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31 March 2016

### **Darebin City Council Submission to the Inquiry into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality**

Darebin City Council (Council) has a long-standing commitment to addressing gender inequality and violence against women. This commitment is illustrated by Council's endorsed position and strategies to increase women's participation, wellbeing and leadership in Darebin as articulated in our Council Plan 2013-17:

Strategy 2.16 *"Gender equity: promote gender equity, prevent violence against women and support the right of women to engage and participate fully and equally in all aspects of community life"*

and dedicated policies and plans: Darebin Women's Equity Strategy 2012-2015, Gender Equity Action Plan 2015-17 and Preventing Violence Against Women Action Plan 2015-17.

While there is no single cause of violence against women, well-established research confirms that gender inequality is a key driver, best defined as the following expressions:

1. Condoning of violence against women
2. Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence
3. Rigid gender roles and identities
4. Male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women (Our Watch, 2015).

Therefore, Council recognises the vital need to address gender inequality as a pre-condition to creating a society that is free from gender-based violence. It is increasingly clear that in order to truly effect change and reduce the prevalence of violence against women, we must tackle the root cause of the problem; *gender inequality*.

Council is pleased to provide this submission as input into the Senate Inquiry into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality. Should you wish to discuss this submission or require further information, please contact:

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## Introduction

Domestic and family violence refers to acts of violence that occur in intimate relationships and between family members. It includes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and financial abuse. Whereas violence against women encompasses all forms of violence that women experience which is gender-based and/or affects women disproportionately. Therefore, “*violence against women*” is used throughout this submission to encompass domestic violence, family violence, intimate partner violence and all other forms of gender-based violence.

In this submission, gender equality is understood as the outcome reached whereby women and men have equal access to resources and power to live free from gender discrimination and the impact this has on their health and wellbeing. Gender inequality describes the unequal distribution of power, resources, opportunity, and value afforded to women and men in society due to prevailing gendered norms and structures (Our Watch, 2015). While it is widely understood and supported by research that gender inequality is a key driver of violence against women, the relationship between the two and the continuum on which these exist continue to be misunderstood by many. Making the link between gender inequality and violence against women is paramount in any effort to reduce Australia’s unacceptably high rates of violence against women.

### 1. The impact of gender inequality in all spheres of life

Violence against women has been referred to as ‘the most pervasive yet least recognised human rights abuse in the world’ by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2008). Such is the gravity of the problem that important international organisations, including the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), acknowledge it as a violation of the rights and freedoms of women to take their equal share in political, economic, social, cultural and civil life (UNGA, 1993). It has significant consequences on the health and wellbeing of women and children, with severe and persistent effects on physical and mental health and enormous costs in terms of premature death and disability.

The values, beliefs and attitudes that we hold about the roles of women and men are stereotypical ideas based on traditional and rigid notions of masculinity and femininity. These have negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of both women and men (WHO, 2008). They also contribute to gender inequality, where we see an unequal distribution of power and resources among women and men. This inequality displays itself in all spheres of personal, community and political life across the lifespan.

Put simply, gender inequality is a daily experience. From an early age, we are (in obvious but also subtle ways, including through toys (Quek 2015, Smith 2014), books (Ciezarek 2014, Albers 2016) or “social policing” by peers or adults) made aware of our gender and the limitations attached to rigid understandings of what being “a girl” or “a boy” is (with no recognition that, far from being a binary, gender is actually fluid (Ehrensaft 2014)). Gender stereotypes limit the ability of both adults and children to explore personal interests, opportunities and responsibilities. We see the impact of gender inequality and its relationship with violence against women in all spheres and stages of life, from the early years, in young people and older people.

Introducing strategies to address the impact of gender inequality, beginning in the early years and continuing through all life stages, in settings where people live, work and play, will see a reduction in violence against women. The early years in particular are vital in preventing violence against women. Promoting positive gender norms in the early years creates a necessary foundation for children to grow and develop their ideas and understanding about gender. An investment in early years, coupled with mutually-reinforcing initiatives across the life stages is paramount to addressing gender inequality across all spheres of life.



## **Promoting Positive Gender Norms in the Early Years and Education Settings**

The early years are a critical time when gender roles and stereotypical notions of what it means to be masculine or feminine are shaped and when positive influences on children's and families understanding of gender norms can most easily be achieved. It also provides a setting and life stage where, through challenging gender stereotypes patriarchy, we can also challenge heterosexism and cisgenderism. There are endless opportunities for educators, policy makers and children's program developers to have a positive influence on gender, through children's play, language, toys and storytelling.

When early years and educational settings (especially practitioners) are equipped with the skills to challenge rigid gender roles and stereotypes, children are given the opportunity to explore the role of gender in creative ways (Rainbow Families Council, 2010). This also creates an inclusive and safe space for children to question and challenge assumptions and stereotypes about gender.

Through developing the capacity of our early years educators, policy makers and program developers, Council has seen first-hand the benefits in creating positive gender norms and practices with children, through maternal and child health, childcare and education settings.

### **Essential actions for the early years:**

- Incorporate challenging norms, attitudes and practices about gender into the national Early Years Learning Framework
- To that end, build on the growing body of evidence highlighting the link between the gendered marketing of toys and gendered violence, as well as the role of books and other early socialisation factors in the upholding of and adherence to rigid gender norms (and conversely the challenging power of these and their capacity to promote a broader understanding of gender, its fluidity and complexity).
- Embed a gender lens across the funding, service planning and delivery of early years

## **2. Making the link between violence against women and gender inequality**

There is a body of research which demonstrates that gender inequality is a key driver for violence against women, yet the relationship between the two and the continuum on which these exist continue to be misunderstood by many. This violence exists on a continuum from sexism, sexist jokes, gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, to assault, rape and murder. Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS) confirm that attitudes to gender equality are the strongest influence on people's understanding of violence. This means that people who hold attitudes that are more supportive of equality between women and men are also more likely to have a nuanced view of violence against women and be less likely to endorse attitudes that are supportive of violence (VicHealth, 2014). With this in mind, it is imperative that Australia finds ways to make the link between gender inequality and the rape and murder of women.

There needs to be recognition and uptake of the significant body of work across the preventing violence against women movement in Victoria, which has been working to find more sophisticated and easy-to-understand ways



to communicate this link. . Namely, Gippsland Women’s Health have established a suite of tools called [Make the Link](#). These posters and tools help to articulate the intrinsic link between gender inequality and violence against women and describe the impact of ‘casual’ and ‘serious’ forms of sexism and violence. Without a wider community understanding of this link, our efforts to reduce gender inequality are diminished.

### **3. Addressing the underlying causes of violence against women**

Gender inequality is suitably described by Our Watch as, *“the core of the problem and the heart of the solution”*. The strongest predictor of high levels of violence against women is unequal power between men and women (VicHealth, 2014), beliefs and behaviours reflecting disrespect for women, low support for gender equality and adherence to rigid and stereotypical gender roles, relations and identities (Our Watch, 2015). Therefore every effort to reduce violence against women, must address the underlying causes and key drivers of violence against women, notably gender inequality. When we address gender inequality to prevent violence against women and improve women’s equal participation, we improve outcomes for the entire community.

Making the link between gender inequality and violence against women is paramount to tackling the root cause of violence against women. Moreover, strategies to address violence against women must challenge the underlying causes of this violence, not simply the symptoms or contributing factors which are often seen as more enticing. Challenging gender inequality can be uncomfortable, because it requires us to interrogate our own values, experiences and privilege. Importantly, it’s our greatest protective factor against violence against women and therefore cannot be compromised.

#### **Essential national actions to tackle the root causes of violence against women**

- A fundamental understanding that “gender inequality is the core of the problem and the heart of the solution” (Our Watch, 2015)
- All tiers of government must develop policy that has a nuanced understanding of the distinctions between primary prevention, early intervention and tertiary response, and is informed by evidence-based frameworks that address the underlying causes of violence against women
- A national approach to preventing violence against women that addresses structural and systemic gender inequalities while simultaneously shifting gender norms, attitudes and practices
- Actions that are mutually reinforcing and occur across all life stages and settings
- Actions that address the contributing factors of violence against women



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