



Submission concerning the City of Melbourne  
'Melbourne's Strategy for a Safer City 2011-2013'

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## **1. Introduction**

Women's Health West (WHW) is the regional women's health service for the western metropolitan region of Victoria. Our services include research, health promotion, community development, training and advocacy around women's health, safety and wellbeing. Since 1994, WHW has hosted the region's largest family violence crisis support and prevention program. These two main arms of the service place WHW in a unique position to incorporate women's experiences directly into our research, health promotion and project work, ensuring that we clarify the connections between structural oppression and individual experience. As a feminist organisation we focus on redressing the gender and structural inequalities that limit the lives of women. WHW's work is underpinned by a social model of health and, as such, we recognise the important influence of, and aim to improve, the social, economic and political factors that determine the health, safety and wellbeing of women and their children in the western region.

Informed by the vision of equity and justice for women in the west, WHW work is guided by the following five strategic goals:

- Delivering and advocating for accessible and culturally appropriate services and resources for women across the region
- Improving the conditions in which women live, work and play in the western region of Melbourne
- Putting women's health, safety and wellbeing on the political agenda to improve the status of women
- Recognising that good health, safety and wellbeing begins in our workplace
- Working with others to achieve our goals

## **2. Response to the Draft Strategy for a Safer City 2011-2013**

WHW welcomes the opportunity provided by the City of Melbourne to respond to the draft 'Melbourne's Strategy for a Safer City' (the Strategy). We commend the Council for its commitment to a safer City of Melbourne, and we look forward to continuing to work with Council over the coming years to ensure a safer city for all Melburnians.

Our submission is primarily concerned with the absence of violence against women in the Strategy as it is currently configured. As a leading provider of services and support for women affected by family violence in the Melbourne area, we are uniquely placed to advise on the prevalence and seriousness of violence against women in the Melbourne LGA.

Our submission outlines our key concerns and provides a series of recommendations for consideration by Council.

### **What is ‘violence against women’?**

Violence against women encompasses ‘physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family and in the general community, including battering, sexual abuse of children, dowry-related violence, rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, and violence perpetrated or condoned by the state (World Health Organisation, 1996).

The term ‘violence against women’ is also sometimes used interchangeably with ‘family violence’, ‘intimate partner violence’ or ‘domestic violence’. WHW, like others in the specialist sector, uses the term ‘violence against women’ in order to include other forms of violence – such as trafficking in women – that form part of the continuum of violence perpetrated against women. ‘Violence against women’ also highlights the fact that violence perpetrated against women is invariably *gendered* in nature – it is violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately (End Violence Against Women, 2008: 27).

While the focus of this submission is focused on family violence/intimate partner violence, WHW recommend that Council adopt the broader definition of violence against women. Many other forms of violence that women experience in the city of Melbourne – for example, sexual assault or sexual harassment on the city streets – is highly gendered in nature. Recognition of the gendered nature of violence that women experience is critical to an effective approach to violence prevention and intervention in the City of Melbourne.

## **3. Prevalence and reported rates of violence against women in the City of Melbourne**

Statistics provided annually by Victoria Police have demonstrated a steady increase in the numbers of reported incidents of family violence in the City of Melbourne in recent years. However, because violence against women is a notoriously underreported crime,<sup>1</sup> increases in the number of incidents attended by police are welcome – increased rates

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<sup>1</sup> The 2005 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) [Personal Safety Survey](#) estimated that only 36 per cent of female victims of physical assault and 19 per cent of female victims of sexual assault in Australia reported the incident to police.

of reported family violence incidents do not necessarily indicate a rise in the gross rates of family violence but may, rather, indicate the willingness of victims to report it.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear based on the available data alone that family violence in the City of Melbourne is a significant cause for concern. With a residential population of approximately 93,105 people,<sup>3</sup> of which at least 46,552 are women, we can surmise on ABS statistical trend data that at least 15,000 women in the City of Melbourne LGA have experienced, are currently experiencing, or will experience gendered violence, irrespective of whether or not they report it.

Women's Health West's family violence intake statistics reflect only a tiny fraction of the true extent of family violence in the Melbourne LGA. This is partly because of the hidden nature of family violence and partly because we do not service the entire LGA. However, even the small portion of available statistical data is significant. From March 2010 to March 2011 inclusive, WHW received 161 fax-backs from Victoria Police units within our catchment in the Melbourne LGA<sup>4</sup> - an average of more than 12 family violence incidents attended by police every month.

While street violence and other forms of alcohol-related public disorder garner much of the media attention in the Melbourne LGA, the data presented here clearly demonstrates that the hidden crime of family violence is equally deserving of police and council resources and attention.

## **4. Recommendations**

### **4.1 Include violence against women as a focus in the 2011-2013 City of Melbourne Safety Strategy**

Women in the Melbourne LGA are statistically far more likely to be unsafe in their own homes, not in public. The evidence provided here provides a clear rationale for the adoption of violence against women within one or all of the three priority areas in the draft Strategy.

Preventing and responding to violence against women/family violence has been adopted as a priority by local, state, and federal Australian governments.

In addition to the human rights obligation to end violence against women, research also reveals that preventing violence against women is cost effective. A report conducted by

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<sup>2</sup> Identified barriers to reporting sexual assault and domestic violence include 'a perception that it [the violence] is too minor to report to police; a lack of awareness that such action constitutes an offence; a desire to "keep it private" and deal with it themselves; shame; fear of the perpetrator; a sense of ongoing responsibility for the safety of other family members; a lack of awareness about, or lack of availability of, culturally responsive services; a fear of not being believed or that no one can help; and previous experience of asking for help but feeling re-victimised by parts of the service response (such as having to re-tell one's story to multiple services, or being cross-examined' (*A Time for Action*, 2009: 16)

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/AboutMelbourne/Statistics/Pages/MelbourneSnapshot.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> This includes Flemington and Melbourne West police stations in 2009/2010; Flemington, Melbourne West, Melbourne East and Melbourne North police stations in 2011/2011.

KPMG demonstrates that in 2009 alone, violence against women cost the Victorian economy \$3.9 billion, and that preventing violence for just one Australian woman would avoid \$20,766 in costs.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4.2 Endorse *Preventing Violence Together: The Western Region Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women***

The City of Melbourne has been a welcome contributor in the development of *Preventing Violence Together: The Western Region Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women* (PVT) through the participation of Nancy Pierorazio and Jennifer Hanuska, Senior Policy Officers, City Safety. Councillor Kanis also lent her support to *Preventing Violence Together* through her attendance at the official launch on 2 December 2010.

Five local governments in the western region<sup>6</sup> have endorsed PVT, and we invite the City of Melbourne to do the same. Endorsement demonstrates high-level commitment to ending violence against women, and builds the strength of our partnership to work in collaboration with one another to prevent violence against women.

We commend the Lord Mayor's call to approach crime 'by addressing the complex social issues which lie behind crime, violence and antisocial behaviour'.<sup>7</sup> PVT takes just such an approach to the crime of family violence, by setting out a series of actions for implementation across council that redress the underlying causal factors that drive the perpetration of violence against women – namely, unequal power relationships between women and men. A copy of PVT is attached to this submission and we recommend that council consider actions from that document to add to the Strategy for a Safer City.

#### **4.3 Provide support and funding for family violence outreach activities in the City of Melbourne**

Timely provision of services and support for women and children who are currently experiencing (or are at risk of experiencing) violence is a critical component of an adequate safety strategy. As noted above, women in Melbourne are most at risk of injury or death as a result of family violence than almost any other risk factor. Currently, WHW only have capacity to provide a family violence outreach worker one day per week in the Melbourne LGA, consisting of four client contact hours per week alternating between the Carlton Family Violence Resource Centre (CFVRC) and the Queen Victoria Women's Centre. Additional resources from the City of Melbourne to expand this service would be extremely beneficial. Qualitative data from the 6 month pilot project conducted between WHW and CFVRC revealed an overwhelming response from the CoM family services workers and maternal child health nurses, who reported that being able to consult and refer to a specialist family violence worker enhanced their service, and lightened their work load considerably. Quantitative data also revealed monthly referral increases, which is a clear demonstration of unmet need.

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<sup>5</sup> *A Right To Respect: Victoria's Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women 2010-2020* (2009): 11.

<sup>6</sup> Brimbank, Maribyrnong, Hobsons Bay, Moonee Valley, and Wyndham.

<sup>7</sup> City of Melbourne, *Melbourne's Strategy for a Safer City*, 2.

Similarly, the Melbourne Magistrates Court and the Family Violence Unit at the Victorian Department of Justice have praised WHW for the provision of much needed outreach and court support for women who have experienced family violence.

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Once again, I would like to commend the City of Melbourne for its commitment to addressing the root causes of violence. Should you wish to discuss any of the recommendations made here, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robyn Gregory', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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