

# OUR WATCH

## SUBMISSION TO THE VICTORIAN YOUTH STRATEGY

December 2020

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## About Our Watch

Our Watch is an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. Since establishment, all state and territory governments have become members of Our Watch.

Our vision is shared with the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan), namely an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence.

The specific mandate of Our Watch is to focus on the *primary* prevention of violence against women and their children; to stop it before it starts. We provide national leadership to drive change in the social norms, structures, attitudes, practices and power imbalances that underpin, drive and support violence against women and their children.

Our Watch has four strategic goals:

1. Evidence: Australians understand the drivers of violence against women and their children and their role in creating change.
2. Action: Australians act to end violence against women and their children.
3. Leadership: We lead a national conversation about ending violence against women and their children.
4. Sustainability: We are a sustainable and well-run organisation.

Our Watch draws directly on international human rights frameworks to provide the rationale for our work, based on an understanding of violence against women as a serious and preventable human rights abuse.<sup>1</sup> *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women* adopts the United Nations' Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) definition of violence against women,<sup>2</sup> that describes violence against women as a fundamental violation of human rights, and points to Australia's obligation under international law to prevent this violence.<sup>3</sup> The human rights-based imperative to end violence, and the human rights principles of collaboration, participation and ensuring equality of outcomes for all, inform every aspect of the framework.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Our Watch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety and VicHealth (2015), *Change the story: a shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*, Our Watch, Melbourne Australia, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

## About this submission

This submission responds to the questions outlined in the *Victorian Youth Strategy discussion paper* released by the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet in September 2020.<sup>5</sup>

The specific mandate of Our Watch is to focus on the primary prevention of violence against women and their children, and ways to address the underlying social norms, structures, attitudes and practices that drive violence. Young Victorians experience, witness and are exposed to violence across the life course and as such, Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Victorian Youth Strategy.

This submission outlines how a primary prevention approach, focused on addressing the underlying drivers of violence against women, can be embedded across all outcomes of the Strategy for young people. This approach can support all young Victorians to be safe, healthy and empowered. Through the application of a gender-lens on the outcomes, all young Victorian women can participate fully and freely in civic, political, social and economic life.

This submission will primarily focus on Outcome: Victorian young people are safe, experience equality of opportunity and are treated fairly.

## Summary of recommendations

Our Watch recommends:

1. A gender impact assessment of the Victorian Youth Strategy be undertaken, in line with the *Gender Equality Act (Vic)*, to ensure it is aligned to cross-governmental gender equality targets.
2. A gendered analysis be implemented across the Victorian Youth Strategy outcomes to understand and address the impact and influence of gender inequality across the life stages and settings in line with *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*.
3. An expansion of the understanding of violence to align with the *Free from Violence Strategy* and to include all forms of violence against women, not only family/domestic and sexual violence but all forms of gender-based violence that occurs in all areas of life.
4. A multifaceted and holistic approach to programming to ensure that prevention of violence against women activities are designed to provide programmatic access for all women with disability, and that tailored, evidence-based interventions are developed and prioritised through the Victorian Youth Strategy to address the disproportionate impact of gender violence against girls and young women with disability.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Premier and Cabinet (2020). *What matters to young people in Victoria: Victorian youth strategy discussion paper*. Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Government.

5. Prioritising further research and engagement with young people who have received and are at risk of receiving child protection services to inform early intervention and prevention programming and approaches to reduce the prevalence of children and young people engaging in youth justice supervision and support this cohort to develop healthy, respectful and equitable peer and intimate relationships.
6. Exploring opportunities to further invest in strengths-based approaches to addressing the impacts of pornography through comprehensive sexuality education both through schools and community settings, including appropriate resources and training for professionals who work with young people.

## Introduction

Our Watch welcomes the Victorian Government's strong commitment to youth participation and engagement and for ensuring that issues that are important to young people have been prioritised in the Strategy. Our Watch also welcomes the Victorian Government's prioritisation of equality, safety and empowerment of all young Victorians. In addition, the whole of government commitment to gender equality through the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy and the *Gender Equality Act* (Vic) (commencing March 2021) is an excellent foundation to understanding and implementing gender equality markers and targets for all Victorians, including young people.

The aspiration of a Victoria where all young people are healthy, safe and empowered and where every young person has equitable access to opportunities to participate fully in the social, economic and civic life of our state requires the careful consideration of the role that gender inequality plays in the lives of young people in Victoria.

Many children and young people witness or experience violence at home and may experience or even perpetrate violence in their own intimate or peer relationships.

All children and young people are, from an early age, exposed to harmful messages that can support violence or discrimination, and stereotype men and women, boys and girls. Exposure to negative messages about gender, consent and violence means that some young people accept violence as normal in their daily lives. This can take the form of victim-blaming or thinking that some violent acts are not serious.

Participation of children and young people in research, programming and policy not only ensures a life course approach to prevention but also works to center the voices of young women and girls who may experience particular forms of violence including early and forced marriage, online abuse and harassment, and sexual violence.

Gender inequality is experienced by children and young people across many areas of life and throughout the life course. Additionally, many children and young people experience a range of forms of gender-based violence:

- In 2017, young women aged 15–34 accounted for more than half (53%) of all police-recorded female sexual assault victims.<sup>6</sup>
- In Australia, young men aged 15-19 had the highest offending rate of sexual assault.<sup>7</sup>
- Plan International’s 2020 report on experiences of online abuse found that in Australia, 65% of girls and young women aged 15-25 have been exposed to a spectrum of online violence (compared to the global figure of 58%).<sup>8</sup>
- Australian research indicates that violence is a common experience for young people. A recent survey of over 400 high school students in Melbourne (14–18 years old) found that 25 - 28% of respondents had experienced physical violence in their ‘most difficult relationship’, while 19 - 25% admitted to being physically violent.<sup>9</sup>

### An introduction to primary prevention of violence against women

Violence against women takes many forms, including physical, sexual and psychological violence. As the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (1993) sets out, they are rooted in, and are a contemporary manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women. Prevention efforts are underpinned by an understanding that the many forms of gender-based violence are interrelated, exist on a continuum and share many of the same drivers.

Primary prevention aims to stop violence against women from occurring in the first place. It works to change the deep-seated gendered drivers of this violence, and the underlying social condition of gender inequality in which it arises. While response and early intervention approaches work with individuals who are already experiencing or perpetrating violence (or at risk of doing so), primary prevention is a whole-of-population approach that aims to deliver a future where all women and their children live free from violence.

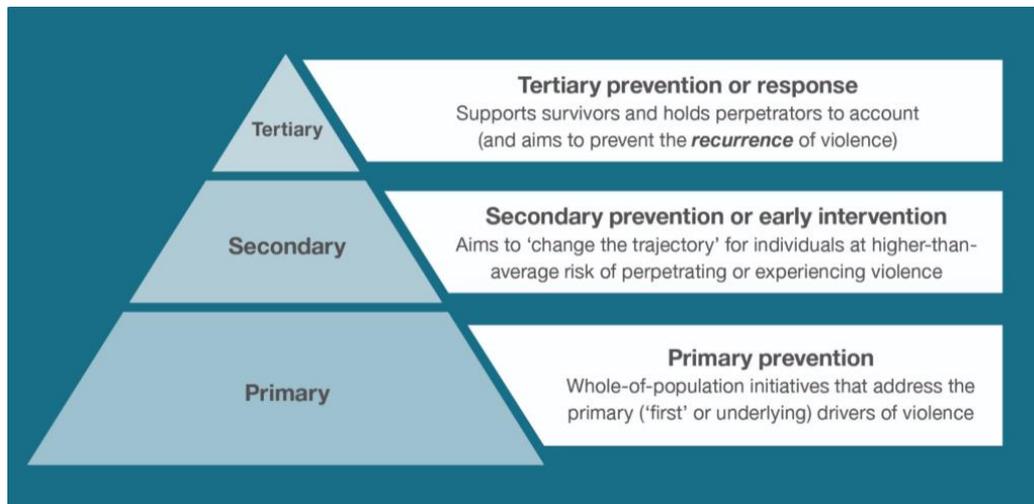
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<sup>6</sup>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. Sexual assault in Australia. Cat. no. FDV 5. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>8</sup> Plan International, (2020), *State of The World’s Girls: Free To Be Online*

<sup>9</sup> Daff, E., McEwan, T. and Luebbers, S. (2018). Australian Adolescents’ Experiences of Aggression and Abuse by Intimate Partners. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.



Primary prevention, early intervention and response are inextricably linked – and mutually reinforcing. For primary prevention to be effective, a well-resourced and well-functioning response and early intervention sector is needed, and conversely, to decrease demand on response services in the long-term, it is important to resource the kind of primary prevention strategies that will reduce the prevalence of violence.

Australia's shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children, *Change the story*, identifies gender inequality as setting the necessary social context in which violence against women occurs. *Change the story*, identifies gender inequality as setting the necessary social context in which violence against women occurs. The framework demonstrates that there are particular expressions or manifestations of gender inequality that are most consistently associated with higher levels of violence against women.

The gendered drivers of violence against women outlined in the framework are:

- Condoning of violence against women
- Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public life and relationships
- Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity
- Male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women

Addressing these underlying drivers of violence against women is the hallmark of a primary prevention approach. *Change the story* sets out five essential actions that comprise such an approach. These are:

- Challenge condoning of violence against women

- Promote women’s independence and decision-making in public life and relationships
- Foster positive personal identities and challenge gender stereotypes and roles
- Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relations between and among women and men, girls and boys
- Promote and normalise gender equality in public and private life

*Change the story* also demonstrates that it is crucial for approaches to prevention to be multi-faceted and sustained, involving:

- multiple techniques in different settings (such as workplaces, schools, and sporting clubs);
- working across the life course; and
- supported by complementary strategies including public policy and legislation to make sustained changes to the underlying drivers of violence.

*Change the story* shows that, while gender inequality is always influential as a driver of violence against women, it cannot be considered in isolation, nor is it experienced in the same way by every woman. Other forms of systemic social, political and economic inequality, discrimination and disadvantage influence and intersect with gender inequality in complex ways, and at all levels of the social ecology and should also be considered and addressed in order to prevent violence against women. In some cases, they can increase the frequency, severity and prevalence of violence against women. This means gender inequality needs to be considered and addressed alongside and together with a range of other factors that may be significant in some cases, such as racism,<sup>10</sup> homophobia,<sup>11</sup> the impacts of colonisation<sup>12</sup> and ableism.

Many organisations working to address violence against women may take a holistic approach and work across the whole spectrum of activity (primary prevention, early intervention and response), in order to meet the needs of their local communities.

The Victorian Government’s commitment to primary prevention is set out in the *Free from Violence strategy*.<sup>13</sup> This strategy draws on the national *Change the story* framework to develop actions to reduce the drivers of violence against women in all its forms with actions that prioritise building prevention structures and systems; building on what prevention initiatives already exist; investing

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<sup>10</sup> J. Chen (2017) *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities in Australia*. Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health. Melbourne.

<sup>11</sup> Rainbow Health Victoria. (2020). *Pride in Prevention: A Guide to Primary Prevention of Family Violence Experienced by LGBTIQ Communities*.

<sup>12</sup> Our Watch. (2018). *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women*.

<sup>13</sup> Victorian Government (2017). *Free from violence: Victoria’s strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women*. Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Government.

in innovative programs and informing approaches; and investing in research and evaluation to understand what drives other forms of violence including elder abuse, violence against people with a disability, adolescent violence and violence within LGBTI communities.

The strategy highlights the following outcomes in the first action plan (2018-2021):

1. Victorians hold attitudes and beliefs that reject gender inequality and family violence
2. Victorians actively challenge attitudes and behaviours that enable violence
3. Victorian homes, organisations and communities are safe and inclusive
4. All Victorians live and practice confident and respectful relationships

### Primary prevention and young people

Prevention initiatives working specifically with children and young people aim to shape positive and equitable attitudes and behaviours at an early stage of life. They aim to give children and young people the skills to decode and challenge the violence-supportive and gender-stereotyping norms and practices they are likely to encounter throughout their lives. This helps them build respectful, equitable relationships of their own. Quality initiatives can further unlock the potential for children and young people to act as agents for change, building skills for them to advocate for gender equality and non-violence, and exercise a positive influence on their communities and future generations.

However, Our Watch recognises that a focus on changing children and young people's attitudes and behaviours individually will not end violence against women – it is crucial that prevention initiatives address the structures, cultures and systems that drive violence against women, including those that children and young people engage with. Approaches can work to transform settings where children and young people live, work, learn, socialise and play to be more gender equitable and free from discrimination.

Prevention initiatives should not burden children and young people with creating 'generational change'. Adults and those with power in systems can make changes as well that will ultimately create sustainable and lasting outcomes. Challenging social norms about power and ageism enables children and young people to participate equitably in civil, economic, social and political life.

Contributing to the creation of systems that value children and young people as more than potential adults who are responsible for cultural change is also an important consideration in primary prevention.

## Victorian Youth Strategy

**Outcome: Victorian young people are safe, experience equality of opportunity and are treated fairly**

This outcome in the Strategy highlights several key issues raised by young people, including, LGBTIQ+ equality and inclusion, gender equality, family violence, youth justice and community safety, disability inclusion and access, caring and parenting responsibilities. These issues require a strong commitment to primary prevention efforts for children and young people across different sectors and settings that contribute to creating an equitable, safe and fair future for young people in Victoria. Primary prevention approaches that are grounded in strong understandings about the underlying drivers of the issues should be prioritised. Evidence-based, multi-faceted and sustained strategies can then be applied to address those drivers.

In the case of violence against women (including family violence/domestic violence, sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based violence), primary prevention requires changing the social conditions, such as gender inequality, that excuse, justify or even promote this violence. Individual behaviours may be the intended result of the prevention activity, but such change cannot be achieved prior to, or in isolation from, a broader change in the underlying drivers of such violence across communities, organisations and society as a whole. A primary prevention approach works across the whole population to address the attitudes, practices and power differentials that drive violence against women and their children; it reaches people where they live, work, learn and play to address the drivers of violence and promote gender equity. This approach needs to be supported by complementary political and institutional strategies, including public policy, legislation and regulation in order to shift the social structures that enable, drive or effectively condone this violence.

The Victorian Youth Strategy provides an important opportunity to drive prevention initiatives that ultimately work to shape the way issues relevant to young people's lives are understood and addressed.

## Gender equality

The Victorian Government has already made important commitments in *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*, including to introduce gender impact analysis in policy, budgets and service delivery. The Victorian Gender Equality strategy outlined the role gender equality plays in primary prevention, namely the gendered drivers of violence against women set out in the national primary prevention framework, *Change the Story*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Our Watch, VicHealth & ANROWS (2015) *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, Melbourne: Australia

While a specific outcome on gender equality in the Youth Strategy is welcome, thinking about all outcomes in the Strategy from a gendered perspective would ensure that young women and girls are adequately represented and engaged in all aspects of social, economic and civic life. This approach also provides an opportunity to understand how gender inequality plays a role in the lives of young people across many areas, and to address these gender inequalities holistically. For example, the impacts of unemployment on young women are likely to be exacerbated by existing gender disparities.

The *Gender Equality Act 2020* (Vic) includes a 'duty to promote gender equality' as well as an obligation for defined entities to conduct gender impact assessments when developing or reviewing any policy, program or service provided that has a direct and significant impact on the public. While the Act will not take effect until March 2021, it is important to ensure that all policies, strategies and programming for Victorians take these obligations into consideration.

The pandemic has presented a challenging year for all Australians and particularly, the state of Victoria which was the most severely impacted by COVID-19. Recent HILDA data revealed that younger people (aged 15 to 24) made up over a third of employees in the worst affected industries.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the pandemic also exacerbated existing gender inequalities, including economic, health and social inequalities for women. Young women were more at risk of getting coronavirus than their young male counterparts,<sup>16</sup> they made up the majority of frontline and essential workers<sup>17</sup> and they were more susceptible to job loss as they were more likely to be in casualised industries.<sup>18</sup> In addition, caring responsibilities have always disproportionately fallen on women,<sup>19</sup> and young

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<sup>15</sup> R. Wilkins, F. Botha, E. Vera-Toscano and M. Wooden (2020) *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 18*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne, 85

<sup>16</sup> Australian Department of Health. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) current situation and case numbers. Retrieved from <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers#cases-and-deaths-by-age-and-sex>

<sup>17</sup> R. Cooper and S. Mosseri, (2020). Pandemic has impacted on women most significantly. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace/pandemic-has-impacted-women-most-significantly-20200604-p54ziu.html>

<sup>18</sup> R. Cassells, and A. Duncan, (2020). Job Keepers and Job Seekers: How many workers will lose and how many will gain? Retrieved from <https://bcec.edu.au/publications/job-keepers-and-job-seekers-how-many-workers-will-lose-and-how-many-will-gain/>

<sup>19</sup> L. Craig, and B. Churchill, (2020). Dual-earner parent couples' work and care during COVID-19. *Gender, Work and Organization*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.1249>

women with caring responsibilities make up the majority young carers in Australia,<sup>20</sup> these responsibilities would only have increased during the pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

Our Watch commends the Victorian Government for its strong commitment and investment to support young people towards recovery from the health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic. The application of a gender lens on the impacts on employment, housing, mental health, and access and inclusion of young women through all areas of the Victorian Youth Strategy will strengthen recovery efforts.

**Recommendation 1: Our Watch recommends a gender impact assessment be undertaken of the Victorian Youth Strategy, in line with the *Gender Equality Act (Vic)*, to ensure it is aligned to cross-governmental gender equality targets.**

**Recommendation 2: Our Watch recommends the Victorian Youth Strategy implement a gendered analysis across the outcomes to understand and address the impact and influence of gender inequality across the life stages and settings in line with *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*.**

### All forms of violence against women

Family and domestic violence is a critical and ongoing issue for young people, However, the experience of violence for young people extends beyond the family and violence from an intimate partner. In line with the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children (2010-2022)*, and the *Victorian Free from Violence Strategy*, all forms of violence against women including but not limited to domestic/family violence and sexual violence, are considered gendered crimes that require a gendered response.

On an international level, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women provides the following definition:

*'The term violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women,*

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<sup>20</sup>Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) .(2018). 2071.0-Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia-Stories from the Census,2016. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Young%20Carers~143>

<sup>21</sup> B. Churchill (2020). COVID-19 and the immediate impact on young people and employment in Australia: A gendered analysis Gender,Work and Organization. Retrieved: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12563>

*including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.'*

Young women experience rates of sexual harassment and violence higher than any other age group,<sup>22</sup> and young Australian women experience online abuse and violence at higher rates than the global average.<sup>23</sup> Australian data also shows that there is increase in the proportion of women feeling unsafe using public transport and waiting for public transport after dark, and a proportion who report feeling unsafe walking alone in their local area after dark.<sup>24</sup> Other research highlights that young women (15-19) are feeling unsafe or experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces and on public transport<sup>25</sup>. The experience of feeling unsafe in public areas is higher still for young women and non-binary people who experience intersectional forms of discrimination.

Data from the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Change the Course* report<sup>26</sup> provided an insight into the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment at Australian universities. The report outlined that in 2015 and 2016, around half of all students surveyed experienced sexual harassment and 6.9% experienced sexual assault. That harassment occurred in multiple settings, including, on campus, while travelling to or from university, at an off-campus event organised by or endorsed by the university, and at university employment. These findings highlight the need for an expansion of the understanding of violence experienced by young people, and especially for young women aged 18-25, as something that occurs both within and outside the family.

A holistic understanding of the types of violence experienced by young women can support responses to this violence which support women, and also prevention approaches that seek to address the underlying drivers. For example, when designing initiatives to challenge the condoning of violence against young women, it is important that examples are included that counter the excusing, justifying, trivialising, and downplaying of all forms of this violence.

**Recommendation 3: Our Watch recommends the Victorian Youth Strategy expand the understanding of violence to align with the *Free from Violence Strategy* and to include all forms of violence against women, not only family/domestic and sexual violence but gender-based**

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<sup>22</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>23</sup> Plan International, (2020), *State of The World's Girls: Free To Be Online*

<sup>24</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Personal Safety Survey (PSS) 2012 and 2016

<sup>25</sup> Plan International Australia & Our Watch (Organization) (2016). *A right to the night : Australian girls on their safety in public places : Plan International Australia and Our Watch survey.*

<sup>26</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017. *Change The Course: National Report On Sexual Assault And Sexual Harassment At Australian Universities.* Available at: <<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/change-course-national-report-sexual-assault-and-sexual>>

**violence that occurs in all areas of life, including the home, in workplaces, at schools/universities, in care settings and in public spaces.**

## Priority areas for prevention and young people

### Disability, inclusion and access

While data on young people with disability and their experiences of violence is limited due to varying factors that exclude people with disability from participating in research, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability Interim Report highlighted that in Australia, almost two-thirds of people with disability have experienced violence in their lifetime, and people with disability are twice as likely as people without disability to experience violence in a 12-month period.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, data tells us that children with disability are 3-4 times more likely to experience violence than children without disability, and prevalence rates appear even higher for children with intellectual disability or disability associated with mental illness.<sup>28</sup> Bullying is also a prevalent form of violence and abuse perpetrated against children and young people with disability, with almost half of the respondents to a 2019 national education survey of children and young people with a disability reporting they had been bullied.<sup>29</sup>

Violence against women and girls with disabilities shares similar characteristics to violence against all women, and to violence against people with disability. It also includes particular forms of gendered disability violence. For young women and girls with disability, sexism, ableism and ageism, and in some cases, other forms of oppression, intersect and compound to drive this violence. Structural inequality, ongoing discrimination, and persistent norms and stereotypes about women with disability create a context in which gendered disability violence is perpetrated against young women and girls with disability more frequently, over longer periods of time, by more people and in more settings, than the violence perpetrated against women without disability or men with disability.

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<sup>27</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *Experiences of Violence and Personal Safety of People with Disability, 2016* (cat. no. 4431.0.55.003). Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/4431.0.55.003?OpenDocument>.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, L., Bellis, M.A., Wood, S., Hughes, K., McCoy, E., Eckley, L., Bates, G., Mikton, C., Shakespeare, T., & Officer, A. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: A systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet*, 380, 899907

<sup>29</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia. (2019). *Time for change: The state of play for inclusion of students with disability; Results from the 2019 CYDA National Education Survey*; Melbourne: CYDA.

The experiences of and exposure to violence against young women and girls with disability call for stronger action to implement primary prevention initiatives across the Victorian Youth Strategy.

Our Watch is currently working with Women with Disability Victoria on understanding the drivers of violence against women with disability and we look forward to sharing this work with the Victorian Government to inform policy and programs in this area.

**Recommendation 4: Our Watch recommends a multifaceted and holistic approach to programming to ensure that prevention of violence against women activities are designed to provide programmatic access for all women with disability, and that tailored, evidence-based interventions are developed and prioritised through the Victorian Youth Strategy to address the disproportionate impact of gender violence against girls and young women with disability.**

### Youth justice and community safety

Exposure to violence, neglect or abuse at a young age has many implications for children and young people. In the case of youth offending, research highlights that children who have experienced violence, neglect and abuse are at greater risk of engaging in criminal activity and entering the youth justice system.<sup>30</sup> Australian data on this relationship tells us that children and young people who have received child protection services are 9 times more likely to receive youth justice supervision (young women at a higher rate than young men) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are 17 times more likely to have experienced both child protection services and youth justice supervision.<sup>31</sup> While the majority of children and young people who receive child protection services do not enter youth justice, approximately half of young people under youth justice supervision have received child protection services.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the Victorian Government's Youth Justice Strategic Plan (2020-2030)<sup>33</sup> highlights that 53% of young people entering youth justice supervision were a victim of abuse, trauma or neglect as a child and 42% have been witness to family violence.

While more evidence is needed to establish a clear link between the experience of and exposure to violence and youth offending, the evidence that exists suggests that young people who are witness

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<sup>30</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. Young people under youth justice supervision and in child protection 2018–19. Data linkage series no. 26. Cat. no. CSI 28. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>31</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. Young people under youth justice supervision and in child protection 2018–19. Data linkage series no. 26. Cat. no. CSI 28. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>32</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. Young people under youth justice supervision and in child protection 2018–19. Data linkage series no. 26. Cat. no. CSI 28. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>33</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety (2020) *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030* Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Government.

to or who have been a victim of abuse, trauma or neglect and who have received child protection services are more likely to engage in youth justice.

The relationship between the experiences of and exposure to violence at a young age and the engagement in youth justice supervision provides an opportunity to create holistic early intervention approaches in programming and policy which also address the underlying drivers of violence against women. Where violence is already occurring, there is a need for tailored early intervention programming to ensure young people are provided opportunities and tools to support their needs alongside primary prevention messages and skills building.

**Recommendation 5: Our Watch recommends through the Victorian Youth Strategy the Government prioritises further research and engagement with young people who have received and are at risk of receiving child protection services to inform early intervention and prevention programming and approaches to reduce the prevalence of children and young people engaging in youth justice supervision and support this cohort to develop healthy, respectful and equitable peer and intimate relationships.**

### Respectful relationships education

Respectful relationships education, alongside comprehensive sexuality education, is crucial to ensure that young people have the information that they need to manage their sexual health and wellbeing and intimate relationships.

Our Watch welcomes the Victorian Government's 2020-21 Budget announcement that it will continue to invest in state-wide Respectful Relationships education programming. Investment in whole-of-school approaches to primary prevention, engaging not only students but families and the wider school community in the process of cultural change, is an important contribution to the generational shifts needed to end gender-based violence.<sup>34</sup>

We look forward to continuing to work with the Victorian Government on this important initiative.

### Young people and pornography

Comprehensive sexuality education can contribute to preventing and reducing gender-based and intimate partner violence and discrimination, increasing gender equitable norms, and building

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<sup>34</sup> Our Watch (2015), *Respectful relationships education in schools : evidence paper*, Melbourne, Vic, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/evidence-paper-respectful-relationships-education-in-schools>

stronger and healthier relationships.<sup>35</sup> This type of education can be a powerful antidote to the harmful sexual norms and expectations presented by non-classroom sources and challenge inaccurate or misleading information about sexuality and relationships.<sup>36</sup>

Our Watch recently published a background paper which highlighted the need for comprehensive sexuality and relationships education that meets the needs of young people, including information on developing and maintaining respectful relationships, and responding to the influence of pornography.<sup>37</sup>

The continued commitment from the Victorian Government towards whole-of-school respectful relationships education would be strengthened further by a renewed focus on comprehensive sexuality education.

Through the Victorian Youth Strategy, the Government could strengthen its existing commitment to sexuality education<sup>38</sup> by investing in capacity building and support for schools to embed comprehensive approaches, including to address the impacts of pornography. Additionally, there is an opportunity to invest in appropriate training and resources for youth sector professionals (including youth workers and health promotion workers) to develop their understanding of the issue of pornography and support them to integrate appropriate actions to address its impacts on young people into their work.

**Recommendation 6: Explore opportunities to further invest in strengths-based approaches to addressing impacts of pornography through comprehensive sexuality education both through schools and community settings. Including appropriate resources and training for professionals who work with young people.**

## Conclusion

Prioritising young people's engagement and participation in our society is critical to ensuring policy, programming and research is relevant, impactful and effective across the life course.

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<sup>35</sup> UNESCO (2018) *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach*, accessed: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

<sup>36</sup> GenPol (2018) *Can Education Stop Abuse? Comprehensive Sexuality Education Against Gender-Based Violence*, accessed: [https://gen-pol.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/GenPol-policy-paper\\_Can-Education-Stop-Abuse.pdf](https://gen-pol.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/GenPol-policy-paper_Can-Education-Stop-Abuse.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Our Watch. (2020). Background paper: Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/pornography-young-people-and-preventing-violence-against-women-background-paper-2020>

<sup>38</sup> See further:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/physed/Pages/about.aspx>

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper and provide input into a safe, equal and empowering future for young Victorians. We look forward to continuing to work with the Victorian Government on these important issues.