



National Centre for Excellence to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children

Stakeholder engagement and the National Research Agenda

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Introduction

Women's Health West (WHW) welcomes the opportunity provided by AHURi to provide public comment on the National Research Agenda for the National Centre for Excellence to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children (NCE).

Since 1988, WHW has actively contributed to the health, safety and wellbeing of women in the western region of Melbourne through a combination of direct service delivery, research, health promotion, community development, capacity building, group work and advocacy. Since 1994 WHW has delivered family violence services for women and children ranging from crisis outreach and court support, to housing establishment and crisis accommodation options, to counselling and group work programs. WHW has been an active and strong supporter of family violence reform at a regional and state wide level, integrating and coordinating family violence services in our region, and ensuring the integration of those services with a range of related sectors, including the housing sector.

WHW also have a health promotion, research and development arm, which offers a range of programs and projects, targeted to prevention and early intervention strategies to improve outcomes for women's health, safety and wellbeing. We are leaders in the development of regional strategies to further our work, seeing partnership within and outside the sectors in which we work as crucial for bringing about effective and sustainable outcomes for women and children.

These two main arms of the service place WHW in a unique position to offer a continuum of responses from prevention to early intervention to crisis response. WHW's strategic plan sets out our approach to partnership and our client-centred approach to service delivery and outcomes that support women to take control over their decisions and their lives.

Women's Health West's expertise in reducing violence against women

As the family violence service for the western region of Melbourne, WHW delivers services and programs that respond to men's violence against women and their children. WHW also leads the western region strategy for the primary prevention of violence against women, *Preventing Violence Together*, as well as undertakes a range of health promotion programs that seek to redress the determinants of violence against women. This breadth of experience and expertise means that WHW are particularly well placed to comment on the National Research Agenda for the NCE.

The work of WHW in the prevention of violence against women has demonstrated that the actions, skills and approaches required to support women and their children who have experienced or are experiencing violence, is entirely different from those that work to prevent violence against women from occurring in the first place. It is essential that the NCE recognises these differences, and develops a research agenda that specifically attends to each of these different levels of prevention in order to ensure the different principles and objectives of these approaches, are maintained.

Consultation questions

1. What are the key issues, areas or topics, you would like to see as a focus for research?

- a. *Research that specifically investigates the primary prevention of violence against women*

WHW recognise that in order to redress violence against women and their children we must continue to research, resource and build capacity across all levels of prevention, including tertiary, secondary and primary prevention. However, in working towards a society in which all women and their children are free from violence, it is vital that we undertake significant work in the prevention of violence against women before it occurs – namely, *primary prevention*. If Australia is to truly tackle and reduce violence against women, primary prevention initiatives must hold a prominent and resourced space in the strategic work we undertake. Unquestionably, such strategic primary prevention initiatives must be informed by a sound research and evidence base, which is the remit of the NCE.

The rationale for a national research agenda that has a focus on primary prevention is demonstrated through the recognition that primary prevention as a discrete field within public health and social policy is a recent phenomenon. For instance, the role of local government and other non-specialist agencies who undertake primary prevention work is quite new. Equally, research that explores the key causes of violence against women and identifies effective strategies for action is still an emerging field of study. Research is required that documents and evaluates promising-practice primary prevention programs, and that further builds upon the existing research around ‘what works’ in prevention across a range of different settings. It is imperative that the NCE undertakes primary prevention research to ensure that Australia’s primary prevention practice is rigorous, evidence-based and indeed, effective. The NCE are ideally placed to provide the national leadership that Australia strongly needs in building the evidence for effective primary prevention practice.

- b. *A deeper understanding of the determinants of violence against women*

The research undertaken by VicHealth, notably its primary prevention framework (2007) and burden of disease study (2004) has been used to inform promising primary prevention practice and government policy both across Australia and internationally. To date, the work of VicHealth has led to a range of primary prevention projects across all regions of Victoria, and has supported the establishment of stronger partnerships between women’s health services, generalist health services, councils and other key organisations. The VicHealth Framework (2007), through its identification of the determinants of violence against women (unequal power relations between women and men, and adherence to rigid gender roles and stereotypes), was the first major Australian research piece that provided the much needed evidence to inform emerging primary prevention practice. With the establishment of a national research centre, it is vital that the NCE takes up the work initiated by VicHealth, and conducts rigorous research that investigates the determinants of violence against women across all levels of society.

In particular, research is required that explores the links between gender inequity as a determinant of violence against women. International research identifies that across the world, in countries where gender equity is high; violence against women is low (UNIFEM 2010). As the national research body for the prevention of violence against women, it is fundamental that the NCE investigates the relationship between gender equity and violence against women in the Australian context.

It is also essential that the NCE conducts research that explores the determinants of violence against women, at a socio-cultural and structural level. This will require undertaking research that moves beyond the individual or community level and investigates the risk and protective factors for violence against women at an organisational, and in particular, societal/institutional/structural level. Indeed, the importance of undertaking primary prevention at a societal/structural level has been acknowledged by the Commonwealth Government of Australia (2010) in its *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022*, stating that 'the social practices and cultural values of broader society shape how violence can occur at an individual level' (p.15).

Much of the existing primary prevention research has concentrated on identifying risk and protective factors at the individual level, for example individual attitudes towards gender equality and violence against women (Fergus 2012). As such, there remains a paucity of research that specifically explores institutional and cultural support for gender inequity across the various domains of Australian society. For example, research is required that investigates the institutional and cultural proliferation of unequal power relations between women and men and adherence to rigid gender roles and stereotypes within media and popular culture, financial institutions, sports and recreation, the education system, military, government etc. Redressing this significant research gap should form a primary focus for the NCE in establishing their national research program.

It will also be important that research undertaken to investigate the determinants of violence against women, attends to *all* forms of violence against women. To date, much of the existing international and national research has focused predominantly on intimate partner violence and sexual violence. It is well established that violence against women occurs through many forms, which all present profound and devastating impacts on women and their children. It is imperative that research exploring the determinants of violence against women is undertaken to explore not only physical and sexual violence in the intimate partner context, but also other forms of violence against women more broadly including economic violence, social violence, emotional violence and spiritual violence.

c. Primary prevention research with 'at risk' population groups

As identified in the VicHealth Framework (2007), there are particular population groups in Australia that are at higher risk of being subjected to violence, or are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of violence once it has occurred. Research is required that investigates the determinants of violence against women and effective primary prevention strategies with

particular at risk populations. This should include undertaking collaborative research in partnership with the following population groups:

- Women with a disability: It is well established that women with physical and cognitive disabilities experience higher rates of violence than those without disabilities (VicHealth 2007).
- Women in same-sex relationships: Victorian statistics suggest that 41 per cent of women in same-sex relationships experience intimate partner violence (Pitts et al 2007).
- Women from migrant and refugee-backgrounds: Violence against women occurs among all cultural, religious and socio-economic groups, but women marginalised by culture, ethnicity and visa status are more vulnerable to violence and are less likely to have the resources to act to report it (Flood 2013).

In particular, it is imperative that the NCE partners engage with Indigenous communities, to explore the determinants of Aboriginal family violence and to identify effective primary prevention initiatives. A number of government publications regarding Aboriginal family violence refer to 'invasion, dispossession and racism' as the causes of Aboriginal family violence (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria 2008). As such, research is required that further explores the causes and contributing factors of family violence within Aboriginal communities. The use of an 'intersectionality approach', whereby violence against women is explored in the context of intersecting social locations (such as gender, ethnicity, class, disability etc), may further support the conduct of this research.

2. Why are these areas, topics or issues important and of national relevance?

The importance of undertaking primary prevention research and initiatives in order to reduce violence against women is well recognised; in particular, the importance of redressing gender inequity and inequality in order to prevent violence against women (United Nations 2006; VicHealth 2007; Fergus 2012). The national relevance of undertaking primary prevention research is highlighted through the focus on primary prevention in the Commonwealth government's *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022* (2010). As such, any federal government initiatives will require a strong evidence-base, which is within the scope of the NCE to provide.

As gender inequity is internationally recognised as the key cause of violence against women, it is of national relevance that the NCE undertakes research that explores gender inequity within the Australian context. This will be vital in order to inform effective Australian primary prevention policy and practice. Of deep concern are the findings from the World Economic Forum's (2012) *Global Gender Gap Report 2012*, which explores gender-based disparities in 135 countries. The recent findings reported that Australia's gender equality and gender equity ranking has significantly declined in its international ranking. While in 2006 Australia was ranked 15th on the Global Gender Gap Index, in 2012 we have dropped to ranking 25th. Undoubtedly, research that explores gender equity in the Australian context and identifies

effective evidence-based policies and practices to promote gender equity is vital and of national significance.

Focusing on primary prevention not only reduces the risk of death, disability and injury to Australian women and children, it also holds significant relevance for the Australian economy. A study undertaken by KPMG found that the costs associated with violence against women exceed \$3.4 billion dollars per year in Victoria; estimated to grow to more than \$3.9 billion by 2021 if primary prevention action is not taken (State Government of Victoria, 2009).

3. What sort of research methodology would you propose for the research areas, topics or issues you have identified (optional)?

In order to fully capture the nuances and complexities of the primary prevention of violence against women before it occurs and to undertake a rigorous investigation of this topic, it is essential that a range of research methodologies are employed by the NCE. Particularly, it will be essential that research methodologies draw upon both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, in order to provide a deep and rigorous investigation of the topic.

The work of primary prevention is recognised as long-term; the best available evidence from VicHealth and the World Health Organisation indicates that in order to achieve the enormous social, cultural, and attitudinal change required to effectively prevent violence against women, primary prevention work must be long-term and sustained (VicHealth 2007). This needs to be a consideration in the study designs adopted by the NCE in order to explore primary prevention. It will be important that research investigating the efficacy of primary prevention strategies and initiatives is longitudinal, and has the necessary resources and funding to investigate changes over time.

A central concern for research undertaken by the NCE will be the development of research that is underpinned by a feminist analysis of violence against women. Recognising the gendered nature of violence against women has been noted as integral to the effective primary prevention of violence against women (VicHealth 2007). Additionally, the importance of research being undertaken in partnership between academics and practitioners is also vital, and might draw upon participatory action research among other research methodologies that support a collaborative approach. The importance of collaboration between researchers and practitioners in the prevention of violence against women has been recognised by the US *National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Centre* (2001), which states that the “Real world experience” of practitioners was highly valued by researchers as a source of generating research ideas, designing projects, and interpreting unexpected research findings’ (p.7).

4. How would the results of the research contribute (a) to knowledge and understanding, (b) improved services, programs or practice and/or (c) changes in policy?

As previously discussed, the *primary prevention* of violence against women is an emerging and new area of study and practice. As such, research findings from the NCE will form

invaluable sources of evidence and knowledge that will be used to inform the work of primary prevention practitioners, regional, state and federal action plans, and State and Federal government policy and legislative reform. Undoubtedly, given the paucity of Australian research that investigates primary prevention and the determinants of violence against women, this research would be applied by government and non-government organisations in order to ensure Australia's initiatives are relevant to an Australian context, and are informed by sound evidence.

To support the application of the NCE's research findings to the work of prevention practitioners and policy makers, it will be essential that research findings are communicated and translated in a clear and accessible manner. Translation of research findings into recommendations that can be readily drawn upon by practitioners and policy makers will be essential in ensuring the development of comprehensive evidence-based programmes and policies.

With the recent establishment of The National Foundation to Prevent Violence Against Women (commonly referred to as *The Foundation*), the magnitude of the NCE undertaking primary prevention research is both timely and paramount. WHW understands that *The Foundation* will provide national leadership to prevent violence against women before it occurs through the implementation of various strategies including community education, social marketing campaigns, resource development, community mobilisation and partnerships. Notably, the role and capacity of *The Foundation* is different to that of the NCE. As a research centre of excellence, the NCE has the highly specialised expertise and skills required to undertake rigorous primary prevention research. It will therefore be essential that the NCE partners and works closely with *The Foundation* to ensure that the primary prevention research generated by the NCE is used to inform the prevention work of *The Foundation* and other prevention practitioners, including women's health services, local governments and health services.

5. What are your top three priority issues/topics for research?

As outlined in this submission, it is vital that the NCE ensures that the primary prevention of violence against women forms a significant focus in the national research agenda.

In undertaking primary prevention research, WHW recommends the following as the top three topics to be investigated in the national research agenda:

a. The link between gender equity and violence against women

How does gender inequity lead to, enable and manifest in, violence against women?
How does gender inequity result from and compound violence against women?

b. The extent and nature of gender inequity in Australia at the socio-cultural level

Where, how, to what extent and in what forms is gender inequity prevalent in key settings, structures, domains and institutions in Australia (e.g. the media, financial

institutions, local government, sports and recreation, the corporate business sector etc)?

What are the direct and indirect impacts of gender inequity at the socio-cultural level in Australia, on women and men, girls and boys?

c. Effective strategies for promoting and advancing gender equity within the Australian context, to prevent violence against women

How can Australian governments and other key institutions develop policies and practices that support gender equity and prevent violence against women?

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