



National Union of Students (NUS) Womens Department's Submission to the

Government Inquiry Into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality

'The Role of Higher Education in Perpetuating and Addressing Violence Against Women'

Prepared by:

Heidi La Paglia

National Women's Officer

National Union of Students (NUS)

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1. Introduction

The National Union of Students (NUS) is the peak representative body for Australian university and higher education students. The NUS Women's Department is responsible for advocating on behalf of all women in the higher education sector, making representation to government bodies and sector stakeholders on how to improve women's participation and welfare in higher education, and working with student unions and activists on campuses to run campaigns around issues that affect women students.

The NUS submission to the Government Inquiry into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality attempts to explain how the Higher Education sector in Australia perpetuates violence against women both at university and within the broader community, and provides recommendations for how government initiatives could improve this situation. In order to address and prevent violence against women in Australia, it is recommended that there be an increased effort by the Federal government to include the Higher Education sector in the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*,¹ and to increase funding for initiatives within Higher Education which address and prevent violence against women.

¹Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* < https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf>.

2. Context: Higher Education and the perpetuation gendered violence

In 2015, the NUS Women's Department's 'Talk About It' survey found that 72% of women who study at university experience some form of sexual harassment while studying, 14% experience rape, and 15% experience violence.²

These statistics are a reflection of the broader community, where women are extremely likely to experience sexual assault and / or violence at some point during their lifespan. In 2012, the *Personal Safety, Australia (PSS)* survey found that 41% of all women aged 18 years and over (3,560,600) had experienced violence since the age of 15.³ While this survey showed that men were just as likely to have experienced violence since the age of 15 (49%), the majority of both males and females said that the act was perpetrated by a male.

While there are a range of influences which contribute to specific instances of harassment and violence, the high rates of violence against both men and women in Australia are broadly underpinned by unequal gender stereotypes and roles.⁴

2.1. Gender Socialisation and Violence Against Women

Throughout childhood, individuals are exposed constantly to cultural information reinforcing gender stereotypes which assume men to be 'powerful' and 'strong' and women to be 'passive' and 'weak'.⁵ These stereotypes are often first taught, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by the family unit, and then are reinforced by every other social institution individuals interact with, including the media, the education system and eventually the workforce.⁶

In both Australia, and the United States, there is a profound amount of evidence to suggest that the gender stereotypes that individuals are exposed to throughout their childhood have a profound effect on how they perceive and interact with others throughout their life.⁷ In the Commonwealth's *National Plan to Address Violence Against Women*, it is noted that there is a direct link between

² NUS 2015 'Talk About It,' *National Union of Students*, p. 25

³ ABS 2012, 'Personal Safety, Australia,' *Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS*, viewed 24 March 2016 <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/12FE9E8891F24C7DCA257C3D000D8254?opendocument>>

⁴ AWHN 2014, 'Health and the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women,' *The Australian Women's Health Network*, p. 9.

⁵ Michigan Union 2016, 'Gender Socialization,' *Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Centre, University of Michigan*, viewed 7 March 2016 <<https://sapac.umich.edu/article/323>>, p. 1

⁶ Connell, RW 1995, *Masculinities*, 2nd edition, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, p. 35.

⁷ Michigan Union 2016, 'Gender Socialization,' *Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Centre, University of Michigan*, viewed 7 March 2016 <<https://sapac.umich.edu/article/323>>, p. 2

gender role socialisation and violence against women in Australia.⁸

“The unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men and adherence to rigid or narrow gender roles and stereotypes reflects gendered patterns in the prevalence and perpetuation of violence.”

2.2. The perpetuation of gender roles and gender violence in Higher Education

The gender roles which perpetuate violence against women are replicated in the Higher Education system, as they are in every other social institution. This is perhaps most evident in the patterns in women and men’s participation. While women’s participation in Higher Education has greatly increased over the last few decades, women are significantly overrepresented in the academic areas which directly correlate to occupations that are associated with feminine traits. Examples of these include: the Arts and Humanities, Education, Nursing, and increasingly, Medicine. On the other side of the spectrum, the areas of study which have been traditionally considered more masculine, such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), are similarly overrepresented by men.⁹

This divide between the areas in which women and men study does itself does not reflect the epidemic of violence against women. However, it does show that the Higher Education sector is compliant in the societal perpetuation of gender roles, which underpin gendered violence.

2.3. Gender stereotypes in the academic curriculum

While the University participation rates of women students have risen greatly over the last few decades, many theorists have argued that the University curriculum has remained pre-dominantly male centric. It is argued that this has stemmed from the founding fathers of Universities who had a strict classical view of what education should look like. This approach to a University education is built around the texts of the western white men who founded philosophy, and therefore omits the cultures of many marginalised groups including racial and ethnic minorities, and women.

Studies have found that curriculum gender bias is particularly evident in male dominated areas such as Engineering, Maths, and the Sciences. In a study done by the National Science Foundation for example, it was found that the *“engineering curricula (and physical science texts) tend to be crafted with over-use of masculine stereotypes and examples, such as automobiles, rockets and weapons.”*¹⁰

These curriculum biases both reinforce gender stereotypes which contribute to masculinity entrenched violence, and contribute to the gender divide in academic areas.

⁸ Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* < https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf>, p. 8

⁹ ABS 2014, ‘ Perspectives on Education and Training: Australians with qualifications in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), 2010–11,’ *Australian Bureau of Statistics*, viewed 26 march 2016 < <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4250.0.55.005~2010%E2%80%9311~Main%20Features~Demographic%20characteristics~5>>.

¹⁰ Joseph, PB 2000, ‘Connecting the Canon,’ in PB, Joseph, Bravmann, SL, Windschitl, MA, Mikel, ER & Green, NS, *Cultures of Curriculum*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Mahwah, NJ.

3. The Need for Investment: Addressing gender inequality and violence

As the institutions which are increasingly becoming the centre of innovation and leadership in Australia, Universities have the ability to be the driving force behind a movement which not only responds to, but also finds ways to prevent gender inequality and violence.

The importance of this is noted in the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women*, which includes strategies to enhance gender equality under National Outcome 1, which aims to keep ‘Communities Safe and Free From Violence.’¹¹

“At every level of society, gender inequalities have a profound influence on violence against women and their children.- Social Policies that address gender inequality and improve the status of women are critical to reducing violence against women.”¹²

3.1. Insufficient Resourcing

Through academic areas Social Sciences and Gender Studies, Universities have the opportunity to research the complexities of gender inequality and gender violence in Australia, and provide recommendations for how it can be alleviated.¹³ However, in recent years, these areas have lost significant amounts of staff and resources as a result of the sector losing federal funding, and of many universities restructuring faculties and academic areas to save money. Melbourne University,¹⁴ Latrobe University,¹⁵ and the University of Sydney¹⁶ and the University of Western Australia (UWA)¹⁷ are all examples of universities which have restructured their Arts faculties in recent years, and cut significant numbers of staff.

¹¹ Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* < https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf>, p. 14

¹² Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* < https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf>, p. 15

¹³ Kennedy, T 2012, ‘We need gender studies to battle inequality across the board,’ *The Guardian*, viewed 26 March 2016 < <http://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/blog/2012/feb/08/gender-studies-inequality-boardroom>>.

¹⁴ Crook, A 2016, ‘Melbourne Uni Arts faculty anger at Dean’s re-appointment,’ *Crikey*, viewed 27 March 2016 < <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/11/06/melbourne-uni-arts-faculty-anger-at-deans-re-appointment/>>.

¹⁵ Yu, A 2014, ‘Drastic cuts at La Trobe University,’ *Bendigo Advertiser*, viewed 26 March 2016 < <http://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/2370073/drastic-cuts-at-la-trobe-university/>>

¹⁶ Olding, R 2016, ‘University of Sydney’s ‘secret’ cut condemned,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, viewed 27 March 2016 < <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/university-of-sydney-changes-show-a-tendency-to-favour-the-corporate-elite-20160125-gmdkro.html>>.

¹⁷ ABC 2015, ‘UWA plans major job cuts with 300 staff to be laid off,’ *ABC News*, viewed 27 March 2016 < <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-09/uwa-major-job-cuts-to-lay-off-300-staff/7015500>>.

Budget cuts in these areas have not only resulted in significant decreases in the courses and units available for students to study on gender inequality, but have also limited opportunities to address and prevent gendered violence at universities and in a broader Australian context.

3.2. Inadequate responses

As a result of budget deficiencies, many university student services around Australia have lost staff, and in turn, capacity to support students who are victims of gender discrimination and / or violence. The effect of this was evident in the NUS ‘Talk About It’ survey, which found that the majority of students who had experienced sexual harassment, assault or violence did not report the incident (94%). This was most often because they didn’t know how (23%), or they didn’t think they would gain support through the process (22%).¹⁸

The experiences of those students who did report the incident also showed that these fears were not unfounded. While there were a few survey respondents that felt supported by staff at their university, an overwhelming majority were unsatisfied with the outcome. Some of the most common reasons given for the dissatisfaction included that there were no repercussions for the perpetrator, or that the university blamed them for the situation rather than providing support¹⁹

While universities collect funds from students every semester to resource support services through the Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF), student advocates, counselling services, and women’s support groups are consistently underfunded, and lack the skills to provide students who experience sexual harassment, violence and / or assault with the support they require,

This service gap both disadvantages the student body, and limits the ability of the Federal government to meet the National Outcome 4 of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*, which is about providing ‘Services that meet the needs of women and their children experiencing violence.’²⁰

¹⁸ NUS 2015, ‘Talk About It,’ *National Union of Students*, p. 22-25

¹⁹ NUS 2015, ‘Talk About It,’ *National Union of Students*, p. 22-25

²⁰ Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* < https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf>, p. 23

4. The Role of Government

In order to adequately address the high rates of violence against women in Australia, it is important that the Federal government takes a coordinated approach that includes the relevant areas of the education and health care systems, as well as government and non-government initiatives.

The need for an integrated service approach has already been recognised by several states governments, such as those in Tasmania and Western Australia, which have both implemented *Safe At Home* initiatives, which aim to provide coordinated support through the police, as well as community services which provide support for women and children to remain in their home after they have experienced violence.²¹

In South Australia, the *Women's Safety Strategy 2005-2010* has an even broader focus “*from early intervention work focussed on preventing family violence, through to community education to raise awareness about the level and complexity of women's safety.*”²²

However, while there is a significant amount of work being done across the country to address and violence against women, the inclusion of universities and other formal educational institutions in government strategies is almost non-existent.

4.1. Supporting the Higher Education sector to address violence against women

As institutions that have a significant influence on the rest of individuals personal and professional lives, universities and training institutions have a unique opportunity to drive a commitment to addressing and preventing violence against women in Australia. However, in order to do this effectively, a commitment from the commonwealth is required to include the education system in strategies to address violence against women, and to provide adequate resources to educational institutions to fund educational programs which address violence, as well as the complex gender inequalities which underly it.

²¹ Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* < https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf>, p. 48

²² Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* < https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf>, p. 46

5. Recommendations.

In order to support the Higher Education sector to effectively address and prevent violence against women in Australia, it is recommended that the Federal government:

1. Include the higher education sector in the National Plan to Address Violence Against Women, as well as in any future strategies to address and prevent gendered violence.
2. Increase funding for Higher Education in Australia to at least the OECD average of 1% of GDP.
3. Provide higher education funding grants specifically for teaching units and research projects, which aim to unravel the gender inequalities which underpin violence against women, and provide solutions for how to address these inequalities
4. Require Universities to provide on campus counsellors and / or referral services for students who experience sexual harassment, assault and / or violence at university. These should be funded through the revenue gained from the Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF).