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The Secretary  
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees  
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CANBERRA ACT 2600

**Submission: Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality**

The South Australian Premier's Council for Women (PCW) welcomes the opportunity to submit comments to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee inquiry into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality.

PCW, a high level independent advisory body to the Premier of South Australia and the Minister for the Status of Women on issues relating to women, aims to facilitate a whole of government approach to meeting the needs of women in South Australia. The views expressed in this submission are those of PCW and do not necessarily reflect those of the South Australian Government.

PCW has prioritised four areas for its current work. These are (in no specific order):-

- violence against women
- workplace flexibility
- women and leadership
- connecting to women in South Australia

State-wide consultations with South Australian women, undertaken by PCW, in 2010 and June 2014 have highlighted deep concern over the persistence of violence against women. South Australian women have called for actions that:-

- Ensure consistency in cross-jurisdictional responses and integrated service responses within South Australia and also across Australia for women moving across state and/or territory borders.
- Acknowledge the importance of cultural differences across government, non-government, and community organisations who are working with women experiencing violence. Included here is a greater understanding of the issues surrounding forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Both recognised methods of control and abuse.
- Guarantee crisis accommodation which is responsive to the needs of individual women experiencing domestic and family violence both with and without children.

[2]

- Facilitate the dissemination of information and education about domestic violence and its impact on women's (and their children's) lives.

### **The role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence**

To effectively eliminate violence against women we must acknowledge:

- (a) that it is rooted in pervasive and persistent gender inequality; and
- (b) its gendered nature, recognising that women are more likely to experience violence than act as perpetrators of violence.

Any comprehensive response necessitates working across primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention.

Across most sectors there is a poor understanding that gender inequality in all spheres of life contributes to the prevalence of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. The United Nations General Assembly's 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women notes that violence against women is an expression of historically unequal power relations between men and women.<sup>1</sup>

Social norms and gendered expectations shape the roles of men and women, defining what is considered appropriate behaviours for each sex. In many societies, women are viewed as subordinate to men and have a lower social status, allowing men control over, and greater decision-making power than, women. These differences in gender roles create inequalities and unless challenged, over time they become entrenched and we, as a society, begin to accept that unequal power and status is fair and just the way things are. These beliefs become values that build attitudes; for example, that girls and women are less important, that they think less and feel more than men, that men are leaders, women caregivers. Paying women less for their work or assigning most or all of child care to them, making it harder for them to get education and job training, or keeping them out of 'good-paying' jobs (or any jobs at all) are tactics, sometimes deliberate and sometime unconscious, to keep the existing power structures as they are.

Men's violence against women is, in itself, an expression of gender inequality. As Flood (2013: 1) states:

"Men's violence both maintains and is an expression of men's power over women and children. Men's violence serves a political function of subordination."<sup>2</sup>

The power and privilege that violence gives to men just because they are men, keeps women from achieving their full potential. This makes violence against women a human rights issue.

In conjunction with tertiary services, PCW recognises that violence is a critical social determinant for the health<sup>3</sup> and wellbeing<sup>4</sup> of women. We need to acknowledge the many forms domestic

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly's 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, December 1993, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Involving men in reducing violence against women: facing challenges and making change, Michael Flood White Ribbon Conference May 13-15, 2013, Sydney <http://www.xyonline.net/sites/default/files/Flood,%20White%20Ribbon%20Conf%202013%20talk.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The health costs of violence: measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence, VIC Health 2004 [http://www.health.vic.gov.au/vwhp/downloads/vichealth\\_violence%20\\_%20summary.pdf](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/vwhp/downloads/vichealth_violence%20_%20summary.pdf)

[3]

violence can take including physical, sexual, psychological, social, emotional, economic/financial or spiritual abuse. PCW considers primary prevention to be a key in addressing the serious impacts of domestic violence. This requires a focus on addressing cultural beliefs, societal norms and structural power differences.

**Recommendation 1:**

Focus on addressing cultural beliefs and societal norms which perpetuate gender inequality by eliminating the gender pay gap; promoting women's leadership and political participation; improving pathways for women and girls in education and training; enabling women's participation in the workforce; and enhancing women's economic and financial security.

**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**

Stereotypes about the roles of women and men in society contribute to a culture that tolerates violence against women and their children. The recent National Community Attitude Survey (NCAS) undertaken by VicHealth in 2014, has once again highlighted the disturbing reality that many young people still believe that men should take control in relationships and be the head of a household (19%) and that women prefer a man to be in charge of a relationship (28%).<sup>5</sup> In both cases more young men held these beliefs than young women. Such beliefs perpetuate power imbalances with women being considered less important than a man. When this power balance is challenged or when men believe they have lost their power in a relationship, for example when a woman leaves a relationship, violence may be used as a way of reasserting power.

Many of the above attitudes are learned from a very young age, for example the messages around the toys that boys should play with versus those that girls are meant to play with.

Ongoing advertising and mainstream media also perpetrate traditionalist interpretations of men's and women's roles by continuing to suggest that women do the work around the home and care for children while men go out to work. The sexual objectification of women's bodies and the promotion of a rape culture in advertising are rooted in social norms and attitudes that spill over into all spheres of life. What popular culture does is to normalise the ways in which women are perceived and the ways in which men should perceive women, and themselves.

**Recommendation 2:**

Ensure advertising and media do not reinforce outdated stereotypes about women and men's roles in the community or the home, particularly regulating the images that portray women as sexual objects.

**Recommendation 3:**

Introduce well-researched and proven education programs into the Australian education system to debunk mistaken old-fashioned beliefs about men and women's roles and educate young people and children about respectful relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> The financial cost of domestic and family violence, July 2011  
[http://www.adfvc.unsw.edu.au/PDF%20files/Fast\\_Facts\\_3.pdf](http://www.adfvc.unsw.edu.au/PDF%20files/Fast_Facts_3.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women – Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents 16-24 years, Harris et al, VicHealth 2015, p 46.

[4]

**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.**

In South Australia, the State Government has developed Violence Against Women Collaborations, under the auspice of *A Right to Safety: The Next Phase of South Australia's Women's Safety Strategy 2011-2022*, which outlines the South Australian Government's response to the *National Plan to Respond to Violence Against Women and their Children*. The primary purpose of these collaborations is to build community capacity to prevent and reduce the incidence of violence against women in local regions by working to create cultural and attitudinal change within the community. To date 15 such collaborations have been established in South Australia. The collaborations are multi-agency partnerships which identify ways in which the local community can be included in strategies to prevent violence against women and their children. Such strategies are low expense for Governments and leads to empowerment of local communities and education about the underlying causes of violence against women and their children.

Our Watch (the Foundation to Prevent Violence Against Women and their Children) has recently begun to trial an education program in selected Victorian schools to educate young people about respectful relationships and gender based violence. Schools are a perfect place to start prevention programs and end development of attitudes that allow gender based violence to occur. Educating Australian students would create a future generation that understands the complexities of gender based violence and how to create respectful relationships in their own lives.

**Recommendation 4:**

Develop a program for Australia wide implementation of grass-roots community collaborations which can join together local organisations and government agencies to prevent violence against women and their children before it occurs.

**Recommendation 5:**

Fund Our Watch to expand its Respectful Relationships Education in Schools program to all Australian schools.

PCW commends the Commonwealth Government for its ongoing commitment to preventing violence against women and for investigating the effect of gender inequality on domestic and family violence.

We look forward with interest to reading the final report of the Committee on this inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Amanda Blair

**Co-Chair**

**Premier's Council for Women**

Ms Christine Zeitz

**Co-Chair**

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