



Submission to the Senate Finance
and Public Administration Inquiry
into **Domestic Violence and
Gender Inequality**

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Introduction

Gender inequality has a strong relationship with a range of types of violence, especially sexual violence and domestic and family violence. These forms of violence are generally considered inherently gendered due to the overwhelming perpetration of the violence by men towards women and children throughout the world.

As the statewide agency in Victoria specialising in responses to family violence, **safe steps** sees the direct and devastating consequences of gendered violence on a daily basis. We are witness to the clear gendered nature of domestic violence through our 24-hour family violence response service.

safe steps welcomes this opportunity to highlight the connection between domestic violence and gender inequality to the Committee, and to progress solutions that will, over time, reduce the prevalence of domestic and family violence.

About safe steps Family Violence Response Centre

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre is Victoria's 24 hour, 7 day per week service for women and children experiencing family violence. **safe steps** provides a critical service intervention, including support, accommodation, advocacy and referral throughout Victoria and nationally. **safe steps** ensures that women and children experiencing family violence, including those at the highest risk of harm, receive an immediate response to keep them safe.

Gender inequality

Change the Story: A shared framework to prevent violence against women and their children (2015) defines gender inequality as:

*a social condition characterised by unequal value afforded to men and women and an unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunity between them.*¹

Women around the world have a lower social status, reduced access to resources, lower wellbeing and a greater chance of living in poverty than men.²

Gender inequality pervades all aspects of society, including interpersonal relationships, communities and social groups, institutions, systems and structures. For example, women and men are broadly unequal in the labour market, within workplaces, and there are inequalities evident between individual male and female employees in particular work sites.

Women are not only affected by disadvantage relating to gender. Frequently gender and other types of disadvantage combine to determine women's life outcomes and options. Wealth, language, transgender status, race, disability, age, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, sexual orientation and religion are all factors that affect women's lives and interact with gender to shape their social, political, cultural and economic status.³ In turn, these factors affect women's access to resources, levels of isolation, and vulnerability to adverse circumstances.

The nature and experience of family violence is influenced by a range of other kinds of inequality. Eliminating gender inequality alone will likely not be sufficient to eliminate family violence. Women and children who face intersecting types of inequality, along with gender inequality, experience greater levels of violence, as well as more barriers to escaping violence. Often this is due to

discrimination, social and economic exclusion, isolation, dependence and human rights violation. Often women experiencing multiple and intersecting inequalities experience violence directly targeted at their identity and associated circumstances, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, disability or sexuality.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence involves an ongoing pattern of threatening, coercive and violent behaviour in a current or former domestic or intimate relationship. This not only includes physical assault, but also threats, verbal abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, abuse of institutional and administrative systems, economic abuse and control, social abuse and isolation, cultural or spiritual abuse, all of which cause a person to live in fear. Domestic violence is most likely to be perpetrated by men towards women and children⁴ – this makes domestic violence a gendered form of violence.

What is family violence?

Family violence has a broader definition than domestic violence, as it includes abuse within a range of relationships involving relatives other than intimate partners, or other people in dependent or interdependent relationships with one another. Family violence, along with other forms of interpersonal violence, is most likely to be perpetrated by men.

About this submission

safe steps works with women and children facing all types of family violence, not only when it is perpetrated by women's intimate partners. Due to the specific Terms of Reference for this Inquiry, however, this submission will focus on domestic violence. Where other types of family violence, such as elder abuse, are included in the comments this will be specified.

This submission refers to the victims and survivors of domestic and family violence as women, and perpetrators as men, due to the overwhelming prevalence of violence being perpetrated by men towards women and children.

Gender roles and expectations are not uniform across Australian society. Cultural and community expectations of gender roles differ, for example between rural and regional areas and in metropolitan centres, between age groups, and they are different for people with disability and people without disability. This submission discusses the dominant representations and expectations of gender roles in society and their influence on domestic violence. **safe steps** acknowledges that not all people relate to the dominant gender roles and expectations in the same way.

Summary of Recommendations

1. That the Commonwealth Government develops and implements a Gender Equality Strategy to comprehensively promote gender equality across all areas of government policy.
2. That the Commonwealth Government identifies a lead agency to resource and support gender equality efforts across government.
3. That the Commonwealth Government produces gender impact statements along with each budget to aid with monitoring the progress of the Gender Equality Strategy.

4. That the Council of Australian Governments develops an Operational Framework to support the implementation of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*.
5. That the Council of Australian Governments ensures that:
 - Evaluation and ongoing monitoring of progress against the National Plan is undertaken by an independent agency
 - Women and children who have experienced gendered violence, with a variety of life experiences and in a range of circumstances, are involved in the evaluation process
 - Subject matter experts, particularly service providers responding to gendered violence, are involved in an ongoing process to monitor and evaluate the National Plan.
6. That the Commonwealth Government addresses the impacts of economic gender inequality through:
 - Reviewing the impact of changes to social security payments on women and men, with a particular focus on the outcomes for survivors of family and domestic violence
 - examining the impact that parental leave arrangements have on gender inequality
 - working with employers to promote retention and career progression of women who are sole parents and/or working part-time
 - applying Family Violence Exception provisions to women on temporary visas.
 - That the Commonwealth and State Governments agree to a national costed plan to increase the availability of social and affordable housing over the next 3-5 years.
7. That the Commonwealth and State Governments agree to a national costed plan to increase the availability of social and affordable housing over the next 3-5 years.
8. That the Council of Australian Governments establishes a separate National Agreement and funding programme to resource responses to and reduction of domestic and family violence.
9. That the Commonwealth Government seeks to establish incentives to promote the participation of men in domestic and caring work.
10. That the Commonwealth Government addresses dominant gender roles and expectations through:
 - Promoting critical media literacy through education
 - Promoting women's artistic and cultural contributions, including through arts and media funding
 - Addressing objectifying and/or degrading portrayals of women through regulation of advertising, television, film and media.

Role of gender inequality contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence

The level of domestic violence incidents within a community has a strong negative correlation with social, economic and cultural inequalities between the genders. Rates of domestic violence are lower in societies that have lower rates of gender inequity.

The role of gender inequality is demonstrated through a variety of aspects of domestic violence. This includes not only the prevalence of domestic violence, but also:

- the severity of men's domestic violence towards women and children
- the dynamics of domestic violence
- the role of gender inequality in creating barriers to safety for women and children
- the role of unequal gendered attitudes, expectations and beliefs, particularly as they influence public authorities.

Violence against women in an intimate or domestic setting breaks through all demographic barriers, but affects some groups of women in higher proportions. Other types of inequalities include disability, age, race, sexuality and income. The intersection of disadvantage is complex and often combines with gender inequality to render some women at higher risk of experiencing domestic violence.

Severity of domestic violence

Gender inequality is demonstrated not only in the prevalence of domestic violence - with 1 in 4 women in Australia having been abused by a current or former intimate partner. The inequality between men and women in regards to experiences of violence is also demonstrated by the severity of the consequences of domestic violence.

Women are more likely than men to be injured or killed, and to have experienced multiple episodes of violence from the same perpetrator, than men who experience violence. When women use violence towards men, it is more likely to be in self defence, and less likely to cause injury, than when men use violence towards women, children and other men.⁵ Men have also been found to cause the same severity of injury without weapons as women using weapons.⁶

The severity of violence is also demonstrated in the different nature of violence being used and experienced by women and men. Men are most likely to experience violence from a stranger, while women are more likely to experience violence from a known person, with an intimate partner being the most likely perpetrator of violence towards women.⁷

This establishes a different context, pattern, history, and consequences of domestic violence than other types of violence.⁸

Dynamics of domestic and family violence as coercive control

Domestic violence is used by perpetrators to control their victims through ongoing forms of abuse. It creates fear and incorporates gendered cultural attitudes to maintain an ongoing cycle of violence.

Domestic violence does not only involve incidents of physical assault perpetrated by one intimate partner against another. More often, the physical assaults develop after a pattern of dominating and controlling behaviour perpetrated by the abuser towards their partner. Men arrested for domestic violence report motivations of a need to punish, control or exert dominance over their partner.⁹

This has been termed as 'coercive control' by Stark, who has demonstrated this pattern within many abusive relationships.¹⁰ More recently the New Zealand Family Violence Death Review Committee has termed this relationship dynamic 'entrapment'.¹¹

The average length of relationship for **safe steps** clients is 8 years. Women often tell us that the abuse in their relationship did not begin with physical assaults, but with subtle indications of control, domination and attempts to undermine the woman. In many cases this behaviour was clearly gendered, with many women reporting that they had experienced:

- criticism of their appearance or weight
- sexual jealousy and/or possessiveness
- criticism of their performance of traditional feminine activities such as cooking and cleaning
- criticism of their mothering

Domestic violence often also involves many acts which directly disempower women's capacity to participate in public life and live independently, including:

- perpetrators jeopardising women's education and/or employment
- preventing women from seeing or speaking to friends, family or community members
- depriving women of money or essential items, including preventing women from contributing money to assist family members
- destroying women's belongings, especially items with sentimental value
- use of tracking software to stalk women

In severe abuse women may be prevented from leaving the home entirely, or expected to perform traditionally feminine tasks under threat of abuse including submitting to sexual control by the perpetrator.

Furthermore, as discussed in the following section of this submission, perpetrators can intensify their abuse through deploying dominant gendered cultural attitudes, gender role expectations and the devaluation of women, in order to prevent victims of domestic violence from seeking safety.

Male dominance and coercive control in domestic violence

Male control and dominance is frequently represented as a normal or inevitable part of heterosexual sexual and romantic relationships, and widely normalised in popular culture as well as learned in peer groups and the family.¹²

This external reinforcement is internalised by men who use violence towards women and children, who often report that they were 'putting the woman in her place', 'teaching her a lesson', or 'punishing' her for a perceived failure to perform a traditionally feminine role or task. Men who use violence also report that they perceive their violence to be justified, and that they do not perceive non-physical abusive behaviour, such as obsessive jealousy and sexual control, to be abusive.

Dominant, culturally sanctioned gender roles, and gender inequality, contribute strongly to this relationship dynamic in abusive relationships.

Gender inequality and domestic and family violence perpetrated by women

Gender inequality is also demonstrated in the patterns of abuse used by women towards other women, men and children. Dominant cultural attitudes signal to both women and men that women have lower social value, and are less deserving of respect. Women as well as men internalise gender roles and expectations through rewards and sanctions for particular behaviour. These attitudes and expectations are often reinforced by other types of social discrimination such as ageism and homophobia, which intensifies the risk of abuse. This strongly contributes towards women's vulnerability to violence, and to the reinforcement of violence supportive attitudes by women. Women's also frequently use violence to reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations.

There is some evidence that violence against LGBTIQ women is more prevalent and severe than violence towards LGBTIQ men.¹³ **safe steps'** data indicate that women in violent same-sex relationships face higher levels of risk than other women experiencing violence (an average of 8 risk factors compared with 6.7 risk factors). * (However this analysis did not have the capacity to determine if this was due to underreporting.)

safe steps also responds to family violence in a range of other relationship contexts, and witnesses first-hand how the complex relationship between gender and violence is expressed in the violence that women perpetrate towards other women. Abuse by mothers-in-law, daughters, and other women is often used to reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations. For example, elder abuse towards mothers often involves the adult child perpetrator having a sense of entitlement to their mother's assets, and devaluing her capacity to manage her own financial affairs.

Gender inequality creating barriers to safety

Power imbalances created by age, education or income place women at increased risk of violence within an intimate relationship.¹⁴

safe steps frequently witnesses how the effects of gender inequality on women experiencing domestic and family violence often exacerbate the violence and create barriers to safety. These effects include:

- women having fewer life options, prompting their dependence on abusive partners
- abusive men using economic abuse to intensify their control over women and children by controlling family finances, jeopardising employment or education
- lack of economic resources being a major barrier to leaving violent relationships and seeking safety
- women returning to abusive partners because the economic hardship they face after leaving makes it impossible to remain free from violence
- women subjected to abuse having their employment jeopardised by the abuser, or needing to leave their job because of the effects of the abuse

* Based on a subset of individual Family Violence Risk Assessment Profiles Jan-Apr 2015, compared to the broader population of cumulative Family Violence Risk Assessment Profiles Jan-Apr 2015.

- abusive men using the Family Law system to prolong their economic abuse of women and children
- survivors of family violence being limited to part-time or casual employment because of child care responsibilities.

Inequality of income and wealth

Average income and wealth are markedly different for women and men in Australia. This places women at additional risk of violence, as they are more likely to depend on their abuser for material subsistence.

Economic disadvantages are more marked for single women with children. Most survivors of family violence are in these circumstances, managing not only the economic consequences of the violence, but also economic hardship as they rebuild their lives. These hardships include a lack of affordable housing and childcare, as well as lost opportunities. In the long term, these result in many survivors of violence facing poverty and potential homelessness in older age.

Lack of affordable housing

Access to housing is a major indicator of women's economic inequality compared with men. Unequal income distribution combined with career interruption leaves most women in a position of having accumulated less wealth over their lifetime. Women who are sole parents or have separated from a male partner are more likely to find it difficult to afford their own home.¹⁵ Women in private rental accommodation often find it difficult to obtain stable accommodation when they leave the relationship, due to lacking a rental history or being listed on a tenancy database for damage or rent arrears caused by the perpetrator. This creates the most significant barrier to safety for women escaping family violence.

In Australia, women are over represented in key poverty indicators compared to their male counterparts. Poverty and economic disadvantage limit the housing options available to women and place them in or at risk of significant housing stress.¹⁶

Housing stress in the context of a housing crisis across society contributes to women and children being unsafe, as women and children have narrowed options to escape violent relationships.¹⁷

Role of gender stereotypes contributing to cultural conditions which support domestic violence

Gendered cultural attitudes contributing to the incidence of domestic violence

Gender role expectations and the devaluation of women

Gender role expectations of women and men are a major contributor to domestic violence.[†] Gender roles are not only different, but produce unequal outcomes, with men positioned as dominant and women positioned as subordinate in family, social and cultural life.

This occurs through expectations that women will:

- be focused on romance, family and catering to others even at the expense of their own wellbeing
- have few or no sexual preferences of their own, and to acquiesce to the sexual preferences of men
- have a pleasing physical appearance, and to accept others' judgements about their appearance without question
- avoid conflict and accept responsibility for mending any conflicts
- have few ambitions outside of romance, family and caring, and to prioritise the needs of others over their own ambitions
- support the social and economic advancement of men

Furthermore, expectations of men that contribute to the widespread use of violence include:

- using aggression towards women, children and other men to have their needs and wants met, and to fulfil their ambitions
- dominating over others
- acting as the 'head of the household', making major decisions and controlling the household finances
- being sexually aggressive, and dominating sexual interactions
- demonstrating leadership in public and social life
- controlling and disciplining the sexuality of women and girls close to them in order to 'protect' them from other men.

Moreover, men's immunity to many of the expectations of women outlined above, leads to unequal relationships between men and women. This inequality is then leveraged by some men, as well as some women, into the abuse of female partners.

As discussed above, the gendered expectation that men will assert dominance is particularly expressed in relation to their intimate relationships with women and children.

Male entitlement to use violence

Men commit the vast majority of interpersonal violence other than domestic violence, including violence towards acquaintances and strangers, sexual violence, and violence associated with

[†] This submission discusses 'expectations' rather than stereotypes, as stereotypes are often oversimplified or untrue, whereas some gendered expectations of women are true and widely conformed to e.g. that women provide the majority of care and support to children and other family members.

alcohol and other drugs. Violence is often justified by an expectation that men will assert dominance over others through aggression and force.¹⁸

*The violence that our society normalises, valorises or condones is in itself ‘masculinised’. The vast majority of acts of violence – whether against women or men, in public or private, in reality or in media and cultural representations – are perpetrated, or depicted as perpetrated, by men.*¹⁹

Many men who are violent towards women and children are not violent towards other men. This indicates that there is a strong relationship between dominant gender roles and how men direct violence towards particular targets.

Condoning of violence towards women and victim blaming

There are significant double standards that apply to women subjected to violence compared with male perpetrators. Violence-supportive attitudes have distinctively gendered attributes which favour men and disfavour women. These cultural codes include:

- assumptions that men are inherently aggressive, and therefore their use of force is to be expected
- a belief that violence is a justifiable or understandable response to being challenged
- expectations that victims can modify their behaviour to prompt a less violent response
- widespread false beliefs that women exaggerate or fabricate claims of abuse by partners.

This myth shifts blame for violence from perpetrators to victims. This myth is dangerous, as it reduces sympathy for victims, reducing the support available for victims of domestic violence to find safety.

The most common manifestation of these attitudes is the belief that if the violence is so severe, the victim would simply leave the relationship. This creates many barriers for women, as separation can be the most dangerous time in an abusive relationship.

Furthermore, **safe steps** is acutely aware of the trivialisation and minimisation of violence by both perpetrators and broader society. Many perpetrators do not provide accurate accounts of the abuse they have inflicted, and seek to convince their victims that they deserved the abuse. As a result, **safe steps** and other family violence specialist services are the only other people to whom women disclose the full extent of the abuse.

Manifestations of these dominant attitudes and expectations within public institutions and service systems include:

- disbelief of women reporting domestic violence
- lack of response to family violence by public authorities when women report and seek assistance
- denial of support to women presenting to services multiple times before separating from an abuser
- pressure on women to separate from an abuser with the threat of having children removed if they remain in the home
- cross-examination practices that draw on victim-blaming attitudes
- the Family Law system treating women experiencing violence as ‘alienating parents’ when they seek to protect themselves and their children from the perpetrator

- interventions that focus on how women can modify their behaviour to reduce the perpetrator's use of violence
- a focus on incidents of assault rather than overall patterns of control and dominance in the relationship
- assumptions that men have legitimate rights to control family finances.

Messages conveyed to children

Education

Through **safe steps'** work responding to violence, **safe steps** emphasises the importance of respectful relationships education within schools to convey healthy messages to students and to stop the cycle of violence.

School education plays a critical role in the formation of cultural values and attitudes. The inclusion of respectful relationship education within the National Curriculum would greatly contribute to the end of violence against women and children. It would tackle underlying dominant gendered cultural attitudes towards women and promote a better community and individual response to the epidemic of domestic violence. The school environment is the ideal setting to confront dominant gender stereotypes and attitudes and "stop them in their tracks". It is a primary prevention stage in the lives of children and young people and is an essential step to ensure that the cycle of violence is not perpetrated within their generation.

Understanding and respect are basic values that benefit people throughout their lives. Respectful relationship education is therefore valuable for our entire community, to instil healthy attitudes in children and young people that will be apparent in all their relationships.

safe steps strongly supports the initiatives by COAG to implement respectful relationship education in all schools.

Marketing, advertising and entertainment

Dominant attitudes to gender, especially gendered double standards for sexual behaviour, body image, and gender roles and responsibilities, are often reinforced through marketing, advertising and entertainment. These have a range of harmful consequences, as demonstrated by the prevalence of eating disorders, psychological distress, and self harm experienced by women and girls.

These dominant attitudes and expectations tend to convey the belief that women have less inherent value than men, and that women only have value if they:

- fit within dominant beauty standards
- only engage in sexual activity in prescribed ways and within culturally sanctioned circumstances
- support and please men
- are not overly ambitious
- focus on supporting others.

These attitudes have been demonstrated as being strongly related to the belief that women experiencing violence deserved or invited the abuse.²⁰

Role of government initiatives addressing the underlying causes of domestic violence

A whole-of-government approach to gender equality

At present there is a piecemeal approach to promoting gender equality, and reducing gender inequality, within all levels of government. The *National Plan of Action to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children* provides a comprehensive range of goals and outcome indicators to reduce violence against women and their children. However, there is not a similar co-ordinated and comprehensive whole-of-government approach to promoting gender equality.

Gender is affected by a range of government policy areas, not only social services and gender policy bodies within government. Income support, planning, infrastructure, immigration, justice, housing, economic and fiscal policy all have implications for gender inequality. A co-ordinated approach can harness the policy instruments in these areas to reduce inequality and promote equality. At present, co-ordination is absent from the national policy agenda. A Gender Equality Strategy is required to drive change at a deeper level across the board.

Recommendation 1

That the Commonwealth Government develops and implements a Gender Equality Strategy to comprehensively promote gender equality across all areas of government policy.

International best practice in promoting gender equality is based on the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). The United Nations Economic and Social Council recommends:

[A] process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetrated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.²¹

This involves:

- Analysing differences and inequalities between men and women, and how their experiences and problems differ
- Questioning assumptions about the composition of families, households or consumers when designing policies and programs
- Addressing activities predominantly performed by women within public policy
- Seeking to design policies and programs to support equitable distribution of benefits and opportunities to women and men

This requires disaggregating data and information by gender, as well as developing meaningful indicators relating to gender inequality within each policy field.

Gender Equality Strategy

These policy initiatives should be driven by a Gender Equality Strategy. A Gender Equality Strategy will provide policy focus to initiatives to reduce gender inequality, and create a platform for a whole-of-government approach to address gender inequality.

Gender equality considerations should be adopted as appropriate to each issue and agency. This can draw on a number of existing tools and frameworks for incorporating gender equality across public policy, such as the World Health Organization Gender Analysis approach.²² Many tools have been adapted and developed by State Governments, women’s health organisations and agencies focused on preventing violence against women, for use in broader public policy and planning.²³

This can provide guidance to policy makers on incorporating gender into any public policy solution, from emergency management, to access to justice and food security. This should include systematic considerations about other forms of inequality and disadvantage, and how they interact with gender. For example, policy and program development relating to transport and infrastructure should address how women with disability use infrastructure differently in comparison to men with disability, as well as women and men without disability.

The Gender Equality Strategy should focus on transforming dominant and unequal gender relations, and not only on areas of gender difference. This will require a focus on addressing underlying causes of gender inequality, and not only its symptoms.

This will provide a basis for broad-ranging public policy solutions that address factors that drive gender inequality, and will open up potential new solutions that have not yet been attempted. When **safe steps** and other agencies focused on addressing violence against women approach a range of agencies to address gender inequality, a Gender Equality Strategy will provide a mechanism to progress the conversations into the development of strategies and solutions.

The Gender Equality Strategy should prioritise certain areas for concerted, long-term efforts to address factors that contribute to continuing gender inequality.

Furthermore, the Gender Equality Strategy should identify how gender inclusion should be incorporated throughout the policy and planning cycle, including stakeholder involvement.

Development of gender equality expertise within the public sector

Cultivating expertise in gender equality is an essential to progressing gender equality efforts. The Office for Women should be supported and authorised to work with other government and non-government agencies to take priorities forward.

Recommendation 2

That the Commonwealth Government identifies a lead agency to resource and support gender equality efforts across government.

Gender responsive budgeting

The Commonwealth Government should undertake ongoing monitoring of the gendered impact of Government initiatives, particularly spending. Gender responsive budgeting²⁴, including gender impact statements outlining the effects of government resource allocation measures, will provide useful baseline and progress data with which to evaluate the progress of the Strategy.

The Gender Equality Strategy should identify the costs and detrimental consequences of gender inequality, such as poverty, hidden homelessness and reduced wellbeing. Reduction in these measures over time will indicate progress towards gender equality.

Recommendation 3

That the Commonwealth Government produces gender impact statements along with each budget to aid with monitoring the progress of the Gender Equality Strategy.

National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children

The *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children* (the National Plan) has now been in place since 2012, with two Action Plans having now been delivered. A range of key learnings from the process of implementation can now be applied to developing the third Action Plan.

Leadership and Co-ordination

While the appointment of the high level Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence Against Women and their Children is a very welcome initiative that will provide strategic direction to the implementation of the National Plan, there is a gap between strategic decision making and ensuring co-ordinated implementation of the National Plan. There is an unclear line of authority to implement the National Plan at each level of government.

Moreover, the division of departmental responsibility for delivering the National Plan between the Department of Social Services and the Office for Women requires co-ordination for transparency and clarity of roles and responsibilities. At present the implementation of the National Plan appears dispersed and lacking in a systematic approach.

Co-ordination of a range of initiatives is essential to ensure that implementation continues to progress the National Plan outcomes, as violence against women relates to government initiatives at all levels, and across a range of portfolio areas including justice, health, human and community services, income support, housing, education, immigration, employment and industrial relations.

In particular, co-ordination between State-level initiatives and Commonwealth Government initiatives could be strengthened through the development of an Operational Framework outlining key areas of responsibility, and linking the goals and outcomes with actions at each level.

The Operational Framework would assist to identify key areas to progress the National Plan, and to manage risks to achievement of agreed outcomes. For instance, the recent implementation of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy placed funding for Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services in an uncertain position. This process was managed separately to the implementation of the National Plan. An Operational Framework would assist to provide greater clarity in these circumstances which would enable a proactive resolution.

Similarly, funding for specific initiatives to assist women with disability experiencing domestic and family violence will be incorporated into the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) under the Commonwealth-State agreements. The NDIS does not have the capacity to deliver the crisis responses that the family violence specific programs have. An Operational Framework would provide the capacity to address policy and funding gaps such as these and to address them to ensure that women do not 'fall through the gaps'.

Recommendation 4

That the Council of Australian Governments develops an Operational Framework to support the implementation of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*.

Monitoring and accountability

safe steps acknowledges the National Evaluation Plan accompanying the National Plan. This provides a useful overview of the evaluation process throughout the life cycle of the National Plan.

However the Evaluation Plan is very process-oriented, with less emphasis on outcomes. It is critical to evaluate the outcomes of National Plan initiatives, as there is likely to be a significant time period between implementation and actual reduction in the prevalence of violence against women.

safe steps proposes that:

- Evaluation and ongoing monitoring of progress against the National Plan should be undertaken by an independent agency
- Critically, women and children who have experienced gendered violence, with a variety of life experiences and in a range of circumstances, should be involved in the evaluation process
- Subject matter experts, particularly service providers responding to gendered violence, should be involved in an ongoing process to monitor and evaluate the National Plan

Qualitative as well as quantitative evaluation should inform the ongoing development and implementation of the National Plan.

Recommendation 5

That the Council of Australian Governments ensures that:

- Evaluation and ongoing monitoring of progress against the National Plan is undertaken by an independent agency
- Women and children who have experienced gendered violence, with a variety of life experiences and in a range of circumstances, are involved in the evaluation process
- Subject matter experts, particularly service providers responding to gendered violence, are involved in an ongoing process to monitor and evaluate the National Plan.

Shared Framework for Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women and Their Children

safe steps commends the development of *Change the Story: A Shared Framework for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women and their Children* (the Framework) by Our Watch, VicHealth and ANROWS. This provides a strong conceptual foundation for prevention of violence against women and children. **safe steps** understands that a range of practical tools and resources will accompany the Framework, which will provide valuable support for implementation.

As noted above it is important that primary prevention of violence against women is reinforced by a broad whole-of-government strategy to promote gender equality.

Other Commonwealth Government initiatives

As noted above, many areas of Commonwealth Government responsibility affect gender inequality and domestic violence. Many of the dominant gendered norms, attitudes and beliefs discussed in the above sections are strongly

Justice

The Australian Law Reform Commission's (ALRC) 2010 inquiry into *Family Violence – A National Legal Response* outlined the reforms to legislation and legal systems needed to address family violence. The recommendations that particularly need to be implemented include:

- A common interpretive framework for family violence across Commonwealth legislation

- Protecting victims and other vulnerable witnesses from direct cross-examination by the perpetrator in family law proceedings
- Protection for women on temporary visas
- Including the experience of domestic and family violence as a protected attribute under anti-discrimination legislation.

In addition to the full implementation of these recommendations **safe steps** recommends that the Gender Equality Strategy takes a particular focus on the justice system. This should include a review of the implementation of the ALRC recommendations.

Economic inequality

Inequality in income, savings, wealth and assets

As discussed above, economic gender inequality is closely related to many dimensions of gender inequality and domestic violence. For most forms of economic security, such as wealth, superannuation, income and housing security, women are disadvantaged compared with men. This is especially the case for survivors of family violence, who face barriers to economic security in the form of job loss, as well as being limited to part time employment so they can also care for children.

A number of government policy areas and initiatives have a significant impact on economic gender inequality including social security, immigration, superannuation, parental leave, child care, housing and health. However, these are routinely developed, evaluated and modified without reference to their differential outcomes for women and men, and the overall impact on gender inequality that these initiatives have.

The Gender Equality Strategy should identify these matters and refocus a range of policy initiatives to reduce gender inequality. These include:

- The impact of changes to social security payments on women and men, with a particular focus on the outcomes for survivors of family and domestic violence
- Examination of the impact that parental leave arrangements have on gender inequality
- Working with employers to promote retention and career progression of women who are sole parents and/or working part-time
- Extending Family Violence Exception provisions to women on temporary visas

Recommendation 6

That the Commonwealth Government addresses the impacts of economic gender inequality through:

- Reviewing the impact of changes to social security payments on women and men, with a particular focus on the outcomes for survivors of family and domestic violence
- examining the impact that parental leave arrangements have on gender inequality
- working with employers to promote retention and career progression of women who are sole parents and/or working part-time
- applying Family Violence Exception provisions to women on temporary visas.

Housing

Housing is a critical asset that can either enable women's safety and independence. Conversely, lacking access to safe housing can precipitate women facing further hardship. This is evident in the large proportion of people seeking assistance for homelessness for whom family violence was a primary reason they became homeless.²⁵

Commonwealth Government initiatives to promote affordable housing for people on low incomes is critical to both provide a platform to promote gender equality, and as a resource to assist women and children escaping abusive relationships. It is urgently necessary for Commonwealth and State Governments to initiatives to promote the growth of social and affordable housing in order to reduce gender inequality.

Recommendation 7

That the Commonwealth and State Governments agree to a national costed plan to increase the availability of social and affordable housing over the next 3-5 years.

Domestic and family violence services are largely resourced under housing budgets due to the relationship between domestic violence and homelessness. While **safe steps** acknowledges that homelessness is a consequence of domestic violence for many victims, this is not an appropriate policy or funding framework for responding to violence.

Family violence specialist support being categorised as homelessness assistance skews service provision in many ways that force women and children into crisis. Women and children need a variety of support to live free from violence, however, support is focused on providing accommodation, rather than meeting women and children's needs to be safe. Therefore it is particularly vulnerable women and children with intersecting disadvantage, such as lack of permanent residency or mental illness, who cannot access support. Support is unavailable for women who seek to remain in a relationship with a partner who is abusing them, and there is a lack of continuity and consistency of support across women and children's entire experience of violence, especially to live sustainable lives free from violence in the long term.

It is also often counterproductive for family violence services to be in competition with homelessness services through a common funding stream, as it creates an incentive for homelessness agencies to refuse a response to women and children experiencing family violence who also have complex needs or are at risk, by referring them to family violence services. Additionally, those family violence services which remain governed by the homelessness service system are, because of homelessness demand, referred women and children at little or no risk of family violence reducing the number of beds available to women at high risk.

Recommendation 8

That the Council of Australian Governments establishes a separate National Agreement and funding programme to resource responses to and reduction of domestic and family violence.

Men's participation in unpaid domestic and caring work

Dominant gender roles and responsibilities have shifted considerably with more women participating in paid employment. Although measures to increase women's participation in paid work have demonstrated success, men's participation in unpaid domestic and caring work has not grown in a similar proportion. Women continue to spend almost double the time as men on domestic and caring work.²⁶

There is also some evidence that demonstrates that increased participation in domestic and caring work is associated with a reduced likelihood of men perpetrating family violence.²⁷

Measures to address this include establishing non-transferrable parental leave arrangements for men. However, as most men earn more than female partners, it is not economically rewarding for most families for men to take parental leave.

Recommendation 9

That the Commonwealth Government seeks to establish incentives to promote the participation of men in domestic and caring work.

Unequal gender expectations, attitudes and roles

Influencing changes in dominant attitudes to gender, especially body image, sexuality, and dominant gender roles, requires a nuanced approach. Measures such as legislative reform need to be accompanied by effective communication and awareness raising. Partnering with private agencies, especially in media, entertainment and fashion industries, may be effective to address the reinforcement of dominant gender stereotypes and double standards through popular culture and public discourse.

The resourcing and regulation of arts, media, advertising and entertainment industries can all make significant impacts on dominant gender stereotypes and unreasonable double standards. Furthermore, promoting critical media literacy and healthy body image through education is an important aspect of preventing representations of dominant gender stereotypes, norms and expectations from becoming violence-supportive attitudes.

safe steps in no way promotes censorship. However, the relationship between representations of women and men in media, advertising and entertainment and attitudes to violence are clear. Use of warnings and classifications in current regulation should be reviewed with regard to gender.

Recommendation 10

That the Commonwealth Government addresses dominant gender roles and expectations through:

- Promoting critical media literacy through education
- Promoting women's artistic and cultural contributions, including through arts and media funding
- Addressing objectifying and/or degrading portrayals of women through regulation of advertising, television, film and media.

Conclusion

safe steps welcomes this opportunity to provide comment to the Committee's Inquiry into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality, and provides this submission to contribute to solutions that can reduce violence and inequality.

safe steps strongly supports the development of a national Gender Equality Strategy to promote a comprehensive response to gender inequality and domestic violence across government. A whole-of-government approach is needed to address the causes of domestic violence.

On a daily basis women contact **safe steps** to seek assistance because they are being abused. As a result, we are in a strong position to report on how gender inequality shapes and drives the prevalence of domestic violence. The relationship is complex, as a variety of factors interact to shape the dynamics, the consequences and the cultural conditions supporting domestic violence.

Expressions of the causal relationship between gender inequality and domestic violence include:

- Greater severity of violence perpetrated by men towards women and children, compared with violence perpetrated by women
- Abusive relationship dynamics that involve coercion and control over women and children by men as central elements that motivate the abuse
- Dominant gender norms and expectations that condone violence against women, excuse men who use violence, and shift blame to the victim
- Broader cultural attitudes that devalue women, especially norms that discourage women's independence
- Broad cultural expectations that normalise men's use of violence and aggression.

These factors must be addressed comprehensively with a whole-of-government Gender Equality Strategy, as well as operational direction, and expertise within the public sector. These initiatives will promote broader social change that will reduce inequality and violence in the long term.

safe steps looks forward to working with the Commonwealth Government to realise these initiatives and to work towards a world without gender inequality and domestic violence.

For further information, please contact Annette Gillespie, **safe steps** CEO at Annette.g@safesteps.org.au or ring (03) 9928 9622.

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