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**A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy**

**A submission by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria**

**March 2016**

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**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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**The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria**

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) is the state peak body for young people aged 12-25 and the services that support them. We are a vibrant, member based organisation with over 300 members – approximately half of them young people, the others comprising local governments, community services, health services and research bodies, all committed to improving wellbeing, participation and equity for young people.

YACVic’s work is guided by our *Code of Ethical Practice*, a framework and set of values for working with young people. The principles outlined in the *Code* include young people’s empowerment and participation, social justice for young people, the safety of young people, respect for young people’s human dignity and worth, and positive health and wellbeing outcomes for young people. In abiding by the *Code*, workers undertake (amongst other things) to demonstrate anti-oppressive practice and non-discrimination, respect diversity, recognise the social and structural forces impacting on young people, and break down barriers that restrict young people’s opportunities.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As such, YACVic welcomes the Victorian Government’s announcement of a Gender Equality Strategy, with its emphasis on increasing women’s safety, security, health and wellbeing, and building a society based on respect and equality.

In this paper, we will explore how young people’s wellbeing and opportunities are affected by inequalities of gender. While we will highlight some areas in which young men face disadvantage and need tailored support, on the whole we will focus on the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by young women. As we will demonstrate, the inequality of young women is apparent across areas as diverse as community leadership, physical safety, mental health, employment and service provision.[[2]](#footnote-1)

**Executive summary**

Strong and lasting results can be achieved by engaging with young people at this formative and transitional stage in their lives, to counter gender-based discrimination early on and support young people’s own initiatives to advance gender equity.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Our submission will speak to three questions raised in the Victorian Government’s consultation paper:

* *‘How do we encourage women and girls to take up leadership roles?’*
* *‘How do we address inequality among the most diverse and disadvantaged groups of women?’*
* *‘How should Government partner with the community, corporate sector, non-profit sector and other stakeholders to advance gender equality?’*

YACVic observes that young women are already taking a lead in their communities – for example through activism, volunteering and engagement with youth/student participation structures. Young women are not unwilling to contribute or show initiative. Rather there is a need for greater recognition and respect for young women’s work, and for the forms of leadership which young women admire and learn from. There is also a need for more accessible, relevant skill-building and mentoring opportunities for young women who are experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage.

Any initiatives to promote young women’s leadership should draw upon established good practices for working ethically with young people and creating safe spaces for young women.

Meanwhile, YACVic is concerned to note that initiatives designed to empower young women and promote gender equity amongst young people have dropped away over the past two decades, despite the many forms of inequality and discrimination young women still face. This decline has been evident in government, the education sector and the youth services sector. We also highlight the need for more inclusive and appropriate ways of working with young women and gender-diverse young people who are facing intersectional forms of disadvantage.

In this submission, we call for new, sustained resourcing to address gaps in youth service delivery to promote gender equity and meet the needs of all young women. Stronger and smarter commitments from government are needed. We also explore how the role of the philanthropic sector in combatting gender-based discrimination could be strengthened. In addition, there will be a need to balance (among other things) system-wide moves towards ‘individually packaged’, ‘client-focused’ funding and the need for wider, transformative cultural and systemic change.

New initiatives should draw upon the strengths of the youth services sector. These include:

* Engaging young people through fun, generalist work in their local communities
* Consulting with young people
* Building young people’s skills and networks
* Working collaboratively with schools and other services.

Some youth services have established a particular history of working with diverse young women and promoting gender equity in their local communities. Their achievements should be identified and built upon. Successful initiatives in the education sector, such as the Respectful Relationships in Schools (REEiS) pilot, should also inform future policy making and program development.

We conclude that a gender equality strategy should be overarching. It should connect and coordinate diverse government interventions and apply a ‘gender lens’ to policy making and program design, delivery and evaluation, with the aim of achieving a fairer, safer and more cohesive community. For example, we identify several priority areas for the Victorian Government: education, mental health, family violence and respectful relationships education. Reforms in these spaces would be far more effective if differences of gender and age were made visible, and if improved outcomes for young women were identified, resourced, measured and reported on.

**Why focus on young people?**

Young Victorians aged between 12 and 25 years comprise almost a fifth of our state’s population.[[4]](#endnote-2) Adolescence and young adulthood are key stages in a person’s life, marked by transitions and new experiences as a young person moves through the education system and into job seeking and employment, while also building new friendships, experiencing their first sexual 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.

As we will demonstrate, young women and gender-diverse young people are disproportionately vulnerable to a number of poor outcomes, including insecure and poorly-paid work, gender-based violence and poor mental health.

At the same time, powerful, positive changes can be achieved through working with young people at this crucial stage of their lives, when their ideas and behaviours are still being formed and their enthusiasm for transforming the world around them is often especially strong.

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. In contrast, the impact of youth-specific interventions can be significant. For example, the health promotion body VicHealth have observed a reduction in young people’s harmful attitudes about gender-based violence since 2009, which they link to recent prevention education work in secondary schools.[[5]](#endnote-3)

* **Recommendation:** Ensure the gender equality strategy is inclusive of young people, especially young women and gender-diverse young people. The strategy should include youth-specific resources, research and reporting. Young people should be engaged in the development of the strategy and subsequent initiatives.

**Young women are creating change in their communities**

A strategy to promote gender equality must draw on and support the experience and initiative of young women. The consultation paper asks ‘How do we encourage women and girls to take up leadership roles?’, but young women are already doing this.

Promoting young women’s leadership should involve recognising and building upon the leadership so many of them are demonstrating, and challenging the norms and practices of an adult world which devalues young women’s talents and initiative. Young women’s ideas and contributions should also prompt us to re-think what it means to be a leader.

In their 2014 ‘She Speaks’ survey of 1,643 young Australian women aged 15-30 for the YWCA, Bernard Baffour et al found that 58% of the young women surveyed already considered themselves to be leaders in their families, schools, communities and/or workplaces. Comments by the young women showed that they tended to associate leadership with helping others, making yourself and other people feel better and happier, and working as part of a team. When the young women were asked to nominate the qualities that made a successful leader, the most popular responses were ‘an effective communicator’, ‘respectful’, ‘hard working’, ‘a team player’, and ‘confident’. In comparison, ‘ambition’ and ‘experience’ received very few votes from young women.[[6]](#endnote-4)

Many young women take up structured opportunities to create change in their communities. In Mission Australia’s 2015 survey of 4,645 young Victorians aged 15-19, they found that young women were morelikely than young men to report taking part in volunteering and student leadership activities. Young women were also slightly more likely than young men to report taking part in ‘youth groups and clubs’, which would presumably include things like FReeZA committees and local government youth advisory groups, which promote young people’s decision-making at a local level.[[7]](#endnote-5)

Young women are also disproportionately likely to offer their input into policy making. For example, in 2015 the Victorian Government Office for Youth launched an online survey and community consultations inviting young people’s views on social issues of importance to them, to inform a 2016 Victorian Youth Policy. Of the 1,003 young people who responded to the survey, 68% were young women. Young women were also a very prominent presence in the related community consultations. For instance, the Koorie Youth Council found that nearly three-quarters of the 227 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who responded to their survey were young women.[[8]](#endnote-6)

Meanwhile, many young women are taking direct, independent action on issues they care about. Examples range from global movements like ‘FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund’ – a youth-led fund to build the capacity of young feminist organisations and empower young women and girls around the world – to local activist groups like the Fitzroy High School Feminist Collective and Brunswick Secondary College Feminist Society, started by secondary students to combat sexism and promote feminist education.[[9]](#endnote-7)

**Removing barriers to young female leadership**

Large numbers of young women are showing leadership and willingness to get involved in social change. If their youthful initiative is not leading to high-status, well-paid roles in the adult world, this is not due to any deficit in young women. Rather, we must address the discriminatory structures and attitudes which cause young female change-makers to be ignored and devalued.

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% also 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%).[[10]](#endnote-8)

Thus, more work is needed to connect young women and men with good female and male role models and gender equity champions in public and political life – and to support such figures to emerge and thrive in the first place! It is also vital to engage with young women’s own experiences of leadership in their communities, schools and workplaces, instead of imposing models which may be alien to them.

The young women surveyed by ‘She Speaks’ also identified having a mentor as an effective strategy to help them become better leaders.[[11]](#endnote-9)

Meanwhile, it is important to address the various forms of disadvantage which prevent some young women from taking up structured opportunities to build their leadership qualities and promote social change. For example, not all young women could attend a leadership opportunity which was held in a metropolitan centre or in a space which was physically inaccessible. Other young women are put off by environments which feel unwelcoming, transphobic, or culturally inappropriate.

Meanwhile, young women experiencing hardship, abuse and chaotic circumstances may find ‘leadership opportunities’ – which are often aimed at high-achieving young people – too difficult to commit to, or simply irrelevant. It should be noted that in some respects young women are especially vulnerable to disadvantage. For example, in 2014-15 young Victorian women aged 18-24 were almost twice as likely as their male peers to be clients of specialist homelessness services, and nearly five times as likely as young men *not* to receive assistance from a homelessness service upon request. Australia-wide, homeless young women report higher rates of extreme distress, suicide attempts and self-harm than their male peers.[[12]](#endnote-10)

Meanwhile, some young women – ironically – find it hard to take up formal leadership or skill-building opportunities because they are too busy taking responsibility elsewhere. For example, approximately 4% of Australians under the age of 25 are young carers, and caring for children and sick or elderly family members is significantly more common amongst young people from Aboriginal, refugee and migrant communities. There is some evidence that young women take on particularly strong caring responsibilities in these communities, often in the context of struggles around financial security, housing, discrimination and cultural identity.[[13]](#endnote-11)

More broadly, it is common for young women to prioritise their links to other people. For example, the 2015 Mission Australia survey found that young women were more likely than young men to rank their friendships and family relationships as ‘extremely important’ or ‘very important’.[[14]](#endnote-12) This is not a mere attitudinal difference. It is suggestive of young women’s emotional labour and the active support they provide to others.

Initiatives to empower young women should recognise and value this work they already do as a form of leadership in itself. But such initiatives should also encourage a more equitable distribution of domestic and emotional labour.

**Good practice for supporting young women’s participation**

Moreover, we submit that any initiatives to promote young women’s engagement and leadership should draw on the *Code of Ethical Practice* (YACVic, 2008) and the youth engagement resource *Yerp: Young People Making Change* (YACVic, 2013). *Yerp* provides a guide to building youth engagement in organisations and communities, including:

* Involving young people from the beginning
* Making your work meaningful, challenging, beneficial and fun for young people
* Building a youth-friendly culture in your organisation
* Ensuring environments are accessible, safe and welcoming for all young people
* Providing a range of ways for young people to get involved, including through fun activities, hobbies, skill-building and contributions to their community
* Utilising young people’s skills and encouraging shared learning with adults
* Providing appropriate support for young people on boards and committees.[[15]](#endnote-13)

Furthermore, any initiatives to foster young women’s leadership would benefit from drawing on the ‘Safe Spaces for Women and Girls’ model developed by the World YWCA and modelled extensively in Sub-Saharan Africa. This model takes a human rights approach to supporting young women to share their ideas, become aware of their rights, and build their capacity as leaders, decision-makers and change agents in their communities. Safe spaces for young women should include the following elements:

* Accessible and safe locations which are convenient and comfortable for young women, and which offer mobile outreach to isolated women.
* Leadership and participation – inclusive, empowering, women-led spaces, which support young women to build skills, develop their advocacy, become peer educators and mentors, and implement programs in their communities.
* Accurate and reliable information to help young women to make decisions – this information should be factual, non-judgemental, age-appropriate, and free from discriminatory messages.
* Building trust – providing confidential and supportive spaces where young women can share their experiences and access counselling, mentoring and peer support.
* Holistic approach – recognising young women’s need for economic empowerment and personal security, and supporting them to continue their education, build informal networks, and take part in decision-making.
* Intergenerational cooperation, giving young women access to a peer mentor or counsellor of a similar age, and ensuring at least a quarter of decision-making positions are held by women under 30.
* Partnership and accountability, with locally based events, links to regional, national and global stakeholders, and support for sister organisations to grow.[[16]](#endnote-14)
* **Recommendation:** Invest in long-term, well-evaluated initiatives which promote the empowerment of young women and gender equity amongst young people. These should utilise expert guidelines for good practice, including the *Code of Ethical Practice*, the *Yerp* youth engagement guide and the YWCA’s ‘Safe Spaces for Women and Girls’ guide.

**Young people, gender, and Victorian policy priorities**

Several key issues affecting the equity and wellbeing of young women have the potential to align well with policy priority areas for the Victorian Government – specifically, education, training and employment, mental health, family violence and respectful relationships education.

A gender equality strategy could work to ensure that these government interventions apply a ‘gender lens’ to policy making and program development. The circumstances of young women and gender-diverse young people should be taken fully into account, and improved outcomes for them adequately resourced, measured and reported upon.

**Gender-based violence**

In 2015, the Victorian Government initiated a Royal Commission into Family Violence, to inquire into and provide practical recommendations on how Victoria’s responses to family violence could be improved. YACVic welcomed this work and stressed in our submission to the Royal Commission the importance of engaging with young people around gender-based violence.

We hope that a Gender Equality Strategy will enhance this work, and engage with the many ways that gender-based violence affects young people.

Many young people are concerned about violence in their communities. A 2015 survey of 3,193 young Australians published by Youth Action NSW and White Ribbon Australia found that 76% of young Australians felt family violence was common or very common in Australia, while 59% felt that dating violence was common or very common. Concern about these issues was higher amongst young women than young men.[[17]](#endnote-15)

There is a strong basis for their concern. For example:

* Young people are disproportionately vulnerable to violence. In their 2012 Personal Safety Survey, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 12% of young Victorian women aged 18-24 and 23% of young Victorian men reported that they had experienced some form of violence in the past year, compared to 5% of women and 9% of men in the general population. Young women were more likely to be assaulted by someone they knew than by a stranger, and were most likely to be attacked in someone’s home. Young men were more vulnerable to stranger violence, and to violence in public places.[[18]](#endnote-16) Given the stigma still attached to violence against women, it seems plausible that the ABS figures do not capture the full extent of the problem.
* In the Fifth National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health (2013), a survey of over 2,000 Australian secondary students found that around a quarter of the students who reported being sexually active reported that they had experienced unwanted sex. When asked the reason, 61% of the girls who had had unwanted sex selected ‘My partner thought I should’, 47% selected ‘too drunk’, and 34% selected ‘I was frightened’. Amongst boys, the most common reasons were ‘too drunk’ (54%), ‘my partner thought I should’ (37%) and ‘too high’ (24%).[[19]](#endnote-17)
* A 2015 report by Our Watch drew on a survey of 2,000 young people and focus groups with parents, and 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 insulted or verbally harassed girls in the street.
* 1 in 4 thought it was pretty normal for guys to pressure girls into sex.
* 15% thought it was OK for a guy to pressure a girl for sex if they were both drunk.
* Parents rarely spoke to their children about healthy relationships, especially not their sons. Some parents thought the topic was unimportant; others felt uncomfortable discussing it.[[20]](#endnote-18)
* The 2014 ‘She Speaks’ survey of 1,643 young Australian women found that 34% reported having received uninvited and unwanted sexually explicit texts and messages, and 27% did not know what to do when they got unwanted male attention. Only 56% felt they could negotiate safe sex, and nearly a quarter wished they felt more confident to set boundaries with their sexual partners.[[21]](#endnote-19)
* VicHealth’s 2013 report on the National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey found that 27% of young men surveyed believed ‘domestic violence is a private matter to be handled in the family’, compared to 17% of the general Australian population. 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 track his female partner without her consent using a mobile phone or computer. VicHealth noted with concern that young people are often given the message that gender equality has already been achieved, and that any remaining disadvantage or violence is the result of ‘poor choices’ by individuals.[[22]](#endnote-20)

Some groups of young women are especially vulnerable to violence and trauma, due to intersectional forms of disadvantage and discrimination. For example:

* According to Women with Disabilities Australia, women with a disability are 40% more likely to experience domestic violence than women without a disability, and 4 – 10 times more likely to experience sexual assault. Of women with an intellectual disability, a shocking 90% have been sexually abused, with around two-thirds of abuse occurring when the young woman is aged under 18.[[23]](#endnote-21)
* In their 2010 survey of 3,134 same sex attracted and gender diverse young Australians, Lynne Hillier et al found that 31% of transgender and gender non-binary young people and 14% of same sex attracted young women had been physically assaulted due to their gender/sexuality. Over 40% of transgender and gender non-binary young people also reported experiencing ‘social exclusion’, ‘rumours spread about you’, ‘being humiliated’ and ‘tolerating homophobic language from friends’.[[24]](#endnote-22)
* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people face particular risks of violence, and are taken into out-of-home care at a much higher rate than the rest of the community. Victoria’s Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People reported in 2015 that of those Aboriginal children who were placed in care, violence by men within the household and alcohol and drug use were driving factors in 90% of cases. These issues are perpetuated and made worse by intergenerational family trauma, disconnection from culture and barriers to accessing appropriate professional help. Particular problems arise when service providers hold inaccurate and discriminatory ideas about Aboriginal families, instead of identifying and supporting their many strengths. More culturally safe research and program development with Aboriginal young people is needed, based on good practice partnerships with Aboriginal-controlled organisations and recognition of the historical and societal factors contributing to family violence.[[25]](#endnote-23)
* Women in Victorian prisons are particularly likely to have been victims of physical and sexual abuse, and growing numbers of young women are being incarcerated. Between 2008-2013 the number of women aged 17-24 in Victorian prisons grew by 163%. The incarceration of young Aboriginal women is a particular concern. Despite this rapid increase, there is no specific youth unit in the adult prison system for young women. Young people can be especially responsive to diversion and rehabilitation initiatives, but at present there are not nearly enough of these to address the many vulnerabilities that young people in prisons face.[[26]](#endnote-24)

**Respectful relationships education**

The majority of young people in Victoria are engaged in secondary schools on a regular basis. With proper support and resourcing, students, staff, parents and community organisations can come together to create safer, more equitable and respectful communities, where gender stereotypes are challenged and violence is rejected. Based on their reviews of violence prevention initiatives, VicHealth have concluded that any violence prevention plan should include school-based interventions, provided they are delivered by well trained staff, have a strong program logic and evaluation, are culturally sensitive and inclusive, and take a whole-of-school approach.[[27]](#endnote-25)

As such, YACVic welcomed the Victorian Government’s 2015 announcement that respectful relationships education would be introduced into the school curriculum for Years Prep to 10. It will focus on challenging prejudice, discrimination and harassment and supporting students to learn to build healthy relationships, understand global cultures, ethics and traditions, and prevent family violence.[[28]](#endnote-26)

However, with a full curriculum and significant demands on their time and resources, schools must have access to strong expert support, adequate resourcing and the guidance of local ‘champions’ in the respectful relationships space. And respectful relationships cannot be addressed in isolation from wider issues of gender inequality, narrow and repressive gender stereotypes and gender-based violence.

Unfortunately there is a history of excellent educational resources being produced by government and the community sector but not taken up by schools due to lack of knowledge, training, time, or local leadership. Left to their own devices, some schools have also chosen to their own local programs in areas like anti-bullying, respectful relationships and girls’ self-esteem. Some were of a very high quality; some were not informed by current research or proper evaluation; some were too brief and isolated to have much impact; and some promoted messages about gender which were discriminatory and harmful.[[29]](#endnote-27)

It is important to refer to the findings of the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools (RREiS) project, which are due out soon. This project, which received funding from the Victorian Government, has worked across three locations to support thirty schools to implement the DET resource ‘Building Respectful Relationships’ as a whole-school approach. Project Implementation Leaders from the national violence prevention initiative Our Watch were placed in regional DET offices for an 18 month pilot to provide expert support to schools, including training school staff in delivering the prevention curriculum and dealing with disclosures of violence. Our Watch also facilitated partnerships between schools, local governments and community service providers to embed a culture of equality and respect across school communities.

In their initial scoping of the existing knowledge base about respectful relationships education, Our Watch identified core elements of good practice, including:

* Address the drivers of gender-based violence. These include structures, social norms and organisational practices which support gender inequality – especially those which normalise violence against women, men’s control of decision-making, limits to women’s independence, peer relationships between men which emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women, and narrow and stereotyped gender roles.
* Have a long term vision, approach and funding. Respectful relationships education should be embedded in school policies, programs and practice, and funded accordingly.
* Take a whole-of-school approach. Respectful relationships should not be sequestered into a single class, but rather implemented as a broader form of cultural change across the school community, involving teachers, other school staff, students’ families, and community service organisations.
* Establish mechanisms for collaboration and coordinated effort. Allowing adequate time for collaborative planning is critical.
* Ensure integrated evaluation and continual improvement. A robust theory of change is needed.
* Provide resources and support for teachers, including professional development about gender-based violence, teachers’ role in prevention, and how to prepare for conversations with students.
* Use age-appropriate, interactive and participatory curriculum.[[30]](#endnote-28)

It is vital that adequate, appropriate training and guidance be provided to teachers, especially those who do not have a background as health/sexuality educators. And while supplementary online resources are useful, we urge that face-to-face professional development is essential here.[[31]](#endnote-29)

* **Recommendation:** Ensure that respectful relationships education in Victorian schools is fully informed by the findings of the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools pilot project and analysis by Our Watch, and by the existing evidence base from Australia and overseas. To date, research into respectful relationships education points to the need for a long-term, well-resourced, whole-of-school approach to combatting gender-based violence. This work should be thoroughly planned and evaluated. It should provide expert support for teachers, address the drivers of gender-based violence, and engage all school staff, students and families to affect cultural and institutional change.
* **Recommendation:** Work with higher education providers to ensure that a solid grounding in respectful relationships education and violence prevention is included in pre-service teacher training.
* **Recommendation:** As part of planning for a state-wide Respectful Relationships curriculum, ensure that community-based family violence, sexual assault and mental health services are adequately prepared, resourced and well connected to schools, in order to deal with a likely rise in disclosures by young people of their experiences of violence.

**Education, training and employment**

The Victorian Government is making very significant investments to transform Victoria into the ‘Education State’, with an emphasis on reducing educational disengagement, rebuilding Victoria’s vocational education and training (VET) sector, and promoting high quality, meaningful education as a pathway out of disadvantage.

It is important to recognise that young people’s education, training and employment varies according to the intersections of gender with other factors like income, culture and place of residence. The 2013 reforms to Victoria’s VET sector under the previous government demonstrated the dangers of ignoring these issues, when a number of male-dominated areas of training were subsidised at much higher levels than most female-dominated fields, and funding was slashed from junior-level Certificate courses – a common pathway for female early school leavers in rural and outer suburban areas.[[32]](#endnote-30)

YACVic calls for policy-making and program development to be especially responsive to the education and training needs of young people living in lower-income areas, and those who leave school without a Year 12 qualification. Here, the impacts of gender-based expectations and inequalities must be taken into account.

For example:

* Young women who leave school without a Year 12 qualification are twice as likely as male early-school leavers to go into Certificate-level study, and more likely than their male peers to go into part-time work. In contrast, young men without a Year 12 qualification are four times as likely as their female peers to go into an apprenticeship, and almost twice as likely to go into full-time work.[[33]](#endnote-31)
* Young men who leave school early are especially vulnerable to unemployment if they live in a low-income area, while young women from lower-income communities who leave school early are disproportionately likely to go into the junior and precarious areas of part-time work, traineeships and Cert I-III study.[[34]](#endnote-32)
* The earlier a young woman leaves school (e.g. Year 10, rather than Year 11 or 12), the less likely she is to find full-time work and the more likely she is to go into part-time work. This pattern appears less marked amongst young men.[[35]](#endnote-33)
* Amongst young people who leave school early and go into the workforce without a Year 12 qualification, young women are over-represented as sales assistants, checkout operators, waitresses and counter-hands. Their male peers are over-represented as kitchenhands, labourers, factory hands and farm workers.[[36]](#endnote-34)
* Gender is a powerful factor affecting young people’s training choices. For example, in Victoria’s VET sector in 2012, men comprised 92% of enrolments in Construction, 91% of enrolments in Mining, and 79% of enrolments in Agriculture, while women comprised 86% of enrolments in Health Care and Social Assistance and 60% of enrolments in ‘Other Services’ (often health and beauty). Historically, women have also been over-represented in the VET sector as sales assistants, office cashiers, secretaries and hospitality workers.[[37]](#endnote-35)
* A comparable gender divide is evident at university. Amongst Victorian Year 12 graduates in 2015, enrolments in computer science, building, and electrical engineering were 92% male, while 92% of ‘personal services’ enrolments were female, along with 91% of enrolments in nursing and 85% of enrolments in human welfare and services.[[38]](#endnote-36)
* High levels of educational attainment do not always translate into advantages in the workforce. In 2014, 57% of female Year 12 graduates in Victoria went on to university, compared with 49% of male graduates.[[39]](#endnote-37) However, when women graduate from university and enter the workforce they already face a wage gap of 9.4% in favour of male graduates. The gap remains (at 4.4%) even when male and female graduates work in the same industry, and it widens over the years.[[40]](#endnote-38)

Any revival of Victoria’s VET and VCAL systems should include interventions to open up areas of training typically stereotyped as ‘female’ or ‘male’, and to address the low pay and casual conditions associated with industries full of women.

Similarly, it would be insufficient to focus on creating new full-time positions for school-leavers in industry areas dominated by men, without also addressing concerns about casualised labour, exploitation and underemployment in the fields of part-time work where young women are prominent.

**Mental health and wellbeing**

In November 2015, the Victorian Government launched the state’s new 10 Year Mental Health Plan. This plan recognises young people’s heightened risk of mental health problems and the need to improve mental health at a community level by tackling disadvantage and marginalisation. The plan recognises that women suffer particularly high rates of mental illness, and links this to gender-based violence.[[41]](#endnote-39)

However, gender disparities are not a very prominent theme in the 10 Year Mental Health Plan, and women’s and men’s different experiences of mental illness were mentioned only briefly in four of the Plan’s twelve discussion papers.[[42]](#endnote-40)

As such, this is a relevant time to look at youth mental health through a ‘gendered lens’.

For example, when Mission Australia reviewed data from their national surveys of young people aged 15-17, they found that young women were almost twice as likely to have a probable serious mental illness as young men, and that while young men’s rate of probable mental illness had remained relatively stable in recent years, the rate amongst young women had grown between 2012-14 from 23% to 27%.[[43]](#endnote-41)

Such findings have been echoed by local studies. For example, a 2015 survey of 2,296 young people through the Cardinia Shire Council Youth Forum discovered 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.[[44]](#endnote-42)

Here, it is important to consider not only the physical and neurological drivers of mental illness, but also the environmental ones. Mission Australia found that young women with a probable mental illness were considerably more likely than their male peers to report being ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned about ‘coping with stress’, ‘school or study problems’ and ‘body image’. Young women were also slightly more likely than young men to report being concerned about ‘depression’, ‘family conflict’, ‘bullying/emotional abuse’, and ‘suicide’ – these were most of the topics listed in the survey. [[45]](#endnote-43)

The results of Mission Australia’s regular youth survey are also suggestive of the high pressures placed on teenage girls, and of young women’s comparatively high levels of anxiety and fear. Of the 4,645 young Victorians aged 15 to 19 who were surveyed 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 (in order): ‘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 by the survey, young women appeared 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%), and somewhat less likely than young men to report feeling ‘positive’ or ‘very positive’ about the future.[[46]](#endnote-44)

These issues are commonly viewed through a clinical lens as ‘mental health problems’. Certainly, better support for young people experiencing mental illness is needed. But in light of the discrimination many young women experience, interventions to improve their mental health should also address safety, empowerment and human rights.

This point is also clear in relation to other young people experiencing gender-based discrimination. In their 2010 survey of GLBTIQ young Australians, Hillier et al found that young people who did not identify with either gender showed exceptionally high rates of self-harm, drug use and suicidal thoughts as a result of vicious persecution (violence, homelessness, school disengagement) – but that these young people were also especially likely to find strength and reassurance through getting involved in activism for social change.[[47]](#endnote-45)

* **Recommendation:** Ensure appropriate governance and coordination structures are in place to enable the Gender Equality Strategy to link up policy development and program design across all areas of government. We suggest a good place to start would be bringing a ‘gender lens’ to long-term planning and reform in the areas of education and mental health. For example:
* Make Victoria’s mental health care system responsive and inclusive of all young women and gender diverse young people.
* Fund preventative and early intervention approaches which tackle the social drivers of poor mental health amongst young women and gender diverse young people, including gender-based discrimination and violence.
* Ensure that young women, especially those from lower-income communities and those at risk of early school leaving, can access high quality, affordable vocational education and training, including in emerging and non-traditional areas. A ‘gender-blind’ approach will not achieve this; targeted measures are needed to combat gender segregation in the VET sector and make traditionally ‘female’ and ‘male’ training fields accessible and welcoming to all young people.
* Ensure that new jobs and apprenticeship opportunities created by the Victorian Government are designed to deliver equitable, beneficial outcomes for both young women and young men.
* Combat the low pay, exploitation and casualised conditions associated with industries full of young women

**Additional priority area: sexual and reproductive health**

While we have not had the scope to explore the topic in depth here, YACVic supports further work in the important space of young women’s sexual and reproductive health. Key issues including rising rates of STIs, young people’s inconsistent use of safer sex practices, disproportionately high rates of young parenthood in rural and regional Victoria (where service access is often poor), inadequate sexual health education for young people, and the connection between all these issues and abusive/inequitable relationships and harmful assumptions about young women’s behaviour, responsibilities and worth. Here, we refer the reader to the research and advocacy of Women’s Health Victoria and a 2013 work by YACVic on the subject.[[48]](#endnote-46)

* **Recommendation:** 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.

**Where are the initiatives to empower young women and promote gender equity?**

**Schools and gender equity up to 2016**

In the 1960s and 70s, policy makers and educators became concerned that the labour market was segregated along gender lines and that young women had poor educational outcomes compared to men. In 1971 less than a third of university students were women. In consequence, from the mid 1970s and into the 1980s, there was a strong policy focus on addressing the under-representation of girls in science, technology, engineering and maths, and on countering violence and discrimination towards girls in schools. National policies on girls’ education were developed in 1986 and 1993, backed by significant resourcing, including regional school support centres with gender equity consultants, gender equity officers in schools, and a state equal opportunities resource centre.[[49]](#endnote-47)

However these support structures have since been dismantled, and the late 1990s and early 2000s were marked by a political and media backlash against feminism. By then, young women were attending university at higher rates than young men, although this was partly because the traditionally female areas of teaching and nursing had become reclassified as tertiary degrees. New concerns were raised that boys were being disadvantaged in the education system. This culminated in a 2002 Australian Parliamentary Inquiry on boys’ education and over $27 million from the Howard Government to boost boys’ educational outcomes. Unfortunately, much of this conversation about boys’ education was marked by calls to biological determinism. Frequent assertions that ‘boys will be boys’ and ‘let boys be boys’ gave the impression that all boys learn in the same way; it also served to dismiss or minimise male bullying. Not enough was done to address the diverse identities and experiences of young men, or the ways young men’s educational outcomes were shaped by income, class, culture, disability, place of residence, and the common Australian link between masculinity and anti-academic attitudes. Nor did policy-makers focus on the fact that young women’s higher educational attainments rarely translated into greater success in the workforce.[[50]](#endnote-48)

One policy space in which schools, governments and the community did continue to focus on girls was body image, which was the topic of a Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry in 2007. Schools worked closely with health services, and the issue garnered prominent champions from the fields of sports, media and entertainment. Body image remains a major concern for young people – in Mission Australia’s 2015 survey of 4,645 young Victorians, body image was selected as an issue of personal concern by nearly a third of young women and 13% of young men.[[51]](#endnote-49) Yet political and popular momentum on the topic appears to have diminished in recent years.

In recent years, there seems to have been a drift away from addressing issues of gender in education. The one prominent exception to this has been a recent push for respectful relationships education in Victorian schools.

**The youth sector and gender equity up to 2016**

There are relatively few comprehensive histories of Victoria’s youth sector, especially in relation to gender. However, based on the available evidence we contend that over the past two decades there has been a decline in youth sector work to empower young women and promote gender equity.

YACVic, as Victoria’s youth peak body, undertook explicit advocacy about young women’s rights during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Examples included a 1990 manual on preventing sexual abuse, a 1997 forum and report on ‘Protecting young women’s rights in service systems’ , a 1997 ‘Young Lesbian Visibility Project’, and significant advocacy on young women’s health issues in the early 1990s.[[52]](#endnote-50)

However, in recent years YACVic’s work has shifted, reflecting the policy priorities of various government departments – and, perhaps, the widespread decline of gender as a popular topic for political and community debate. We have raised issues of gender-based discrimination in the context of family violence, sexual health, vocational education and training, abortion, and pornography. We have also provided a home for the HEY Project, a Victorian Government initiative to improve the quality of life for sex/gender diverse and same sex attracted young people. However, recently we have done relatively little work with a specific focus on gender equity, or on young women as a cohort with their own strengths, problems and perspectives.

Consequently, there have been areas of neglect. For example, in a major 2013 survey of youth service providers around Victoria, YACVic invited youth services to identify the various forms of assistance they offered to young people and the gaps in service delivery they had noticed. We suggested dozens of possible categories of service delivery, such as mental health, housing, holiday programs, legal assistance, and life skills. However, our survey did not ask about services for young women (or young men) or programs to promote gender equity. (The closest we came was ‘sexual assault/domestic violence’, which is related but not the same.) While our final study gathered extensive and very valuable data about Victoria’s youth sector, there remains a gap in our knowledge about the gendered component of service delivery and unmet need.[[53]](#endnote-51)

Since the mid 2000s, there also appeared to be something of a decline in academic research about Australian young people and gender. *Youth Studies Australia*, the important and valued journal of the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, published at least 51 articles about young women, young men and / or gender issues between 1994-2013. While these were diverse, since the mid 2000s it is possible to trace a decline in articles about young Australian women as a cohort, gender-based discrimination, or the need to empower girls from a feminist perspective. It is likely this does not reflect any bias in the journal itself, but is indicative of trends in academic work.[[54]](#endnote-52)

In conversations with YACVic, several youth service providers have commented that there seems to have been a drift away from interventions specifically for young women since the 1990s. Some have also observed a decline in young men’s programs over the past decade, in favour of ‘gender blind’ approaches. In particular, youth services have observed a reduction in preventative, strengths-based interventions. (This mirrors a wider trend in service delivery away from generalist youth work.)

However, in the last couple of years there has been a perceptible rise in interest by youth services in addressing gender-based discrimination and violence. In a 2013 questionnaire sent to our members, YACVic asked youth services and young people to nominate their ‘top three’ priorities for YACVic’s policy work: none of the respondents mentioned young women or gender. However, when we surveyed our members (and some non-members) again in 2015, nearly half the responses we received about policy priorities mentioned issues relating to gender equity. These included family violence, gender roles, violence against women, and young people’s access to relevant sex education.

This seems a highly opportune time to build the youth sector’s capacity to work with young people around gender equity.

**Challenges in measuring ‘gendered’ youth service delivery**

To inform this submission, we conducted a scoping of the recent 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. We also scanned the recent communication materials of 60 other organisational members of YACVic (community service organisations and health providers) and a number of other providers of youth services.

We were looking for initiatives which explicitly promoted gender equity and/or programs targeted specifically at young women. As many youth programs are short-lived, we looked not only for current interventions but also for programs which were given prominence in the organisations’ communication materials over the past two or three years.

Due to time limitations, we could not conduct a truly comprehensive study, as this would have required interviewing staff from hundreds of services. As such, it is likely that some youth services are doing ‘gendered’ work which we have not identified. (This is especially possible for SFYS providers and LLENs, whose capacity to educate the public about their work has been affected by a climate of great uncertainty as regards their funding and service requirements.) Conversely, it is also possible that some services which flag gender equity as a priority issue have not actually done much work on the ground.

However, within the limitations of our approach, we offer the following observations.

**How common is ‘gendered’ youth service provision?**

Only a minority of youth service providers appear to offer programs specifically for young women or interventions which explicitly promote gender equity. However, those that do work in this space have significant expertise to share.

27 out of 79 local government youth services stated that they provided programs for young women and/or raised issues of gender equity in their publications. So did 5 out of 31 LLENs and 2 out of 51 SFYS providers. However, as noted above, this may well be an under-estimation due to limited public reporting on their work.

When we looked at YACVic’s 2015 membership base, we identified some 60 youth services which were YACVic members, in addition to local governments, LLENs and SFYS. Of these 60 services, 12 were identified as offering young women’s programs or gender equity initiatives.

We also identified a further 10 providers of youth services which were not 2015 YACVic members, but which offered initiatives for young women.[[55]](#footnote-3) Due to the diverse nature of the youth sector, and the short-term and poorly funded nature of many youth programs, it is possible there are other interventions we failed to identify.

**What are the youth sector’s greatest strengths in the ‘gendered’ space?**

One of the greatest strengths of local government youth services teams is their ability to work collaboratively with schools and other services to engage with large numbers of young people in generalist settings. We identified 11 different programs across 7 LGAs where local government youth services worked with schools to educate young women (and sometimes young men) on topics including respectful relationships, body image, safer sex, self-esteem and life skills.

One LLEN, two SFYS providers and five other providers of services for young people also reported collaborating with schools and other services to deliver generalist programs for students about respectful relationships, sexuality education, violence prevention and/or body image. (Again, this may be an under-estimation due to limited public reporting.)

Another common way youth service providers work in a ‘gendered’ and generalist space – sometimes progressively, sometimes problematically – is through the provision of fun activities and school holiday programs for ‘girls’ and ‘boys’. We identified 11 gender-specific activity programs delivered by 8 local government youth services teams, although we suspect the true number is higher. (We also identified two youth service providers from outside of local government which described offering programs for girls which combined fun activities with building self-esteem.) Some of these programs combine adventurous activities like surfing, go-karting and rock climbing with conversations about relationships, body image, culture and sexual health. Examples include the ‘Girls Go Extreme’ program supported by the City of Greater Geelong, and the ‘New Change All Girls Day’ at the City of Brimbank. Other services simply offer recreational activities – some of which suggest a reinforcing of gender roles, such as makeup sessions for girls and sporting activities for boys.

Local government youth services teams are also distinguished by their large-scale consultations with young people. One recent example was the 2014 Banyule Youth Summit, where 100 young people came together to discuss issues that mattered to them. Discrimination, harassment and inequality of young women was a prominent theme, as was the lack of recreational and sporting opportunities for young women from multicultural backgrounds. Recommendations from the young people included film-making project about sexism, the formation of an Australian African Banyule Young Women’s Advisory Group, and the setting aside of culturally appropriate spaces in the Olympic Village for young women from refugee and migrant backgrounds to get active.[[56]](#endnote-53)

In a more specific space, we note that the youth sector is an important provider of support to young women who are pregnant and parenting. We identified 6 young mothers’ support groups provided by 4 local government youth services. 3 LLENs reported initiatives to support young mothers’ educational outcomes; and one SFYS provider reported offering therapeutic, educational activities for young mothers. We also identified another 8 support programs for young mothers offered by 6 other youth services.

If a gender equality strategy aims to improve life outcomes for young mothers (as one of the ‘diverse and disadvantaged groups of women’), it is important to engage with the youth services that support them.

**What other supports do youth services provide to young women?**

The youth sector is characterised by great diversity, short-term programs and limited funding. This means there are a number of ‘one-off’ interventions to promote young women’s wellbeing, which may have positive impacts at a local community level without necessarily connecting to wider service provision. In our scoping of current or recent youth programs around the state, we identified:

* Three support groups for refugee and migrant young women, supported by local government youth services teams
* Three mentoring and career planning programs specifically for young women – two offered by local governments, one by a LLEN
* Two girls’ self-defence classes offered by local government
* Two programs to encourage girls into non-traditional industries – one offered by a LLEN and one by a community service provider
* Four self-esteem and mentoring programs for young Aboriginal women at risk of family violence, unemployment or involvement in the justice system – three offered by community services (two of which were Aboriginal-specific providers) and one by a LLEN
* Emergency housing settings specifically for vulnerable young women, offered by two community services
* Two pieces of research and advocacy into forced marriage of young people, undertaken by community services
* Two initiatives to educate the community about the impacts of pornography on young people, offered by community services.

Other interventions included:

* A therapeutic art program for girls suffering from poor self-image, eating disorders and social exclusion, offered by a SFYS provider.
* An anger management program for girls offered by a community service provider
* Resources for supporting multicultural young women in sporting clubs, offered by a community service provider
* A program to engage vulnerable young women and girls at risk of sex work.[[57]](#endnote-54)

More work is needed to ‘join up’ the findings of these diverse programs, and to build the capacity of the youth sector to work with a ‘gendered lens’ across the board.

**Where are the gaps in ‘gendered’ youth service delivery?**

Gender-specific programs and gender equity initiatives appear to be far more common in metropolitan Victoria than in rural and regional Victoria. Of the 45 services which we identified as providing programs for young women and/or prioritising gender equity as an issue in their publications, 32 of them were based in metropolitan Melbourne. This probably reflects the different levels of resourcing of services in rural, regional and metropolitan areas – as well as the fact that many community services do not operate outside of larger centres. From our scoping, it appears that rural communities are especially reliant on local governments and LLENs to deliver initiatives in the ‘gendered’ space, possibly because there are very few other services on the ground.

Advocacy bodies have also identified other gaps in gender-responsive youth service delivery.

For example, YSAS, the youth alcohol and other drug (AOD) service, has observed gaps in AOD service delivery for young women. Scoping recent research about youth AOD supports, YSAS found that the youth AOD sector has tended to develop in response to the needs of young men being referred across from the justice system. Youth AOD services have not been as good at responding to the needs of young women seeking help around AOD use, whose drug use severity and drug related harms are higher than those of their male peers. Young women in the AOD sector are also significantly more likely than young men to be coming from backgrounds of neglect, abuse and/or sexual violence, and their rates of mental illness, self-harm and suicide attempts are double those of their male peers. In response, YSAS has recommended the development of youth AOD services for young women, women’s spaces within youth AOD services, and greater service responsiveness to young women’s needs. Proactive work is also needed to target vulnerable young women early in the life of an AOD problem.[[58]](#endnote-55)

Meanwhile, the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) has identified shortfalls in service delivery suitable for young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Outcomes for these young women would be improved by more accessible information about the services available; better access to leadership opportunities and culturally appropriate activities; more support for pregnant and parenting young women to continue their education; culturally appropriate communication about sensitive topics like sexual health and family violence; accessible information for young women about their legal rights in Australia; better relationships between culturally specific and mainstream services; more work to address intergenerational conflict; and more accurate and positive portrayals of multicultural young women, led by the young women themselves. CMY also identified that services must be supported to address the multiple forms of disadvantage that young women from refugee and migrant backgrounds may be facing. These can include language barriers, trauma, dependence on their families, lack of IT skills, caring responsibilities, expectations by family members that women will marry young, and fear of the police, justice and community sectors in Australia.[[59]](#endnote-56)

From our scoping of current and recent youth sector programs to promote young women’s wellbeing, we would also note:

* There were very few programs aimed at young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Those we identified tended to be run by Aboriginal-specific services. This echoes our finding from the 2013 survey of the Victorian youth sector: that much greater work is needed to make youth services welcoming, inclusive, culturally competent and safe for Aboriginal young people. Meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations should be part of this. Similarly, the Koorie Youth Council have identified a significant need for investment in more Koorie youth worker roles and generalist supports for Koorie young people, to engage young people in fun, welcoming settings and address any issues early on.[[60]](#endnote-57)
* There were *no* programs offered by mainstream youth services which focused on young women with disabilities. Nor was there much focus on promoting existing programs as accessible to everyone. Indeed, some otherwise positive and progressive programs for young women may inadvertently exclude women with disabilities by focusing on physical activity and outdoor adventures. This aligns with our finding from the 2013 survey of the Victorian youth sector: that much more work is needed to address service gaps for young people with disabilities. In particular, mainstream youth services should be better trained and funded to support young people with disabilities to participate in general youth activities and programs as ‘young people’. [[61]](#endnote-58)
* **Recommendation:** Invest in long-term, well-evaluated initiatives which promote the empowerment of young women and gender equity amongst young people. These should identify, build upon and link up existing successful initiatives in the youth, education and mentoring sectors. Key community stakeholders should be engaged in meaningful partnerships with government. These stakeholders include social change movements led by young women and gender-diverse young people, as well as local government youth services, specialist youth service providers in areas like AOD and homelessness, providers of high quality, well evaluated youth mentoring programs, community health services, the School Focused Youth Service, Local Learning and Employment Networks, schools, TAFEs and flexible learning providers.
* **Recommendation:** Build the capacity of the youth services sector (including generalist youth services) to counter gender-based discrimination, educate about respectful relationships, and work inclusively with all young women. Particular work is needed to improve the cultural competence, disability competence and community linkages of youth services, so that they can work appropriately and effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women, young women from refugee and migrant backgrounds, young women with disabilities, and transgender and gender-diverse young people.

**Future funding models for gender equity**

We call for new resourcing to support the empowerment of young women and promote gender equity amongst young people. These interventions should work at personal, community and systemic levels.

At present, human service delivery is shifting away from ‘program focused’ funding towards ‘client focused’ models which undertake to provide each client with a ‘package’ of services responsive to their individual needs and directed by their own priorities. This approach has the potential to empower people using services.

However, it must be accompanied by appropriate supports for diverse and vulnerable people to understand and navigate the system – and their own needs. (For example, many all young women have not been educated or encouraged to identify issues like controlling, abusive relationships as a problem for which they are entitled to seek a legal/service response.) There must also be provision of expert, appropriate and culturally safe service delivery for people who have historically not been well served by ‘mainstream’ providers. This includes many young women.

A gender equality strategy should advise policy makers and program designers on how to ensure that ‘client focused’ service delivery still addresses wider systemic issues of disadvantage and injustice. It is important to avoid the risk of treating every problem merely as the personal ‘failing’ of an individual. It is also important to ensure that service funding is not tied so narrowly to pre-determined individual outcomes that there is no room for innovation.

Smaller not-for-profit and youth-specific providers often achieve excellent outcomes with clients at a personal level. But they will also need sufficient security and capital to plan and deliver responses to large-scale issues like gender-based discrimination.

* **Recommendation:** Ensure resourcing is available to counter the norms, structures and practices that perpetuate gender inequality at personal, community, systemic and social levels. The growth of ‘client-focused’ funding should be an opportunity to provide more responsive, sensitive and appropriate supports to young women - not to force young women into generic, gender/culture blind services or stifle wider innovations for social change.

**Engaging the philanthropic sector**

Philanthropic stakeholders should be part of future partnerships with the Victorian Government to advance gender equity. Philanthropic funding is important to many youth services. Indeed, some young women’s services have reflected to us that they have become especially reliant on philanthropic support given the shortage of government funding streams which focus on young women.

Key stakeholders in this space include:

* The Australian Women Donors Network, a not-for-profit body which advocates for a ‘gender-wise’ approach to social investment and grant-making as a means to deliver a fairer, more equitable society.
* The Victorian Women’s Trust, which in addition to delivering its own grant programs has also produced a guide ‘Gender Lens for Inclusive Philanthropy’.
* FRIDA, the young feminist fund, an international body which provides young feminist groups with small grants, leadership/capacity building opportunities, and guidance about leveraging resources and increasing their donors’ and allies’ commitments to feminist work.

Unfortunately, many philanthropic bodies are inattentive to issues of gender equity. Women’s relative lack of power and visibility means they are more likely to be overlooked in program planning, implementation and evaluation. Where this occurs, philanthropic impact is reduced and women’s inequality can be reinforced.[[62]](#endnote-59)

The Australian Women Donors Network estimates that 12% of philanthropic foundation grants in Australia are allocated to women’s and girls’ projects.[[63]](#endnote-60) In a 2014 scoping by YACVic of philanthropic funding for programs for young people in Victoria, 6% of the youth grants we identified – 20 grants in all – appeared to have a focus on young women or gender equity.[[64]](#endnote-61) (As the philanthropic sector is so diverse and reporting so uneven, it is possible some other initiatives were funded without our identifying them.)

In our 2014 scoping of philanthropic grants to youth programs, we also noted:

* The Victorian Women’s Trust and Invergowrie Foundation were very prominent sources for funding for young women’s programs. This shows the value of having grant-makers with a female focus. However, it also shows that programs for young women can rely on a disturbingly small donor base.
* The two most popular areas for philanthropic grants for young women were educational advancement (this was also the most popular area for ‘youth’ grants in general) and young women’s leadership.
* Some philanthropic bodies funded programs for specific groups of young women: three programs for young women from African backgrounds, two for young mothers, one for young Aboriginal women, and one for former prisoners.
* We did not identify any grants allocated specifically for young women with disabilities.
* We identified only one (modest) grant for a program targeted at sex/gender diverse and same sex attracted young people.
* The amounts of philanthropic funding for young women’s programs varied greatly, from $3,000 to over $150,000. However, the majority of grants were between $5,000 and $20,000. This is in keeping with the size of philanthropic funding to youth programs in general. It means that while philanthropic contributions are important to youth services, these services can very rarely run an entire, long-term program on the strength of one philanthropic donation.[[65]](#endnote-62)

The philanthropic sector has the potential to work more effectively to promote young women’s equity, leadership and social change. The Australian Women Donors Network and the Victorian Women’s Trust encourage grant-makers and grant-seekers to ask themselves questions such as:

* Does your grant-making purposely seek to enhance gender equality?
* Does the project take into account the possibly different needs, interests and circumstances of women and men?
* Does the project for which funding is being sought have clear aims and targets for men/boys or women/girls or both?
* Is there a satisfactory gender representation on the project management and governance group?
* Are there opportunities for women/girls to give voice and enjoy real and effective involvement in the project?
* Are the needs and interests of women and/or girls safeguarded in practical and effective ways – e.g. child care, other caring roles, language and cultural sensitivities?
* Are there measures or systems in place to evaluate the impact of the project on women and men?
* How do other factors like age, ethnicity and socio-economic status intersect with gender in relation to this program?
* What are the expected outcomes for women and girls? Will these outcomes last in the medium to long term, or will they be positive but short-lived?
* Will the outcomes be communicated beyond the project to strengthen advocacy and policy development elsewhere?[[66]](#endnote-63)

To promote better outcomes for young women, it is also important to address some longstanding issues between youth services and grant-makers. These include the tension between philanthropy’s preference for funding new, innovative, time-limited projects and the demand by community services for sustainable resourcing for their long-term work. The limited capacity of youth services to access philanthropic grants – which are fiercely contested and often have demanding application processes – is another barrier.

As part of encouraging greater collaboration between the sectors to promote gender equality, it would be valuable for the Victorian Government to work with YACVic, Philanthropy Australia and key stakeholders in the women’s philanthropy space to facilitate conversations with grant-makers and grant-seekers about how to coordinate philanthropic giving, use a ‘gender lens’, and foster stronger understanding between youth services and the philanthropic sector.

* **Recommendation:** Bring together philanthropic bodies and youth services to identify key issues concerning young people and gender equity and support grant-makers and grant applicants to employ a ‘gender lens’ to achieve optimal results through philanthropic funding. This should be done in collaboration with key stakeholders including Philanthropy Australia, the Australian Women Donors Network, YACVic and key grant-makers such as the Victorian Women’s Trust and FRIDA.

YACVic would be happy to discuss any of these issues further with you. For enquiries, please contact Jessie Mitchell, on (03) 9267 3722 or [policy@yacvic.org.au](mailto:policy@yacvic.org.au)

**Recommendations**

1. Ensure the gender equality strategy is inclusive of young people, especially young women and gender-diverse young people. The strategy should include youth-specific resources, research and reporting. Young people should be engaged in the development of the strategy and subsequent initiatives.
2. Invest in long-term, well-evaluated initiatives which promote the empowerment of young women and gender equity amongst young people. These should utilise expert guidelines for good practice, including the *Code of Ethical Practice*, the *Yerp* youth engagement guide and the YWCA’s ‘Safe Spaces for Women and Girls’ guide.
3. Ensure that respectful relationships education in Victorian schools is fully informed by the findings of the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools pilot project and analysis by Our Watch, and by the existing evidence base from Australia and overseas. To date, research into respectful relationships education points to the need for a long-term, well-resourced, whole-of-school approach to combatting gender-based violence. This work should be thoroughly planned and evaluated. It should provide expert support for teachers, address the drivers of gender-based violence, and engage all school staff, students and families to affect cultural and institutional change.
4. Work with higher education providers to ensure that a solid grounding in respectful relationships education and violence prevention is included in pre-service teacher training.
5. As part of planning for a state-wide Respectful Relationships curriculum, ensure that community-based family violence, sexual assault and mental health services are adequately prepared, resourced and well connected to schools, in order to deal with a likely rise in disclosures by young people of their experiences of violence.
6. Ensure appropriate governance and coordination structures are in place to enable the Gender Equality Strategy to link up policy development and program design across all areas of government. We suggest a good place to start would be bringing a ‘gender lens’ to long-term planning and reform in the areas of education and mental health. For example:

* Make Victoria’s mental health care system responsive and inclusive of all young women and gender diverse young people.
* Fund preventative and early intervention approaches which tackle the social drivers of poor mental health amongst young women and gender diverse young people, including gender-based discrimination and violence.
* Ensure that young women, especially those from lower-income communities and those at risk of early school leaving, can access high quality, affordable vocational education and training, including in emerging and non-traditional areas. A ‘gender-blind’ approach will not achieve this; targeted measures are needed to combat gender segregation in the VET sector and make traditionally ‘female’ and ‘male’ training fields accessible and welcoming to all young people.
* Ensure that new jobs and apprenticeship opportunities created by the Victorian Government are designed to deliver equitable, beneficial outcomes for both young women and young men.
* Combat the low pay, exploitation and casualised conditions associated with industries full of young women.
* 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.

1. Invest in long-term, well-evaluated initiatives which promote the empowerment of young women and gender equity amongst young people. (See Recommendation 2.) These should identify, build upon and link up existing successful initiatives in the youth, education and mentoring sectors. Key community stakeholders should be engaged in meaningful partnerships with government. These stakeholders include social change movements led by young women and gender-diverse young people, as well as local government youth services, specialist youth service providers in areas like AOD and homelessness, providers of high quality, well evaluated youth mentoring programs, community health services, the School Focused Youth Service, Local Learning and Employment Networks, schools, TAFEs and flexible learning providers.
2. Build the capacity of the youth services sector (including generalist youth services) to counter gender-based discrimination, educate about respectful relationships, and work inclusively with all young women. Particular work is needed to improve the cultural competence, disability competence and community linkages of youth services, so that they can work appropriately and effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women, young women from refugee and migrant backgrounds, young women with disabilities, and transgender and gender-diverse young people.
3. Ensure resourcing is available to counter the norms, structures and practices that perpetuate gender inequality at personal, community, systemic and social levels. The growth of ‘client-focused’ funding should be an opportunity to provide more responsive, sensitive and appropriate supports to young women - not to force young women into generic, gender/culture blind services or stifle wider innovations for social change.
4. Bring together philanthropic bodies and youth services to identify key issues concerning young people and gender equity and support grant-makers and grant applicants to employ a ‘gender lens’ to achieve optimal results through philanthropic funding. This should be done in collaboration with key stakeholders including Philanthropy Australia, the Australian Women Donors Network, YACVic and key grant-makers such as the Victorian Women’s Trust and FRIDA.

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3. The distinction between ‘equality’ and ‘equity’ is complex and contested. In this paper, we call for equity approaches – designed to counter longstanding injustice and remove unfair barriers – as a means to arrive at equality. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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