

# More than ready: Bystander action to prevent violence against women in the Victorian community

## Research highlights

Promoting respectful relationships and gender equality



This study, funded by VicHealth and conducted by **Dr Anastasia Powell** and the **Social Research Centre**, provides evidence that while many in the Victorian community recognise unacceptable behaviour towards women, individuals and organisations can do more to respond.

### Introduction

Violence against women – including family violence and sexual assault – is a major public health problem and its prevalence remains unacceptably high in Australia. Intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15 to 44 years, contributing more to ill health in this age group than other well-known risk factors such as smoking and obesity. Without appropriate action, the cost of this violence to the Australian economy is predicted to rise to \$15.6 billion per year by 2021.

Preventing violence against women before it occurs requires action to address the social conditions that can lead to violence. Research shows that key prevention actions include the promotion of gender equality and the development of respectful attitudes within organisations and communities.<sup>1</sup>

Research points to the need for bystanders to play a more significant role in preventing violence against women. For the purpose of this study, a 'bystander' is anyone not directly involved as a victim or perpetrator, who observes an act of violence, discrimination or other unacceptable or offensive behaviour.

Recent evidence reviews have identified the potential for bystanders to make a difference to the social conditions that lead to violence against women, for example, by confronting sexist attitudes and challenging organisational policies that discriminate against women.

### What is bystander action?

For the purpose of this study, 'bystander action' refers to the action taken by a bystander to identify, speak out about or seek to engage others in responding to specific incidents of sexism, discrimination or violence against women. Bystander actions may also be responding to behaviour, attitudes, practices or policies that *contribute* to sexism, discrimination or violence against women.

In this study, bystander action is not focused on getting physically involved in a violent situation. Rather, bystander action includes a much broader range of responses and actions, such as confronting a friend or colleague who continually makes sexist jokes; talking to your manager if women are being treated unfairly in the workplace; or challenging spectators or players who use sexist sledging on the sports field. For further discussion about bystander action to prevent violence against women, refer to the full research report.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> VicHealth (2007). *Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria*. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> VicHealth (2012). *More than ready: Bystander action to prevent violence against women in the Victorian community*. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

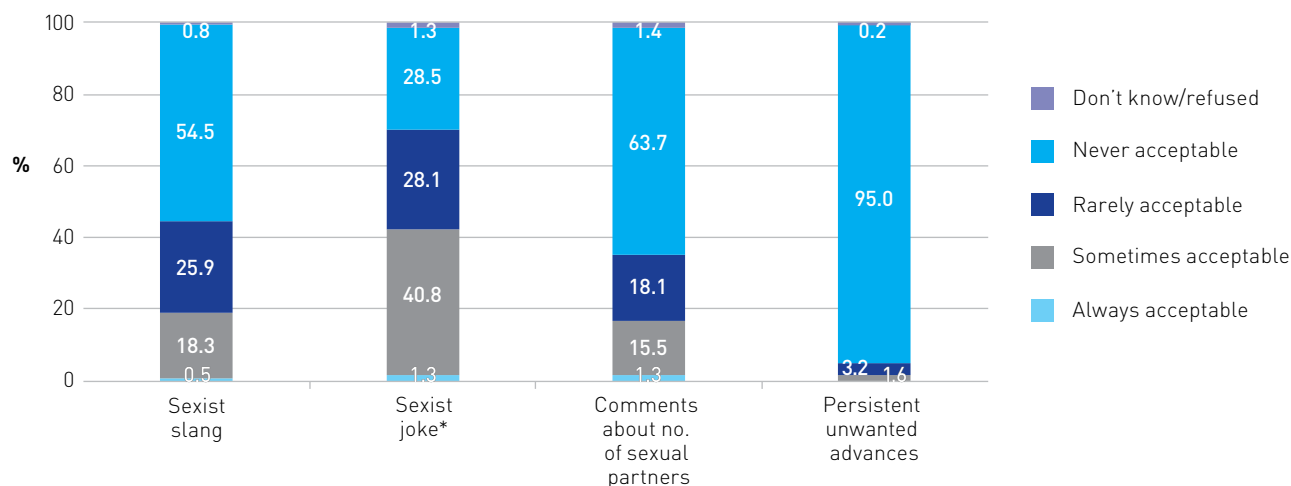
# Silent bystanders are an untapped resource and have a greater role to play in the prevention of violence against women.

## The survey

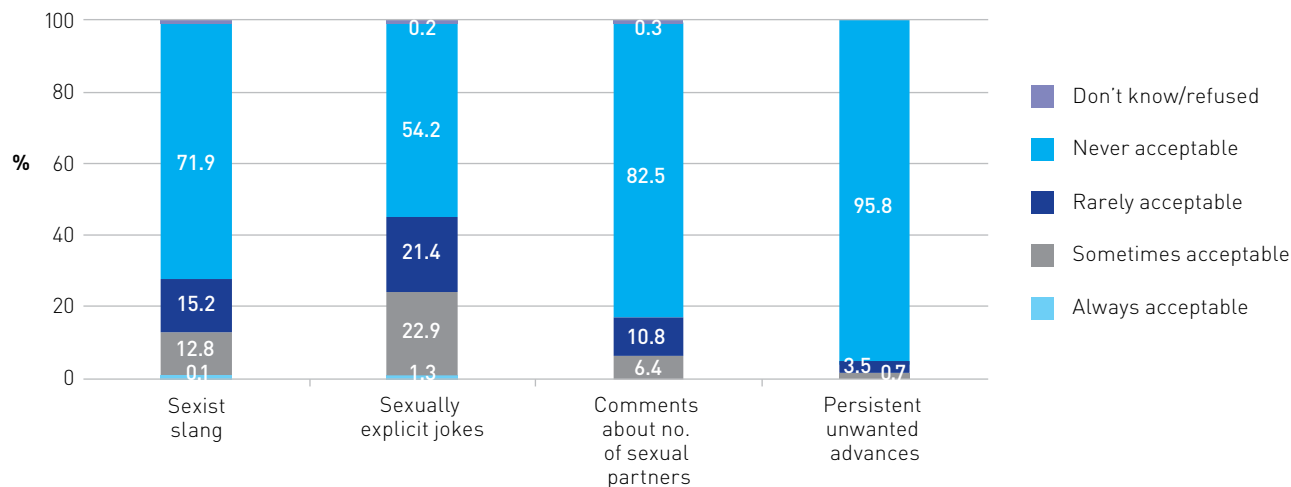
In 2011, VicHealth and the Social Research Centre conducted a large-scale community phone survey across Victoria. The survey was the first of its kind to identify, firstly, whether Victorians recognised sexist and discriminatory behaviour as harmful or deserving attention and, secondly, their readiness to take action in situations of sexism or discrimination in public, at workplaces and in sports clubs.

The random telephone survey was conducted with Victorian residents aged 18 years and over. While interviews were mainly undertaken in English, some interviews were also undertaken in Greek, Italian and Mandarin. The final number of interviews was 603, with 399 conducted in the Melbourne Statistical Division and 204 throughout the rest of Victoria. For further detailed information about the development and conduct of the survey, refer to the technical report.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Perceived acceptability of selected behaviour in general social settings**



**Figure 2: Perceived acceptability of selected behaviour in workplace settings**



<sup>3</sup> Pennay & Powell (2012). *The role of bystander knowledge, attitudes and behaviours in preventing violence against women. A technical report*, The Social Research Centre. Melbourne.  
\* Any joke that is told at the expense of a person based on their gender.

# The Victorian community expects organisations to do more to promote respect and gender equality.

## Key findings

### How many have witnessed unacceptable behaviour towards women?

- Around one-third (29%) of respondents said they had witnessed sexism towards women in the last 12 months at work, within their sports club or among friends and family.
- The majority of the Victorian community view sexual harassment (e.g. comments about number of sexual partners, persistent unwanted sexual advances) and verbally abusive behaviour towards women as never or rarely acceptable.
- While there is widespread condemnation of physical and verbal abuse, there is moderate community acceptance of sexist attitudes that are expressed, for example, through sexist slang, comments about number of sexual partners and sexist jokes.
- Sexist behaviour is considered more acceptable in social environments than in workplaces or sports clubs (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).
  - Among friends and family, 54.5% said it is 'never acceptable' to use sexist slang to describe women, 25.9% said it is 'rarely acceptable', and 18.3% said it is 'sometimes acceptable'.
  - In workplaces, by contrast, 71.9% said it is 'never acceptable' to use sexist slang to describe women, 15.2% said it is 'rarely acceptable', and 12.8% said it is 'sometimes acceptable'.

### How many have taken bystander action?

- Almost half (47.6%) of respondents who had seen violence, sexism or discrimination reported 'either saying or doing something in response, or taking some other form of action'.
- However, people were more hesitant to act on or respond to more subtle behaviour such as sexist comments,

jokes and slang. A man telling a sexist joke about women in a social setting is the incident least likely to elicit bystander action.

- In general, women, university graduates and people aged between 35 and 54 years were most likely to report having taken bystander action in response to violence, sexual harassment or sexism.
- While young people aged 18 to 34 years were the most likely to have witnessed sexism or violence in the last 12 months, they were least likely to have taken bystander action.
- Around 13% of respondents were uncomfortable when witnessing sexist or discriminatory behaviour or attitudes but chose not to take bystander action.

### What factors can encourage a person to take bystander action?

Victorians are most likely to take bystander action when:

- they perceive the behaviour as serious, and
- they believe they will have strong support for such action from their peers and colleagues, community or organisation.

The survey reveals a range of factors that can either encourage or hinder the willingness of individuals to act. In particular, the likelihood of taking action is influenced by:

- that person's level of confidence in their capacity to act
- whether they think their action will have a positive impact on the situation
- whether they believe they will have the support of their friends, peers or colleagues.

People who strongly support gender equality were more likely to report that they had taken bystander action in the last 12 months.

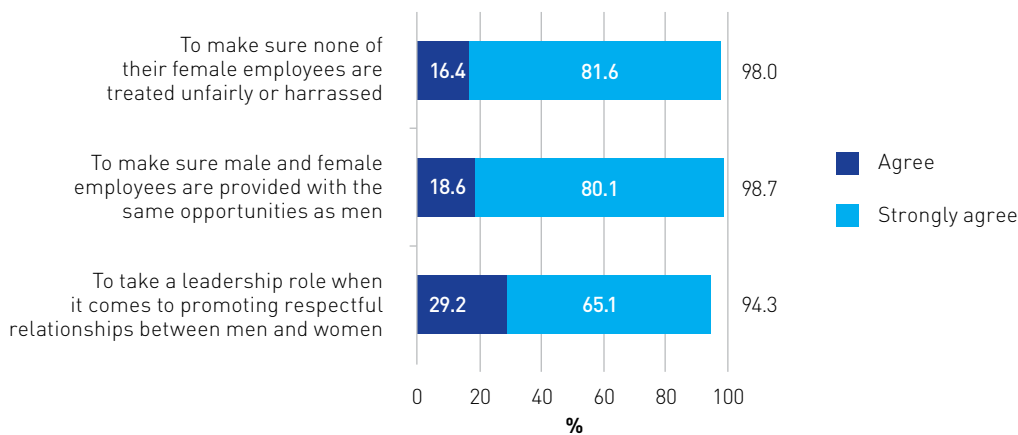
In addition, those who were aware of policies and procedures relating to respectful relationships, gender equality and/or sexual harassment in their workplace or organisation were also more likely to report that they had taken action.

### Can organisations be leaders in preventing violence against women?

The survey results show that the Victorian community expects organisations to do more to promote respect and gender equality and to play a leadership role in this area.

- The vast majority of respondents (98.7%) expect employers to ensure that women are provided with the same opportunities as men and to ensure that none of their female employees are treated unfairly or harassed (98%). More than nine in 10 (94.3%) also agreed that employers should take a leadership role in educating their workforce about respectful relationships between men and women (see Figure 3 overleaf).
- The vast majority of respondents (97.6%) expect their local community sports clubs to provide an environment that makes girls and women feel welcome. Almost nine in 10 (88.9%) expect local community sports clubs to educate males about acceptable behaviour towards females and 86% think local sports clubs should play a leadership role in the community by promoting respectful relationships between men and women.

**Figure 3: Percentage who agree that employers have these responsibilities**



## Recommendations

The research shows wide community recognition and concern about sexism, discrimination and violence against women, and clear support from the Victorian community for organisations to do more to promote gender equality and respect. It points to the importance of creating community cultures and organisational conditions that support and encourage bystander action.

There is strong potential to encourage more bystander action in workplaces and sports clubs, especially in response to the more subtle forms of violence against women – like verbal abuse – and the social conditions that contribute to violence against women – such as sexist attitudes and jokes.

The survey has identified that there are people who are uncomfortable seeing sexism or discrimination take place, but who have not yet taken bystander action. Bystander programs should build on this recognition of harmful behaviour and help individuals to overcome the final barriers to action.

In addition, this research has highlighted the potential to encourage more men and young people to take bystander action.

Programs that are designed to increase bystander action must build individuals' knowledge and skills, but should also build a social climate where there is strong and visible support for bystander action when sexism or discrimination have occurred. These programs are most likely to be effective when they are integrated by organisations that have an existing commitment to recognising and ending violence against women.

This research has affirmed the vital role of community, organisations and leaders to adopt a strong stand on violence against women and to support equal and respectful relationships between women and men.

Where sexism, discrimination and violence go unchallenged they are effectively condoned. Yet, silent bystanders are an untapped resource and have a greater role to play in the prevention of violence against women.

This publication is a summary of the VicHealth report *More than ready: Bystander action to prevent violence against women in the Victorian community* by Dr Anastasia Powell.

For more information about this study and to view the full report, visit the VicHealth website:  
[www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/publications/freedom-from-violence](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/publications/freedom-from-violence)