

BPW in South Australia

Submission to the Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality Inquiry

BPW in South Australia is affiliated to BPW International and advocates locally, nationally and internationally for women. BPW International works for global gender equality in power and decision-making through our advocacy and UN participation. BPW develops the business, professional and leadership potential of women through its advocacy, mentoring, networking, skill building and economic empowerment programs and projects around the world. Campaigning to raise awareness and seek prevention of domestic violence and lobbying for gender equality are part of our core business.

We have decided to address the issues briefly under each of the headings:

Domestic violence and gender inequality, with particular reference to:

- a. the role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence;**

In Australia there is clear evidence across many spheres and throughout the community about the role of gender inequality and its links to domestic violence.

We will start with the quote from our Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull when he called upon all Australians to make a cultural shift and to stop disrespecting women. He declared that gender inequality lies at the heart of domestic violence. He clearly stated that violence against women starts with disrespecting women:

"Let me say this to you: disrespecting women does not always result in violence against women. But all violence against women begins with disrespecting women..."

For many women, this statement from the highest politician in the land is long overdue – by decades!

Inherently Australian culture has been thus – whenever issues came up that were seen as “women’s issues” they were dismissed or at least put on the back-burner to deal with more important issues. Domestic violence was certainly seen as one of those issues, a woman’s issue which anyway only happened to certain women, not admitting that it could happen anywhere and potentially to anyone. This attitude – calling it a women’s issue is interesting as normally society does not deal with issues by blaming the victim but they do (and have done for decades) with men’s violence against women. My point here is – with a drink driving accident – *do we primarily blame the person who was hit?* Or the one punch/coward punch – *do we blame the one who was hit/killed?*

This must be addressed and has certainly started to be addressed better. But this is only part of the problem.

Recent research has begun to examine how our culture underpins the acceptance of domestic violence. The *Herald Sun*, on White Ribbon Day 25 November 2015, ran a story about DV as their major front page story, with the truly disturbing news – coming from research released by the federal government – that *“by the age of 10, young Australian boys are downplaying and excusing sexist and violent outbursts, and girls are already blaming themselves for this behaviour”*.

Sporting coaches, even those of very young children, can still be heard making statements such as “don’t be a girl” or “you’re playing like a girl”. Why is this a derogatory term? After years of this in Australia, why are we not surprised when young sporting heroes believe they can disrespect, take advantage of a girl, commit violence, when their coaches over many years have ingrained such messages into their psyches.

The real point, now gradually being recognised across society, is that men’s violence against women (MVAW) is not a woman’s issue but everyone’s issue – an issue for the community, our schools, businesses, governments – all of society. As a nation we are all devalued by not valuing women.

An alternative message to boys and young men to “don’t be a girl” is “be a man”. This is just as destructive and divisive: *“The three most destructive words that every man receives when he’s a boy is when he’s told to ‘be a man,’”* —Joe Ehrmann, coach and former NFL player. This message furthers a false and toxic ideal of masculinity. Australia has long been seen as a men’s country, a blokey country, tending to revere the idealised but toxic masculinity myth and to put down as weak those who do not live up to that image. This is slowly changing, but still leaves many men believing they should aim to reach this unattainable toxic persona.

Gender inequity for women in Australian society is seen across many spheres:

- the gender pay gap is currently 17.9% and the widest it’s been for a long time
- the casualisation of the workforce – mainly affecting women (~75%)
- women’s work taken for granted and consequently not valued
- the diversity of women in the workplace is not currently representative of our communities
- women’s ideas often ignored in board rooms, until repeated by one of the males
- women retire on 1/3 less than their male counterparts
- women’s sporting groups paid significantly less than men’s
- media coverage of women’s events less than men’s
- women breastfeeding their babies in public vilified but sexualised images of women in advertising (even at family events) being seen as acceptable
- women are still sexualised in advertising, by the men they work with and business leaders
- the acceptance of wolf-whistling or calling out sexist messages to women or young girls
- Family Court decisions putting relationships of children with their fathers above their and their mother’s safety.

All such attitudes contribute to the whole – “doing nothing is not an option”. We have a unique opportunity now to change attitudes, given society’s growing realisation that “something needs to change.”

We have need to take advantage of this rare window of opportunity and accept this challenge, to take a strategic and comprehensive approach to address many of the cultural barriers to resolving the dilemma of family violence -while creating a responsive and dynamic system that recognises the needs of victims, perpetrators, our schools and businesses and our society.

b. 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 in:

i. the marketing of toys and other products

Two examples of poor and dangerous messages are the selling of sexualised girl dolls, and computer/video games which often involve violence – with male characters leading the violence.

ii. education, and

Australia needs:

- gender empowerment programs developed and implemented in schools, delivered by qualified social workers.
- pastoral care workers (School Chaplaincy Program) replaced by social workers.
- time allocated in all years from 6-12 for program delivery.
- child protection (protective and respectful behaviours) in the curriculum from R-12 which is reported in school annual reports
- programs focused on respect for sexuality and sexual orientation.

iii. entertainment;

Computer/video games often involve violence, with male characters leading the violence and female figures either secondary or the recipients of violence.

Clubs, sporting or community groups, should be safety audited to assess what they offer, both officially and as entertainment or rewards, to children and young people. It isn't ok to engage strippers for a party for 16 year olds or to allow pornography access on premises, and such actions could in fact be seen as grooming.

c. 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; and

Government (all levels) funding to sporting and other children's clubs should be tied to the auditing of a Safe Clubs Framework. This Framework must cover attitudes and practices toward children and young people.

Some issues in the Family Court must be shared with the Criminal Court if assessed as abusive or criminal. Parental access has been permitted in cases where there is evidence of parental violence, justified on the basis of a principle that prioritises the need for a relationship with both over the safety of the children. The safety of both the children and the mothers needs to be the primary priority.

Legal support services are not covering a broad spectrum of women:

- financial net is not wide enough
- (ex)wives of powerful men not covered

We are taking this opportunity to share a small excerpt of the AASW submission to the recent AHRC Roundtable on DV & CP as another example of our concerns:

“When domestic violence issues are referred to the child protection system the mother is often made responsible for protecting the children. Child protection systems often emphasise the behaviour of the mother as the issue that puts children at risk, rather than the abusive behaviour of the perpetrator, which places the children at risk. Women victims of violence often bear the full force of

official surveillance and judgement of their competence as a mother, with the perpetrator of that violence disappearing from public scrutiny. The perpetrator is not held accountable for his violence, escaping any scrutiny or accountability. Rather than taking this opportunity to engage with the perpetrator and hold him to account for his violence the system misses a unique window to intervene and force him to deal with his behaviour and return the family to safety. A study conducted in Queensland that explored domestic violence in the context of child protection found when interviewing workers that ‘...the misunderstanding of domestic violence often leads child protection officials to hold nonviolent mothers responsible for ending the violence’ and that ‘male perpetrators of violence were sometimes judged to be satisfactory fathers, just not good husbands’. Such misunderstandings of domestic violence ultimately lead to poor outcomes for children and unsustainable and unsafe plans in the child protection field.”

Australia’s policies for families and women are fragmented and disconnected. This is blatantly evident in Australia’s approach to MVAW and DV.

It is no much that the “*left hand doesn’t know what right hand is doing*”, but rather the “siloes approach” in government that is the problem. Australia needs a suite of policies working together to address the range and complexity of gender issues that contribute to the alarming level of violence experienced by women.

Our patriarchal culture, with mainly white middle-aged men making the decisions, prioritises the economy over society. Women and families interests come later if there is funding available to deal with them.

When will Australia – our governments and our business community – realise they will do better in economic and developmental terms if we apply the Women’s Empowerment Principles, look after our education system and at families’ involvement in the workplace, deliver accessible affordable childcare and fair and equitable PPL, expand the opportunities for flexible work and ensure a co-ordinated, connected and comprehensive suite of policies that addresses all these including MVAW & DV?

d. any other related matters

Evidence of DV and CP that is accepted in the Family Court needs to be transferrable to Criminal Court when appropriate.

Politicians and church leaders should undergo evidence-based gender-orientation education programs to ensure accurate knowledge and to dissolve power networks based on keeping silent about sexual orientation.

We need a Children’s Commissioner in each state. Children’s voices need to be heard *earlier, stronger and more frequently and more authentically* in Family Court matters about DV and abuse. Many children ask “*why wasn’t I heard?*”

BPW in South Australia Domestic & Family Violence Taskforce

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BPW in South Australia

Taking Action for Women’s Equality – at work, on boards, in leadership

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