

# Promising practice forum: Building momentum to prevent violence against women

## A summary of the National Primary Prevention Hub April 2021 forum

### Executive summary

This paper provides a summary of a webinar and online discussion forum hosted by Our Watch as part of the National Primary Prevention Hub (the Hub) in April 2021.

The forum focused on two key methods that can increase the effectiveness of work focused on the prevention of violence against women:

1. working with different stakeholder groups across multiple levels in a community or setting
2. collaboration between organisations.

The forum examined these themes through two case studies:

- Women's Health Victoria's [shEqual project](#), which is the first coordinated effort in Australia to promote gender equality and address the drivers of violence against women in advertising, working in-depth with the advertising industry
- Take the Lead, a primary prevention consortium based in Sydney's western suburbs that brings together local government and a range of community service organisations to deliver local, place-based prevention initiatives.

The forum was designed to be interactive. Participants engaged in breakout rooms following the first case study and were invited to ask questions of presenters following the second case study.



## Key points

### **Building effective collaborations strengthens prevention**

- Local, placed-based work is a key part of efforts to prevent violence against women. Working across organisations at local levels to build effective collaborations maximises the impact of this work - it increases the reach of programs, reduces isolation and improves strategic responses to needs in the local community.

### **Working across multiple levels in prevention**

- Effectively working with different stakeholder groups across a setting increases the reach and impact of efforts to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women. The establishment of a rigorous evidence base that informs strategic planning and taking time to build a network of relationships is critical to this approach.

### **Strategic approaches to communication about prevention**

- Communicating effectively about primary prevention of violence against women work can be difficult to navigate. Having a strategic approach based on the aim and audience of this work and how best to engage particular communities and audiences is critical to successful engagement.

## Introduction

In April 2021, the [National Primary Prevention Hub](#) (the Hub) held an online, interactive promising practice forum exploring effective collaborative practice to prevent violence against women. This paper provides a summary of the forum.

The Hub is led by Our Watch and funded by the Department of Social Services under the Fourth Action Plan of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*. The project supports information-sharing, enables connection and collaboration, and facilitates coordination among organisations designing and delivering primary prevention policies, programs and campaigns.

The delivery of a series of webinars, forums and online discussions is a key activity of the Hub. Findings from feedback surveys from Hub events prior to the April forum identified that participants appreciated the case studies profiled in Hub events. Stakeholders also made clear that they wanted opportunities to connect with other participants and presenters in order to learn from the experience and expertise of others. As a result, the Hub team designed the April forum to combine these two threads of feedback, with case studies, breakout room discussions, and time for questions for presenters from participants.

Following the event, participants at this forum again communicated that they appreciated the case studies and overall, the interactive nature of the forum was rated highly. However, we received mixed feedback about the experience of breakout room discussions. The Hub team will continue to listen to participant experiences from the feedback surveys to inform event adaptation and determine the best ways to engage participants in online events.

The interactive promising practice forum, held in April 2021, explored methods to improve the effectiveness of work focused on the prevention of violence against women. The forum focused on two key methods:

1. working with different stakeholder groups across multiple levels in a community or setting, for example:
  - individuals and communities
  - organisations and industries
  - policy makers and regulators
2. effective collaborative practice to prevent violence against women.

[Evidence shows](#) that initiatives to prevent violence against women will be most effective if done in collaboration and across multiple levels in a community or setting. This ensures efforts are consistent and mutually reinforcing. The forum also highlighted how working in partnership and utilising others' strengths and skills forms the basis for effective prevention activity. The forum heard presentations from two projects working in different contexts that have utilised a combination of these approaches:

- Women's Health Victoria's [shEqual project](#), which is the first coordinated effort in Australia to promote gender equality and address the drivers of violence against women in advertising, working in-depth with the advertising industry
- Take the Lead, a primary prevention consortium based in Sydney's western suburbs that brings together local government and a range of community service organisations to deliver local, place-based prevention initiatives.

The presentations provided an overview to participants of:

- how the projects built momentum in their early stages and identified opportunities to develop their work
- how they developed collaborations and engaged stakeholders along the way
- how they are working at multiple levels within their community or setting to maximise their reach
- day-to-day wins and challenges in the delivery of primary prevention work, and lessons learnt from these.

The participatory forum was aimed at practitioners working to prevent violence against women (directly or indirectly), policy-makers, and other professionals interested in this work.

## Case study 1: Women's Health Victoria's shEqual project

[Women's Health Victoria](#) (WHV) works collaboratively with individuals, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to inform and improve policy and service delivery for women. WHV's Gender Equality in Advertising project seeks to end violence against women through work in the advertising setting.

Despite the well-established consequences of promoting traditional gender roles, the Australian advertising industry still relies heavily on these stereotypes. The hyper-feminisation, sexualisation and objectification of women; depictions of ideal masculinity that promote stoicism, dominance, and even violence; and an underrepresentation of diverse gender identities remain key themes in contemporary advertisements. Exposure to this imagery has been shown to perpetuate gendered behaviours and career aspirations among children, and negative health outcomes for young women, including disordered eating and low self-esteem. More broadly, the perpetuation of gender stereotypes inhibits the achievement of gender equality, thereby maintaining a context in which violence against women can and will occur.<sup>1</sup>

To address this, the shEqual project works with researchers, advertising agencies and regulatory bodies to establish a robust evidence base and enact meaningful change at multiple levels in the advertising industry. shEqual's aim is to ensure advertising reflects the diversity and multidimensionality of Australian communities and contributes to creating a society in which all people are viewed and treated as equal and live free from violence. As such it adopts an intersectional approach, by attending to the ways in which gendered representations intersect with disability, race, Indigeneity and sexuality.

### Developing an evidence base and building a framework

In its initial phases, WHV partnered with RMIT to develop an evidence base to guide and inform the rest of the project. This partnership published reports that examined [the impact of sexist advertising](#) (2018); [community responses to gender stereotypes in advertising](#) (2019); and [promising practice in addressing problematic gender portrayals](#) (2019).

The [Seeing is Believing National Strategic Framework](#) was released in late in 2020. The framework is based on research and consultation with the advertising industry, industry regulators, and the prevention sector. It establishes the impetus for change and highlights the importance of doing so via a whole-of-community approach that includes: cultural change in the industry, community engagement and empowerment, and more effective regulation and policy.

### Promoting cultural change in the advertising industry

Though the advertising industry has a young workforce, most industry leaders are older and male. This, alongside the significant levels of attrition among women (particularly associated with parental leave), suggests the existence of a glass ceiling. As such, the shEqual project has been strategic in how it approaches working with the industry. These strategies include:

- a project reference group made up of industry representatives and project partners that provides feedback on project initiatives, strategic direction and access to industry networks

- an online [pledge](#) that takes advantage of the competitive nature of the industry, to build a critical mass of individuals and companies committed to achieving advertising equality
- [a training module](#) that educates advertisers about the connection between the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and violence against women, and how they can help prevent this violence (regardless of their role)
- the utilisation of advertising industry media to profile the work of the shEqual project.

Upcoming work includes:

- an ambassador program that aims to recruit industry leaders as agents of change and offer guidance to industry around how they can better support women at critical stages in their careers, including when they take parental leave
- industry mapping that facilitates more strategic planning by identifying key stakeholders (e.g. conglomerates that own multiple advertising companies) to maximise the project's reach, given its limited resources
- industry auditing to document women's experiences and inform the development of more effective strategies.

## Community engagement and empowerment

shEqual acknowledges that consumer action feeds into industry change, and aims to educate and empower consumers to help end sexist advertising through:

- the [pledge](#): consumers and members of the community can also take the pledge
- social media engagement and campaigns such as #SnapSexism
- a [reporting toolkit](#) that: builds media literacy around sexist advertising, harmful gender norms and the link between gender inequality and violence against women; and teaches consumers how to make complaints about sexist advertising.

## Regulation and policy

Affecting regulatory change in the advertising industry is challenging as it is largely self-regulated. shEqual aims to overcome this by:

- Lobbying the [Australian Association of National Advertisers \(AANA\)](#) and [AdStandards](#). As a result, the AANA recently changed their [Code of Ethics](#), which now prohibits the focus on body parts or use of overly sexual imagery where this is not relevant to the product or service being advertised.
- Leveraging opportunities created by the *Gender Equality Act 2020 (Vic)*, for example in relation to procurement processes.
- Utilising industry auditing (outlined above) to evidence the need for regulatory change. This is part of a long-term strategy to develop alternative regulation models, such as co-regulation.

## Case study 2: Take the Lead Consortium (NSW)

Take the Lead is a primary prevention consortium that delivers placed-based programs across the Parramatta and Cumberland Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Sydney's western suburbs. The [City of Parramatta Council](#) created the consortium in 2018 to:

- increase the capacity of local services
- facilitate a more coordinated approach to primary prevention across these two geographically large and culturally/socio-economically diverse LGAs.

The Council continues to facilitate the consortium, and provide primary prevention training, advice, and support where needed. Other consortium members include Cumberland Women's Health Centre, Hope Connect, and Boronia Multicultural Services. In line with the evidence set out in [Change the story](#), each consortium member delivers a different set of programs according to their unique expertise, ranging from targeted, one-on-one support through to broader community-level initiatives.

In line with *Change the story* essential action 'Promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships', [Cumberland Women's Health Centre](#) delivers the Employment Boost program: a medium-term program for victim survivors of family violence, that seeks to reduce unemployment and promote women's independence by:

- facilitating women's obtainment of free qualifications
- addressing practical barriers to employment (e.g. resume writing and interview skills)
- therapeutic workshops to build confidence and self-esteem
- one-on-one case management.

In line with *Change the story* essential action 'Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relations between and among women and men, girls and boys', [Hope Connect](#) delivers three programs as part of the consortium, with a focus on promoting equal and respectful relationships:

- respectful relationship workshops for young people, many of whom have backgrounds of complex, intergenerational trauma
- Construction Zone, an 8-week workshop that teaches women practical maintenance skills while facilitating discussions about the impact of gender norms
- parenting workshops that focus on gender stereotypes, which are now embedded into supported playgroups due to low levels of attendance.

In line with *Change the story* essential action 'Foster positive personal identities and challenge gender stereotypes and roles', [Boronia Multicultural Service](#) delivers programs aimed at challenging gender stereotypes:

- community events to celebrate women, promote male care givers and challenge gendered violence
- fathers and kids camp
- workshops for fathers that want to tackle gender inequality.

## Challenges

Common challenges faced by consortium members include:

- **Bicultural work:** Race-based discrimination and inequality are often most pressing issues faced by the communities the consortium works with, which makes it difficult to engage them in initiatives around gender inequality. This is exacerbated if community leaders and/or gatekeepers are not supportive of the work, as they may prevent access to the community.
- **Practical issues of placed-based work:** For example, the lack of affordable venues that provide or can accommodate free onsite childcare creates a significant barrier to women's engagement in prevention programs, and access to schools has been extremely restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Engaging young people:** Many young people in Parramatta and Cumberland are disengaged from formal education, and youth and community organisations do not have the resources or capacity to conduct meaningful outreach. Partnerships have helped to overcome this issue to some degree, when for example, a group of organisations obtained funding for an after-hours youth support worker.
- **Limited resourcing:** All the consortium members are small services and therefore both time and resources are scarce.

## Strengths

Strengths identified by the consortium include:

- **Common values and commitment:** Each organisation aligns itself with feminist values, locates their work within the [Change the story](#) framework and recognises the importance of intersectionality in primary prevention. These shared values and commitments have helped to bind the consortium together and enabled effective collaboration.
- **Working around challenges:** Consortium members highlighted the importance of flexible and targeted approaches, and creative solutions. For example, to engage young people who were not interested in discussing gender inequality at length, consortium members conducted prevention work at a street gym. Though these interactions were fleeting (chatting to participants while they had a drink break), it proved to be one of the few effective forms of engagement for this hard-to-reach demographic.
- **Collaborating and learning from each other:** The consortium adopts an iterative approach to primary prevention work by meeting regularly, investing in relationship-building and remaining open to learning and adapting. This has practical benefits by, for example, facilitating inter-agency referrals, and reduces isolation within and between primary prevention organisations.
- **Network building and knowledge-sharing:** The consortium prioritises the sharing of expertise, challenges and learnings, at the interagency level and through evaluation processes. A state-wide community of practice has also been established, which consortium members both draw knowledge from, and contribute knowledge to.

- **Measuring the impact:** In order to develop a standardised evaluation framework that could be implemented across each of the vastly different member organisations, the consortium utilised the [Change the story](#) essential actions as a shared set of outcomes. Evaluation data is collected via surveys, verbal feedback and program completion rates, however there is a big focus on documenting participants' experiences and foregrounding their voices to evaluate the effectiveness of consortium activities.
- **Working strategically with external organisations and services:** The consortium engages with stakeholders at multiple levels, from community development workers to policy and regulatory agencies, in order to garner support for the broad suite of projects and programs undertaken by local council.
- **Building on existing systems and strategies:** Where possible, the consortium seeks to build on, improve and/or adapt existing programs in line with new and emerging evidence, in order to achieve desired outcomes in the most cost- and time-effective manner.

## Discussion group summary

Forum participants were allocated to breakout rooms for discussion of issues relevant to the case studies presented during the event. Questions for this session fell under two themes and groups decided which theme to focus on.

### Theme 1: Communicating about primary prevention

- What challenges do you face when communicating about primary prevention with stakeholders? How can these challenges be reduced?
- What have you found works when communicating with stakeholders?

Key themes that emerged in discussion groups that focused on theme 1 included:

- There can be challenges engaging with people or organisations who have not previously engaged with the issue of violence against women.
- Trying to make the messages relevant to everyone in the community can also be a challenge including how to help people to see their role in prevention work.
- Inclusive language, community-led projects, meeting people where they are at, long-term consistent funding, and intersectional practice were all identified as ways to address challenges relating to communicating about primary prevention.
- To ensure appropriate messaging reaches all communities, it is critical to understand the needs of local communities, and to tailor communication strategies appropriately.
- Resistance and backlash are recurrent issues in all settings. Having conversations within organisations about the need for bravery when trying to communicate about specific issues such as the prevention of violence against women, gender equality and consent can help. There is a need to be comfortable in calling out issues for what they are, and not talking around them.
- There is an opportunity to move past awareness raising and into behaviour change through communications approaches, however stakeholders are seeking further guidance about how to do this.



## Theme 2: Working across multiple levels

- How do you plan to work across multiple levels in the programs or projects you work on?
- What are some of the successful ways you've built on existing work in order to extend its reach to include new audiences, organisations or parts of your community?

Key themes that emerged in discussion groups that focused on theme 2 included:

- Co-designed, community-led design is an approach that highlights community needs. Working with community leaders, local community representatives, local government members and working up to state government level ensures that projects have impact at different levels of the socio-ecological model.
- Utilising partnerships and collaboration to maximise reach involves lots of discussion and negotiation in order to understand other organisations' priorities and points of view to work together to reduce gender inequality. There also needs to be an understanding of the limitations of other organisations and in any partnerships.
- Working with a "whole-of" approach is critical so that it is not just particular parts of an organisation or a community that is engaged in the work.

## Conclusion

This promising practice forum provided an opportunity for people working towards the primary prevention of violence against women to connect and hear from others working in the area. The case studies of the shEqual project, which takes a multipronged approach to working with the advertising industry to achieve gender equality, and the collaborative and placed-based work of the Take the Lead consortium provided an avenue to enable connection and exploration of practice ideas. Participants also provided their own insights and expertise on two key topics: working across multiple levels and communicating about primary prevention.

Feedback from this forum will inform future events through the Hub.

## Endnotes

- 1 McKenzie M, Bugden M, Webster A, Barr M. (2018). [\*Advertising \(in\)equality: the impacts of sexist advertising on women's health and wellbeing\*](#). Melbourne: Women's Health Victoria. (Women's Health Issues Paper; 14).