

Fact sheet 3.

Why gender matters



What is gender?

Gender and sex are different concepts that can be incorrectly interchanged.¹ Sex is assigned at birth (female/male) based on a set of biological features. Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that are learned and considered appropriate for women and men, girls and boys (for example, blue is for boys, pink is for girls; boys shouldn't cry and should be tough while girls should be caring and pretty). Gender expectations vary between cultures and can change over time.²

The [Genderbread Person](#) is a helpful teaching tool for breaking the big concept of gender down into bite-sized, digestible pieces.

Femininity and 'feminine' traits are often treated as inferior to masculinity and 'masculine' traits. Likewise, men who express 'feminine' traits or women who express 'masculine' traits can be put down. For example, in many cultures, nurturing and caring are valued as feminine traits and considered necessary for mothers to display, while fathers are expected to be the breadwinners, and stoic. Men are encouraged to be assertive leaders, while women who display these attributes can be referred to as 'bossy' or 'aggressive'. These social roles can create inequality, such as when decision-making and financial control rests only with men, in the family unit or in workplaces.

What is gender inequality?

Gender inequality is the unequal value afforded to men and women and the unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunity between them. It has its origins in historical and contemporary laws,

policies and social norms that have constrained the rights and opportunities of women. Women and men generally experience different access to resources, power and decision-making opportunities, and different responsibilities and benefits. Gender stereotypes continue to be perpetuated and reinforced at all levels of society through our structures, practices and social norms. While some of these have changed in recent times, others continue in both formal and informal ways.

Gender *equality* seeks to transform these differences and its goal is equal outcomes for everyone. Gender *equity*, on the other hand, relates to the processes required to achieve this equality. Challenging conventional understandings of gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality is an essential part of preventing violence against women.

Why is language important?

These fact sheets mostly use binary language that assumes only two categories of sex and gender. While neither sex nor gender exist in set categories, this language sits within current community understandings. For this reason, binary language can frame discussions about violence against women, as it conveys the overwhelmingly gendered nature and dynamics of violence perpetration and victimisation.³ Nevertheless, it's important to acknowledge that there are people whose experiences and identities are not captured by binary language. Where possible, we should use inclusive language that does not reinforce gender binaries to reflect the experiences of those who do not fall within a binary framing⁴ for example, gender diverse people⁵.

¹ Gahagan, J. (2021, 14 July). [The difference between sex and gender, and why both matter in health research](#). *The Conversation*.

² Our Watch. (2021). [Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia](#) (2nd edn). Our Watch.

³ Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story*.

⁴ Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story*.

⁵ See - [Men in focus evidence review](#), glossary pg 102 for a definition of gender diverse

Likewise, language used to describe violence against women often focuses on the experiences of those who are cisgender and heterosexual. While there is significant overlap between the drivers (causes) of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people and the drivers of violence against women, there are also unique and additional factors driving this violence. This relates to how LGBTIQ bodies, people and relationships are seen as less valid, healthy or worthy in our society.⁶ See Rainbow Health Australia's [Pride in Prevention Messaging Guide](#) for information on how to support communications and engagement in preventing family violence experienced by LGBTIQ communities.

What role does gender play in violence?

We say that violence is gendered because 95% of violence experienced by people of any gender is perpetrated by men.⁷ In addition, women and men's experience of violence is very different, based on their gender. Also, higher levels of violence against women are consistently associated with lower levels of gender equality in both public life and personal relationships.⁸ It is in this way that gender inequality provides the social context in which violence against women occurs.

How can men play a role in prevention?

Not all men perpetrate violence. But the attitudes, actions and inactions of men that condone or ignore violence, put women down or perpetuate gender inequality are a significant part of the problem. Often without realising it, and to varying degrees, men are privileged by, benefit from and participate in the structures, norms and practices that drive gender inequality and, in turn, men's violence against

women. Men (and some women) remain complicit in the problem when they do nothing to challenge and transform gender inequality and the drivers of violence against women, and continue to benefit from them. For more information about engaging men in prevention efforts, see [Men in focus practice guide: Addressing masculinities and working with men in the prevention of men's violence against women](#).

How can councils prevent violence against women?

Councils are uniquely placed to influence people's lives where they live, learn, work, socialise and play, from the early years to old age. They play a critical role in supporting different communities to thrive and experience good quality of life. Councils can help to prevent violence against women through promoting gender equality and addressing the drivers of violence against women – see Fact sheet 1 for more information. Councils can start with simple actions to advance gender equality, such as an assessment of internal culture, policies, services and facilities. This analysis is referred to as 'applying a gender lens', or a gender audit. It can reveal where there are differences in attitudes towards women and men and the opportunities afforded to them.

Acknowledging these differences and challenging discriminatory practices are all important to prevention work. See Fact sheet 4 for more information on council's role in preventing violence against women. Fact sheet 5 contains guidance for councils that are newer to this work.

An example of applying a gender lens is Horsham Rural City Council's (Vic) [gender impact assessment](#) of their Community Grants Program, to improve access for people of diverse genders and identities.

⁶ Carman, M., Fairchild, J., Parsons, M., Farrugia, C., Power, J., & Bourne, A. (2020). [Pride in Prevention: A guide to primary prevention of family violence experienced by LGBTIQ communities](#). Rainbow Health Victoria, La Trobe University.

⁷ Diemer, K. (2015). ABS Personal Safety Survey: Additional analysis on relationship and sex of perpetrator. University of Melbourne.

⁸ Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story*.

