

Building a Gender Equality Strategy

A response to the discussion paper
‘Victorian Gender Equality Strategy’.

September 2016

About YACVic

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc. (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria. Our vision is for a Victorian community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people. We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation.

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A Gender Equality Strategy for Victoria

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the state peak body for young people aged 12-25 and the services that support them. We have 238 members – approximately half of them young people, the others comprising local governments, community and health services and research bodies. Our vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities.

In March 2016, in response to the announcement of a Gender Equality Strategy for Victoria, we produced a detailed paper about promoting gender equality amongst young people. We discussed violence prevention, education, employment, mental and sexual health, and the value of programming, policy development and philanthropic ventures designed specifically to support and empower young women.*

We refer the reader to our original paper (available [here](#)), and we continue to advocate on the issues raised in it.

In this submission, we have taken several key points from our original paper and expanded upon them, in response to the priorities of the Victorian Government's August 2016 *Gender Equality Strategy Discussion Paper* – notably 'Education', 'Health and wellbeing', 'Violence against women and girls' and 'Leadership'.

We nominate some immediate opportunities for action, which we suggest would align effectively with the wider policy priorities of the Victorian Government.

For a meaningful, effective Gender Equality Strategy, two approaches are critical:

- Working across government and different sectors – including community, health and local government – to promote strong, collaborative planning and

* We use the term 'young women' to refer to anyone aged 12-25 who identifies as a young woman. We also recognise that gender-based discrimination, exclusion and violence affects other young people with a range of gender identities – and that gender-diverse young people show particular strengths in resilience and advocacy for social change. We believe a gender equality strategy must work to prevent and address all forms of gender-based injustice. We do not have the scope to address all relevant issues here, but we acknowledge them wherever possible and would welcome the opportunity to discuss them further. See also YACVic's work in coordinating the HEY Project and supporting Safe Schools Coalition Victoria.

service/program delivery, coordinated in line with the Victorian Government's policy platforms. Relevant areas include education, youth, mental health, vulnerable families, vocational education and training (VET), and family violence.

- Attaching new funding to the Gender Equality Strategy, and utilising some of this funding to deliver interventions targeted at promoting gender equality amongst young people and strengthening the wellbeing, participation and empowerment of vulnerable and marginalised young women.

Why focus on young people?

Young Victorians aged between 12 and 25 years comprise almost a fifth of our state's population.¹ Adolescence and young adulthood are key stages in a person's life, marked by transitions and new experiences as a young person is expected to move through the education system and into job seeking and employment, while also building new friendships and adult relationships, and developing an independent identity.

All of these experiences are profoundly shaped by a young person's gender, and by where that gender – in combination with other factors like culture, income, disability and sexuality – locates them in the wider world.

Young women and gender-diverse young people are disproportionately vulnerable to a range of poor outcomes, including insecure and poorly-paid work, gender-based violence and poor mental health. For example:

- VicHealth's 2013 report on the National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey found that 27% of young men believed 'domestic violence is a private matter to be handled in the family', two thirds of young men and over half of young women believed that women could leave a violent relationship if they really wanted to, and 46% of young people believed it was sometimes OK for a man to use technology to track his female partner without her consent.²
- The 2015 Our Watch survey of 2,000 young people found that 1 in 3 young people didn't think exerting control over someone was a form of violence, 1 in 4 didn't

think it was serious when guys verbally harassed girls in the street, and 1 in 4 thought it was pretty normal for guys to pressure girls into sex.³

- In the Fifth National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health (2013), 28% of the 440 girls in Years 10-12 who reported being sexually active said that they had experienced unwanted sex. The most common reasons cited were 'My partner thought I should' (61%), 'Too drunk' (47%) and 'I was frightened' (34%).⁴
- Of the 4,645 young Victorians aged 15-19 surveyed by Mission Australia in 2015, 51% of young women felt they would experience barriers to achieving their study and work goals, compared to 44% of young men. Young women were more likely than young men to worry about the following barriers to success: 'academic ability', 'financial difficulty', 'family responsibilities', 'lack of jobs', 'physical or mental health', 'lack of information', 'where you live', 'lack of family support' and 'lack of school support'. In almost every topic area offered, young women reported being more worried and less confident than young men. Young women were also less likely than their male peers to report feeling very happy with their lives as a whole – 9% compared to 16%.⁵
- From their recent national surveys of young people, Mission Australia found that young women aged 15-17 were almost twice as likely as young men to have a probable serious mental illness.⁶
- In 2006, 90% of boys aged 13-16 had seen online pornography, as had 60% of girls – and this was before widespread use of smartphones. Contemporary online porn is significantly more likely to feature violence and humiliation of women than earlier sexual entertainment used to, and only 10% of contemporary porn scenes show condom use. Research with young people, teachers and health services indicates that online porn is having negative impacts on young people in relation to body image, safe sex, consent, and gender roles.⁷
- A 2015 survey of 2,296 young people by the Cardinia Shire Council Youth Forum found that young women and young people who did not identify with either gender reported significantly higher rates of stress, anxiety, unhappiness and concerns about body image and mental health than young men did.⁸

Some groups are especially vulnerable, with gender-based inequalities compounded by other forms of disadvantage and/or abuse. For example:

- Young women with disabilities are at risk of significantly poorer education and employment outcomes than their peers without disability, and according to Women with Disabilities Australia they are at very high risk of physical and sexual violence. For example, it is estimated that a shocking 90% of women with an intellectual disability have been sexually abused, with around two-thirds of abuse occurring when the woman is aged under 18.⁹
- A 2010 survey of 3,134 same sex attracted and gender diverse young Australians found that 31% of transgender and gender non-binary young people and 14% of same sex attracted young women had been physically assaulted in response to their gender or sexuality.¹⁰
- Victoria's 2015 Royal Commission into Family Violence observed that Victorian Aboriginal women are *forty-five times more likely* to experience family violence than non-Aboriginal women, and that Aboriginal children and young people are especially vulnerable.¹¹
- Recent surveys and interviews conducted with 1,061 young Victorians who were clients of alcohol and other drug services found that fewer young women than young men were accessing these services. However, those young women who were clients of AOD services were significantly more likely than young male clients to be categorised as 'most at risk'. These young women were more likely than their male peers to have a history of poor mental health, insecure housing or homelessness, disconnection from family, self-harm, suicide attempts, and being the victim of violence, abuse and neglect.¹²

However, despite these alarming findings it is possible to achieve very powerful and positive changes by working with young people at this pivotal point in their lives, when their ideas and behaviours are still being formed and their enthusiasm for transforming the world around them is often especially strong. For example:

- The YWCA's 2014 'She Speaks' survey of 1,643 young Australian women aged 15-30 found that 58% of the young women surveyed already considered themselves to be leaders in their families, schools, communities and/or workplaces.¹³
- Mission Australia's 2015 survey of 4,645 young Victorians aged 15-19 found that young women were more likely than young men to take part in volunteering and student leadership activities.¹⁴
- Young women tend to be more likely than young men to offer their input into policy making and 'youth engagement' / 'student engagement' initiatives. For example, two-thirds of the 1,003 young people who responded to the 2015 Victorian Government Youth Policy survey were young women.¹⁵
- Many young women are taking direct action on issues they care about. Examples range from global philanthropic movements like FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund to feminist collectives in local secondary schools.¹⁶
- The 2010 survey of 3,134 same sex attracted and gender diverse young Australians found that young people who did not identify with either gender got involved in activism for social change at especially high rates, and drew strength and reassurance from this work.¹⁷
- VicHealth observed a reduction in young people's harmful attitudes about gender-based violence since 2009, which they linked to successful prevention education work in secondary schools.¹⁸

Youth-specific approaches, across government

While we welcome the discussion paper's focus on the importance of promoting gender equality in school settings, we would caution against treating young people's issues simply as a Department of Education and Training (DET) matter. Interventions to promote gender equality amongst young people should occur in a range of other settings too, including health, employment and community strengthening.

Initiatives to promote gender equality should recognise young people as a cohort, different to older adults and young children. Historically, young people have not been

well served by policies and services which simply absorb them into settings meant for older or younger groups.

At a time of significant new policy development and planning in Victoria, the Gender Equality Strategy could deliver benefits by working closely with diverse areas of government to ensure that:

- A 'gender lens' is applied to policy making and program development.
- Outcomes in relation to gender equality are measured and reported upon.
- Adequate new resources are committed to meet identified areas of need.

A Gender Equality Strategy could also work to ensure that appropriate governance, coordination and resourcing are in place to enable the Victorian Government to work closely on these issues with other relevant stakeholders – e.g. NGOs, peak bodies, local government, health services and philanthropic providers.

Respectful Relationships Education

The first section of the Gender Equality Strategy discussion paper ('Education') notes that work is underway to develop Respectful Relationships Education in Schools.

On the recommendation of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Government is incorporating respectful relationships education into the curriculum from years Prep to 10. It will be part of the Health and Physical Education and the Personal and Social Capability curriculum. In 2015 a pilot version was delivered by Our Watch with DET in 19 Victorian schools. From 2017 it will be compulsory.

In the 2016 budget, the Victorian Government allocated \$21.8 million 'to enable the development of whole-school approaches to respectful relationships', including:

- Training and support for approximately 120 mentor 'lighthouse' schools to champion the program and drive positive change in their own and other schools.
- Professional learning for thousands of primary and secondary teachers.
- Dedicated health officers in each of DET's local areas to support schools in responding to family violence and making connections with relevant services.¹⁹

(We understand there will be two roles in each DET region, their work divided approximately equally between preventative and responsive work.)

The evidence from the Our Watch pilot and comparable programs elsewhere indicates that in order for respectful relationships education to be effective, there must be a long-term, well-resourced, whole-of-school approach, which combats gender-based violence through age-appropriate, interactive and participatory curriculum. This work should be thoroughly planned and evaluated. There should be expert support for teachers and meaningful engagement of all school staff, students and families to affect cultural and institutional change.²⁰

Unfortunately one topic not addressed in the Royal Commission's recommendations, or in the undertakings of the Victorian Government to date, is the need for a solid grounding in respectful relationships education and violence prevention in pre-service teacher training. We hope to see the Victorian Government working with higher education institutes to ensure that new teachers enter the workforce with a strong and confident understanding of how to approach these issues.

At present, it is also unclear what the role of respectful relationships education will be in independent and Catholic schools. (It is our understanding that while the curriculum is available to them, they are not required to implement it, and may not have access to the same professional supports as their state school colleagues.) Nor is it clear to us how the respectful relationships curriculum will be implemented in specialist schools.

Given the importance of the topic – and the particular vulnerability of students with disabilities to violence and abuse – it is vital that the Victorian Government works closely with different educational providers to ensure that all school communities can take part in equivalent levels of evidence-based respectful relationships education, tailored to the needs of their school community.

➤ **Educate for respectful relationships beyond the classroom**

One message we hear regularly from our stakeholders is that while teachers will receive training and professional support from DET to deliver the respectful relationships

curriculum, it is vital that expert support is also provided for the entire school community to develop a whole-of-school approach. This should include:

- Appropriate expert support for wellbeing staff, non-teaching staff, and families.
- In-depth consideration of broader school cultures and schools as workplaces.
- Strong working partnerships between schools and external health and community services, to ensure adequate, holistic support for students experiencing, or at risk of, violence.

It is not yet clear where this support will come from, or whether it will be provided at all. While we welcome the new resourcing to DET offices to support respectful relationships education, we must observe that traditionally the education sector has struggled to work closely and effectively with other sectors without dedicated, expert support in partnership-building and community strengthening.

The Gender Equality Strategy has strong potential to work across government and with diverse sectors to promote whole-of-community planning and collaboration. Such work will be especially important during the transitional period as the new respectful relationships curriculum is delivered for the first time.

In particular, it is vital to ensure that community-based family violence, sexual assault and mental health services are adequately prepared, resourced and coordinated to work with schools to deal with a likely rise in disclosures by young people of their experiences of violence, and to provide intensive, individualised support. The 2015 evidence paper from the Our Watch pilot observed:

‘[R]esearch shows that ongoing collaboration between the education and violence prevention sectors is crucial for the effectiveness of Respectful Relationships Education, whether at the school or education system level. This may introduce sectors that have not worked together previously.’²¹

The Our Watch evidence paper observed that respectful relationships education must be supported at several levels in the community. Methods should include:

- Funding and coordinating violence prevention and women's organisations to support schools and teachers in primary prevention of gender-based violence and to promote gender equality.
- Working with wider community, such as local government, sporting clubs, local workplaces and other community organisations, to reinforce messaging.
- Working to raise community understanding of and support for Respectful Relationships Education in schools.
- Advocating for social change to support equality and respect, and the role of the Australian education system in achieving this.²²

Schools and DET cannot be expected to deliver these community and civic components alone.

In the past, community-wide and preventative approaches to student wellbeing have been supported strongly by the School Focused Youth Service (SFYS). However, the new guidelines for SFYS specify that this service now focuses on the 20% of students aged 10-18 who are attending school but are vulnerable to disengagement. The guidelines make clear 'SFYS does **not** address the engagement needs of the remaining 80% of students.'²³ This would seem to limit the capacity of the program to support respectful relationships education as a whole-of-school or community-wide initiative.

Meanwhile, the Partners in Prevention network (PiP, Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria) builds the capacity of community-based services to provide training and guidance to schools on respectful relationships and violence prevention. We welcomed the Victorian Government's announcement of continued funding for this very valuable initiative. However, the modest scale of PiP limits the program's capacity to provide intensive, tailored support for all school communities who need it around the state.

Schools will continue to look to community-based organisations for this support. Historically, a number of schools have worked with external providers to introduce respectful relationships programs and similar interventions into their classrooms. In the future, many schools may still turn to these organisations (for example, the Centres Against Sexual Assault) to provide ongoing expert support for schools to develop respectful relationships as a whole-of-school approach.

However, DET guidelines about school-community partnerships in this space have so far been very broad, stating only that such interventions should be ‘meaningful to students and the community’ and in keeping with school and government policy.²⁴

Schools will need more assistance than this to implement respectful relationships education collaboratively and effectively, and the relevant community-based services will need adequate resourcing to provide this expert support.

➤ **Measuring success**

One role of the Gender Equality Strategy could be to work with DET to ensure that the impacts of respectful relationships education on Education State targets are being considered, measured, reported and built upon.

The Education State: Schools (2016) locates respectful relationships education in the first priority area (‘Excellence in teaching and learning’) of the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes. Arguably respectful relationships also contributes to the priority areas of ‘Positive climate for learning’ and ‘Community engagement in learning’.

A high quality, evidence-based, whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education should help to build school communities which are safe, inclusive and welcoming, and where students are encouraged to pursue their diverse interests, talents and goals without being held back by harmful stereotypes. This speaks to several ambitions and targets of the Education State²⁵:

Ambition	Target
More students will be resilient	Over the next 10 years, Victorian students reporting high resilience will grow by 20 per cent.
More students develop strong critical and creative thinking skills	Over the next 10 years, more students will reach the highest levels of achievement in critical and creative thinking.

Ambition**Target**

More students excel in scientific literacy

Over the next 10 years, there will be a 33 per cent increase in the proportion of 15 year olds reaching the highest levels of achievement in scientific literacy.

Breaking the link

Over the next 10 years, Victoria will reduce the impact of disadvantage on achievement.

A Gender Equality Strategy could help to keep a focus on how respectful relationships education is working to further these goals.

Issues of gender equality and the impacts of respectful relationships education could also be considered via DET data collection methods including the Victorian Student Health and Wellbeing Survey, the Victorian Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey, and the Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey.²⁶

The Gender Equality Strategy could play an important role in advocating for strong analysis of issues of gender equality in these surveys, and appropriate sharing of data with other departments, schools, community services and the wider community. The findings could then be used to inform planning of future interventions.

Equitable participation in diverse study pathways

The first theme area of the Gender Equality Strategy discussion paper ('Education') stresses the need to counter restrictive and harmful gender stereotypes through a more equitable education system. In particular, the strategy aims to encourage girls and young women to study and become leaders in traditionally male dominated STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

To progress these goals, we submit that the Gender Equality Strategy could work with DET to apply a 'gender lens' to the relevant ambitions and targets of the Education State, to ensure Education State initiatives are working to close the 'gender gap' in these areas.²⁷ The relevant Education State targets include:

Ambition	Target
More students excel in scientific literacy	Over the next 10 years, there will be a 33 per cent increase in the proportion of 15 year olds reaching the highest levels of achievement in scientific literacy.
More students excel in reading and mathematics	Over the next five years for Year 5, and the next 10 years for Year 9, 25 per cent more students will be reaching the highest levels of achievement in reading and mathematics.
More students develop strong critical and creative thinking skills	Over the next 10 years, more students will reach the highest levels of achievement in critical and creative thinking.

The Victorian Government's 'STEM in the Education State' (2016) recognises the gender inequalities in STEM and girls' relative lack of confidence in science and mathematics – even when girls are achieving high marks there. (This shows the problem is not simply one of persuading more young women to enrol in STEM subjects, but rather ensuring STEM cultures which do not exclude and discriminate against young women.)

However, while making many undertakings to improve STEM delivery in general, the Education State makes very few specific undertakings around gender equality, apart from suggesting that future actions could include 'supporting more students, including girls and other underrepresented groups, to excel in STEM, become confident in their STEM related abilities, understand the relevance of STEM learning to a diverse range of jobs, and pursue STEM careers.'²⁸

The Gender Equality Strategy could support this as an action and work with DET to develop specific targets.

➤ **Active student engagement and decision-making**

YACVic supports equitable engagement of young women in STEM subjects. However, we would also observe that when young people have been consulted about their own educational experiences – notably by the student-led Victorian Student Representative

Council (VicSRC) – they commonly raise concerns about certain subjects and study / career pathways being privileged over others. It is common for students to reflect that they would like to take part in a schooling system where many diverse areas of study and training are offered and valued equally, including in the areas of arts and vocational education and training.

Through VicSRC, students have stated:

‘When we are involved in making decisions about our learning, we are more likely to stay at school and to do better. We also perform better at school when we are able to choose pathways, subjects and tasks that are meaningful and relevant to us. This kind of student-centred learning, which focuses on our needs rather than delivering set knowledge, helps us become more confident, adaptable, effective learners ... All academic and vocational pathways including VET, VCAL and VCE are important and should be equally valued as useful qualifications in preparation for life beyond school.’²⁹

We submit that any initiatives to strengthen young women’s participation in STEM subjects should be student-led, and informed by the targets identified by VicSRC for strengthening student engagement. (For details, see ‘Recommendations’.) Students show higher levels of confidence and achievement when they can take part in meaningful decision-making about their learning and choose pathways, subjects and tasks that are relevant to them. Student engagement can also be strengthened by supporting students and teachers to work together in constructive and respectful environments to reflect on classroom practice and develop teaching approaches which are responsive to a diversity of learning styles.³⁰

The Gender Equality Strategy could provide new support for key stakeholders like VicSRC and DET to work with students to foster gender equality in traditionally male-dominated areas of study. These should include not only university-oriented STEM pathways, but also vocational pathways such as mining and agriculture.

Here, female students – including those who have disengaged from STEM subjects – could be engaged to work with teaching staff in a supported, facilitated way to build classroom practices in STEM which are meaningful, relevant and welcoming to all students.

Such initiatives could also adapt several of VicSRC's other approaches to strengthening student engagement, which include empowering students to become 'technology leaders' within their schools; supporting student action teams to research and recommend solutions to school problems; and supporting student-led sustainability movements, as we will discuss below.

➤ **Tech Schools: new opportunities for equitable engagement**

The Victorian Government has a particular opportunity to promote a more equitable culture within STEM settings through the delivery of the new Tech School model. The Tech Schools will operate in ten Victorian communities. They will be hosted on university and TAFE campuses, and will focus on 'leading-edge technology, discovery and innovation.' Tech Schools will provide discovery and 'taster' programs for Years 7 to 10 students, enrichment and extension courses, and potentially VET courses for Years 11 and 12. These options will be open to students from participating schools in the area. Tech Schools are also intended to be learning centres for the wider community.³¹

The Gender Equality Strategy could play a useful role here by supporting the advocacy of VicSRC to embed meaningful student voice and 'two-way' youth participation in the new Tech School model – and by providing additional resourcing and expertise where necessary to ensure equitable gender representation within this approach. (For details, see 'Recommendations'.)

Since Tech Schools are also intended to be learning settings for the wider community, we suggest that the Gender Equality Strategy could help facilitate partnerships between Tech Schools, VET or flexible learning providers and relevant community stakeholders to develop initiatives which use the resources of Tech Schools to help promote educational engagement, employment prospects and community connections amongst disadvantaged and marginalised young women – for example through holiday programs, taster courses and targeted VET initiatives.

➤ **Student-led sustainability initiatives**

Another way the education system might promote young women's engagement in traditionally male-dominated areas of study, while also benefitting the wider community, is through engaging and meaningful sustainability initiatives.

Over ten years of VicSRC Congresses, student leaders from around Victoria have consistently identified the importance of environmental issues. Students have researched school conservation projects and sustainable school management (e.g. energy and water efficiency, food gardens, native vegetation, recycling, school design and travel plans), and made recommendations for how the Victorian Government could support schools to become more sustainable. Sustainable schools provide opportunities for innovative and meaningful learning by linking real-world issues with practical skills, scientific knowledge, critical thinking, social and moral development, nutritional knowledge, and pride in one's community. VicSRC have also noted that student-led sustainability work helps students see the value of their own contributions and their potential as community leaders and educators.³²

We suggest that high quality sustainability education could help to bridge the gap between STEM (and some vocational) subjects which are traditionally dominated by young men, and the fields of student leadership, community volunteering and social activism, where young women are often more prominent participants. When sustainability initiatives are genuinely student-led, they also help to build young women's leadership capacities.

➤ **Ending discrimination and exclusion in educational settings**

While the Gender Equality Strategy discussion paper considers options for engaging more young women in STEM study, it does not address the other side of the problem: the disengagement and exclusion of female students who originally wanted a STEM pathway. The 'leaky pipeline' for female STEM students is well documented.

There are several reasons for this – a shortage of female leadership and mentoring appears to be one – but overseas studies show strong evidence of young women being

driven out of STEM pathways through discrimination and violence. It is worth considering whether these findings might be relevant to Australia. For example:

- A 2011 survey of 666 scientists across 30 countries found that 64% had personally experienced sexual harassment, inappropriate remarks, or sexist jokes. Over 20% reported having been sexually assaulted. The vast majority of students were young and at a junior level when this happened; women trainees were the primary targets and most perpetrators were men senior to them.³³
- A 2014 survey of almost 600 field scientists through the Southeastern Archaeological Conference (USA) found that more than two-thirds reported having experienced sexual harassment at a field site. 13% said the harassment directly affected their careers, such as forcing them to change jobs or leave the discipline, and a quarter said the harassment had affected their careers in other ways, such as making them doubt their abilities or avoid field research.³⁴
- A 2015 Florida survey of 426 people working in astronomy and planetary science found that 24% had felt unsafe at some point in their current role due to their gender; 32% had been verbally harassed in their current job because of their gender; 82% had heard sexist remarks from their peers in the field, and 44% had heard these remarks from their current supervisor.³⁵
- Yale University microbiologist Jo Handelsman asked 127 professors of biology, chemistry and physics at six US universities to evaluate the identical CVs of two fictitious college students for a job as a laboratory manager – one with a female name attached, one with a male name. The professors rated the male applicant as significantly more competent and hireable than the (identical) female applicant, were more likely to be willing to mentor the male student, and said they would offer the female student (on average) US\$3,730 less per year.³⁶

If a key objective of the Gender Equality Strategy is to promote STEM pathways for young women, we suggest it would be valuable to resource an initiative to prevent and address gender-based workplace discrimination and violence in the STEM settings of higher education and research institutes. Relevant partners in this work would include violence prevention bodies like Our Watch, health promotion bodies like VicHealth, and the National Union of Students, as well as the Australian Human Rights Commission,

which is currently undertaking research into sexual harassment and assault in universities.

Such initiatives should be informed by the work of the Victorian Workplace Equality and Respect Project. This project (funded at \$900,000 by the Victorian Government through Our Watch) aims to build an evidence-based model and standards for key workplace actions and activities to prevent violence against women.

Supporting young women to shape and lead their communities

The third priority area of the Gender Equality Strategy discussion paper ('Leadership') aims to remedy the significant shortage of women in senior leadership positions. We submit that this problem should be addressed partly at the source: by building on the leadership potential of young women and supporting their transitions into adult life.

As we identified in our original submission to the Gender Equality Strategy, there is no shortage of young women demonstrating leadership qualities and working to achieve positive changes in their communities. If anything, young women tend to be rather over-represented in designated 'youth leadership' and 'student leadership' settings.

The problem is that outside of youth leadership programs, young women's initiative is frequently overlooked and devalued. By the time they reach the workforce or begin to engage with public / political life, many young women struggle to find a meaningful and respectful place for their ideas and leadership qualities to take effect. Barriers are even greater for young women who are experiencing multiple layers of discrimination on grounds of culture, income, disability, sexuality, gender identity, or geographical isolation.

Young women have been generous and proactive in sharing their views on these issues. When the 2014 'She Speaks' survey asked 1,643 young Australian women what strategies would help Australian women move into leadership roles, almost half the young women agreed that it was necessary to change behaviours and cultures towards employed women and men. 37% wanted to see more 'visible female role models'. Less than a quarter of young women felt they had witnessed effective leadership in public

life; they were far more likely to report learning from good leadership at their school, TAFE or university (50% of respondents), in their community (48%), their workplace (45%), or their family/home (45%).³⁷ The young women also identified having a mentor as an effective strategy to help them become better leaders.³⁸

We submit that one valuable role of the Victorian Government's Gender Equality Strategy could be to invest in long-term, well-evaluated initiatives which promote the empowerment of young women and gender-diverse young people. This should be done in collaboration with local government, youth service providers, women's service providers, and youth-led bodies which promote gender equality, such as young women's feminist collectives, young LGBTIQ action groups, and Minus 18. (For more details, see Recommendations.)

Initiatives should include identifying young women and gender-diverse young people who are working (or eager) to transform their communities, and linking them with older mentors who can support the progress of these young people into the workforce and public life. There should be particular emphasis on supporting young people who might otherwise struggle to access conventional leadership or professional mentoring opportunities. Examples might include young women shut out of traditional leadership spaces due to geographical distance, income barriers, physical inaccessibility, lack of cultural safety, or discrimination on grounds of sexuality or gender identity.

This is an opportune time to be undertaking such work, due to the recent release of the Victorian Government's 2016 Youth Policy. The Youth Policy makes significant undertakings to strengthen young people's engagement with Victorian Government policy and program development, and to provide new opportunities for young people to build their leadership and advocacy skills.

Key initiatives of the Youth Policy will include:

- An advisory body – the Victorian Youth Congress – to advocate on issues of importance to young Victorians, including through meetings with Cabinet Ministers. Membership of the Congress will emphasise diversity and combatting disadvantage; the group will include Aboriginal young people, young people from

multicultural backgrounds, young people with disabilities, LGBTIQA young people, and young people from rural and regional Victoria.

- A Youth Summit for young people from around Victoria.
- A symposium on co-design of services with young people, government and sector representatives.
- In-depth consultations with young people on issues of importance to them, conducted with the support of youth organisations. There will be an emphasis on involving young people who have not been well engaged by conventional consultations in the past, such as culturally diverse young people and young people in the justice system.
- An annual survey of young Victorians about the issues and action areas that are important to them.

These new initiatives provide strong opportunities for the Gender Equality Strategy to work with the Victorian Government Office for Youth to create and strengthen leadership pathways for young women and gender-diverse young people. Through the above structures, the Victorian Government will be engaging with a large, diverse range of young people eager to take a lead in effecting positive change in their communities.

A Gender Equality Strategy (in collaboration with government departments and youth services) could take this opportunity to identify young people with a passion for gender equality, and connect them with relevant mentors and other supports to develop their skills and networks as advocates, entrepreneurs and change-makers. As part of this process, it would be ideal for the young people to be supported to take part in meaningful work experience and decision-making processes within government and the youth sector. For example, they might take part in bodies which organise funded campaigns around gender equality and violence prevention, or which allocate grants in this space.

The Victorian Government's new youth engagement mechanisms also provide a good opportunity for a Gender Equality Strategy to gather insights from young women and gender-diverse young people into how to make pathways into political and public life

and decision-making roles more accessible and relevant for them. These recommendations should then form the basis for funded actions under the Strategy.

Strengthening young women's health and wellbeing

Under the fourth priority heading ('Health and wellbeing'), the Gender Equality Strategy discussion paper identifies that gender-based inequality causes poor physical and mental health outcomes for women, especially those also facing other forms of discrimination and exclusion. The paper recognises that gender should be given active consideration in the development of health policy and programs.

Any initiatives to improve women's access to health supports should pay particular attention to young women and gender-diverse young people. They are at exceptionally high risk of poor mental health and (in the case of gender-diverse young people) self-harm, drug use and suicidal thoughts. These issues can be directly linked to discrimination, exclusion and violence.

More work is also needed to promote better sexual and reproductive health amongst young women and gender-diverse young people, especially in rural and regional areas, with the recognition that issues such as young parenthood and STIs can be directly related to low social status, violence and discrimination. (For details, see our original submission.)

Young people experiencing poor health face particular barriers to getting the right professional help. They may worry about the costs of seeing a doctor, or avoid seeking help due to fear, stigma and discrimination. Such fears are not necessarily unfounded; some young people have experienced gender-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination within the health services system.

Moreover, some young people cannot access suitable health services where they live. For example, in a 2013 survey of 213 Victorian youth services by YACVic and the Victorian Council of Social Service, we identified that youth mental health support was the third greatest area of unmet need, cited by 52% of respondents. A further 27% of respondents identified an unmet need for youth counselling services.³⁹

Given their high vulnerability to mental health problems, we contend that one way a Gender Equality Strategy could improve the wellbeing of young women would be to advocate for adequate access to appropriate mental health supports. For example, in our advocacy to the Victorian 10 Year Mental Health Plan, YACVic put forward recommendations to the Victorian Government including:

- Work with Mental Health First Aid Australia, the School Focused Youth Service and principals towards an eventual goal of making Teen Mental Health First Aid training available to all Victorian secondary students, and making Youth Mental Health First Aid training available to staff and parents at all Victorian secondary schools.
- Put into place adequate coordination, training, resources and dedicated staff time to ensure that Victorian secondary schools implement reputable, evidence-based models of mental health planning, mental health literacy, parental engagement around mental health, and trauma-informed teaching practice.
- Extend access for school wellbeing teams (especially in underserviced areas) to secondary consultation and external clinical supervision.
- Strengthen community-based mental health services for young people in underserviced areas.⁴⁰

There could be a role for the Gender Equality Strategy in advocating for the importance of such reforms, and for the need to make the mental health care system responsive to and inclusive of all young women and gender-diverse young people. The development of a 10 Year Mental Health Plan for Victoria provides an opportunity for such advocacy.

The Gender Equality Strategy could also utilise its cross-departmental (and inter-sectorial) role to help ensure that the respectful relationships education in schools initiative fully engages relevant health professionals as part of a whole-of-school approach. Relevant stakeholders should include the Secondary School Nursing Program and the new Doctors in Secondary Schools program, being piloted in 100 schools. These professionals must be adequately trained and supported in understanding and preventing gender-based violence, responding to mental health

problems which are prompted or exacerbated by discrimination, and providing GLBTIQA-inclusive practice.

Furthermore, a prominent objective of Victoria's 10 Year Mental Health Plan is co-production of services with consumers. The Mental Health Workforce Strategy states the intention of embedding lived experience within the mental health workforce to foster peer support, peer advocacy, positive role-modelling and practical solutions, and to develop innovative models of co-production.⁴¹

We submit that a Gender Equality Strategy could play a part in ensuring that this approach includes meaningful engagement with young women and gender-diverse young people, on grounds of their especially high risk of poor mental health and the historically poor way that the health system has tended to deal with them.

Finally, to assess the effectiveness of all this work, the Gender Equality Strategy could bring a 'gender lens' to the identified outcomes of the Victorian 10 Year Mental Health Plan, to assess how well the Plan is working to deliver improved health outcomes for women. The outcomes of the 10 Year Plan include closing the gap in social and emotional wellbeing for at-risk groups, reducing the suicide rate, supporting young people to manage their mental health, ending stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems, and ensuring genuine choice in treatment options. (See the 10 Year Plan for full details.)⁴²

Primary prevention and early intervention – going beyond health services

Promoting the wellbeing and equality of young women must go beyond the clinical health services system. Primary prevention and early intervention in a range of community-based settings is also vital.

Unfortunately, as we observed in our original submission, over the past fifteen years there has been a notable decline in programs and initiatives designed specifically to promote the wellbeing, self-esteem and community connectedness of girls and young women. In a scope of Victorian youth service providers in 2015, we found that only a minority offered programs that were specifically for young women, or interventions

which explicitly promoted gender equality – although there were some very strong individual programs operating in local communities. (See our submission for details.)[†]

We identified several prominent gaps in ‘gendered’ youth service delivery:

- Interventions based in rural communities. This presumably reflects rural communities’ limited access to resources and services in general.
- Alcohol and other drug support services tailored to the needs of young women. This gap persists despite research by YSAS demonstrating that young women in AOD services tend to have life experiences, circumstances and needs quite different to their male peers.
- Generalist, preventative, strengths-based programs which focus on gender equality and/or engaging and empowering young women, and which are targeted at communities facing disproportionately high levels of disadvantage and discrimination. These include Aboriginal young people, culturally diverse young people, and young people with disabilities.

The gap in strengths-based, empowering, generalist supports for young women with disabilities is especially stark. We identified *no such programs* offered by any mainstream youth service in 2015. Furthermore, very few mainstream youth services seemed to actively promote their young women’s interventions as accessible and welcoming to young women with disabilities.

This reinforces a concern raised by YACVic and VCOSS in 2013, when we surveyed 213 youth service providers from around Victoria and found that 30% reported gaps in services for young people with disabilities. A common concern raised (which we also hear frequently from young people with disabilities themselves) is that these young people often wish to access mainstream services and activities where they can simply

[†] To inform our original paper, we scoped the online promotional materials and publications of Victoria’s local government youth services teams, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) providers, as well as 60 other organisational members of YACVic and a number of other providers of youth services, looking back over the previous three years. We were looking for initiatives which explicitly promoted gender equity and/or programs targeted specifically at young women. We recognise that this approach (undertaken during a limited submissions period) was not exhaustive, but it does give a general sense of the climate in the youth sector at that time.

participate as young people – but they find many barriers to doing so.⁴³ Given the high rates of abuse and exclusion of young women with disabilities, this marginalisation from youth supports is especially concerning.

We are also concerned that there is not stronger, consistent resourcing for culturally-appropriate interventions to promote young women's engagement and wellbeing, violence prevention, and gender-appropriate cultural and community strengthening amongst young Aboriginal Victorians.

The importance of strengths-based, holistic approaches to improving the wellbeing of young people came across in the report of the 2016 Koorie Youth Summit, where 180 Aboriginal young people from around the state gathered to discuss the issues of importance to them. The young people identified a number of ways their communities could be strengthened, including through positive self-representation, cultural knowledge and expression, and culturally safe spaces where young people can seek support on a range of issues. One recommendation made by the young people was a 'Healing Your Mob' camp, an outdoor experience which would provide group support and positive bonding for young people and their families and support them to engage with their culture, learn skills, and connect with support services. This model should include gender-specific services, cultural mentors, and cultural skills classes.⁴⁴

Moreover, the need for prevention and early intervention strategies targeted at Aboriginal young people was a strong theme in submissions to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The Commissioners noted that historically there had not been nearly enough investment in such culturally-appropriate initiatives. Many prevention initiatives which had demonstrated positive impacts were not funded to scale, or were reliant on short-term funding. The Commissioners recommended that the Victorian Government prioritise providing adequate funding to Aboriginal controlled community organisations to undertake early interventions and prevention activities and programs, as well as interventions that focus on cultural strengthening. (See Recommendation 146 of the Royal Commission.) We contend that young people should play an important part in such initiatives, and should be engaged actively in program strategy and design.⁴⁵

The release of a Gender Equality Strategy would provide a perfect opportunity to dedicate new resourcing to long-term, well-evaluated initiatives which promote the wellbeing, equality and community connectedness of young women, especially young women who are facing disadvantage, discrimination and/or isolation. These initiatives should build upon and link up existing successful programs in the youth, education, health and mentoring sectors.

We would be delighted to discuss any of these issues further with you. Please contact Policy Manager Dr Jessie Mitchell on 9267 3722 or policy@yacvic.org.au

Recommendations

➤ Respectful relationships education

Ensure adequate resources, governance structures and partnerships are in place to:

1. Engage and support community-based services in the areas of family violence, sexual violence, mental health and student engagement to work with schools to support the development and delivery of respectful relationships education.
2. Support (with additional funding where necessary) the capacity of the abovementioned sectors to respond appropriately to new disclosures of violence and requests for support for vulnerable students, which may emerge via participation in respectful relationships education .
3. Ensure that school-aged young people in alternative settings, VET settings, and Catholic, independent and specialist schools are engaged in equivalent, evidence-based respectful relationships education relevant to the needs of their school communities.
4. Work with other stakeholders such as local government, sporting clubs, workplaces and community services to reinforce messaging about respectful relationships, gender equality, and the role of the education system in this space.

- This work should align with three recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence:

- That a primary prevention strategy be developed with dedicated funding and performance measures
- That a high quality website be created or expanded to educate the community about all forms of family violence; and –
- That prevention work should be developed in consultation with relevant communities, ensuring that community awareness and prevention activities ‘use language, imagery and messaging that reflect the diversity of the community’.⁴⁶

5. Work with higher education institutes to ensure that pre-service teacher training includes a strong, evidence-based grounding in respectful relationships education and violence prevention.
6. Adequately fund a discrete evaluation of the rollout of the respectful relationships education in schools initiative, which allows for learnings from each year to be integrated into the following year's rollout.
7. Work with stakeholders in DET and the school, university and community sectors to support ongoing evaluation of the support provided to teachers and other school staff to implement respectful relationships education, identifying any gaps in support, and recommending targeted expert responses.
8. Help ensure that the respectful relationships education in schools initiative fully engages relevant health professionals as part of a whole-of-school approach. Relevant stakeholders should include the Secondary School Nursing Program and the new GPs in Schools program, as well as school wellbeing teams. These professionals must be adequately trained and supported in understanding and preventing gender-based violence, and providing GLBTIQA-inclusive practice.
9. Work with DET to ensure that the impacts of respectful relationships education on the identified targets of the Education State are being considered, measured and reported upon. (See *Education State: Schools*, p.11)
10. Work with DET to ensure that the impacts of respectful relationships education and gender equality issues are measured and analysed via data collection methods such as the Victorian Student Health and Wellbeing Survey, the Victorian Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey, and the Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey.⁴⁷ Support appropriate sharing of this data with other departments, schools, services and the wider community, and use the findings to inform planning of future interventions under the Gender Equality Strategy.
11. Ensure respectful relationships education is informed by the expertise and priorities of related initiatives such as Safe Schools Coalition Victoria and Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan.

➤ **Equitable participation in diverse study pathways**

12. Work with DET to apply a 'gender lens' to the ambitions and targets of the Education State concerning strengthening student competency and excellence in the areas of scientific literacy, reading and mathematics, critical and creative thinking skills, and the arts. The aim should be to ensure Education State reforms are helping to close any significant 'gender gaps' in study pathways. (See *Education State: Schools*, p.11) As part of this, advocate for the Education State to include as one of its objectives 'supporting more students, including girls and other underrepresented groups, to excel in STEM, become confident in their STEM related abilities, understand the relevance of STEM learning to a diverse range of jobs, and pursue STEM careers,'⁴⁸ as suggested in the recent Education State STEM paper.

13. Provide new support for key stakeholders including DET and the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) to develop student-led approaches to fostering gender equality in diverse areas of study, including vocational pathways. These initiatives should be informed by the targets identified by VicSRC for strengthening student engagement in general, which include:
 - Learning goes beyond the classroom and we can see how each activity is useful and relevant to our lives.
 - Schools support and train students as 'technology leaders' within their school, helping them develop real-world skills.
 - Schools consult their SRC about ways to get broad student input into curriculum planning and assessment.
 - Schools create student action teams, or other similar initiatives such as 'students as researchers', through which students can explore matters related to curriculum content, learning and teaching approaches, and school organisation.
 - All schools develop formal processes that value student voice in gaining and implementing student feedback on curriculum, learning and teaching and assessment.⁴⁹

There should be particular attention paid to engaging female students to work with teaching staff in a supported, facilitated way to build classroom practice in STEM which is meaningful, relevant and welcoming to all students. Ideally, these processes should work not only with girls who are already actively engaged in STEM, but also with those who are not.

14. Support the advocacy of VicSRC to embed meaningful student voice within the new Tech School model, and provide additional support to ensure that this student engagement approach works to strengthen gender equality. The recommendations of VicSRC as regards Tech Schools in general include:

- Ensure students are at the front and centre of any Tech School development, design and programs.
- Formally elect two students on to the Tech School Managing committees.
- Create a Student Advisory Committee for each of the Tech School projects to advise the Managing Committees. Ensure the committee is properly resourced and supported to innovate and work successfully.
- Ensure students are represented on the Curriculum committee and other committees developed by the Tech Schools as appropriate.
- Conduct a student led survey of student views to inform the Tech Schools initiative before, during and after.
- Design annual large-scale events like a Tech Schools Youth Summit to enable young people to 'pitch' proposals for consideration of the Tech Schools initiative. This could be an opportunity for students who have worked on projects within the Tech school in their area to get more funding and support to expand their idea.
- Work with young people to design and support models for diverse representation.
- Ensure a minimum of two young people work together on a committee or advisory body.⁵⁰

15. Resource partnerships between Tech Schools, youth services, the Navigator program, Local Learning and Employment Networks, and VET or flexible learning settings to develop initiatives which use the resources of the Tech Schools to promote educational engagement, employment prospects and community

connections amongst disadvantaged and marginalised young women – for example through holiday programs, ‘taster’ courses in STEM and vocational areas, and targeted, industry-accredited VET qualifications.

16. Investigate the feasibility of providing new support to key stakeholders like DET and VicSRC to develop sustainability education initiatives, which include objectives for strengthening young women’s engagement in traditionally male-dominated areas of STEM and VET. These initiatives should be informed by the sustainability targets identified by VicSRC as part of their student engagement policy platform, which include:
 - Expand and develop the 5 Star Leadership program that helps schools become more sustainable.
 - All schools have a sustainability plan that the whole school community knows about and is working on.
 - All teachers have professional development on environmental education.
 - Schools ask their SRCs to work on sustainability projects, committees and initiatives.
 - Schools create student-led and student-partnered sustainability and environmental committees and groups to lead action in these areas.⁵¹
17. Investigate the viability of funding an initiative to prevent and address gender-based workplace discrimination and violence in the STEM settings of higher education providers and research institutes. Relevant partners in this work would include violence prevention bodies like Our Watch, health promotion bodies like VicHealth, the National Union of Students, and the Australian Human Rights Commission. The initiative should be informed by the work of the Victorian Workplace Equality and Respect Project, funded by the Victorian Government through Our Watch.

➤ **Supporting young women to shape and lead their communities**

18. Invest in initiatives to identify young women and gender-diverse young people who are working (or aspiring) to transform their communities, and support them to develop campaigns for social change and their own leadership and advocacy

skills. There should be an emphasis on supporting young people who might otherwise struggle to access conventional leadership or professional mentoring opportunities. Useful approaches might include:

- Linking these young people with relevant older mentors through a high-quality, well-evaluated mentoring program, to support the progress of these young people into the workforce and public life.
- Supporting the young people to develop their skills and networks as advocates, entrepreneurs and change-makers.
- Providing them with opportunities for meaningful decision-making experiences within government and the youth sector. For example, these young people might be supported to take part in bodies which organise funded campaigns for gender equality or allocate community grants to promote gender equality and violence prevention.

The new youth engagement mechanisms being developed by the Victorian Government Office for Youth as part of the 2016 Youth Policy will provide opportunities for government to connect with young people.

Any funded initiatives should utilise expert guidelines for good practice, including the *Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector*, guidelines in high quality mentoring programs provided by the Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance, the *Yerp* guide to high quality youth engagement, and the YWCA's *Safe Spaces for Women and Girls* guide. (See our original [submission](#) for more details.)

19. Work with the Victorian Government's new youth engagement mechanisms (currently being developed under the 2016 Youth Policy) to gather the thoughts of a wide mix of young women and gender-diverse young people as to how pathways into political and public life and decision-making roles could be made more accessible and relevant for them. These recommendations should then form the basis for funded actions under the Gender Equality Strategy.

➤ **Promoting young women's health and wellbeing**

20. Invest in long-term, well-evaluated initiatives which promote the wellbeing, empowerment and community connectedness of young women who are facing

disadvantage, discrimination and/or isolation. We note that there are particular gaps in holistic, preventative, strengths-based initiatives targeted at young women with disabilities, Aboriginal young women, and young women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Here, the Victorian Government should work in collaboration with youth service providers, women's health services, Aboriginal controlled community organisations, and relevant youth-led bodies such as young women's feminist collectives and Minus 18.

21. Advocate to make the mental health care system responsive to and inclusive of all young women and gender-diverse young people. The symposiums on service co-creation being developed by the Victorian Government Office for Youth through the 2016 Youth Policy might provide a relevant opportunity for such work.
22. Support the particular engagement of young women and gender-diverse young people in the 10 Year Mental Health Plan's initiatives to promote co-production of services with consumers.
23. Advocate for adequate access to appropriate mental health supports for all young Victorians, with particular recognition of the vulnerability of young women and gender-diverse young people. This could involve supporting YACVic's recommendations to the Victorian 10 Year Mental Health Plan, which included:
 - Work with Mental Health First Aid Australia, the School Focused Youth Service and principals towards an eventual goal of making Teen Mental Health First Aid training available to all Victorian secondary students, and make Youth Mental Health First Aid training available to staff and parents at all Victorian secondary schools.
 - Put into place adequate coordination, training, resources and dedicated staff time to ensure that Victorian secondary schools implement reputable, evidence-based models of trauma-informed teaching practice, mental health planning, mental health literacy, and parental engagement around mental health.
 - Extend access for school wellbeing teams (especially in underserviced areas) to secondary consultation and external clinical supervision.

- Strengthen community-based mental health services for young people in underserved areas.

24. Apply a 'gender lens' to the identified outcomes of the Victorian 10 Year Mental Health Plan, to assess how well the Plan is working to deliver improved health outcomes for women.

25. Work with the women's health sector, youth services and schools to develop a strategic, articulated approach to improving young people's access to sexual and reproductive health services (especially in rural areas), and relevant, accurate sexuality education with a strong focus on communication, diversity and navigating real-life concerns. This should connect to the respectful relationships curriculum.

26. Work with the youth AOD sector and young people to develop specific youth AOD treatment services tailored to young women, as well as better integrating young women's needs into current programs. These services and programs should be trauma-informed and pay attention to improving education and employment opportunities for young women. We also support further work to foster 'women's spaces' and 'female friendly' activities and residential stays within youth AOD services, which have traditionally been aimed more at young men. (See the work of YSAS for more information.)

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