



Submission to the Department of Health and Human Services on the Gender Equality Bill Exposure Draft

On behalf of the Respect Victoria Board of Directors and Chief Executive Officer

Attention	Gender Equality Unit Office for Women Department of Health and Human Services
Date	10 October 2018
Exposure Draft	Gender Equality Bill
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1. Introduction

Respect Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Gender Equality Bill Exposure Draft (the Bill).

Respect Victoria was established as a statutory authority on 4 October 2018 following the passage of the *Prevention of Family Violence Act 2018* (the Prevention of Family Violence Act). Respect Victoria was established in response to Recommendation 188 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (the Royal Commission) which provided for a primary prevention of family violence agency. Respect Victoria is central to Free from Violence, Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women (Free from Violence strategy). Respect Victoria leads on two of five key pillars of the Free from Violence strategy – research and evaluation, and communicate and engage.

Respect Victoria is working for a future where all Victorians experience equality and respect where they live, work, learn, and play. Our work spans all manifestations of family violence and all forms of violence against women across all Victorian communities in light of the Royal Commission's finding that family violence and violence against women are pervasive across the state.

Respect Victoria provides leadership in the prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women through community engagement as well as research, evaluation and advice on policy and program reform to improve the way government, organisations and the community work together to prevent family violence.

Respect Victoria's work to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women is grounded in the evidence that the underlying drivers of violence against women are particular expressions of gender inequality that play out in normative and structural inequality in public and private life.

Respect Victoria's enabling legislation, the Prevention of Family Violence Act, is guided by principles that closely accord with the principles contained within the Bill. These principles are grounded in the recognition that gender equality is a precondition to the prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women. Some of the Prevention of Family Violence Act's guiding principles that are directly relevant to the Bill include:

- all persons should live in a safe and equal society free from violence
- gender inequality within society is connected to the existence of discrimination, family violence and violence against women and the prevention of these forms of violence contributes to a more equal society
- equality and respect should be promoted across the community
- gender equality and respectful relationships should be promoted.

Respect Victoria also has important legislative functions relating to how the Victorian community understands, promotes and drives the prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women. These powers and functions include the provision of advice, support, grants and funding to organisations; the monitoring, assessment and endorsement of primary prevention programs; the monitoring of trends in family violence and violence against women; and the undertaking and dissemination of research on the prevention of family violence and the suitability of programming.

Respect Victoria will also be advising and reporting to the Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence on policy and progress as well as the suitability of funding through guidelines, standards and procurement guidance.

Respect Victoria congratulates the Department of Health and Human Services (the Department) on the Bill. By enshrining the path to gender equality into Victorian law, the Bill will support sustained action that will directly improve the equality and safety of all Victorians for generations to come.

2. Overview

Respect Victoria strongly supports the Bill and its actions to promote and facilitate progress towards achieving gender equality in Victoria. The Bill has the potential to deliver strong social and economic benefits to the entire Victorian community.

Critically, the Bill will contribute to increasing positive, long-term primary prevention of family violence and violence against women outcomes. In addressing gender inequality as a known driver of family violence, the Bill will serve as a supportive structural platform, complementing and strengthening Respect Victoria's work to build quality and evidence around preventing family violence and all forms of violence against women.

In this submission, we commence by acknowledging the strong complementarity between the Bill and the Prevention of Family Violence Act. Both pieces of legislation are aimed at driving meaningful, enduring change for all Victorians. Both pieces of legislation also share a common vision articulated through guiding principles that all Victorians should live in a safe and equal society, that gender equality is a precondition for the prevention of family violence, and that gender equality is a shared responsibility.

This submission provides feedback on the Bill's:

- principles and 'actions'
- action plans, targets and policies; and
- monitoring and oversight considerations.

The Respect Victoria Board strongly supports implementation of the Bill, and in line with the roles and responsibilities of Respect Victoria as outlined in the Prevention of Family Violence Act, commits to supporting implementation through:

- frameworks and guidelines for relevant public sector entities in the preparation of their Gender Equality Action Plans, where relevant to the primary prevention of family violence
- overall monitoring and oversight of the Bill, as it relates to the prevention of family violence, in partnership with other relevant agencies, including through the development of procurement advice and guidelines.

Respect Victoria would welcome the opportunity to consult with the Department about these considerations in more detail as the Bill's drafting evolves and once legislation comes into effect.

3. Principles and 'actions'

Respect Victoria supports the Bill as a robust legal framework to promote and drive gender equality, an important precondition to the prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women. Respect Victoria supports the inclusion of principles and actions underpinning the legislation. Below, Respect Victoria proposes an additional action – promotion of Aboriginal self-determination – for specific consideration in the Bill. Of particular importance to the work of Respect Victoria are the actions focusing on intersectionality, the collection of gender-disaggregated data and the importance of challenging rigid gender stereotypes, our key interests in these actions are detailed below.

3.1. Aboriginal self-determination

In light of the Victorian Government's work to advance Aboriginal self-determination and reduce inequalities experienced by Aboriginal Victorians, Respect Victoria proposes the inclusion of an additional action that requires relevant entities to promote Aboriginal self-determination. Family violence, gender-based violence and discrimination within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is compounded by the legacy of colonialism, forced removal of children, assimilation, segregation and intergenerational trauma. The devastating impact of these policies can only begin to be turned around when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are supported to make their own decisions on matters that affect their lives and their communities. We recommend that inclusion of Aboriginal self-determination within the Bill be undertaken in consultation with

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and relevant organisations, and with advice from the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum.

3.2. Intersectionality

Respect Victoria strongly supports the Bill's recognition that an individual's experience of gender inequality may be compounded by other forms of disadvantage and discrimination. Respect Victoria recommends that the Bill explicitly contemplates requiring relevant public sector entities to embed intersectionality considerations from the outset of the Gender Equality Action Plan design process.

In line with Respect Victoria's wide remit, we will be focusing efforts on preventing family violence and all forms of violence against women across all Victorian communities. This approach recognises that structural, community and individual factors intersect in complex ways across all manifestations of family violence and that family violence is experienced differently by communities across Victoria.

3.3. Challenging gender stereotypes

Respect Victoria strongly supports the Bill's recognition of the negative impact that gender stereotypes can have on all Victorians and the need to challenge the limiting beliefs that underlie gender stereotypes. There is a large body of research showing that rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity are key drivers of violence against women. As part of our vision for a future where all Victorians experience equality and respect where they live, work, learn, and play, Respect Victoria will focus on developing and supporting new initiatives, including campaigns and education, that challenge the attitudes and culture that cause violent behaviour.

Respect Victoria will support implementation of the obligations required under the Bill through its focus on building the evidence base around effective primary prevention programming which will include programs that target gender stereotyping.

3.4. Focus on gender-disaggregated data

Respect Victoria commends the Bill's focus on ensuring Gender Equality Action Plans provide for the collection of gender-disaggregated data to measure progress towards achieving gender equality.

Respect Victoria is committed to building evidence and quality around the primary prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women. Gender-disaggregated data collection is key to building an evidence base that promotes increased accountability and outcomes-focused policy and programming.

Data-collection and analysis arising from compliance with the Bill should be used to inform policy and decision-making as well as facilitate organisational learning and continuous improvement. To this end, Respect Victoria strongly recommends that the Bill contemplates public reporting on progress against targets, actions to be taken under Gender Equality Action Plans as well as demonstrated regard to procurement guidelines. Public reporting on this data will ensure other organisations across the Victorian community, including the private sector, can benefit from the learnings arising from implementation of the Bill by public sector entities.

More broadly, Respect Victoria is well-placed to support the Department with ensuring that data relevant to the primary prevention of family violence that is obtained through monitoring the Bill is appropriately and sensitively handled to inform Victorian Government policy and programming development. Respect Victoria would also consider how to best leverage the information as a catalyst for data-driven innovation when it comes to gender equality and family violence primary prevention programming.

4. Action plans, targets and policies

Respect Victoria supports the Bill's proposal requiring relevant public sector entities to prepare a Gender Equality Action Plan, meet gender equality targets and incorporate a gender equality procurement policy into their procurement plans. Below, we consider the key ways in which Respect Victoria's remit complements the proposed remit of the Bill and positions our agency as an appropriate option for supporting relevant public sector entities with advice and guidance. We also propose to support overall monitoring and oversight through the development of advice, standards and guidelines. Finally, we recommend the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework as well as considerations for the development of regulations.

4.1. Gender Equality Action Plans

Respect Victoria strongly supports the Bill's proposal to mandate Gender Equality Action Plans for relevant public sector entities. As the largest employer in Victoria, the Victorian public sector has a critical leadership role to play in setting a strong example to other sectors as well as actively promoting and facilitating gender equality through the sector's work across the state. Victoria leads the nation when it comes to public sector commitment to achieving gender equality and preventing family violence, Gender Equality Action Plans would further crystallise that commitment as well as provide measures and standards to enable progress to be tracked over time.

An important component of Victoria's progress towards achieving gender equality is action taken by local government. Respect Victoria recognises the exceptional work performed by local government and the Municipal Association of Victoria in designing and delivering structurally-focused, place-based and culturally appropriate responses to progress gender equality within local communities as part of a broader primary prevention approach.

As the largest deliverer of primary prevention programming in Victoria, local government is a critical partner in driving gender equality outcomes. Respect Victoria will be working with local government through the Municipal Association of Victoria to build quality and saturation of evidence-based primary prevention programming including programs aimed at achieving gender equality. As part of this function, Respect Victoria would therefore be well-placed to support local government with advice and guidance to support the development of Gender Equality Action Plans as they relate to primary prevention programming.

In addition to assessing and endorsing primary prevention programming, under the Prevention of Family Violence Act, Respect Victoria is also responsible for providing advice to government and the Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence. Respect Victoria would therefore be appropriately positioned to provide Victorian Government departments with advice and guidance to support the development of Gender Equality Action Plans as they relate to primary prevention programming.

4.2. Gender Equality Targets

Respect Victoria supports gender equality targets for relevant Victorian public sector entities. Research conducted by the Centre of Ethical Leadership indicates that the most successful gender equality initiatives are those that apply challenging targets, backed by effective sanctions and incentives. Targets will ensure government is able to measure progress over time and identify organisations that require additional support.

There is a strong body of international and domestic research showing the effectiveness of structural change facilitated by targets. Research shows that structural and norms-based reforms should be implemented concurrently to support sustained, long-term cultural change around discrimination and inequality¹. This is because attitudinal change at individual and community levels is difficult to embed and sustain without the changes to systems and governing policies facilitated through structural reforms such as legislative action and public sector targets.

¹ PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia (2015) 'A high price to pay: the economic case for preventing violence against women', viewed 20 September 2018: www.thelookout.org.au/sites/default/files/The-economic-case-for-preventing-violence-against-women-2015.pdf

Targets for gender equality in leadership, the workplace as well as associated policies such as flexible working are an important means of creating cultural and attitudinal change. Community and individual attitudes towards women are informed by the visibility of women in leadership positions within public and political life. Community attitudes towards gender roles and norms can also be shifted through the increased visibility and acceptance of men in non-traditional occupations or through men's increased uptake of parental care and leave.

Targets should be carefully phased in over two to four years and accompanied by information and resources to facilitate and ensure organisational preparedness.

4.3. Gender equality procurement policy

Respect Victoria supports the requirement for procurement officers to consider information on an organisation that is bidding for Victorian Government contracts or funding in relation to gender equality and primary prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women.

Government spending on procurement is a significant economic driver in Victoria, each year the Victorian Government spends several billion dollars on purchasing goods and services from the private sector alone. Government procurement also holds immense potential as a driver of improved social outcomes. Developing procurement policies that maximise the potential for community benefits as part of a 'value for money' assessment process is good practice. This approach also ensures that public spending aligns with government's policy priorities and community expectations for public expenditure.

Government procurement represents an important opportunity to ensure Victorian workplaces reflect and support gender equality and work to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women through the promotion of sustainable cultural change.

Under our enabling legislation, Respect Victoria is responsible for establishing standards and guidelines, as well as advising government on grants and funding decisions as part of our transition to an accreditation model. It will therefore be important that procurement guidelines developed under the Bill align with our standards, guidelines and procurement advice for government relating to the primary prevention of family violence. Given our responsibility to advise the Minister on grants and funding decisions, we would welcome the opportunity to ensure procurement guidelines developed under the Bill align with any guidelines or advice Respect Victoria has prepared.

5. Monitoring and oversight considerations

An important component of Respect Victoria's remit is to research, monitor, assess and endorse primary prevention programming carried out by organisations and government to ensure the guiding principles contained within the Prevention of Family Violence Act are given effect. Given this function, Respect Victoria is well-positioned to support overall monitoring and oversight of the Bill in partnership with other relevant agencies through our own powers to advise government on grants, funding and quality primary prevention programming as well as our power to advise and report to the Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence on primary prevention of family violence policy and progress.

5.1. Guidelines

Respect Victoria supports the Department's proposal to develop guidelines that will underpin the design and implementation of Gender Equality Action Plans, support progress towards achieving gender equality targets as well as advance gender equality through procurement.

Respect Victoria is responsible for building evidence and quality to inform effective primary prevention programming and policy. As a first step, we will be investing in empirical research as well as focusing on quality assurance through the development of practice guidelines based on empirical data, action research, and testing. As a second step, we will then use those guidelines to work in partnership with key stakeholders to test outcomes of practice, build evaluation capacity, and encourage adoption of evidence and innovations found to be effective.

This work will form part of a transition to an accreditation approach as evidence builds on what works to prevent family violence.

Guidelines associated with the Bill should be regularly updated as the evidence base grows around how settings can most effectively build gender equality as both an intrinsically important social outcome as well as a means to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women.

Respect Victoria's work to expand the evidence base around effective primary prevention programming positions Respect Victoria as an appropriate agency to assist government with the development of guidelines to facilitate implementation and oversight of the Bill, as it relates to the prevention of family violence.

5.2. Monitoring and evaluation framework

The proposed Bill is world-leading in its focus on ensuring the Victorian public sector promotes and progresses gender equality. Given the significance of the Bill, Respect Victoria recommends that the Department consider developing a monitoring and evaluation framework to support outcomes associated with the Bill. This would also contribute to building the evidence base as to what works when it comes to gender equality and family violence primary prevention progress which would greatly complement the work undertaken by Respect Victoria.

5.3. Regulations

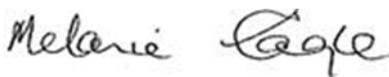
Respect Victoria supports the Department's proposal to develop regulations associated with the Bill. If accepted, our proposal to play a role in monitoring and oversight of the Bill could be articulated within regulations. When developing regulations we request that the Department consults with Respect Victoria to ensure alignment with the remit of the Prevention of Family Violence Act.

6. Conclusion

Respect Victoria wishes to extend our warm congratulations to the Department on the development of this historic Bill. Work to achieve gender equality in Victoria will benefit greatly from the vision, leadership, infrastructure, partnerships and actions created by the Bill. Though progress may take significant time, investment and effort, the Bill represents a critical step towards gender equality and the prevention of family violence and all forms of violence against women for our state. We look forward to working closely with the Department to maximise the potential benefits facilitated by the Bill.

If you have any questions about this submission, please contact Respect Victoria at secretariat@respectvictoria.vic.gov.au

Warm regards



Melanie Eagle
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Respect Victoria Board of Directors



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