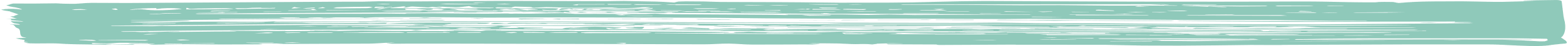
February 2024

Submission in response to the Victorian Government’s Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2024-2026 Consultation



Our Watch

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# 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 not an ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problem.’ 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](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/) 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 and social structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national frameworks, [*Change the story*](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/change-the-story-a-shared-framework-for-the-primary-prevention-of-violence-against-women-in-australia)(2nd ed 2021)[[1]](#endnote-2), *Changing the picture* (2018)[[2]](#endnote-3) and *Changing the landscape* (2022),[[3]](#endnote-4) we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched, underlying drivers of violence against women. 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.

# Executive Summary

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Victorian Government’s consultation for the Third Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2024-2026 (the Third Rolling Action Plan). In line with Our Watch’s expertise and significant evidence base in primary prevention, this submission will focus on addressing the consultation questions related to focus areas one, two, three and five of the [*Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria’s work to end family violence*](https://www.vic.gov.au/strong-foundations)narrative. Since the Royal Commission into Family Violence, Victoria has led the way in adopting a whole-of-population approach and establishing a breadth of activities to prevent violence against women. While Victoria has substantially progressed on the prevention journey, preventing violence against women is long-term, generational work, and significant ongoing commitment and resourcing is required.

We strongly encourage the Victorian Government to maintain an explicit focus on primary prevention in the next phase of family violence reforms, ensure ongoing investment in prevention and include concrete actions across settings. This focus and investment will support Victorian progress towards its target of a state free from family violence and gender inequality, as well as its obligations to work towards ending violence in a generation under the National Plan and Closing the Gap.

The Third Rolling Action Plan provides an important opportunity to consolidate and build on the actions from the two previous actions plans to sustain long-term change and a community-wide approach to prevention. In particular, there is an opportunity for the Victorian Government to sustain and strengthen its commitments to prevention in the Third Rolling Action Plan with focused commitments within Government and the public service to:

* maintain political leadership
* continue to build on its whole-of-government prevention policy machinery
* secure governance, coordination and accountability mechanisms
* grow a dedicated prevention workforce
* build the prevention evidence base
* invest in multifaceted and multipronged prevention initiatives.

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](mailto:amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au).

### ****Key Recommendations****

Our Watch makes a number of overarching recommendations in this section, in addition to more detailed recommendations under each of the consultation survey questions related to specific policy areas and levers.

Our Watch recommends that the Victorian Government:

1. Maintain a strong focus on preventing violence against women, including retaining a standalone primary prevention action plan.
2. Centre intersectionality as a core principle to guide all focus areas and implementation of the Third Rolling Action Plan and focus on prevention approaches to address the gendered and intersectional drivers of violence.
3. Continue to establish and build on existing elements of primary prevention infrastructure, including growing the workforce and maintaining a dedicated prevention capability framework, to sustain prevention outcomes over the long-term.
4. Prioritise the principle of Aboriginal self-determination, including building on existing structures such as the Dhelk Dja Partnership and the ongoing Treaty process, to develop and strengthen Aboriginal led-prevention initiatives and support Aboriginal community-based organisations and workforces to lead this work.
5. Build the evidence about what works to prevent violence against women across priority settings and with diverse cohorts, audiences, and communities to expand and inform emerging and promising prevention practice, supported with monitoring and reporting.

# The importance of maintaining a clear and strong primary prevention focus to sustain change

The Victorian Government has led the nation with the development of its standalone [*Free From Violence*](https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-05/Free-From-Violence-Victorias-Prevention-Strategy.pdf) primary prevention strategy, including its two associated actions plans and outcomes framework. This has contributed to substantial primary prevention activity, established important prevention infrastructure (including a specialist workforce), and created opportunities which have strengthened the primary prevention evidence base.

Prevention is a long-term, generational process that requires sustained and concerted efforts across governments and other sectors.[[4]](#endnote-5) Victoria is a leader in primary prevention nationally, and primary prevention requires sustained attention and investment scaled up across the state in order to achieve lasting impact.

[*Counting on change*](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/counting-on-change-a-guide-to-prevention-monitoring/), Our Watch’s guide to prevention monitoring, highlights an expected increase in reporting and demand for response services in in the short to medium term, as there are improvements in community awareness of violence against women and more people are challenging violence-condoning attitudes.[[5]](#endnote-6) *Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria’s work to end family violence* demonstrates this expected increase.[[6]](#endnote-7) Importantly however, as more people stand up against violence and the behaviours and attitudes that support it, women have greater independence and decision-making power, gender roles are less rigidly enforced, and more people have the skills and desire to create positive, equal and respectful relationships, will we start to see a decrease in rates of violence against women.

As a result, Our Watch strongly encourages the Victorian Government to maintain an explicit focus on and investment in primary prevention, address the gendered drivers of violence against women, and embed intersectionality in all focus areas and actions of the third Rolling Action Plan.

### A focus on primary prevention

A whole-of-population primary prevention approach is distinct to response, early intervention and recovery components of domestic family and sexual violence (DFSV) policy and activities. While distinct, primary prevention complements and enhances early intervention, response and recovery activity, and is part of the comprehensive and holistic approach to violence against women involving a continuum of interdependent and interlinked strategies. In a constrained fiscal environment, where investment decisions will be guided by the Third Rolling Action Plan, Our Watch encourages ongoing recognition of the role of primary prevention to complement and sit alongside the needs of early intervention, response and recovery sectors and services.[[7]](#endnote-8)

There has been, and continues to be, value in having a clear and effective primary prevention strategy and Action Plans that ensure engagement across a broad range of sectors, workplaces, communities and other stakeholders and includes a whole-of-government approach. The scope and scale of activity required to prevent violence against women may be more difficult to achieve without this explicit focus and distinct actions.

Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to ensure the prevention frameworks, infrastructure and activities developed over many years continue to support the long-term goal of preventing violence against women. In our view, a clear and strong focus on primary prevention should be maintained in the Third Rolling Action Plan. This includes maintaining critical mechanisms for the coordination of primary prevention in Victoria such as the Primary Prevention Sector Reference Group, peak bodies and sector organisations.

### ****Scope of the Third Rolling Action Plan****

In the Third Rolling Action Plan, we recommend the Victorian Government continue to make explicit reference to the evidence-based gendered drivers of violence against women, which includes family violence. The gendered drivers of violence against women are:

* Driver 1: Condoning of violence against women.
* Driver 2: Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence in public and private life.
* Driver 3: Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity.
* Driver 4: Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.[[8]](#endnote-9)

The ‘gendered drivers’ of violence arise from gender-discriminatory institutional, social and economic structures, social and cultural norms, and organisational, community, family and relationship practices that together create environments in which women and men are not considered equal, and violence against women is both more likely to occur, and more likely to be tolerated and even condoned.[[9]](#endnote-10)

References to addressing sexual violence in the Third Rolling Action Plan appear to be limited to that violence where it occurs within a ‘family or family-like relationship’. We acknowledge the Victorian Government’s intention to develop a dedicated sexual violence strategy to ‘coordinate and improve the way [the government] responds to all forms of sexual violence’.[[10]](#endnote-11) However, Our Watch suggests the language is clearer regarding the scope of the Third Rolling Action Plan and suggest the inclusion of gendered violence occurring outside family or family-like contexts.

### ****Continue to prioritise intersectionality****

The Victorian Government has done important work in centring intersectionality and ensuring prevention work is safe, inclusive and meaningful for all Victorians. Strengths of this work include selecting intersectionality as one of the three reform-wide principles to guide the implementation of Victoria’s family violence reforms, as well as the Everybody Matters: Inclusion and Equity Statement, the Intersectionality Capacity Building project and the *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families Agreement* (Dhelk Dja Agreement).

It is essential to sustain an intersectional approach to primary prevention, acknowledging the multiple and intersecting systems of sexism, racism, colonialism, classism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, homo-, bi- and transphobia, ableism and ageism, and the need to challenge and shift the corresponding systems of power and privilege.[[11]](#endnote-12)This is integral to the success of primary prevention.[[12]](#endnote-13)

We encourage the Victorian Government to continue to centre intersectionality as a core principle to guide all focus areas and implementation of the Third Rolling Action Plan, as well as a focus on prevention approaches that address both the gendered and intersectional drivers of violence.

# Responses to consultation survey questions

## Focus area 1: Drive down family and sexual violence

### 1.1: What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to build a community-wide approach to preventing family and sexual violence?

#### **Embed primary prevention across settings**

The Victorian Government can continue to develop a strong community-wide approach to primary prevention by working across all settings to build on existing prevention activities and pilot new initiatives to contribute to the prevention evidence base.

Our Watch welcomes the recognition in [*Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria’s work to end family violence*](https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/2303438-Strong-foundations-FA4-Web.pdf) that primary prevention “is complex, long-term work that requires all parts of our community to work together.”[[13]](#endnote-14) *Change the story* guides promising and effective prevention practice in all settings where we live, work and play, including in schools, higher education institutions, workplaces, sports, media, and local governments across Victoria.[[14]](#endnote-15) To achieve a comprehensive community-wide approach to preventing violence against women, evidence-based primary initiatives across these settings require sustained investment to significantly scale up prevention activity.

There is an opportunity for Victoria to continue its leadership in primary prevention by building the prevention evidence base and piloting prevention activities in settings that have received little attention to date. *Change the story* outlines a list of settings where it is crucial to build the evidence and practice expertise (p. fvr96). Based on our analysis, Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to develop prevention activity initially in health, family and community services, faith-based contexts, and legal, justice and corrections contexts. We understand some of this work is already underway.

A focus on these priority settings could be taken with a view to building towards multifaceted work across all settings, at all levels of the socioecological model, in the next strategy. Dedicated investment to build the necessary systems and structures to embed and connect prevention activity across the state will ensure consistent, coordinated and evidence based activity.

#### **Continuing to build and expand the prevention infrastructure**

Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to continue to build and expand prevention infrastructure in the Third Rolling Action Plan, as part of building and maintaining a whole-of-community approach to preventing violence and more broadly, addressing the social context of gender inequality.

Prevention infrastructure is a term describing the essential foundations required to enable prevention efforts to be most effective and to ensure that they lead to sustained long term social change.[[15]](#endnote-16) It includes the establishment of systems, processes, activities, strategies, and leadership that support ongoing, comprehensive, and coordinated primary prevention action. *Change the story* identifies eight key elements:

1. Sustained political leadership
2. Private sector, civil society and community leadership
3. A well-resourced, independent women’s movement
4. Policy, regulatory and legislative reform
5. Mechanisms for coordination, collaboration and quality assurance
6. Mechanisms for workforce and sector development
7. Strong evidence based, informed by ongoing research, practice and evaluation
8. National monitoring and reporting mechanisms.[[16]](#endnote-17)

The Victorian Government’s leadership in primary prevention and promotion of gender equality through a suite of legislative, regulatory and policy reforms has enabled the development of strong prevention infrastructure. In addition to Free From Violence: Victoria’s strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women (2017) and subsequent rolling action plans, this infrastructure includes:

* [Safe and Strong: Victorian Gender Equality Strategy (2016-2021)](https://www.vic.gov.au/safe-and-strong-victorian-gender-equality)
* [Our equal state: Victoria’s gender equality strategy and action plan (2023-2027)](https://www.vic.gov.au/our-equal-state-victorias-gender-equality-strategy-and-action-plan-2023-2027)
* The [*Gender Equality Act (2020)*](https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/about-gender-equality-act-2020) and important policy machinery and associated infrastructure such as [gender responsive budgeting](https://www.budget.vic.gov.au/gender-responsive-budgeting)
* The Commission for the Gender Equality in the Public Service
* Establishment and work of [Respect Victoria](https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/)
* The role and work of the [Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor](https://www.fvrim.vic.gov.au/monitors-reports) (which tabled its final report in 2023).
* The [Family Violence Research Agenda (2021-2024)](https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-family-violence-research-agenda-2021-2024), specifically the inclusion of primary prevention as a research priority.

Sustaining this leadership, political will and investment as business as usual across government and in a multipartisan way is crucial to sustain prevention activities over the long term. Together, these key elements create an enabling environment for state-wide prevention action and ensure that government investment achieves long-term prevention outcomes. The Third Rolling Action Plan is an important opportunity to consolidate and build on the actions from the two previous actions plans to sustain long-term change and a community-wide approach to prevention.

***A focus on workforce development***

[*Building from Strength the 10-Year Industry Plan for Family Violence Prevention and Response*](https://www.vic.gov.au/building-strength-10-year-industry-plan)and the Centre for Workforce Excellence are critical initiatives for workforce development and a key contribution to Victoria’s prevention infrastructure. Of particular importance is the accompanying prevention capability framework that outlines the foundational skillsets required to deliver prevention activities. This system-level framework has positioned Victoria as a leader in the country in building a dedicated, highly skilled prevention workforce in the State.

The ongoing success of Victoria’s efforts to prevent violence against women depends in part on the size of the primary prevention workforce and the capacity of this workforce to plan, implement, scale-up, monitor and evaluate primary prevention initiatives. The workforce must also be multidisciplinary and developed in a way that values and reflects diversity, intersectionality and lived experience. Further workforce and sector development is needed to meet both the existing demand for prevention activities safely and effectively, and to continue to expand the reach and uptake of prevention practice and research.

Our Watch’s evidence review [*Growing With change: Developing an expert workforce to prevent violence against women*](https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/02/09115356/Growing-with-change_AA.pdf)(*Growing with change*) outlines the five key areas governments can focus on and a number of strategies that can be put in place to expand the prevention workforce and support its growth. This includes:

1. **Workforce planning**, such as establishing and strengthening workforce planning mechanisms, conducting periodic censuses of the state’s prevention workforce to understand size, capabilities and skills of the workforce, and maintaining a dedicated prevention capability framework.
2. **Workforce preparation and pathways**, including establishing clear pathways into the workforce through higher education and vocational education and training (VET) courses, such as funding the development of prevention education at VET level and consider classifying prevention as a critical skill, and focus on teaching educators to build their skills and knowledge in primary prevention concepts and in appropriate pedagogical techniques for integrating the concepts into their teaching content and practice – both within specific prevention education and related vocational pathways. It is also critical to ensure these pathways are accessible to diverse communities.
3. **Sector governance and coordination,** including developing new (where necessary) and building on existing mechanisms for coordination to bring together key stakeholders to inform and contribute to the development of Victoria’s primary prevention workforce across all levels of government and community organisations.
4. **Working conditions**, such as establishing data mechanisms that collect data around pay and conditions to highlight and focus on improving working conditions for prevention workers.
5. **Professional development**, including continued investment in peak bodies that have a dedicated focus on supporting the prevention workforce in their capacity, building, learning and professional development, such as Safe and Equal in Victoria.

Taking actions across all five of these areas through the Third Rolling Action plan can inform a holistic approach for workforce development. Specifically, Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to:

* establish pathways to specialisation for professionals to play a leadership role in policy, regulatory and legislative reform.
* support the workforce in developing a professional identity across the state.
* inform and support quality assurance mechanisms to function across settings.
* engage with civil society to understand the needs and priorities of the workforce.
* offer technical assistance and guidance to diverse stakeholders who are doing prevention work within their own setting or sector, in particular contexts, or within a particular community.

#### **A strong and sustainable sector**

Prevention and community-based organisations and the broader prevention sector are essential to the success of prevention and require sustained investment and support to ensure the longevity of prevention initiatives and activities. Sustainable funding of the sector was highlighted as a foundational element for effective primary prevention activity in the state in the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor’s report on the prevention system.[[17]](#endnote-18) Our Watch encourages long-term, dedicated funding and resourcing of prevention initiatives and organisations to support ongoing innovation and implementation and to maintain current outcomes and achieve new ones.

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 1.1.1. Build the evidence about what works to prevent violence against women across priority settings and with diverse cohorts, audiences and communities to expand and inform emerging and promising practice.
* 1.1.2. Ensure the sustainable growth and development of the primary prevention infrastructure in Victoria.
* 1.1.3. Grow and resource the primary prevention workforce to plan, implement, scale-up, monitor and evaluate primary prevention initiatives.

### 1.2: What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to support Aboriginal-led prevention?

Our Watch acknowledges that the Victorian Government has worked closely in partnership with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal-controlled organisations to identify the strategic priorities for Aboriginal-led prevention work.[[18]](#endnote-19)This partnership is currently guided by the Dhelk Dja Partnership Forum and has led to a series of deliverables in the *Free from violence: Second action plan* (2022 – 2025) that prioritise and support Aboriginal community-led prevention activities.

The development of policy and programs to address family violence requires the meaningful involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations and should continue to be guided by the Dhelk Dja Agreement which centres the collective strengths of Aboriginal knowledge, systems and expertise as well as obligations under Closing the Gap.

There are opportunities to build on the Victorian Government’s existing efforts in promoting Aboriginal self-determination and leadership in preventing violence against Aboriginal women in Victoria, including the Dhelk Dja Partnership Forum and its Treaty process. We encourage the Victorian Government to implement the five proposed actions as outlined in the [Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor Report on Aboriginal led early intervention and prevention.](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-12/Aboriginal-led-prevention-and-early-intervention-report-21-December-2022.pdf) For example, that Report noted short-term funding for Aboriginal-led prevention initiatives, the capacity of the workforce, and data and evaluation as particular challenges to ensuring implementation of sustainable primary prevention activities.

We also encourage alignment between actions in the Third Rolling Action Plan with the national Standalone Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan and priorities at a state-based level.

Our Watch’s approach to preventing violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is underpinned by [*Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/changing-the-picture/)*.* The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor in its reports highlighted the value of engaging with *Changing the picture* in developing a framework for the prevention of Aboriginal family violence in Victoria.[[19]](#endnote-20)In particular, Changing the picture emphasises that the design, planning and implementation of any prevention activity should include steps to create a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and promote self-determination. It also notes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations have the unique capacity to provide culturally safe services and are able to develop localised, specifically designed solutions that have community support.[[20]](#endnote-21)

Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to continue to engage with and support these organisations to lead this work and ensure the development and implementation of primary prevention initiatives is culturally safe and effective, and welcomes any input into this process where appropriate.

**Recommendation**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 1.2.1. Build on and maintain existing structures such as the Dhelk Dja Partnership and implement the five proposed actions outlined in the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor Report to sustain support for Aboriginal community-based organisations and workforces leading this work.

### 1.3: What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to engage men and boys to change attitudes and behaviours that can lead to violence?

Our Watch commends the Victorian Government for work to date in engaging men and boys, including ongoing support to build the prevention evidence base and funding organisations such as the Jesuit Social Services and The Man Cave to implement prevention pilots on this issue for male students and school staff.[[21]](#endnote-22)

Addressing harmful patterns of masculinity and engaging men in prevention efforts is critical as violence against women and against people of all genders, including in LGBTIQA+ relationships, is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men.[[22]](#endnote-23) All men have a role to play, not only in challenging their own attitudes and behaviours, but also to help shift the social structures and norms that maintain gender inequality and drive violence against women. Investment is required to pilot and evaluate programs that engage men and boys to understand what works to promote healthier masculinities and more positive and respectful male peer relationships.

In the line with the [*Men in focus*](https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/11/06231949/Men-in-focus-Evidence-review.pdf) evidence base, Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to concentrate on the following initiatives in the Third Rolling Action Plan:

* Develop multifaceted strategies and initiatives engaging men and boys that promote positive masculinities and peer relations across priority settings, including schools, higher education institutions, workplaces, sports clubs and the media.
* Develop and support pathways for men to enter the prevention workforce and build the capacity of existing workforces to work with men and boys in priority settings and sectors that already engage men.
* Support efforts to coordinate evaluations of existing programs across Victoria that engage or target men and boys to build the evidence of what works.

It is important to identify the distinctions between primary prevention initiatives and other work such as broader men’s health and wellbeing. These distinctions of what is (and what is not) an evidence-based strategy to engage men and boys in prevention of violence against women should be explicit in the Third Rolling Action Plan and subsequent investments in primary prevention initiatives that engage men and boys (e.g., as part of funding guidelines). Our Watch refers the Victorian Government to the guiding principles for addressing masculinities and engaging men in the prevention of violence against women outlined in the *Men in focus practice guide* (see p. 30).

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 1.3.1 Continue to invest in the development, implementation and evaluation of evidence-based primary prevention initiatives that engage men and boys to address the gendered drivers of violence.

## Focus area 2: Children and young people

### 2.1: What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to engage children and young people to create generational change?

As the Victorian Government is aware, primary prevention efforts need to reach and engage everyone, at every age and stage of life. To reinforce and sustain change across the population, prevention must engage people not just on a one-off basis, but in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways over the course of their lives: from early childhood to older age. While the generational change that primary prevention promotes is not just the responsibility of children and young people, early childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood are important life stages where children and young people are exposed to and develop ideas about gender roles and stereotypes and personal identities, and as people grow older, ideas about intimate/sexual relationships begin to form.

There are near-universal mechanisms to engage with children, young people, educators and parents across early childhood, school years and higher education settings. Initiatives to engage children and young people must embed an intersectional approach to ensure activities reach all children, families and education institutions.

Our Watch, often in partnership with the Victorian Government, has developed evidence-based, age-appropriate prevention approaches to engage children and young people to create generational chance across primary and secondary schools, as well as young people in higher education institutions.

#### **Respectful Relationships Education in schools**

The Victorian Government is currently leading the nation with its best practice approach to [Respectful Relationships Education](https://education.ourwatch.org.au/) (RRE), the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence, which includes teaching and learning about healthy relationships, gender, power and control in relationships and consent education.

The Respectful Relationships initiative in Victoria is strongly aligned with the evidence base for the whole-of-school model of RRE, incorporating all seven of the core elements identified as essential components for effective RRE.[[23]](#endnote-24) Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to maintain and scale up the current commitments and investments to ensure that the education system in Victoria continues to build on the substantial system and structural reform already undertaken and continue to lead the way nationally on embedding evidence-based RRE across the education system. This is in line with the recommendations of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor report on the primary prevention system architecture, as a critical element of prevention in the state.[[24]](#endnote-25)

[Evaluations](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/rr-progress-summary.pdf) of the evidence-based approach to RRE in Victoria to date have been positive with improvements in student social and emotions skills and wellbeing.[[25]](#endnote-26) This speaks to the significant impact RRE can have across the school community when appropriately prioritised and resourced. RRE is a generational initiative and as such the effectiveness of the initiative would be most effectively measured through a combination of short, medium, and long-term measures. As a result, a longitudinal study on Victoria’s RRE initiative would make an important contribution to the evidence base for RRE.

#### **Primary prevention in higher education institutions**

As a place of learning, development and socialisation, higher education institutions are formative settings for the attitudes and behaviours of young people when independence increases and young people transition to post-secondary education and/or training. Higher education institutions have a unique opportunity to contribute to prevention and gender equality outcomes as workplaces, education providers and a community.

Our Watch has developed a number of ‘whole of setting’ frameworks to support primary prevention in [higher education settings](https://tertiaryeducation.ourwatch.org.au/), including [universities](https://tertiaryeducation.ourwatch.org.au/resource/educating-for-equality/) and [vocational education](https://tertiaryeducation.ourwatch.org.au/how-to-prevent-violence-in-tafes/) institutions.

Many institutions in the Victorian higher education sector are already doing work towards advancing gender equality, however it is often not integrated into practice that recognises its contribution towards the primary prevention of violence against women. In the context of a national focus on the university sector and high rates of sexual violence on university campuses, there are opportunities for the Victorian Government to align, support and scale up primary prevention activities in higher education settings that engage young people. [[26]](#endnote-27)

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 2.1.1. Sustain and scale the current commitment and investment in respectful relationships education (RRE).
* 2.1.2. Resource a comprehensive longitudinal study to assess the effectiveness and impact of Victoria’s RRE initiative over time to build on the RRE evidence base.
* 2.1.3. Promote the adoption of ‘whole of setting’ primary prevention frameworks and engage young people, such as Educating for Equality and Respect and Equality in TAFE, in higher education settings to address the prevalence of violence against women and girls.

### 2.3: What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to enable Aboriginal-led services for Aboriginal children and young people?

As outlined above in our response under section 1.2, the development of policy and programs in addressing family violence requires the meaningful involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations and should be guided by the Dhelk Dja agreement.

Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to support services for children and young people, including the types of initiatives outlined below which are drawn from *Changing the picture*. Our Watch emphasises that these initiatives should led by Aboriginal communities and organisations and informed by the Dhelk Dja Partnership Forum.

Initiatives include:

* Ensure RRE activities that engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are developed and implemented either by, or with the engagement of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parents, Elders and community members.
* Build on services and supports to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people heal from their exposure to family violence, including programs that promote the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in out-of-home care.
* Invest in mentoring and leadership programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that draw on evidence of what works to support and help provide a positive transition to adulthood.[[27]](#endnote-28)
* Implement strategies that help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children develop resilience early in life. Early life resilience is linked to the long-term prevention of violence as well as numerous other positive health and wellbeing outcomes.[[28]](#endnote-29)

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 2.3.1. Guided by the principle of self-determination embedded in the Dhelk Dja Agreement, invest in Aboriginal-led primary prevention initiatives for children and young people as outlined in *Changing the picture*, to prioritise self-determination and culturally safe prevention practice.

## Focus area 4: Responding to change

Our Watch notes that questions 4.1 and 4.3 in this focus area of *Strong foundations* primarily relates to changes associated with shifts in technology. We have responded to Survey Question 4.3 outlining the challenges and opportunities that arise with a focus on technological environment and digital setting. Question 4.1. focuses on sexual violence in addition to family violence. We suggest that sexual violence is represented in other parts of the strategy in addition to this focus area as well, with clear links to the dedicated sexual violence strategy that is under development. Please see our feedback on scope on page 7 under scope.

### 4.1: What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to respond to cultural, social and technological shifts that impact family and sexual violence?

In response to this focus area, we encourage the Victorian Government to broaden the scope to ensure sufficient attention is given to responding to other cultural and social changes in Victorian communities. This includes taking ongoing action to address the social context in which violence arises – gender inequality and other forms of structural and systemic discrimination, inequality and injustice.[[29]](#endnote-30) The intersections of racism; colonialism; classism; heteronormativity; cisnormativity; homo-, bi- and transphobia; ableism and ageism influence the prevalence, dynamics and impacts of violence against women. These are embedded in social and economic structures, social and cultural norms, and organisational, community, family and relationship practices. Building the evidence base and piloting primary prevention programs that explicitly address these intersecting systems of power and discrimination is an important element of Victoria’s action in prevention.

Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to take steps to proactively address shifts in underlying cultural and social conditions which might impact the prevalence, dynamics and impacts of violence against women. Focus areas to consider, in alignment with the primary prevention evidence base, include:

* Backlash and resistance to primary prevention, gender equality and women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights.
* The impacts of systemic racism including in public discourses such as that associated with recent Referendum.
* Domestic impacts of the global political economy and international peace and security, including conflicts and crises.
* Economic crises (e.g., cost of living, refugee and migrant employment).
* Impacts of climate change and the increasing frequency and severity of natural crises in Australia.

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 4.1.1. Consider building the primary prevention evidence base in the context of multiple social and cultural shifts occurring in Victorian communities, such as those related to backlash and resistance, global and national political, economic, social and environmental impacts and crises, and climate change.

### 4.3: What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to embrace technology in how we prevent and respond to family violence?

While the use of technology to perpetrate violence against women is a rapidly growing and serious problem, technology does not create violence in and of itself, but rather a new way to perpetrate it.[[30]](#endnote-31)

Multifaceted and multipronged prevention activity that address the gendered drivers across settings in the community will model safer online behaviours and attitudes. A focus on prevention activity via technology and in the digital/online environment is an important part of work, when undertaken in the context of whole-of-community evidence-based preventions activities. We suggest reframing the focus on technology as a standalone focus area and integrating activities in the digital/online environment within the other four focus areas.

The possibility for technology to support primary prevention is an emerging area of practice and research. We encourage the Victorian Government to consider activities in this setting and engage in consultation with a diversity of prevention stakeholders throughout the planning, development, implementation and evaluation to ensure online initiatives are evidence-based. Any digital/online prevention initiatives should be one part of a cohesive suite of prevention activity occurring within the community.

If the priority area is maintained, Our Watch suggest reviewing the existing work in the digital space and expanding upon it. Many initiatives to date have focused on early intervention – to keep people safe in online environments – and response – to support victims of technology-facilitated abuse. In addition to these critical initiatives, it is important to resource the development of primary prevention strategies that will reduce the prevalence of violence in the long term. For example, Our Watch is currently funded by the Commonwealth Government to scope and strengthen the prevention evidence base in digital settings to support emerging primary prevention practice.

Under Focus area 1, Driving down family and sexual violence, the Victorian Government could look towards opportunities to make important contributions to building the evidence base for primary prevention in digital/online settings in the context of fast evolving technology. For example, investing in and building the evidence-base to better understand and address the impact of influencers that promote harmful gendered stereotypes and encourage gendered violences, and the impacts of pornography in the development of harmful attitudes and behaviours in relation to gender roles and relationships.[[31]](#endnote-32)

The National Plan emphasises the shared responsibility and need for collaboration and coordination across the public and private sectors to prevent technology-facilitated abuse. Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to consider opportunities to support this coordination by aligning the actions in this focus area of the Rolling Action Plan with the actions in the National Plan (refer to pages 108 – 109).

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 4.3.1 Integrate the focus on technology and associated activities in the digital/online environment within the other four focus areas under the Rolling Action Plan.
* 4.3.2. Invest in evidence building and the development, implementation and evaluation of primary prevention initiatives that harness technology to engage target audiences, including online behaviour change campaigns and better understanding the impacts of influencers and pornography in driving/reinforcing violence against women.

### 4.4: What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to reduce and respond to the risk of family violence during times of crisis?

Through the Third Rolling Action Plan the Victorian Government has an opportunity to embed primary prevention and address the drivers of violence against women throughout crisis preparation, response, and recovery policies and frameworks including emergency management. *Change the story* outlines how crises can reinforce the gendered drivers of violence against women, increasing the likelihood and severity of violence against women.[[32]](#endnote-33) National and international literature finds increased rates of violence and abusive behaviour towards women during disasters, crises and emergencies particularly for women with disabilities and women living in disadvantaged circumstances.[[33]](#endnote-34)

Our Watch encourages the Victorian Government to consider specific opportunities to expand and apply existing gender responsive policymaking and budgeting approaches specifically to crises and post-crises policymaking as part of the Third Rolling Action Plan. For example, in planning for natural disasters, ensure a whole-of-organisation primary prevention approach is embedded throughout emergency services to ensure the safety of women and girls. Our Watch also emphasises the importance of ensuring the design of economic stimulus packages and social assistance programs is informed by a gender lens, and intersectional gender analysis, to ensure the benefits are fairly distributed and address existing inequalities that limit women’s independence.

Collecting disaggregated data in times of crises is critical to develop a nuanced and intersectional understanding of women’s experiences. Further, by integrating an intersectional analysis into existing processes such as gender responsive policy-making and budgeting can support efforts to address compounding intersecting factors that can increase the severity and prevalence of violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, women who are incarcerated, women from refugee, asylum seeker and migrant backgrounds, LGBTIQA+ people, and older women.[[34]](#endnote-35)

Retaining and building upon existing primary prevention work during times of crisis is also important to sustain the progress that has been made and ensure the sector is equipped to respond to emerging issues. This includes ensuring that primary prevention work continues to be resourced, that organisations are supported to adapt their work to the changing context, and that active efforts are made to retain staff working on initiatives who hold expertise in primary prevention. Government policymaking and decision-making in crisis response and recovery planning should also be in consultation with women’s and specialist violence against women organisations.

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 4.4.1 Apply a gender lens to disaster response planning and emergency management in the context of disasters and crises to proactively address the increased risk of violence against women, ensure these events do not worsen existing inequalities and increase community resilience over the long term.
* 4.4.2. Develop a comprehensive intersectional gender and disaster data collection strategy to enhance the effectiveness of gender responsive policy making and budgeting.
* 4.4.3. Commit to resourcing primary prevention work in times of crisis to ensure the sector has capacity to sustain progress and respond to emerging issues.

## Focus area 5: Understanding impact

### 5.1: What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to strengthen how we measure impact?

Our Watch commends the Victorian Government’s significant work toward developing frameworks, systems and governance to measure and monitor its impact in reducing violence against women.

Strengths in Victoria’s monitoring landscape include the [Prevention of Family Violence Data Platform](https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/prevention-of-family-violence-data-platform), the Gender Equality Outcomes Framework, the Free From Violence Outcomes Framework and the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (including both the delivery of the seven Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor reports and ongoing efforts to monitor and report on implementation progress ). Our Watch recognises the work already undertaken to refresh the FFVOF (also the prevention domain of the Family Violence Outcomes Framework) in line with [*Counting on change*](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/counting-on-change-a-guide-to-prevention-monitoring/), Our Watch’s guide for measuring population-level progress towards prevention of violence against women.

There are opportunities to connect Victoria’s monitoring and reporting efforts with the National Plan Outcomes Framework and Performance Measurement Plan to ensure ongoing visibility and impacts of Victoria’s prevention activities on a national level. Alignment, where possible, with other state prevention outcome frameworks and/or performance management plans would also facilitate the development of a national prevention database. Respect Victoria’s efforts to develop a state-wide impact framework and monitoring, evaluation and system may also provide opportunities to align data collection and reporting of prevention activity across Victoria.

We encourage the Victorian Government to maintain its commitment to finalise the refresh of the prevention domain in the Family Violence Outcomes Framework, so that the impact of primary prevention efforts can be understood and demonstrated. This includes prioritising short-, medium- and long-term indicators and measures that target all levels of the socioecological model to provide a more holistic understanding of progress to address the gendered drivers of violence against women and to strengthen primary prevention practice. To support implementation in the context of fiscal constraints, we suggest the Victorian Government decide on an initial number of priority short-, medium- and long-term indicators and measures for which data is available and/or feasible to collect. An initial phase of data collection should be used to determine priority baselines across the prevention domain so that change can be monitored over time.

Understanding the impact of the Victorian Government’s prevention efforts will require strengthened connection between the Outcomes Framework and prevention initiatives. The development of short- and medium-term indicators and measures relevant to initiative-level interventions would support this. Utilisation of standardised tools, templates and reporting systems would also ensure data is systematically collected and reported across Victorian Government departments in a way that enables aggregation, and analysis to demonstrate impacts of government-led and funded initiatives. Our Watch recommends collaboration and coordination across departments to develop and implement the systems, processes, tools and templates for data collection, reporting, sharing and analysis.

Understanding the collective impacts of discrete prevention initiatives requires the Government to set clear expectations regarding data collection obligations (for example, through funding agreements), and provide capacity building support to both the Victorian Public Service and funded organisations to meet those obligations. This should ensure understanding of roles and responsibilities in relation to operationalising the Outcomes Framework and the resources available to support this. For example, resources may include guidance documents, data dictionaries, program logic templates, data collection tools, and templates/systems for reporting initiative-level data.

Finally, given the intersection between prevention and gender equality initiatives, outcomes, indicators and measures, Our Watch also encourages the Victorian Government to ensure consistency across Victoria’s policy and reporting ecosystem, including the Third Rolling Action Plan and gender equality strategies and action plans.

**Recommendations**

Our Watch recommends the Victorian Government:

* 5.1.1. Prioritise building a strong monitoring system and associated infrastructure to be able to demonstrate progress towards long-term outcomes, including:
* A coordination mechanism (e.g., a working group) to inform cross-departmental collaboration and coordination, ensuring a whole of government approach to measuring prevention outcomes.
* Short-, medium- and long-term indicators and measures for all levels of the socioecological model.
* Consistent data collection supported by, for example, standardised tools, templates and resources for implementing organisations and departments.
* Strengthen the connection between government funded interventions (programs & initiatives) and the Outcomes Framework.
* Capacity building support to relevant staff in the VPS and funded organisations so they can improve data collection and quality.
* Ensure a whole-of-government approach to data sharing and systems of data collection, analysis and dissemination to demonstrate progress against outcomes.

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