Policy Guide:
Primary Prevention of Gender-based Violence and the Early Years

Our Watch

Preventing violence against women

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 is the national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation established 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, social structures and systems that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national frameworks, *Change the story* (2nd ed 2021), *Changing the picture* (2018) and *Changing the landscape* (2022), 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.

About this Policy Guide

Our Watch has prepared this Policy Guide as part of its ongoing work and commitment to provide clear and accessible evidence, information and advice to inform the development of primary prevention policy in the early years.

Drawing on current literature on prevention in the early years, this Policy Guide articulates how governments, particularly the Commonwealth Government, can use the policy levers available to them to embed the primary prevention of gender-based violence in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. The recommendations in this guide are designed to support the Commonwealth Government to reach its aspirations and commitments laid out in national plans and strategies relevant to the early years.

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Executive summary

Our Watch's vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence, in which they have the opportunity and support to develop healthy, equal and respectful relationships, and grow up free from the limitations of rigid gender stereotypes, amongst families and communities that model gender equal attitudes and behaviours.

Gender-based violence is a serious and widespread problem in Australia, however, it is preventable. Primary prevention means stopping violence from occurring in the first place by addressing its underlying drivers. Our Watch's national evidence-based framework, *Change the story*, shows that gender inequality, rigid and hierarchical gender stereotypes and limits to women's independence help create a context in which disrespect and violence against women are more likely.[1]

The early years (0 to 5) are a vital period in the development of a child's identity. It is therefore also a critical time for the prevention of gender-based violence. Primary prevention work in the early years ensures that children are not limited by rigid gender stereotypes, which play a role in driving men's violence against women, and they are supported to develop positive, equal and respectful relationships. To be effective, primary prevention activity in the early years should be reinforced by gender equal attitudes, behaviours, and practices in all aspects of a child's environment.

Key focus areas to prevent gender-based violence in the early years

The early years (0 to 5) is a critical life stage for the primary prevention of gender-based violence. Efforts should focus on challenging rigid gender stereotypes and supporting children to develop positive, equal and respectful relationships using evidence-based and age-appropriate strategies and resources. These should be reinforced across all aspects of a child's life.

1.

Embed gender equality into key ECEC frameworks: Principles of gender equality and challenging rigid gender stereotypes are built into and strengthened in the National Quality Framework.

2.

Develop a whole-of-system primary prevention framework for ECEC services: A coordinated approach is taken to embed prevention in the policies and frameworks governing early childhood education in Australia and support the development of a stand-alone framework for whole-of-service primary prevention.

3.

Support early years workforce knowledge and capacity in primary prevention: Enable the early years workforce to plan and implement prevention initiatives in early years settings.

4.

Value and resource the ECEC workforce: The socio-economic value of ECEC work is increased through investment in a sustainable and quality workforce, thereby ensuring ECEC settings themselves do not perpetuate gender inequality.

Gender-based violence

Our Watch's vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. However, men's violence against women is a serious and widespread problem in Australia.

An average of one woman is killed every nine days by a current or former partner.[2]

Since the age of 15, 1 in 4 women (27%) have experienced violence, emotional abuse, or economic abuse by a cohabiting partner, and 1 in 5 women (22%) have experienced sexual violence.[3] 1 in 2 women (53%) has experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime.[4]

Men's experiences of gender-based violence are significantly lower. For example, since the age of 15, 1 in 8 (12%) men have experienced violence by and intimate partner or family member, and 1 in 16 (6.1%) men have experienced sexual violence.[5]

Some women experience disproportionate levels of gender-based violence due to intersecting factors, such as the ongoing impacts of colonisation and systemic racism. Such factors heighten the severity and frequency of violence, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are 31 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence-related assaults compared to non-Indigenous women.[6]

Children are also victims of domestic, family and sexual violence. A recent report found that 76 per cent of filicides in Australia occur in the context of domestic and family violence that involves a history of child abuse and/or intimate partner violence.[7]

The good news is that this violence is **preventable.**

Upstream:
Prevention

Midstream:
Early intervention
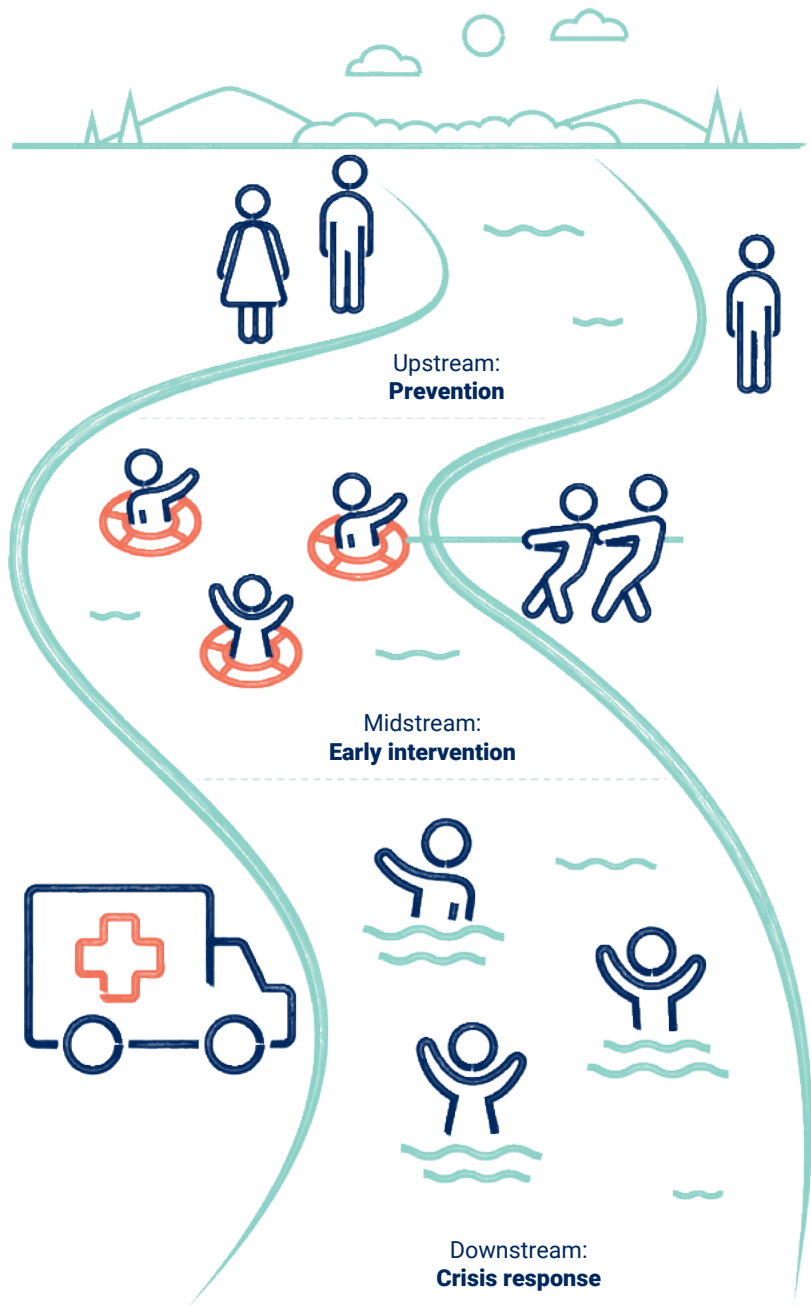
Downstream:
Crisis response

Figure 1: Primary prevention of violence against women as an 'upstream' approach – *see alternative text for Figure 1*

Primary prevention means stopping violence against women from occurring in the first place by addressing its underlying drivers. This requires changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; including by reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence. This also requires shifting the power imbalances and social norms, structures and practices that drive and normalise violence.

Prevention is an 'upstream' approach (see Figure 1 above). It aims to work across society, in everyday settings, to prevent people from ever experiencing violence. This complements 'downstream' approaches, like early intervention, which intervene as soon as violence occurs, to try to stop it from becoming worse; and crisis response services that respond when violence has progressed to a crisis or emergency. Appendix One outlines the gendered drivers of violence and the primary prevention approach.

What evidence tells us about the early years and preventing gender-based violence

Early years and child development

The early years (0 to 5) is a critical life stage for the primary prevention of gender-based violence.[8] The first five years of a child's life are when environmental influences have a significant impact. A child who is living in an environment with supportive relationships and consistent routines is more likely to develop well-functioning biological systems, including neural circuits, as well as cognitive, emotional and social capacities that promote positive development and lifelong health.[9] The early years, therefore, provides a significant window of opportunity to positively influence a child's development, sense of identity, health, learning, safety, resilience and happiness. It is a critical period of development and an effective area of focus for health promotion initiatives and primary prevention activities.[10]

Identity, gender roles, and relationships

The early years is when gender roles become embedded and personal identities are forming. *Change the story* shows that rigid and hierarchical gender stereotypes and male peer relations that emphasise aggression, dominance and control help create a context in which gender inequality, disrespect and violence against women and girls is more likely. Although it is often thought that children are relatively free of the social biases and stereotypes that adults exhibit, evidence shows that the foundations for these stereotypes are laid down in the early years and the effects can compound over time.[11]

Children typically start to learn 'gender appropriate' and 'gender-role' behaviour around the age of two and usually identify with a gender by age two or three.[12] This is also when they tend to have a growing understanding of some of the social meanings associated with gender categories, roles and stereotypes.[13] A review of studies examining the presence of gender stereotypes and biases expressed by three to five year olds found that gender stereotypes influenced children's assessments of what activities people engage in, their perceptions of what occupations are appropriate or available, and their feelings about who they regarded as credible sources of information.[14] One study found that gender stereotypical behaviour at the age of three predicted gender-stereotypical behaviour at the age of 13, a decade later.[15]

Commonly used language can set norms and expectations for children that are carried through to adulthood. For example, phrases like 'boys will be boys' are often used to downplay or excuse boys', and later men's, aggression and violence towards girls and women,[16] while 'boys don't cry' sends the message that boys are expected to suppress vulnerability and weakness and not express their feelings.[17]

Exposure to norms, stereotypes and relationship behaviours in the early years can influence and shape a person's relationships into adulthood.[18] For example, their use of violence versus respect, or loving communication versus antagonism.

Early years: policy context

Efforts to embed and strengthen prevention practice in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings can be strengthened where they are systematically embedded through policy, practice and structural change. There are five systems that relate to early childhood: childcare, preschool, child health, family support and child protection. Responsibility for these systems is shared between Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments, which means there are opportunities for many stakeholders to contribute.

There are numerous national plans and strategies in place relevant to the early years. The recommendations in this guide are designed to support governments at all levels to reach the aspirations laid out in these documents, some of which include:

- The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2023, which identifies the early years as an important setting for the prevention of violence against women.

- The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034, which articulates a vision for all children in Australia to thrive in their early years and have the opportunity to reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families supported by strong communities.

- A National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care (draft), which will provide long-term direction to achieve a quality, accessible, affordable and equitable ECEC system.

- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy, which paves the way for governments, non-government sectors and communities to collectively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up healthy, engaged with education, connected to family and community, and strong in culture.

- The National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which outlines how all governments will work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031, which aims to ensure children and young people in Australia reach their full potential by growing up safe and supported, free from harm and neglect.

- The National Quality Framework, which provides a national approach to the quality of education and care services in Australia.

Primary prevention in the early years

The goal of primary prevention in the early years is to support all children to navigate gender identity, gender stereotypes and respectful relationships using evidence-based and age-appropriate strategies and resources, as well as examining the structures that support the early years system to ensure they do not perpetuate gender inequality.

There are multiple forms of influence on children's establishment of gender norms and stereotypes, including family, peers, educators, the media, toys, language and play.[19] To be effective, targeted primary prevention activity in the early years must be reinforced by gender equal attitudes, behaviour and practices in all aspects of a child's environment. The early years are a potential catalyst for profound social change, with opportunities not only in supporting children to develop positive relationships and live free from gender stereotypes, but also in examining the structures that support the early years system, including ECEC settings, and ensuring they too promote and normalise gender equality.

The role of ECEC in supporting women's economic independence and participation

Strengthening women's economic security, independence and social, political and economic participation is one important strategy to address the gendered drivers of violence against women.[20] Childcare is one of the greatest enablers of women's workforce participation, but where ECEC services are expensive or difficult to access, women's choices and opportunities are restricted.[21]

Childcare cost is frequently cited by mothers as the reason for not taking on more hours of paid work.[22] Australian parents face some of the highest out-of-pocket ECEC costs in the OECD, making returning to work harder and placing families under financial pressure.[23] The scarcity of childcare in some areas also limits women's workforce participation. Female parents with a child under 5 years who live in a 'childcare desert', (a term that refers to areas where there are three or more children for every available ECEC spot), have lower levels of workforce participation.[24] ECEC availability tends to be poorer in regional and remote areas and in communities experiencing higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage,[25] with a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.[26]

While this Policy Guide focuses on primary prevention opportunities *within* ECEC settings, policy actions that support equity in access to quality ECEC services, such as the recommendations in the Productivity Commission report, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, and future actions for addressing paid and unpaid care outlined in the *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality*,[27] are also critical to achieving gender equality, modelling gender equitable relationships to children and preventing gender-based violence.

Parents and carers' essential role in primary prevention

Parents, carers and communities have an important role to play in primary prevention and reducing the impact of gender stereotypes in children's first 5 years of life.

Research shows 79% of parents in Australia would like to challenge restrictive gender stereotypes. However, many felt that social and cultural barriers, such as men being predominantly higher earners in their households, the role of men as 'bread winners' and the role of women as the 'primary caregiver', all hindered their ability to demonstrate equitable gender roles to their children.[28] Growing evidence also demonstrates the critical and unique role of fathers/male caregivers in early childhood development, with father engagement positively impacting social, behavioural, psychological and cognitive outcomes in children, as well as increased capacity for empathy, positive self-control and self-esteem, and greater levels of social competence.[29]

Given the many policy and legislative levers available to them, governments can play a key role in creating the conditions in which parents can realise and demonstrate gender equality.

For example, in addition to improving access to ECEC, reforms to paid parental leave, pay equity and workplace flexibility for both men and women can enable parents to make child-rearing arrangements based not on gender stereotypes and gendered expectations about men's and women's roles in the workplace or in the home, but on a more equal assumption about how these roles can be shared.

Primary prevention and early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings

Why ECEC settings are vital

ECEC services and facilities are important settings for primary prevention initiatives. These settings have direct contact with children in the early years and their families, and they are places where young children spend the majority of their time outside of the home. They employ large, often feminised, workforces and have the infrastructure to support organisational change. ECEC services also operate as community hubs, connecting families, carers and children across the community, so they have significant reach into, and influence in, local communities.[30]

Girls and boys can have different education and care experiences, despite advances in understanding the negative impact of gender stereotypes on children.[31] Gender biases and stereotypes can be reproduced in teacher-student interactions, play, pre-primary education curricula, and teaching and learning materials.[32] The unconscious stereotypes that educators carry about gender can be readily passed on to preschool children and can affect how they are treated in the classroom.[33]

Across Australia, many ECEC settings are already engaged in prevention work, even if it is not labelled as such. Through pedagogy, practice and educator interactions with students, there is already formal and informal work under way to address the gendered drivers of violence. This includes fostering children's personal identities in ways that are not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes, and strengthening positive, equal and respectful relationships between and among girls and boys. However, to make this work sustainable, and to ensure educators are given the support they need, it needs to be embedded in the policies and frameworks governing early childhood education in Australia.

What needs to change

A whole-of-setting approach to primary prevention is necessary to achieve comprehensive, long-lasting change.[34] This means that primary prevention actions must work across all levels of the socio-ecological model – individual, organisational and community, system and institutional, and societal. In ECEC settings, this means that efforts to address the drivers of gender-based violence must:

✓ Involve all those who engage with the ECEC setting in primary prevention efforts, including leadership, staff, volunteers, children, families, the community, and those outside of the ECEC setting who provide it with services or support.

✓ Map and utilise the levers or mechanisms that can support, enable and systematise prevention activity across the ECEC setting, beyond those that exist in individual services.

✓ Include policy, practice and structural change within the ECEC setting that sits alongside broader policy, regulatory or legislative change that supports prevention activity where people live, learn, work, socialise and play.

Prevention in early childhood – practice example:
Tangentyere Council 'Girls Can Boys Can' Project

The 'Girls Can Boys Can' project is a primary prevention initiative of the Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group, which provides early childhood and primary school educators with age-appropriate resources, activities and lesson plans. These challenge rigid gender stereotypes, showing healthy, fun, equal and respectful relationships between girls and boys, along with the strengths of Aboriginal children, families and communities. Girls Can Boys Can has also been expanded to be used in community settings with adults. Girls Can Boys Can seeks to promote gender equality and create and disseminate strengths-based representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities to speak back to the ongoing impact of colonisation.

Developed in 2019 by the Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group, alongside educators from the Larapinta Child and Family Centre and Braitling Primary School in Mparntwe, and funded by the Northern Territory Government and the Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation, Girls Can Boys Can is a community-led, evidence-based project guided by a strengths-based approach, which acknowledges and celebrates the skills, knowledge, history, connections, and relationships of Aboriginal people.

Summary: key opportunities for governments

The below table provides a summary of key focus areas, potential actions for the Commonwealth Government, and outcomes that these actions will contribute to. These focus areas are expanded upon in pages 15 to 22.

Key policy area	Outcome	Key actions for Commonwealth Government
1. **Embed gender equality into key ECEC frameworks**	Principles of gender equality and challenging rigid gender stereotypes are built into and strengthened in the relevant elements of the National Quality Framework (NQF) to ensure educators receive the necessary training and support to engage in primary prevention; gender equality principles are applied systematically; and children's outcomes are assessed against appropriate standards.	▪ Embed gender equality into the NQF, considering all relevant components, including the NQF Objectives and Principles, the National Quality Standards, and approved national learning frameworks (i.e. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*). ▪ Align efforts to embed gender equality in the NQF with the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy.* ▪ Establish appropriate governance mechanisms to provide advice on modifying specific components of the NQF, including consideration of practice implications. This should include representation from gender equality and primary prevention specialists.
2. **Develop a framework for whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC settings**	A stand-alone framework for whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC settings is developed that enables the policy, practice, culture and leadership changes needed to prevent gender-based violence in the early years, recognising the role of everyone in the ECEC community.	▪ Commit to building evidence for whole-of-service primary prevention applicable to ECEC settings, drawing on best practice, evidence-based Respectful Relationship Education (RRE) in school settings to inform research. ▪ Consider investing in pilot projects to be delivered and evaluated by relevant experts in government-operated ECEC centres. ▪ Ensure activities implemented in ECEC services with higher proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children, children with disabilities and other marginalised communities are developed and implemented with engagement of the community.

Key policy area	Outcome	Key actions for Commonwealth Government
3. **Support early years workforce knowledge and capacity in primary prevention**	The early years workforce has the capacity to plan and implement prevention initiatives in early years settings.	• Support the incorporation of primary prevention concepts into higher education teaching content and practice. • Support VET providers to embed primary prevention content into existing courses by incorporating ASQA approved VET course and competencies. • Draw on the recommendations of Our Watch's *Growing with change* report to develop initiatives that will strengthen educator and trainer capability to deliver primary prevention course content.
4. **Value and resource the early childhood education and care sector**	The socio-economic value of ECEC work is increased through investment in a sustainable and quality workforce, thereby ensuring ECEC settings themselves do not perpetuate gender inequality.	• Explore strategies that address the gender segregation of the ECEC sector and consider specific actions aimed towards attracting and retaining men and gender diverse educators into the ECEC workforce. • Commit to greater investment in workforce development to support training, scholarships and other initiatives to respond to the workforce challenges that the ECEC sector faces, including the implementation of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy actions. • Prioritise the ECEC sector within local jobs and skills programs in regional and rural areas. • Explore and identify the structural barriers to, and strategies for, improving conditions in the sector, including award reform that ensures skills are properly valued, and upskilling, career progression and retention are incentivised.

Key focus areas for prevention of gender-based violence in ECEC settings

1.

Embed gender equality into ECEC frameworks

For prevention of gender-based violence in ECEC settings to be systematic and effective, it is important that principles of gender equality and challenging rigid gender stereotypes are built into, and strengthened in, the relevant elements of the *National Quality Framework (NQF)*, Australia's system for regulating early childhood education and care. Elements of the NQF where these principles could be incorporated or strengthened include in the NQF objectives and principles, the National Quality Standards (NQS) and the approved Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) *Belonging, Being, Becoming*. This will ensure that:

- educators receive the necessary training and structural support to engage in this work;

- gender equality is systematically applied, minimising the risk of it being considered an optional extra; and

- children's outcomes are assessed against appropriate standards.

In Our Watch consultations, representatives from early years settings indicated their support for integrating primary prevention concepts into early years frameworks to support a systematic approach to prevention in ECEC services.

Government can support the early childhood sector to integrate suggested changes, and ensure educators have the training and support needed, by aligning this work with the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy*. This could encompass including gender equality as a key requirement for early childhood teaching and incorporating it into vocational educational and training qualifications and professional development opportunities.
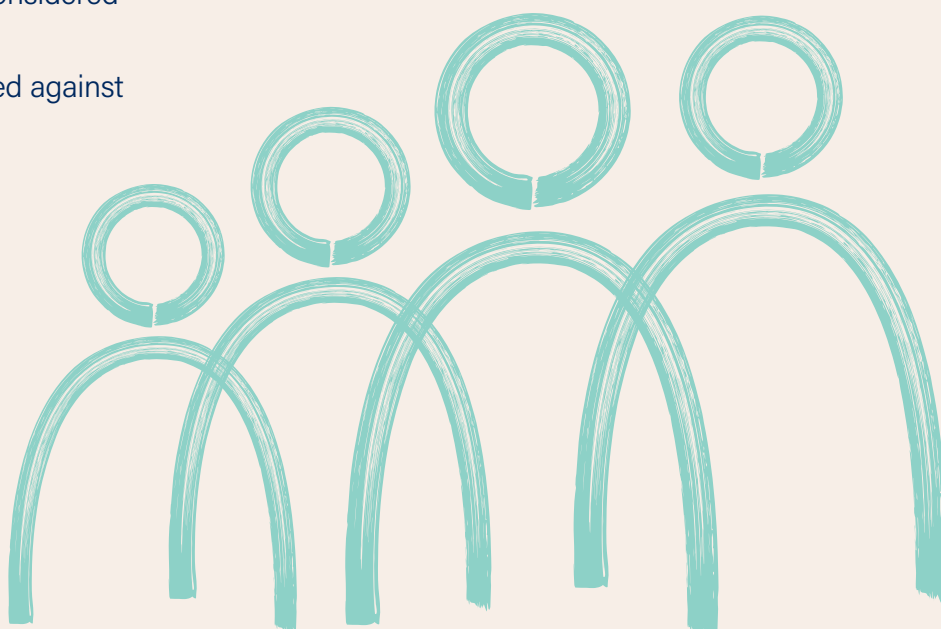
Examples of how gender equality can be embedded or strengthened in the National Quality Framework (NQF)

Reviewing and updating the NQF to ensure the relevant elements explicitly include principles of gender equality will provide the foundations for ECEC services to undertake primary prevention of gender-based violence and support services to avoid reproducing and reinforcing rigid gender stereotypes. For example:

- Principle 3 currently refers to all children's capacity and right to succeed regardless of "diverse circumstances, cultural background and abilities". This could be expanded to include children's right to succeed free of gender bias and stereotypes.

- Quality Area 7 of the NQS (Governance and Leadership): Standard 7.1, "Governance that supports the operation of a quality service", could include a statement of philosophy that reflects the importance of gender equality across all aspects of the service's operations.

- *Belonging, Being, Becoming* Outcome 1 'Children have a strong sense of identity': This outcomes states that "*Being* involves children developing an awareness of their social, linguistic and cultural heritage, of gender and their significance in the world". This language could be strengthened to acknowledge the importance of actively challenging gender stereotypes, without which, there is a risk of reproducing and reinforcing rigid stereotypes.

Preventing violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Under the NQF, there is no explicit requirement for ECEC services to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture into their curriculum. According to the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care (SNAICC), the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, this is problematic because ECEC services that do not reflect the culture and knowledge of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community are not seen as culturally safe and may have adverse long-term consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.[35] *Changing the picture*, a national resource to prevent violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, also identifies "improving policy and practice to better support and strengthen Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledge, languages and perspectives, in diverse contexts and settings, including in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations" as a key action to address drivers of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls.[36]

SNAICC recommends developing a cultural competence framework that will support the implementation and assessment of the guiding principles of the NQF to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ways of knowing, doing and being are integrated into the curriculum. This would ensure that ECEC services are culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but would also make progress addressing the drivers of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children.

Key actions for government

✓ Embed gender equality into the NQF, considering all relevant components, including the NQF Objectives and Principles, the National Quality Standards, and approved national learning frameworks (i.e. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*).

✓ Align efforts to embed gender equality in the NQF with the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* to ensure educators have the training, support and professional development needed to implement the work.

✓ Establish appropriate governance mechanisms to provide advice on modifying specific components of the NQF, including consideration of practice implications. This should include representation from gender equality and primary prevention specialists.

✓ Develop, in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), a cultural competence framework that will support the implementation and assessment of the guiding principles of the NQF to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ways of knowing, doing and being are integrated into the curriculum.[37]
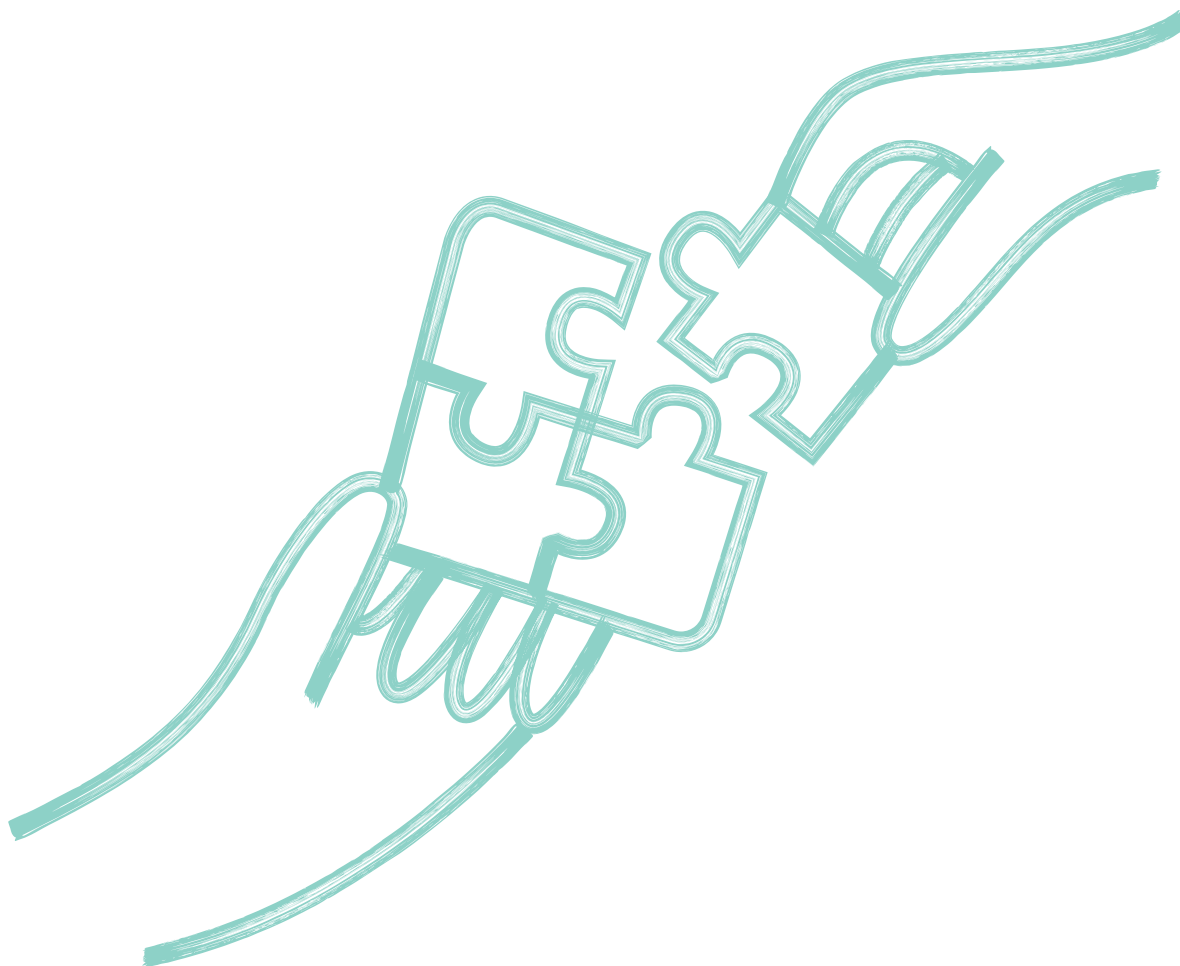
2.

Build evidence and develop a framework for whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC settings

A stand-alone framework for whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC settings, developed by government in partnership with early childhood education and primary prevention specialists, and which addresses policy, practice, culture and leadership changes, would significantly advance the prevention of gender-based violence in the early years. This framework could draw on and be informed by the evidence base for best practice respectful relationships education (RRE) in schools.

Our Watch defines RRE as the holistic approach to primary prevention of gender-based violence in education settings.[38] It uses the educational system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change, by recognising these settings as educational institutions, workplaces and community hubs to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence. While there is an established evidence-base for RRE in school settings, evidence on whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC services is still in its infancy (see case study below). Investment in pilot projects delivered and evaluated by experts in government-operated ECEC centres may be one approach to support evidence-building.

There are several factors that increase the complexity of implementing a whole-of-setting, best practice approach to primary prevention in ECEC services. These include, for example, the privatisation of ECEC centres in Australia, the different jurisdictional regulatory schemes for regular and ad hoc services, as well as resourcing constraints.

The Commonwealth Government can play a key role in advancing whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC settings by supporting evidence building and the development of an evidence-based national framework. This would be achieved by collaborating with primary prevention and early childhood education

specialists, and by providing guidance and regulatory support to promote consistent policy and practice across jurisdictions, including connecting a national primary prevention framework to the NQF and Early Years Learning Framework, in line with evolving evidence.

More broadly, governments at all levels can publicly recognise the importance of the early years for primary prevention of gender-based violence and express support for whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC settings that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence.

Key actions for government

✓ Draw on the evidence to develop a comprehensive, stand-alone framework for primary prevention in ECEC settings, in partnership with both early childhood education and primary prevention specialists.

✓ Commit to building evidence for whole-of-service primary prevention applicable to ECEC settings, drawing on best practice, evidence-based Respectful Relationship Education (RRE) in school settings to inform research.

✓ Consider investing in pilot projects to be delivered and evaluated by relevant experts in government-operated ECEC centres.

✓ Ensure activities implemented in ECEC services with higher proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children, children with disabilities and other marginalised communities are developed and implemented with engagement of the community.

Prevention in early childhood – practice example
WAGEC 'ALL IN' Project

The 'ALL IN' project implemented by the Women's and Girls Emergency Centre (WAGEC) is an example of an emerging model of a whole-of-service primary prevention program. It equips and empowers early childhood educators, leaders, centre directors and families with the skills, knowledge and confidence to actively challenge rigid, harmful gender roles and stereotypes that affect children in their care. Based on *Change the story*, ALL IN explores how children's play, language, resources and storytelling can promote positive messages about gender, inclusion and respectful relationships.

Educators and leadership teams engage with in-person workshops, online reflection sessions and specific scenario-based coaching, and are provided with resources promoting gender equality and respectful relationships. Family-specific resources, workshops and support for promoting safety and security of children to achieve quality outcomes are also offered. ALL IN demonstrates the potential for pragmatic, whole-of-service primary prevention in ECEC services to reach educators, leaders, children, families and communities.

The ALL IN project was piloted in 12 ECEC services in NSW in 2023/2024 and has recently been evaluated by UNSW, with overall positive findings.

3.

Support early years workforce knowledge and capacity in primary prevention

It is critical to build the capacity of the early years workforce to plan and implement prevention initiatives to enable long-term success in embedding gender equality in early years settings. In line with Our Watch's *Growing with change: Developing an expert workforce to prevent violence against women*, accredited primary prevention training and education should be introduced as a strategic component of workforce development in early years settings.

Opportunities to build workforce capacity include:

- Incorporating primary prevention concepts into higher education teaching content and practice, drawing on *Our Watch Prevention in teaching and learning* (PTL) resources, including the *Educators' guide to prevention in teaching and learning*.

- Building on and rolling out existing primary prevention education at the Vocational Education and Training (VET) level, such as the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) accredited courses in *Gender Equity*, and in *Contributing to Primary Prevention of Family Violence and Violence Against Women*.[39]

- Investing in educator and training capability so that primary prevention education and training is high-quality, relevant, aligned with the evidence base, and is informed by current good practice in prevention.[40]

Once there is sufficient capacity to deliver education and training at a national scale, the Australian Education and Care Quality Authority (AECQA), through the NQF, could adapt accreditation standards and include an understanding of the prevention of violence against women as a requirement for the profession.

Key actions for government

✓ Support the incorporation of primary prevention concepts into higher education teaching content and practice.

✓ Support VET providers to embed primary prevention content into existing courses by incorporating ASQA approved VET course and competencies.

✓ Draw on the recommendations of Our Watch's *Growing with change* report to develop initiatives to strengthen educator and trainer capability to deliver primary prevention course content.

✓ Embed primary prevention competencies into AECQA-regulated qualifications.

4.

Value and resource the ECEC workforce

For primary prevention in the early years to have a transformative effect, early years systems and structures themselves must not perpetuate gender inequality. Work to guide the development and education of children, which also enables greater nation-wide workforce participation and productivity, is vital work with immeasurable social and economic impact. However, the value of this key social infrastructure is not reflected in wages and conditions of the ECEC workforce.

The ECEC sector in Australia is highly feminised, with women making up 96 per cent of the workforce.[41] In 2021, men represented only 3.9 per cent of workers in centre-based day care services, with the proportion even lower for in-home care (2.2%) and family day care (3.5%).[42] The socio-economic devaluation of ECEC work through low pay, poor conditions and insecure employment are manifestations of deeply rooted gender inequalities. Stereotypes depict childcare as something women are intrinsically good at, enjoy, and do for the love of it, as opposed to work conducted by a specialised workforce of trained educators and teachers that facilitate enriching pedagogical play-based education.[43] Simultaneously, the low proportion of men in ECEC is, in part, due to outdated historical and cultural perceptions of care as a 'maternal' task and the lack of male role models in ECEC, with boys less likely to aspire to become early childhood educators.[44] Educators in ECEC can help shape children's perceptions of gender and challenge this gendered division of care labour that drives inequality. For example, men in ECEC can role model respectful male peer relations and support boys to reject masculinities that emphasise aggression, dominance, and control – a driver of gender-based violence.[45]

Many countries have taken action to address gender imbalances and occupational segregation in the ECEC workforce, with measures including communication campaigns, vocational and career advice, education and qualification fee subsidies and the establishment of men in childcare networks. Targeted strategies like these are one part of a broader suite of institutional and structural reform aimed at transforming the ECEC sector from one that reproduces gender inequality to one that promotes gender equality.[46]

Concerningly, a high number of early childhood educators (37%) do not intend to stay in the sector long-term.[47] The most common reasons for ECEC workers wanting to leave the industry include low wages, low social status, excessive workload, insufficient time to provide quality care, and lack of career progression paths.[48] Opportunities for individuals to increase earnings are further constrained by a relatively flat career structure where length of service is not reflected in wages.[49]

Our Watch welcomes the recent announcement of a pay increase for early childhood educators[50] and recognises the significant advocacy that has gone into reaching this result. However, an increase in remuneration, while critical, is only one piece of the puzzle. More action is needed to break down gender inequalities within the system and ensure early childhood educators receive the recognition they deserve. Investment in a sustainable and quality workforce requires not only equitable remuneration, but also sustainable work conditions (including manageable workloads, adequate staffing levels, and access to resources and support), opportunities for professional development and clear pathways for career progression.[51]

Key actions for government

✓ Explore strategies that address the gender segregation of the ECEC sector and consider specific actions aimed towards attracting and retaining men and gender diverse educators into the ECEC workforce.

✓ Commit to greater investment in workforce development to support training, scholarships, and other initiatives to respond to the sector's workforce challenges, including the implementation of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy actions.

✓ Prioritise the ECEC sector within local jobs and skills programs in regional and rural areas.

✓ Explore and identify the structural barriers to, and strategies for, improving conditions in the sector, including award reform to properly value skills and incentivise upskilling, career progression, and retention.
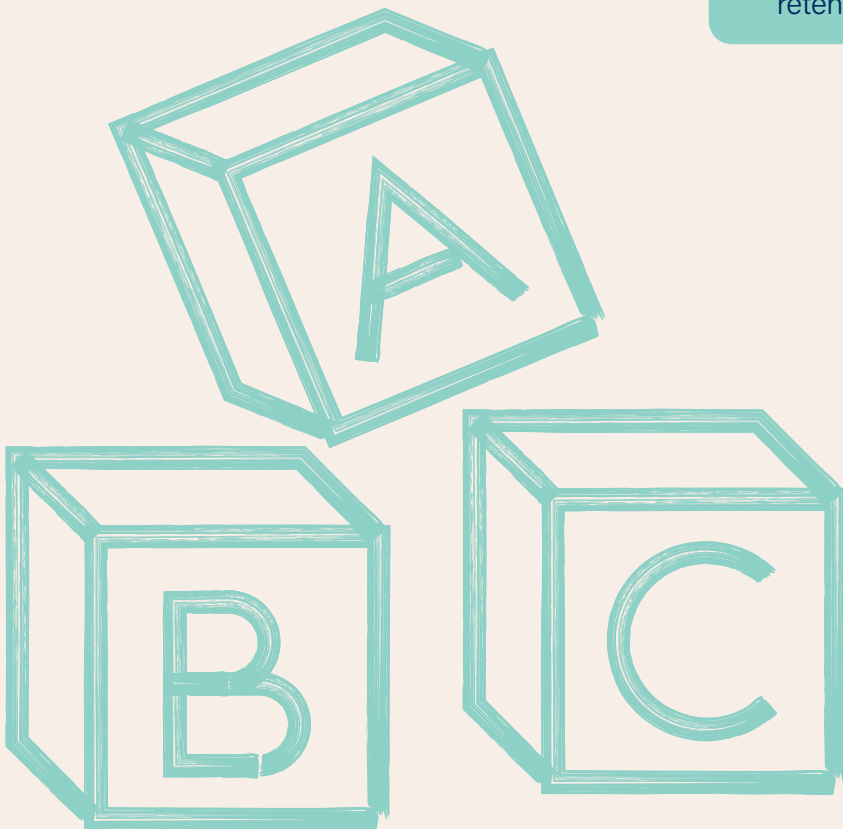
Appendix One: drivers of gender-based violence and the primary prevention approach

Change the story is the national framework for the primary prevention of violence against women. It reviews national and international evidence on violence against women and primary prevention strategies, summarising the latest research on prevention, drivers of violence, effective practices and necessary systems for sustained prevention. The approach outlined in *Change the story* aims to drive change by framing the gendered drivers of this violence as occurring across society and affecting all women. It aims to influence laws and policies, as well as the practices and behaviours of organisations, groups and individuals. Through a whole-of-society approach, primary prevention addresses the systems, structures, norms, attitudes, practices and power imbalances that drive violence against women.

Change the story identifies four main gendered drivers of violence against women and outlines how these drivers manifest in different ways (pp. 36–45).
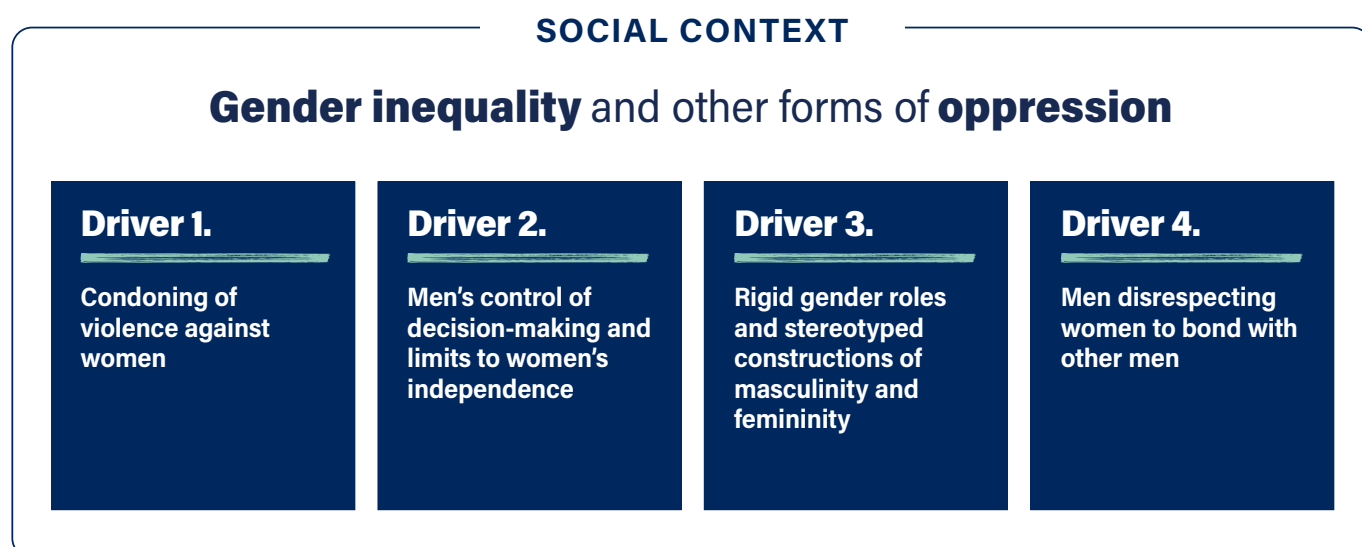

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Gender inequality and other forms of **oppression**

Driver 1.

Condoning of violence against women

Driver 2.

Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence

Driver 3.

Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity

Driver 4.

Men disrespecting women to bond with other men

Figure 2: The gendered drivers of violence against women and the social context of gender inequality – *see alternative text for Figure 2*.

Driver 3: rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity and the early years

Gender stereotypes are beliefs or assumptions about the attributes or characteristics that are innate or appropriate for women and men. Gender stereotyping is the practice of applying, promoting and reinforcing these assumptions.[52]

Men who hold hierarchical views about gender roles and relationships, or who form a rigid attachment to these socially dominant forms of masculinity, are more likely to demonstrate sexist attitudes and behaviours, hold violence-supportive attitudes, and perpetrate violence against women.

Gender stereotypes can restrict what both boys and girls can do. Over the life-course, these stereotypes can have implications for household and societal roles, and the respect and status afforded them. This in turn sets up a foundation for the distribution of power and respect across gender lines.

While gender is always relevant in explaining violence against women, other forms of oppression intersect with the gendered drivers to affect the prevalence and dynamics of gender-based violence. These include discrimination and disadvantage, including sexism, racism, religious and cultural discrimination, colonialism, ableism, homo-, bi- and transphobia, ageism and class discrimination.[53]

Changing the picture, Our Watch's dedicated resource for preventing violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, also identifies the need to address the legacies of colonisation for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people in Australia as key actions for preventing violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children. Similarly, Our Watch's *Changing the landscape* outlines how specific expressions of ableism and gender inequality intersect to drive violence against women and girls with disabilities.
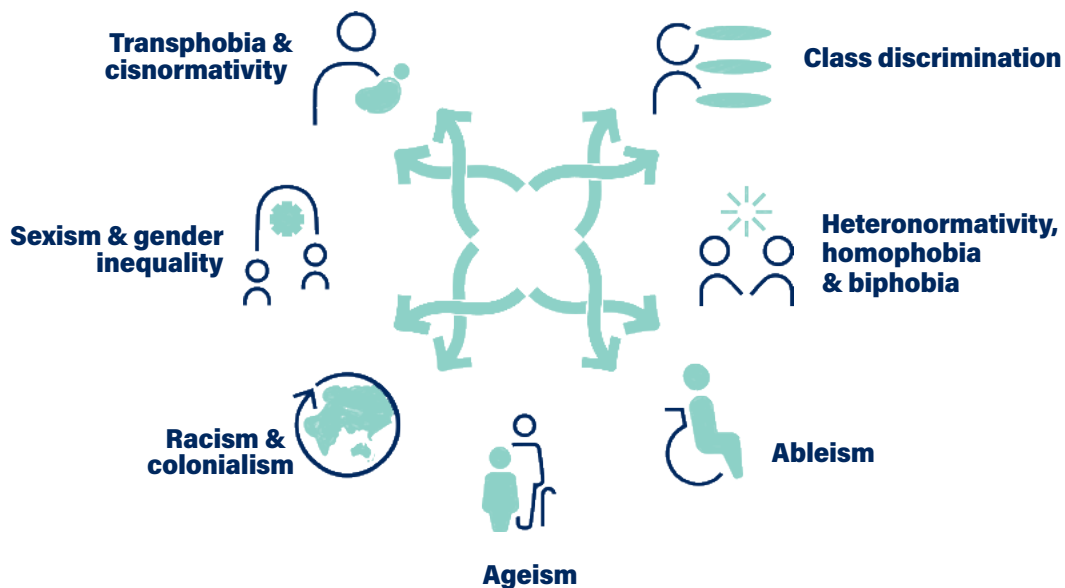

Figure 3: Violence against women occurs in the context of multiple intersecting forms of oppression, discrimination, power, and privilege – *see alternative text for Figure 3*.

Change the story also identifies four reinforcing factors, which do not predict or drive men's violence against women on their own, but each play a role in influencing the occurrence or dynamics of violence against women.[54] The reinforcing factors are:

- **Reinforcing Factor 1:**
  Condoning of violence in general.

- **Reinforcing Factor 2:**
  Experience of, and exposure to, violence.

- **Reinforcing Factor 3:**
  Factors that weaken prosocial behaviour.

- **Reinforcing Factor 4:**
  Backlash and resistance to prevention and gender equality.

Primary prevention means stopping violence against women from occurring in the first place by addressing its underlying drivers. This requires changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence. This also requires shifting power imbalances and social norms, structures and practices that drive and normalise violence.[55]

A comprehensive and holistic approach to preventing violence against women must involve a continuum of interdependent and interlinked strategies, with efforts across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. All aspects of work along this continuum, while distinct, are mutually supportive and equally necessary. The primary prevention approach aims to address the gendered drivers and gender inequalities that manifest at all levels of our society and engages the most amount of people, across the life course and in all settings, including in the early years, to change the story of violence against women.

Reinforcing Factor 2: experience of, and exposure to, violence

Direct experience of, or exposure to, violence as a child can have a profound and lifelong impact. Early trauma can affect the developing brain, predisposing a child to later behavioural problems. Childhood exposure to violence against women also normalises violence as an expression of masculinity in relationships, as children learn that it is acceptable for men to control and denigrate women.

Without intervention, this developmental pathway can lead to a higher risk of perpetration of partner violence for boys and potential victimisation for girls.

However, the impact of negative experiences can be mitigated by social, educational and psychological factors, including positive relationship models, and exposure to gender-equitable and non-violent norms. This

demonstrates the need for interventions to address gender norms and power relations, not just the experience of violence itself.

While *Change the story* recognises that childhood experience of, and exposure to, violence is a reinforcing factor in gender-based violence, and outlines strategies to reduce the long-term impact of exposure to violence, the purpose of this brief is not to focus on particular cohorts of children, such as those likely to experience and/or witness violence. Rather, it takes a whole-of-setting approach to prevention of gender-based violence in the early years. It must be acknowledged, however, that any prevention initiatives involving children in the early years may include children who have been exposed to, or experienced, violence. Therefore, it is important that the design of prevention initiatives takes a trauma-informed approach.

Change the story identifies eight essential actions to address the gendered drivers of violence and the social context that gives rise to such violence, many of which speak to the importance of the early years for primary prevention action. A selection of relevant actions is listed in the below text box 'Essential actions to prevent gender-based violence and the early years.'

Essential actions to prevent gender-based violence and the early years.

Build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes.

- Raise awareness of the negative impact of gender stereotyping on children and increase community support for children to act in ways, or take on roles, that defy gender stereotypes.

- Encourage and support children to develop personal identities that are not constrained by gender stereotypes.

- Build the capacity of children to reject rigid gender roles, and to challenge aggressive, entitled, controlling and dominant constructions of masculinity and subordinate or sexualised constructions of femininity and girlhood.

- Promote and support gender-equitable domestic and parenting practices, including through policy and legislation, early parenting programs and workplace initiatives.

Support boys in developing healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships.

- Teach boys how to recognise, understand and challenge harmful expressions of masculinity and male privilege in their own lives, and in their peer groups.

- Counter constructions of masculinity as dominant, aggressive, controlling or hypersexual in both public and private life, and within media and popular culture.

- Develop and promote representations of men and boys modelling respectful, fair, ethical, safe, supportive, equitable behaviours within relationships, to normalise these behaviours for men.

Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relations between and among girls and boys, in public and private spheres.

- Provide systemic support for initiatives (including, but not limited to, respectful relationships education in all education and care settings) that promote positive, equal, respectful relationships between people of all genders, in all contexts.

- Challenge peer relations between men and between boys that involve hostility or disrespect towards women, or that objectify or sexualise women and girls.

- Increase critical media literacy among children, young people and adults, including building skills to engage respectfully in an online environment.

Appendix Two: primary prevention and the early years guiding principles

Any primary prevention actions in the early years should adhere to a set of key principles, including:

- A **whole-of-community approach** that involves and meets the needs of children, their carers, broader families and kin, early educators, and broader communities in their places of work, learning, and their homes. Efforts to address the gendered drivers of violence must include policy, practice and structural change within the early years setting, be complemented by wider policy and regulatory change, and engage broader levers and mechanisms available to government to enable a systematic approach to primary prevention of violence across the early years setting.

- **Gender transformative principles** that intentionally question and challenge (rather than overtly or inadvertently reinforce) rigid and hierarchical gender roles that children may assume and carry into their adult life. These principles should align with the broader approaches to gender equality and gender transformative approaches underpinning complementary strategies such as the National Plan and the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality that are necessary to reach all Australians across the life-course and have the greatest impact on the drivers of violence against women.

- An **intersectional approach** that considers how gender inequality intersects with other forms of systemic and structural oppression and discrimination — including colonialism, ableism, racism, homo, bi- and transphobia, ageism, and class discrimination, for example — to contribute to discrimination and privilege, and influence perpetration and experiences of violence.

- Embed **trauma informed** and **culturally safe** practices to recognise the prevalence of trauma and its impact on the emotional, psychological and social wellbeing of children, families, educators and communities.

Resistance and backlash

Resistance and backlash to violence prevention and gender equality efforts is an inevitable part of the social change process. Resistance and backlash can be understood as any active or passive action, behaviour or attitude that seeks to block change, uphold the status quo of gender relations, or re-establish male privilege and power. Backlash is a more aggressive form of resistance, which can involve verbal or online attacks, or actual physical violence. Resistance to gender equality and prevention work also intersects with resistance to other forms of equality and rights-based social change. This can heighten the risk of violence against women who experience intersecting forms of oppression.

Consultations with the early years sector found that early years professionals sometimes experience resistance from parents, for example towards their child wearing certain gendered clothing or costumes in dramatic play or engaging in particular spaces in the play environment, such as the "home corner". They also described examples of backlash from community members in instances where programs promoting gender equality were perceived as "promoting gender change" in young children.

Resistance and backlash from parents and the community can dissuade early years professionals from engaging in prevention activity. Knowing how to mitigate and respond to resistance and backlash is an important component of undertaking prevention activity. The Our Watch website provides some tips for minimising and responding to resistance and backlash.

Appendix Three: alternative text for figures

Figure 1: Primary prevention of violence against women as an upstream response

Infographic showing the different stages of intervention in the problem of violence against women. The different stages of the problem are represented by a river.

Prevention is work that occurs upstream in the river, because it is trying to prevent the problem from happening in the first place. This is represented in the image as people standing on the riverbank, stopping anyone from falling in.

The second stage is early intervention. It is work that tries to help people who have only just fallen into the river. Early intervention is represented in the image by a person throwing life buoys to rescue people who are midstream in the river.

The third stage is crisis response. It occurs downstream when the problem is already advanced. It is represented in the image by an ambulance attempting to rescue people who are in very serious trouble much further downstream in the river.

Figure 2: The gendered drivers of violence against women and the social context of gender inequality.

Infographic listing the four gendered drivers of violence against women.

The four gendered drivers of violence are:

Driver 1: Condoning of violence against women.

Driver 2: Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence.

Driver 3: Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity.

Driver 4: Men disrespecting women to bond with other men. The four gendered drivers are framed by the social context they occur in. This social context is gender equality and other forms of oppression.

Figure 3: Violence against women occurs in the context of multiple intersecting forms of oppression, discrimination, power, and privilege.

Infographic showing multiple intersecting forms of oppression and privilege that shape the social context in which violence against women occurs and affect its prevalence and dynamics. The illustrated intersecting forms of oppression and privilege are ableism, ageism, racism and colonialism, class discrimination, sexism and gender inequality, heteronormativity, homophobia and biphobia, and transphobia and cisnormativity.

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