June 2025

Submission in response to the Commonwealth Government's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

Our Watch

Our Watch

Preventing violence against women

Contents

Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is a whole of community issue. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Aboriginal people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes, institutions, systems and social structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national evidenced-based frameworks, *Change the story* (2nd ed 2021)[1], *Changing the picture* (2018)[2] and *Changing the landscape* (2022)[3], we work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

Since establishment, one of Our Watch's key focus areas has been developing the evidence base for respectful relationships education. Our Watch has led pilots in secondary and primary schools, worked alongside policy makers, educators, students, school leadership and experts in designing, implementing, and evaluating respectful relationships education across Australia. Through its leadership role in both convening the first National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Group (2017–2020) and chairing the current National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Working Group (2023-present), Our Watch supports national information sharing, practice coordination and policy development. We provide ongoing advice to the education sector, including Commonwealth, state and territory Departments of Education, on what is needed to design and deliver best practice respectful relationships education to stop gender-based violence before it starts.

Executive Summary

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide advice to the Commonwealth Government's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review. We note that this Review has an interest in:

- Best practice in relation to preventing and responding to bullying in schools;
- Types of actions, resources and supports that are working to address or prevent bullying in Australian schools; and
- Possible models and content for a consistent national standard for responding to bullying in schools and its underlying causes in school contexts.

In response, Our Watch's submission:

- Conceptualises bullying within the broader context of violence in schools.
- Highlights the gendered power dynamics that underpin bullying, discrimination and other forms of gender-based violence in schools, for both staff and students.
- Highlights that understanding bullying through a gendered and intersectional lens is essential if the underlying drivers of this behaviour is to be addressed.
- Emphasises the need to go beyond a narrow model of 'bullying education'.
- Outlines the need for nuanced interventions that:
  o take a comprehensive, holistic and intersectional approach;
  o address issues of gender and power; and
  o challenge negative social and peer norms.
- Presents the evidence for best practice respectful relationships education (RRE) as a readily available measure that meets these needs and represents the most promising approach to preventing bullying and discrimination in schools.
- Highlights the role that the Commonwealth Government, and other Australian Governments, can play in implementing and supporting RRE across the country.

This submission focuses on the potential of respectful relationships education (RRE) as an evidence-based approach which uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change. RRE supports children and young people to identify, challenge and avoid limiting or harmful gender stereotypes, establish equitable and respectful attitudes, and develop positive personal identities and interpersonal relationship skills. Critically, RRE goes beyond individual education, working at the education system level and taking a whole-of-school approach that engages schools as both education institutions and workplaces. It works with school leadership, creates systems and practices to support school staff, builds positive school cultures, ensures age-appropriate curriculum delivery and appropriate policy development, and promotes community engagement.

An evidence-based approach to RRE is the most promising and comprehensive strategy to address bullying and other forms of gendered discrimination and harassment in schools. It is a readily available mechanism, with established examples of successful implementation in Victoria and trials in Queensland, positive evaluations, and a suite of available frameworks, tools and supports, both for policy makers and for school staff, that would enable rapid scale-up across the country.

Governments have a crucial role in developing a long-term vision and approach for RRE and supporting an evidence-based whole of school approach. This is recognised in the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*, Recommendation 10 of the *Respect@Work Sexual Harassment National Enquiry Report* and Recommendation 59 of the *Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence*.

Summary of recommendations

1. The Commonwealth Government explicitly recognises the gendered nature of much school-based bullying and discrimination, including by:

   a) Reviewing and updating the national definition of bullying to explicitly recognise the gendered pattern and nature of much bullying, and the disproportionate rates of bullying experienced by young women, and LGBTQIA+ and non-binary students.

   b) Developing a governance structure that works across education departments and divisions to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to preventing gender-based violence, including bullying.

2. That, rather than addressing bullying with a standalone measure, the Commonwealth Government leverages its existing commitment to and investment in evidence-based respectful relationships education (RRE) as a mechanism for addressing gendered bullying, harassment and discrimination in Australian schools.

3. The Commonwealth Government expands upon the current Consent and Respectful Relationships Education measure to ensure ongoing, needs-based funding to all jurisdictions and school sectors and investment in evidence-based respectful relationships education that incorporates all seven components of best practice.

4. The Commonwealth Government supports all states and territories to phase in implementation of a whole school, evidence-based approach to RRE. One significant way the Commonwealth can assist is to support the development of a national RRE workforce across jurisdictions and school sectors.

5. The Commonwealth Government develops a comprehensive approach to RRE monitoring, evaluation and learning, including a theory of change that can guide and monitor approaches to RRE across jurisdictions and school sectors, including capturing data relating to gendered bullying in schools

6. State and territory governments mandate the teaching of evidence-based respectful relationships education curriculum, that addresses the gendered drivers of violence, in age-appropriate ways across all year levels.

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director of Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, Amanda Alford at amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au

Understanding bullying in schools

The gendered nature of bullying, discrimination and harassment in schools

Schools strive to be a place of equality, opportunity and learning for all students and a safe, equitable and inspiring workplace for staff. Unfortunately, discrimination, bullying and harassment persist for school students and staff across Australia with substantial levels of this unequal treatment relating to sex, gender and sexuality. To end bullying and discrimination, there is a need to address the underlying drivers and social context which enables these behaviours to occur.

Research examining bullying has found it to be a highly gendered behaviour, particularly amongst adolescents.[4]

- According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1 in 3 Australian teenagers report experiencing discrimination.[5] At ages 16–17, 1 in 8 females (13%) reported sex discrimination compared to 1 in 20 males (5%).[6]
- Trans young people aged 14-25 experience elevated rates, with 74% reporting experiences of bullying.[7]
- In addition, 39% of same sex attracted teens report sexual identity discrimination between the ages of 14 and 17 (compared to 5% of all teens).[8]

The role of rigid norms and attitudes about gender and sexuality in driving bullying

A high proportion of bullying is underpinned by rigid attitudes, behaviours and views about gender, sex and bodies.[9]

- The gendered nature of bullying drives experiences of both victimisation and perpetration, with much bullying being strongly connected to ideas about masculinity. It can be targeted towards boys who do not adhere to dominant forms of masculinity (such as being tough, stoic, hypersexual) and the sexual harassment of girls can be used by boys to establish male status and bond with other boys.[10]
- Young men with supportive attitudes towards rigid forms of masculinities are much more likely to make sexual comments to women they don't know, while also being more likely to have personally experienced physical bullying in the past month.[11]

Research shows bullying tends to become more sexualised in nature as students move into secondary school, manifesting in forms of sexual, gender based and homophobic harassment.[12]

Rigid ideas of gender and sexuality are also driving alarming rates of sexual and gender-based harassment and assault for young LGBTIQA+ people, with significant associated negative impacts on young people's mental and physical health, safety, and wellbeing.

- A large Australian study of young people aged between 14-21 who identified as LGBTIQA+ has shown that approximately 60.2% of participants said that they had

felt unsafe or uncomfortable in the past 12 months at secondary school due to their sexuality or gender identity.[13] This resulted in over a third of secondary school students missing day/s at their educational setting in the past 12 months.[14]

▪ Trans students report experiencing elevated levels of harassment, bullying and physical or sexual violence in school, predominantly perpetrated by classmates.[15] Trans young people who experience bullying report higher rates of wanting to hurt themselves, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, self-harming, reckless behaviour, and diagnoses of depression, eating disorders, anxiety, personality disorders and PTSD than those who did not experience bullying.[16]

▪ LGBTIQA+ young people who are part of educational institutions in which they feel validated and confident to express their identities, report better mental health and subjective happiness[17].

Data clearly suggests a complex relationship between patterns of bullying and rigid norms about gender and sexuality and their associated power dynamics. Addressing school related gender-based violence, including bullying, therefore requires an understanding of gender dynamics and deep-rooted patriarchal, social and cultural norms,[18] if we are to prevent this violence from occurring.

Bullying and discrimination as forms of gender-based violence

Bullying and discrimination are forms of gender-based violence[19] and are human rights violations which have serious impacts on young people's mental and physical health, safety, and wellbeing.[20] The gendered social norms and unequal power dynamics that exist in most societies have a pervasive influence on violence, including school related gender-based violence.[21]

Violence in schools includes physical, psychological and sexual violence, as conceptualized in **Figure 1** below. Bullying can overlap with and include elements of all these broader forms of violence. It can take various forms, including cyberbullying, sexual comments and harassment, physical aggression and threats, and psychological violence such as taunting, insults, social exclusion and denial of resources. As shown in this conceptualisation, gender and sexual orientation are key factors affecting victimisation.[i]

Understanding bullying and discrimination in schools within the broader scope of gender-based violence that occurs in schools is essential if the underlying drivers of all these behaviours are to be addressed.

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[i] Our Watch prefers the term 'victimisation' to vulnerability. It is not factors like gender and sexuality *in and of themselves* that make a person more likely to experience violence. Rather it is the systems of oppression based on these factors that encourage perpetrators to target or victimise certain people and allow them to use violence against certain people with greater impunity.
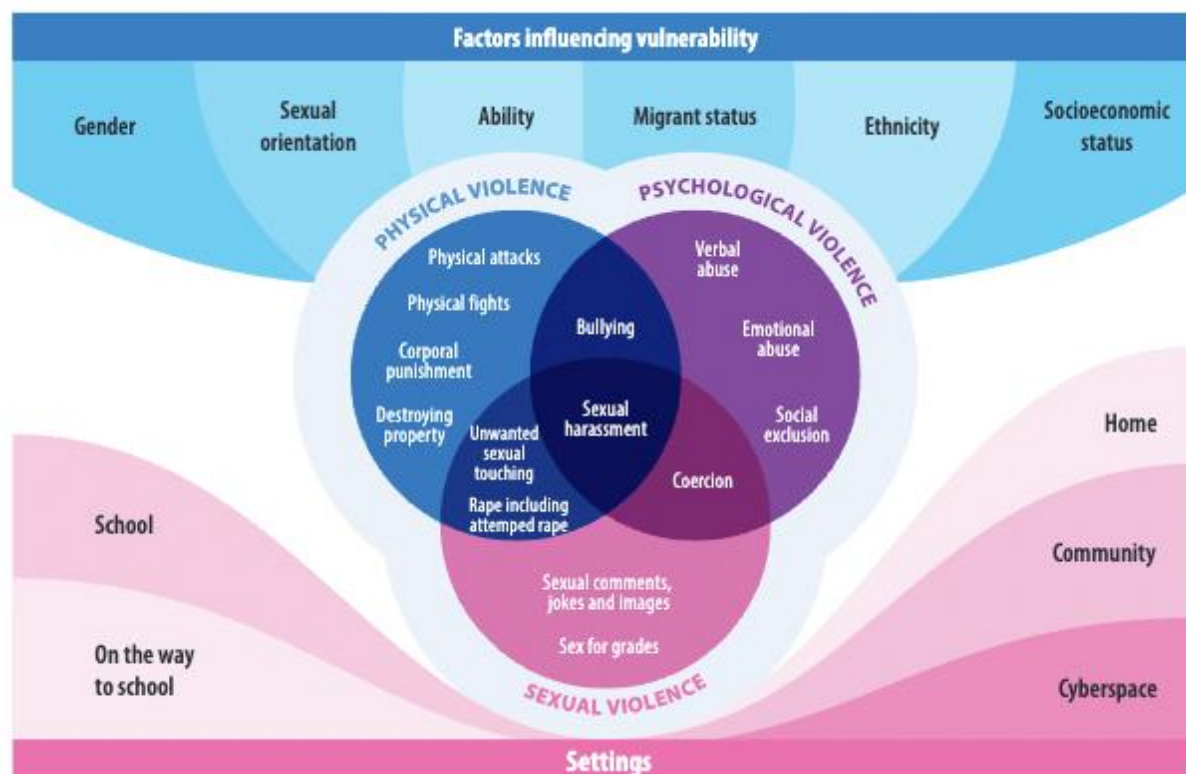
Figure 1 Conceptual framework for understanding bullying within the broader context of school violence, showing gender and sexuality as key factors affecting victimisation.

Source: UNESCO Office Bangkok and Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (2023).[22]

Perpetration of bullying and sexual harassment

There is growing evidence recognising the links between the perpetration of bullying with the perpetration of sexual harassment and sexual violence. For example, homophobic name-calling of peers in early high school was found to be a predictor of future sexual violence perpetration against both male and female students.[23] Homophobic teasing is likely influenced, not only by attitudes towards gender equality, but also the level of acceptance of the behaviour within peer groups, often being viewed as pro-social.[24]

Peer social norms are changing rapidly with the recent rise and popularity of online of male influencers like Andrew Tate. This is leading to challenges related to ideas of male supremacy within Australian schools.[25] This includes harmful and problematic messages, such as that men need to conform to rigid ideas of masculinity (be tough, strong, hypersexual) to be a 'real man', that women are possessions of men and should submit/be accountable to men. Teachers report this influence as leading to a noticeable shift in boys' behaviour towards women and girls.[26] Important emerging evidence is demonstrating an increase in sexual harassment, sexism and misogyny perpetrated by boys towards female teachers. Many female teachers state that their workplaces are no longer safe due to misogynistic behaviour directed towards them and female students.[27] Teachers are unable to effectively address these issues in classrooms where they are constantly being challenged, disrespected and harassed.

Preventing bullying in schools: what is needed?

Moving beyond 'bullying education'

- Despite bullying education having prominence in schools for some time, research has found that many approaches oversimplify the role of social norms and inequalities and peer hierarchies within adolescent relationships.[28]
- The limited success of bullying programs has been attributed to the widespread absence of a critical power lens, including gender. [29]
- A challenge for addressing bullying is the internalisation and normalisation of gender inequality. Young people often justify forms of gendered inequality, discrimination and violence encountered in schools[30] believing they are part of a typical school experience.[31] This reflects the broader Australian context in which young people do not necessarily recognise the gendered nature of domestic and family violence, or that perpetration is most commonly by men, and many hold victim-blaming attitudes.[32]
- There is a need to move beyond 'bullying education' to more nuanced interventions that challenge negative social and peer norms and develop the necessary skills for building and maintaining respectful relationships.[33]

A holistic approach that integrates anti-bullying work with a broader approach to respectful relationships

- Rather than approaching 'bullying education' in isolation from other issues, there is a need for a holistic approach that integrates this issue within a broader approach to respectful relationships. This enables interventions to engage with the social context in which bullying takes place, and to identify and address the underlying drivers of bullying and other forms of abuse, harassment and violence in schools.
- Research indicates that to address the limitations of previous approaches to bullying education, there is a need for a broader, systemic approach, one that focuses on gender, power and control.[34]
- Approaches that focus on identifying, questioning and challenging the drivers of gender-based violence have been found to be more effective than those that do not.[35]

An intersectional approach

- An intersectional gender and power analysis must underpin our understanding of bullying and other discriminatory treatment in schools, and our approach to preventing and addressing it. While challenging gender inequalities needs to be at the centre of efforts to prevent gender-based violence, an intersectional approach involves addressing not only gender inequality, but other forms of structural inequalities, negative stereotypes and discrimination, including racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia.

- An intersectional approach allows the underlying causes of bullying and discrimination to be addressed and ensures all students and staff have access to the kinds of tailored support they need, and can develop the knowledge and skills to facilitate respectful relationships at school, with peers, and in the community.

A consistent, ongoing approach throughout the school years

- Bullying will not be effectively addressed through 'one-off' programs or interventions, or 'standalone' policies and procedures in isolation.
- Addressing bullying needs to be integrated into a broader approach to respectful relationships, because this approach can provide consistent messaging, from the beginning to the end of a young person's schooling.
- Best practice approaches commence age-appropriate teaching and learning as early as possible and enable students to build incrementally on knowledge as they progress through year levels.
- Research into effective approaches to address bullying and sexual violence in schools found that it is important to respond to the ways in which bullying tends to become more sexualised in nature as students move into secondary school, manifesting in forms of sexual and gender-based harassment and homophobic harassment.[36] Integrating the topic of bullying into broader respectful relationships education that spans the school years enables this kind of progression. For example, materials for younger children may involve topics such as gender stereotypes and the need to ask and give permission for physical touch such as hugging, while older students may have more detailed conversations about sexual violence and 'affirmative consent' within relationships.

Respectful relationships education: the most promising tool to prevent bullying in schools

Respectful relationships education (RRE) offers the most promising approach to addressing gendered bullying, harassment and discrimination in schools. It also aligns with UNESCO's call for a 'whole education' approach to tackling bullying.[37]

RRE engages schools as workplaces, education institutions and community hubs. It supports school leadership, processes and practices to prevent bullying, discrimination, harassment and violence. As a systemic approach that works across the education system, RRE is a valuable tool for all Australian governments seeking to address bullying.

An evidence-based approach to RRE provides a readily available mechanism to address bullying and harassment in schools by:
- identifying the gendered nature of behaviour (through incident data collection)
- setting up appropriate systems for responding to disclosures of violence
- teaching about gender, power and control through the curriculum
- supporting teachers to discuss, educate and appropriately address complex topics related to gender expression, stereotypes and diversity
- challenging harmful and limiting gender stereotypes, and role-modelling equality and respect via a whole-of-school approach.

Grounded in national and international evidence and characterised by a critical analysis of gender inequality and power, RRE is an approach that focuses on transforming attitudes, behaviours and practices by addressing the underlying drivers of bullying and violence. It supports young people to build the knowledge and skills required to reject bullying and aggressive behaviour and discrimination, and challenge gender stereotypes.

RRE goes beyond individual education. It uses the education system to establish a systemic and consistent approach across all schools, to enable effective implementation, coordination and monitoring, support teachers through professional development, and ensure age-appropriate curriculum delivery and appropriate policy development.

RRE also takes a systemic, 'whole-of-school' approach in individual schools. It works with school leadership to role model respect and equality, create systems and practices to support staff, build positive school cultures and promote community engagement.

When integrated effectively into the education system, best-practice respectful relationships education can help shift the gendered drivers of violence, bullying and harassment at individual, school, system, policy and broader societal levels. Australian evaluations[38] support the potential of RRE to help reduce rates of gender-based bullying and harassment, challenge violence-supportive norms, and create more gender equitable school cultures.

A Blueprint to support governments to implement RRE

For further information about RRE, including its potential to address bullying in schools, Our Watch refers the Rapid Review Taskforce to the newly released *Respectful relationships education blueprint for preventing gender-based violence through education systems* (2025). The Blueprint is available online at this link, and is also attached as part of this submission.

The Blueprint is an actionable policy guide for how to design, implement and monitor an evidence-based approach to respectful relationships education across Australian education systems and school sectors. Developed through extensive consultation with the education sector, it highlights some of the issues currently facing our schools including tech-facilitated abuse, gendered and sexualised bullying, and the increase in sexual harassment experienced by staff and students.

The Blueprint emphasises the importance of establishing strong foundations and clear actions to ensure schools are supported by governments to embed respectful relationships education. This creates cultures that promote and role model gender equality and respect in all aspects of school life.

The Blueprint:

- builds on the Our Watch *Respectful relationships education brief for policy makers* (2021) by providing step-by-step guidance on how to build the foundations to embed RRE into the education system.
- draws on the national and international literature to summarise all the elements of a holistic, best-practice approach to RRE .
- outlines each of the steps required by government and non-government school sectors to design, implement and coordinate RRE.
- outlines the work required at the education system level, to build the necessary foundations to enable school level implementation and to support coordination and monitoring of a system level approach to evidence-based RRE.
- acknowledges the important role that all 3 education sectors (government, independent and Catholic) play in the primary prevention of gender-based violence.

The Blueprint provides guidance to strategic policy and decision makers, the RRE workforce and cross-sector stakeholders responsible for schools at all levels of government and across school sectors.

Recommendations for government

Australian governments have a clear opportunity to prevent discrimination and bullying in schools through investment in and commitment to evidence-based RRE.

Governments play a crucial role in developing a long-term vision and approach for RRE and supporting an evidence-based, whole-of-school approach. This has been recognised through the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022 – 2032*, Recommendation 10 of the *Respect@Work Sexual Harassment National Enquiry Report* and Recommendation 59 of the *Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence*.

The Australian Government is providing $77.6 million to states and territories and non-government school sectors over a five-year period through the Consent and Respectful Relationships Education measure. This aims to ensure Australian students receive high quality, age-appropriate, evidence-based consent and respectful relationships education to help prevent gender-based violence by promoting healthy and respectful relationships between young people. Implementation of the measure is being delivered in partnership with states, territories, and non-government school sectors and informed and guided by the National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Working Group (NRREEWG), which is chaired by Our Watch.

This measure provides a valuable opportunity for school sectors and jurisdictions to evaluate, review and build upon their current approach to RRE. It also provides a suitable and evidence-based mechanism through which to ensure measures to address bullying are integrated into the overall RRE approach.

The deeply entrenched nature of the drivers of gender-based violence, including bullying, means that a long-term commitment and systemic approach are needed for RRE to become a catalyst for generational change. A best-practice and sustainable model of RRE requires education departments and governments to lead the way in supporting an evidence-based, consistent and unified approach.

Our Watch recommends:

1. The Commonwealth Government explicitly recognises the gendered nature of much school-based bullying and discrimination, including by:

   a) Reviewing and updating the national definition of bullying to explicitly recognise the gendered pattern and nature of much bullying, and the disproportionate rates of bullying experienced by young women, LGBTQIA+ and non-binary students.

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