



Gender equality and respectful relationships

Local government action guide

Councils can influence the quality and distribution of conditions needed for good health, that is, the natural, built and social environments in which we live, learn, work and play.¹ They have a major role in supporting the objectives of the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* by protecting, improving and promoting public health.²

Councils can help prevent violence against women before it occurs by addressing the known contributors to such violence. This includes:

- increasing gender equality in all areas of life including education, income and social rights
- reducing the adoption of stereotypical roles by men and women
- challenging permissive attitudes towards violence against women.

This guide is one of six providing evidence-informed actions that councils may consider when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans and other local strategies. The proposed strategies are consistent with state health promotion priorities and prevention frameworks, including the *Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations*, the forthcoming Victorian Gender Equality Strategy and 10-year Family Violence Action Plan, the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* and the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015–2019* (the Plan).^{3,4,5}

The Plan builds on a 'systems thinking' perspective that recognises the complexity of health issues and the underlying causes of poor health and wellbeing. It also identifies place-based approaches as a key platform for change, recognising that the places where people spend their time – communities, schools, workplaces, sporting clubs and more – play an important role in shaping their health and wellbeing. The aim is to maximise value by leveraging multiple networks, investments and activities to deliver outcomes for communities.

Links to other guides and further resources and available at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/localgovernmentguides.

Links to the Victorian Population Health Survey 2014 findings are available at www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/population-health-systems/health-status-of-victorians/survey-data-and-reports/victorian-population-health-survey/victorian-population-health-survey-2014.

For more detailed information on your area go to www.exploreyourdata.com.au.

Why are gender equality and respectful relationships a public health and wellbeing priority?

- The ability to participate in equal and respectful relationships is an important contributing factor to mental health and wellbeing.^{6,7} Conversely, intimate partner violence is detrimental to physical and mental health.⁷
- In Australia, more than two in five women (41%) have experienced violence from a man known to them at some point in their lifetime since the age of 15.⁸
- Male intimate partner violence contributes more to the disease burden for women aged 18 to 44 years than any other well-known risk factors like tobacco use, high cholesterol or use of illicit drugs.⁷ Violence against women is associated with an increased risk of serious mental health problems including suicide, anxiety and depression.^{9,10,11}
- Violence against women is more likely to occur in contexts of unequal relationships between men and women¹² or when there are more rigid distinctions enforced between the roles of men and women.^{13,14,15} Violence is also more common in families and relationships in which men control decision-making^{16,17} and less so in those relationships in which women have a greater level of agency.^{16,18}
- In relation to gender equality, the VicHealth Indicators Survey 2015¹⁹ found that
 - approximately one-third of Victorians held low support for gender equality in relationships
 - more than half of young men and nearly a third of young women held low support for gender equality in relationships.

Understanding equity

Health equity is the notion that everyone should have a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential and that no one should be disadvantaged from achieving this potential if it can be avoided.

Inequities are the observed differences between population groups (e.g. a subpopulation group and the Victorian population) that stem from socioeconomic, political and cultural drivers of social position.

Equitable approaches are those aimed at closing the gap in outcomes for different population groups. This may mean providing additional support for people experiencing disadvantage in order to achieve equal outcomes.

Strategic goal

Council is committed to taking action to reduce violence against women within their communities.

Objective and actions

Improve gender equality and respectful relationships

- Develop a whole-of-council approach to preventing violence against women that aims to promote gender equality across all local government domains including sport and recreation, health and community services, arts and culture, workplaces, leadership and human resources and urban development.^{20,21}
- Analyse council policies, programs and services, measure if they are equitable towards both genders and determine how equitable practices can be embedded in service planning and design.^{22,23} This includes ensuring program, project and service planning includes impact assessments for the participation, benefits and barriers in relation to gender.^{23,24}
- Ensure all council consultations incorporate gender equality, so that diverse groups of women have the opportunity to participate in community decision-making through active citizenship.^{22,23}
- Improve gender equality within councils by improving female representation in decision-making bodies, improving job design and flexibility and establishing mentoring programs.^{22,23}
- Set a target for female representation in leadership roles and council committees. Establish appropriate annual targets and timelines to achieve gender equality on council boards and committees.^{23,25}
- Implement a monitoring and evaluation process that reports annually on the significance and impact of gender equality across all areas of local government work.^{20,22,23}
- Make gender awareness training available to local government staff to improve knowledge, attitudes and behaviour with respect to gender equality.²³
- Develop and support partnerships with other councils, community groups and organisations who are working towards preventing violence against women in the community to collectively change community and cultural attitudes.²⁰
- Provide support and training to local sports clubs to assist their efforts to increase female representation in governance roles and coaching positions and encourage team participation for women and girls.^{26,27,28}
- Audit council infrastructure and facilities to evaluate how accessible, welcoming, relevant and secure they are for people, including 'at-risk' priority groups.²⁹
- Evaluate the impacts and outcomes of local policies and programs for different social groups.³⁰ VicHealth's *About Fair Foundations and promoting health equity* resource provides further information about how this can be achieved – www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/fairfoundations.

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