequality.
- Build inclusive data institutions. High priority should be placed on diversity and inclusion in the workforce, and analysts should critically assess how elements of their own identity shapes the data they collect, analyse and use.