Submission on the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy

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Contents

Introduction

safe steps commends the Victorian Government for the initiative to establish a Gender Equality Strategy for Victoria. This Strategy will be crucial to improving the lives of women, particularly women in disadvantaged circumstances, and who experience barriers to participating in society.

safe steps sees, on a daily basis, some of the most harmful consequences of gender inequality for individuals and communities, in the form of family violence. **safe steps** is therefore particularly aware of the importance of progressing gender equality in order to prevent violence against women and their children.

The development of this Strategy offers a unique opportunity for the Victorian Government to embed gender equality in planning, policy and program development across government. The Gender Equality Strategy should take a transformative approach to make fundamental changes to power imbalances and inequalities between men and women.

safe steps presents this submission and the recommendations therein to assist in this process. We welcome further opportunities to contribute to the development and implementation of the Strategy.

About safe steps Family Violence Response Centre

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre is the Victorian 24 hour, 7 day per week service for women and children experiencing family violence. **safe steps** provides a critical service intervention, including risk assessment, safety planning, support, accommodation, referral and advocacy. **safe steps** supports women and children throughout metropolitan and rural Victoria, and collaborates with services across Australia to ensure women and children are safe. **safe steps** ensures that women and children experiencing family violence, including those early in their experience of violence and those at the highest risk of harm, receive an immediate response to keep them safe.

Summary of recommendations

1. That the Victorian Government develops a Gender Equality Policy Framework to guide the contribution to gender equality from program areas across the Victorian public sector. The Framework should:
   - Be based on existing tools for incorporating gender analysis into public policy
   - Identify factors that influence, and are affected by, gender inequality
   - Prioritise matters for concerted and long-term efforts, to reduce gender inequality
   - Determine how gender inclusion can be incorporated throughout the policy and planning cycle.

2. That the Victorian Government requires all Departments to develop Gender Equality Action Plans that map gender outcomes, are informed by stakeholders.

3. That all Victorian local Councils are required and supported to develop and implement Gender Equality Plans.

4. That the Victorian Government establishes a Gender Equality Task Force to provide leadership to the Strategy, and high level external engagement.

5. That the Victorian Government integrates gender equality actions and targets into public sector performance frameworks.

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

7. That the Victorian Government prioritises investment in responding to violence against women and children to support the Gender Equality Strategy.

Scope of the Strategy

Consultation paper questions:

> *How should Government partner with the community, corporate sector, non-profit sector and other stakeholders to advance gender equality?*
>
> *What is the role of business in addressing gender equality?*
>
> *How do we address inequality among the most diverse and disadvantaged groups of women?*

Gender inequality

A clear definition of gender inequality needs to underpin the Strategy to ensure a clear understanding of the scope of the issue.

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] The Gender Equality Strategy should therefore focus on reducing these disadvantages. This may require changes to the assumed roles of both men and women.

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.

Difference and inequality

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.

These complex intersections of gender and other disadvantage affect women's interaction with public agencies, services and authorities at all levels. For example, women in rural and regional areas are affected by natural disaster in different ways than men.[4]

Certain policy areas and government agencies have particular importance for disadvantaged women, such as Child Protection, justice, and health. **safe steps** regularly liaises with government agencies to support women with whom we are working. These agencies have not been designed to address the needs of women, and often have practices, policies or processes that are based on traditional gender roles, or which incorporate a victim blaming rationale that creates additional barriers for women escaping family violence.

It is necessary for the Gender Equality Strategy to address these complex factors, and how they intersect with gender. In most cases, specific initiatives 'targeted' or 'tailored' for particular population groups will not be sufficient. Gender and disadvantage will need to be a central consideration for planning, policy and program development in most areas. A Gender Equality Policy Framework, as recommended below, will provide this.[5]

This will particularly enable a clearer process for agencies such as **safe steps** to address the gender inequality in various areas of public policy, by providing a mechanism through which women's disadvantage in a range of settings can be remedied.

Sex and gender diversity

safe steps notes that people other than men and women – people who identify their gender as non-binary or genderqueer – are part of Victorian society. They are also affected by gender inequality, although in different ways than men and women. This has recently been recognised by the Victorian Government through the introduction of the Gender and Sexuality Commissioner, who has responsibility for addressing Victorian public policy issues affecting people of diverse genders, sexes and sexual orientations. **safe steps** recommends that the Gender Equality Strategy also addresses the needs of people of non-binary genders.

There is a lack of Australian research about sex and gender diversity and its relationship with gender inequality. **safe steps** recommends that the Victorian Government gathers further evidence regarding the relationship of sex and gender diversity to gender inequality to inform the Gender Equality Strategy.

Addressing inequality and power: taking a gender transformative approach

The Gender Equality Strategy should address the differences between men and women in the context of unequal power relations. Inequalities are not merely differences, but create advantages and disadvantages between groups of people. Intersecting inequalities such as Aboriginality, socio-economic status, and disability should also be addressed in the overall context of unequal power and status.

This involves attending to not merely quantitative equality, such as participation of women and men in an initiative or program, but also how the outcomes affect the inequalities and relations between genders.

Similarly, merely involving more women within male-dominated settings will not be sufficient to change how activities and attributes associated with women, such as child-rearing, are devalued, and how women are penalised for engaging in them. The Strategy should facilitate the development of policy solutions that can transform current relations of unequal status and power.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming was introduced as the major global strategy to promote gender equality by the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995.

The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) defines gender mainstreaming as:

> *The 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.[6]

In essence, gender mainstreaming is where "a concern for gender equality is brought into the 'mainstream' of activities rather than dealt with as an 'add-on'".[7]

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 Policy Framework

safe steps recommends that the Victorian Government develops a Gender Equality Policy Framework to sit alongside the Gender Equality Strategy. 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.[8] Many tools have been adapted and developed by other Australian State Governments, women's health organisations and agencies focused on preventing violence against women for use in broader public policy and planning.[9]

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 urban planning should address how women with disability use urban spaces differently in comparison to men with disability, as well as women and men without disability.

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 Policy Framework will provide a mechanism to progress the conversations into the development of strategies and solutions.

The Gender Analysis approach identifies a range of factors in public policy that influence affected by, and which affect gender inequalities and differences including:

- Socio-economic circumstances, including responsibilities and roles
- Risk and vulnerability
- Access to services and resources
- Differences in experiences of services
- Barriers to access or participation in programs or services

- Differing outcomes and consequences

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

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

Recommendation 1
That the Victorian Government develops a Gender Equality Policy Framework to guide the contribution to gender equality from program areas across the Victorian public sector. The Framework should:
- Be based on existing tools for incorporating gender analysis into public policy
- Identify factors that influence, and are affected by, gender inequality
- Prioritise matters for concerted and long-term efforts, to reduce gender inequality
- Determine how gender inclusion can be incorporated throughout the policy and planning cycle.

Priority issues

safe steps recommends that the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy should aim to address strategic priority targets in order to influence broader society, rather than trying to achieve whole-of-society change within a short-term period. In addition, the development of a Gender Equality Policy Framework as recommended below, will provide a systematic process to address gender equality considerations in public policy.

The Strategy should also progress a number of key areas of inequality including:

- Violence against women
- Unequal participation in paid and unpaid work
- Women's leadership
- Economic inequality
- Attitudes towards gender equality, women's bodies, activities and femininity

These priorities are discussed further in this submission.

Roles and responsibilities

Government

safe steps supports the direction of the Strategy, and recommends that the Victorian Government has a leading role in progressing it. It may also be beneficial for the Strategy to have a strong focus on internal Victorian Government processes, decisions, policies and operations.

Each government Department should develop a Gender Equality action plan guided by the Gender Equality Policy Framework, and which addresses the priority matters in the statewide Strategy. Business units and agencies within government should also have gender equality plans and policies in place as appropriate to their operations.

Furthermore, a set of cross-government targets for employment of women, particularly women with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, should be determined by the Strategy.

Recommendation 2
That the Victorian Government requires all Departments to develop Gender Equality Action Plans that map gender outcomes, are informed by stakeholders.

Local Government

Local Government has a strong role in promoting gender equality at a local level. A number of projects aimed at promoting gender equality and primary prevention of violence against women have been delivered through Local Government. This has provided a gender equity focus to a number of important services and activities including planning, as well as youth, recreation and maternal and child health services. **safe steps** recommends that these initiatives are extended and supported across all Councils.

Recommendation 3
That all Victorian local Councils are required and supported to develop and implement Gender Equality Plans.

Community and not-for-profit sector

The community and not-for-profit sector, and social movements, have historically been the source of leadership for efforts towards gender equality. Community based initiatives have a greater capacity to be innovative and responsive, compared with large organisations, business, and the public sector. This is likely to continue. Government can strengthen these initiatives through providing support to innovative community initiatives.

Private sector

The private sector plays an important role in relation to gender equality in a variety of ways including employment, and dissemination of gendered messages and images through media, entertainment and popular culture. Industry regulation, anti-discrimination and harassment initiatives, and public awareness campaigns have all made progress with practices in the private sector.

safe steps recommends that the Victorian Government undertakes particular engagement with print, broadcast and online media, to develop pathways for disseminating messages supportive of gender equality.

Governance and accountability

Consultation paper question:

How do we ensure we meet our objectives over the long term?

Governance

Strategic governance

safe steps recommends that a high level task force is convened by the Victorian Government to provide leadership. This task force should include government, non-government, research, and private sector partners, particularly media sector representation. This group should have a degree of autonomy to make findings and recommendations to the Victorian Government, and to engage with the public.

This will provide a greater degree of momentum to the Strategy. It may also create impetus for the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy to influence change at the Commonwealth Government level. Examples of this type of leadership being effective in driving reform have been demonstrated in reforms to other areas of public policy, including sexual abuse and family violence.

Recommendation 4
That the Victorian Government establishes a Gender Equality Task Force to provide leadership to the Strategy, and high level external engagement.

Implementation

It is necessary to integrate gender equality considerations into the everyday activities of agencies within Government by creating an 'authorising environment' to support the implementation of the Strategy. This includes:

- Decision makers at the appropriate level to implement changes
- Support from dedicated personnel with expertise in gender equality, and a mandate to influence decisions
- Involvement of key stakeholders in planning, policy and program development, and implementation
- Integration of specific targets and actions into performance frameworks for the public sector
- Monitoring and reporting of indicators, outcomes, and long-term impact.

Recommendation 5
That the Victorian Government integrates gender equality actions and targets into public sector performance frameworks.

Development of gender equality expertise within the public sector

Cultivating expertise in gender equality is an essential to progressing gender equality efforts. The Women and Equality branch of the Department of Premier and Cabinet should be supported and authorised to work with other government and non-government agencies to take priorities forward.

Measurement and evaluation

The Gender Equality Strategy will need to be underpinned by a strong data analysis. In some indicators of gender differences in policy outcomes, it may appear that women enjoy greater access than men, e.g. utilisation of certain services, or educational attainment. These indicators need to be contextualised within overall societal inequality.

Moreover, certain data sets are based on assumptions relating to gender, such as the composition of households and the status of family members. This can give the impression of a greater degree of parity than is actually the case.

The Gender Equality Policy Framework should provide clear guidance about use of relevant and meaningful measures of inequality and progress. A Gender Analysis process should be incorporated into the Framework.

Gender responsive budgeting

The Victorian Government should undertake ongoing monitoring of the gendered impact of Government initiatives, particularly spending. Gender responsive budgeting[10], 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.

Recommendation 6
That the Victorian Government produces gender impact statements along with each budget to aid with monitoring the progress of the Gender Equality Strategy.

Measuring the consequences of gender inequality

The Gender Equality Strategy and Policy Framework 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.

Priority areas

Consultation paper questions:

What are the most urgent areas of gender inequality that Victoria should tackle first?

What is the role of men in a gender equality strategy?

A great deal of progress has been achieved towards reducing gender inequality over the past century. However, many areas of inequality remain particularly intractable. These areas often cut across several areas of policy responsibility and require a combination of strategies to address and reduce. Many also contribute to the most egregious forms of gender inequality.

Violence against women

Men are most likely to perpetrate violence against other men, and against women and children. The patters of violence experienced by men and women also have significant differences, with men far more likely to experience violence perpetrated by a stranger, and women more likely to experience violence perpetrated by someone they know.[11]

Women and girls are more likely to experience violence within intimate and familiar settings, and perpetrated by a relative or someone they know. This means the type of violence experienced by women and girls is more likely to be ongoing and to result in complex consequences, and that the barriers to safety are greater, for women and girls.[12]

safe steps is intimately familiar with how gender inequality drives violence against women and children. Supportive attitudes towards male domination over women and children serve to build a sense of entitlement by men to control and have privilege over women and children. Male entitlement to dominate women and children drives family violence. This sense of entitlement is borne from gender inequality and normative gender roles that assume that women are subordinate to men, and women's needs, interests and capacities are of lesser value.[13]

Circumstances where gender relations are challenged and where men lose access to traditional forms of authority, such as during natural disasters or economic downturn, have been shown to increase violence against women and children.[14] This is due to perpetrators retaliating towards their intimate partners and family members for a loss of control in their external life.[15] It is therefore reasonable to expect an increase in violence against women and children for a period of time as gender inequality is reduced. safe steps recommends that this increased risk is addressed through greater investment into services responding to violence against women.

Recommendation 7
That the Victorian Government prioritises investment in responding to violence against women and children to support the Gender Equality Strategy.

Violence and gender inequality

The prevalence of violence against women, with 1 in 4 women experiencing violence from a partner or ex-partner, and 1 in 5 women experiencing sexual violence[16], means that a significant proportion of women are living with the adverse consequences of abuse. Women are also more likely to experience psychological distress than men; a significant proportion of this distress is due to abuse and violence.

This additional factor must be taken into account in measures to address gender inequality.

Furthermore, gender inequality results in women facing greater barriers to safety when they do experience abuse, including lack of wealth and savings, lack of access to affordable housing, and lack of support. This often results in long-term disadvantage in the form of lost earnings and lost career progression opportunities.

Sexual harassment

Approximately 1 in 3 women in Australia have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime.[17] Sexual harassment is a highly prevalent form of aggressive and dominating behaviour which is a barrier to employment security, career progression, and social participation. In some cases sexual harassment is also violence, bullying and abusive.

There have been significant efforts to address the prevalence of sexual harassment in workplaces, and more recently in sporting organisations. However, in settings with varying employment and participation arrangements, and which rely strongly on social and professional networks, such as the music industry, many of these measures are difficult to enact.

It is necessary to address the prevalence of sexual harassment across a range of settings in addition to workplaces with measures appropriate to those settings. This includes voluntary and semi-professional sectors, and settings such as the arts and entertainment industry where women experience harassment as audience members as well as employees and volunteers.

Economic inequality

Men's participation in unpaid domestic and caring work

Traditional 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.[18]

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.[19]

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.

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.

Career progression

Women's labour market participation is increasing, although it remains lower than men's participation. However, although more women are in paid employment, many face barriers to career progression. Often this is due to career interruption as women take leave to have children or care for other family members, and take on more part-time roles.[20]

Women working part-time report to **safe steps** that they feel they are treated as a less committed employee, and therefore not treated as favourably when promotion opportunities arise. This barrier is particularly strong in some professional and commercial sectors. This is an important cultural barrier that has not been shifted through legislative provisions to enable flexible working arrangements.

Single mothers

These 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.

Housing and tenure

Access to housing is a major indicator of women's economic inequality compared with men.

> *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.*[21]

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.[22] 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.

The Strategy should address the effects of economic gender inequality on women's access to housing, especially their long-term housing security.

Health and wellbeing

Attitudes and body image

Attitudes to gender, especially gendered double standards for sexual behaviour, body image, and gender roles and responsibilities, are difficult to define and quantify, as these vary in different social settings and within families. Many are formed through personal experiences and relationships, making it difficult to intervene and change these attitudes. Nevertheless, these have a range of harmful consequences, in the prevalence of eating disorders, psychological distress, and self harm experienced by women and girls.[23]

Influencing changes in attitudes to gender, especially body image, sexuality, and 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 gender stereotypes and double standards through popular culture and public discourse.

Reproductive freedoms

safe steps supports women's right to reproductive choice, including support with pregnancy, birth and child care, as well as pregnancy termination. The Victorian Government should seek to reduce barriers to reproductive choice.

Education

Primary and secondary education should be prioritised as a source of many formative experiences and attitudes. For this reason, respectful relationship education has targeted school age children. Gender equality should be promoted throughout education, including in early childhood education, in school policies and procedures, and in the workforce.

Women's participation and leadership

Women do the majority of volunteering and community-based support work in Victoria.[24] However, these roles are not equally recognised or valued in the way men's roles are. Moreover, women's achievements in professional and creative fields are not recognised to the same extent as men's achievements. This limits the visibility of many women, and their access to leadership and decision-making positions.

Due to this unequal representation of women, it is necessary to ensure that women can participate equally in decision-making processes at all levels, particularly with regard to matters affecting their families and communities. This will require a variety of mechanisms to empower women, including quotas for representation, recognition, support to participate such as provision of transport and child care, and proactive efforts to engage women.

Conclusion

A Gender Equality Strategy is essential to provide leadership and co-ordination to progress gender equality throughout Victoria. The Victorian Government should seek to establish gender equality within policy and program development across government, to provide a platform to progress gender equality throughout all areas of public policy.

Improving gender equality is an essential aspect of preventing violence against women and their children. Moreover, the relationship between gender inequality and incidences of violence should be addressed by the Strategy, such that there is a planned response to changes in the prevalence of violence.

safe steps welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing development and implementation of the Strategy.

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