

Federal Parliamentary Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia

Submission from the Association of Women Educators (www.awe.asn.au)

In relation to:

- the adequacy of policy and community responses to domestic violence;
- how the Federal Government can best support, contribute to and drive the social, cultural and behavioural shifts required to eliminate violence against women and their children; and

Returning a feminist lens to education policy development

In the 1980s Australia was admired, internationally, for its government sponsored feminist leadership. In the early 90s every Australian education department had a gender equity unit and there was active and explicitly feminist development and implementation of gender equity policy.

Over the past three decades the state has increasingly marginalised and silenced feminist critique of politics, policies and programs (Marshall, 1998, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003, 2005; Francis and Skelton 2005), and stymied the agency of feminist bureaucrats (Sawer, 1990; Yeatman, 1990; Eistenstein, 1996; Connell, 1987; Franzway et al., 1989; Blackmore 2011, Yates, 2008). Due to this systemic sidelining of a gender analysis in policy development and professional learning, understanding of the dimensions of gender and disadvantage and the persistent and far reaching impacts of the dominant, popular construction of hegemonic masculinity are not adequately incorporated into education policy (Connell 1997; Connell 2001; Ollis 2011).

In 2014, most of the gender justice work in education is decentred and the dominant discourse is gender neutral. Illustrating this problem is the way the proliferation of programs and resources to respond to bullying and violence over the past three decades has been increasingly informed by individualist and psychological discourse and 'expertise' featuring the 'omission or denial' of substantial research from the fields of sociology and education regarding the significance of gendered attitudes and behaviours (Mills, 2001). A significant example of the effect of this non-recognition is that in schools the problem of gendered violence is 'still poorly understood, the definition narrow and teachers reluctant and afraid to address it in the classroom' (Ollis, 2011).

The effectiveness of educators requires that administrators and systems acknowledge the issues, understand the complexities and contestations, and provide stronger and more public support for engendering change. Leaders provide important conditions requisite to mobilising progressive spaces – a strong commitment to gender justice; a deep and critical knowledge about issues of gender construction; and an understanding of teaching and schooling as political processes that can both enable and constrain gender justice.

More than curriculum - critical pedagogy makes the difference

An anti-oppressive approach to education, informed by critical pedagogy, is central to confronting and transforming power dynamics in schools and in the wider community. This approach engages citizens **from an early age** in development of understandings about identity and relations of gender and power.

Educators can engage students from an early age as active, empowered learners able to critically read the social and political world about them, and to negotiate the politics of daily life in the active pursuit of justice for self and others. Through critical pedagogy, educators provide a 'discursive

framework that forms the conditions of possibility for certain selves (Probyn, 1993, p. 168). They can cultivate understandings, attitudes and skills for resisting narrow ways of being that impact negatively on their own and others' lives, for example by examining the ways individual and group identities and behaviours are shaped by social and cultural factors (race, class, ability, gender, family background, sexuality, language, culture, etc.) and the dynamics of privilege, status and power. Such understandings challenge dominant forms of masculinity and femininity, and support the construction of non-violent forms of gender identities.

Critical pedagogy makes the difference in the multiplicity of ways that dominant groups and power relations, and normative narrow and restrictive beliefs and identities, can be continuously analysed, debated, and challenged through the everyday curriculum and life of the school. For educators who are sufficiently equipped there are countless opportunities within the **everyday curriculum**, as well as in designated curriculum and programs, for reflection on concepts which expose prejudice, and to examine and overturn the negative attitudes which underlie many bullying and violent behaviours. Equally there are many opportunities to reflect on and foster positive, inclusive and proactive attitudes and practices.

Supporting teachers' professional learning

Although gender justice work in the education systems arena has largely been stalled or subverted, in recent years the Federal government, primarily through the work of the Office for Women, has increased focus on and funding for programs for gender equity. Substantial funding has gone to rounds of Respectful Relationships programs which are conducted in schools by outside agencies. **A focus on outside programs is inadequate.** It is timely for shared understanding and partnerships in this agenda to be developed across sectors and departments, recognising the constraints of neo-liberalism and corporate managerialism to the recognition of feminism and a gender analysis in policy and practice, and the return of respect for the professionalism of the knowledge worker.

The implementation of the new Australian curriculum needs to explicitly pay attention to the ways social justice concerns can be articulated and embedded **in its delivery**. This includes the necessity for increased professional support and learning.

Educators are key to integrated, embedded and sustainable social change. Findings from local and international evidence-based research points to **the primary importance of the teacher and teaching, supported by strategic teacher professional development** (McRae, 2001; Rowe, 2003; Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010) focussed on critical understandings and attitudes to power dynamics (Twemlow et al., 2006).

'We must better prepare educators to critically examine the power structures of the school and the community so that they may act as role models and provide their students with the language and the tools to confront the inequalities (re)produced within that system' (Meyer 2008, p. 42).

Support is needed for the nurturing of pre-service and in-service educators' professional 'threshold' knowledge about gender in relation to notions of identity and privilege, status and power, and all areas of social difference (race, class, ability, family background, sexuality, language, culture, etc.). Such support requires that teachers critically examine their own assumptions and behaviours and acquire a deep and critical understanding of how gender is constructed, so as to identify and challenge (rather than reinscribe) the structures and practices that normalise and perpetuate gender inequity, and problematise and offer alternatives to dominant gender constructions (Palmer, 1998; Howard, 2003).

An explicitly feminist lens on education policy development, including policy support for professional learning for educators, is key to an integrated, embedded, sustainable community wide path to gender equity and an end to gendered violence.

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