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Submission to inform the development of the Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children 2010-22*.

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Support Help and Empowerment Inc welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-22*. Taking a strategic and informed approach to improving safety for women and their children is crucial to a successful outcome for the National Plan. Working towards a society free from violence should be a priority for Australia and will only come about through a collaborative effort.

About Support Help and Empowerment Inc

Support Help and Empowerment (SHE Inc) is a not-for-profit, non-government organisation that provides free and confidential counselling and support for women who are currently experiencing or have experienced domestic abuse.

SHE was established in 1989 to provide short to long-term support and counselling for women affected by domestic violence. Twenty five years on we continue to provide this vital service to women within Southern Tasmania, operating with the belief that women are entitled to a life free from violence.

SHE policies and practices are informed by the belief that people have the right,

- To live free from violence and in safety
- To equality and respect
- To recognise their potential and
- To make informed choices regarding their lives

The services we offer to individuals include face-to-face and/or phone counselling and support sessions, groups, information and resources, and referral to other services. SHE also takes an active role in cultivating positive change in the community by holding community education sessions, working collaboratively with other service providers, hosting events to raise awareness of family violence, contributing to research about family violence, and maintaining a presence in key advisory boards and networks.

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Introduction

Since its foundation SHE has witnessed some significant developments in Tasmania in response to domestic violence. The *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tasmania) introduced economic and emotional abuse and intimidation as criminal offences and grounds for obtaining Family Violence Orders. The Act also recognises children as victims of family violence in their own right, and amendments to the *Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1997* acknowledge exposure to family violence as a form of child abuse requiring mandatory reporting.

The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-22 (the National Plan) is a positive step towards reducing violence against women, however SHE believes that it is being undermined by a broader political environment that neglects to respond to the inequities that impact the status of women in Australia. The current federal government, in a relatively short time, has demonstrated a lack of commitment to addressing systemic issues that affect women's health, status and greater opportunities in Australia. Funds established by the Labor government for the provision of wage increases for childcare and aged care workers have been abolished by the Coalition, ensuring that the predominantly female workforce of these sectors remain grossly underpaid. Changes introduced by the Labor government to increase the transparency of the appointment process for federal judges have been discarded by the Coalition, a move that senior NSW judge Ruth McColl interprets as a worrying sign that the government is winding back measures that promote gender diversity on the bench. The Coalition's support for gender diversity in Australian businesses is also questionable, given the decision to relax gender reporting rules for Australian companies, with organisations requiring significantly higher numbers of staff before they must provide detailed reports about gender balance to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

The First Action Plan of the National Plan justly acknowledged that broader social policy initiatives addressing gender inequality are critical to reducing violence against women, but this is not being reflected by the actions of the current government.

The Coalition has also made decisions that will impact directly on the lives of women experiencing domestic violence, such as drastically cutting funding to legal aid. Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, a legal service for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people experiencing family violence, is one of the areas facing significant cuts, while community legal centres and Legal Aid Commissions are also receiving less funding. Given that Indigenous women are up to 45 times more likely to experience

family violence than non-Indigenous women,¹ the importance of specialised services to assist Indigenous women experiencing family violence cannot be overstated. Community Legal Services are similarly crucial for women who are experiencing violence, particularly those without the resources to seek other legal assistance. If the Coalition wants to ensure that women are able to escape family violence, they must prioritise funding for the services that will assist those women throughout the process.

Access to ongoing specialised services for women who have experienced abuse and violence in relationships is essential to addressing the impact and damaging consequences of the abuse, and providing women with pathways to escape and remain free from abuse. However, discussions about reducing violence against women must also acknowledge the need to engage all sectors of the community to challenge the societal beliefs, cultural norms and codes of behaviour that diminish the status of women.

Discrimination, limited stereotypes and gender inequalities must not be tolerated. Primary prevention is needed that promotes respectful relationships, develops positive attitudes and normalises gender equality, and it needs to be targeted at the whole population for its message to be enduring.

Key Questions for Consideration

1. What have been the achievements/gaps under the First Action Plan?

As noted in *Current Thinking on Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women*,² few countries have succeeded in implementing and evaluating multi-sectorial, sustained measures to change the practices, attitudes and behaviours that cause and contribute to violence against women. Not surprisingly there has been little information about the success of programs and services related to the First Action Plan. Measuring the success of the six National Outcomes using only three surveys is unlikely to produce sufficient information on which to build a solid strategy. While the Progress Report on the First Action Plan contained basic information on the programs and services being developed nationwide, SHE feels that more in-depth critical appraisals and program evaluations should have

¹ Ferrante, A., Morgan, F., Indermaur, D., & Harding, R. (1996). *Measuring the extent of domestic violence*. Hawkins Press Sydney.

² Ministry of Women's Affairs. (2013). *Current Thinking on Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women*: New Zealand Government.

been included or otherwise made available. Representation of key stakeholders has been lacking in several areas throughout implementation of the National Plan. For example, the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children Tasmanian Implementation Plan Consultative Group* does not include a representative from a specialist family violence organisation.

Tasmania has developed *Taking Action: Tasmania's Primary Prevention Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children 2012-22* (the Strategy). The Strategy states that the focus for the State in the first three years of the Tasmanian Implementation Plan will be on developing primary prevention solutions to reduce levels of family violence and sexual assault in Tasmania. Outcomes listed for primary prevention include respectful relationships education and *The Safe at Home Program*. The strategies chosen for primary prevention in Tasmania need to be developed and enhanced

The First Action Plan does not adequately consider change at a legislative level. A critical appraisal of current legislation is needed, and changes must be made where that legislation undermines the goals of the National Plan. For example, the *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tasmania) is currently very narrow in its definition of family violence as violence committed by a spouse or partner, failing to incorporate other types of family violence such as that committed by a boyfriend/girlfriend or by a woman's children. Australian laws regarding corporal punishment of children are also alarmingly outdated, with most states providing either explicit legislation or common law defences for parents who physically discipline their children. As the chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Jean Zermatten, notes, "there is no doubt that corporal punishment is a violation of children's rights under the Convention of the Rights of the Child because it is constitutive of violence that causes physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering".³ SHE believes that the National Plan's efforts to reduce violence against women and children must include the reformation of existing state and federal legislation so that they are consistent our with human rights obligations.

2. *What are the opportunities for consolidating and building upon the actions undertaken under the National Priorities of the First Action Plan?*

The actions to implement social marketing and awareness campaigns, and to embed evidence-based best practice respectful relationships education in schools were extremely positive components of the

³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2013). Ending corporal punishment of children. Retrieved 12 March 2014, 2014, from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/CorporalPunishment.aspx>

First Action Plan. On a local level, funding was provided for the Migrant Resource Centre (Southern Tasmania) Inc. to run the Developing and Maintaining Respectful Relationships program for high school students from CALD backgrounds in Southern Tasmania. This program addresses gender stereotyping, media influence, ethical conduct and skills-building. SHE recognises the need for specialised programs for young people from CALD backgrounds, and hopes that the success of this program will lead to an expansion to include a school wide prevention approach that involves engaging teachers and parents, and educating students from Kindergarten-Year 12. This is a vital strategy, as school-based programs have shown the strongest evidence of effectiveness of all primary prevention interventions.⁴ School-based programs have the advantage of targeting a population at a stage when there are strong prospects for prevention, together with the practical advantages of reaching a wide audience.

Ultimately, SHE would like to see anti-violence and relationship education programs become a part of the curriculum in all schools nationwide. Furthermore, SHE would like to see respectful relationships programs being implemented more broadly across other community groups, such as sporting and recreational groups, community organisations, workplaces and businesses, and as a part of settlement procedures for refugees and asylum seekers.

3. *What types of other initiatives could benefit from a national focus?*

The white ribbon campaign is a successful example of the importance of recognising the positive role that men have in preventing violence against women. This is necessary because, as the campaign says, “the violence perpetrated by men against women must stop and it is up to men to stop it”. Programs must promote a way for men to speak out against violence against women and to challenge the attitudes and behaviours of the minority of men who use or condone violence against women.

Workplace initiatives, especially those for male-dominated work forces, could benefit from a national drive. One example is the Women’s Health Victoria *Stand Up: Domestic Violence is Everyone’s Business*. This is a whole-of-company program that uses three key elements: leadership, training, and message promotion. Together, these three elements can create a workplace that does not tolerate violence. Stand Up was introduced into Linfox, a predominantly male workforce, in March 2010.

⁴ VicHealth. (2007). Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria. Melbourne: VicHealth.

Central to the program was the notion of the 'bystander approach', which was used to encourage men to stand up against attitudes and behaviours that support domestic violence. The program was also careful to establish men as individuals who can make a difference, rather than as perpetrators. Following the training, 95 percent of participants were happy or very happy that Linfox was working with a non-profit organisation to prevent domestic violence.⁵

Broader community education and campaigns have proven to be successful in changing community attitudes when they have been enduring and persistent over a period of time. Campaigns that promote healthy relationships, respectful communication and consent need to be invested in, in order to address cultural assumptions that perpetuate violent and abusive relationships.

4. *In order to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in addressing violence against women, where is there scope to reduce duplication of programs and services provided by the Commonwealth and the states and territories, as part of the Second Action Plan?*

Firstly, clear mechanisms for feedback from community organisations through to national bodies would reduce the likelihood of duplication. Secondly, research, consultations and needs analysis's would reveal key areas to be targeted and ensure that programs and campaigns were relevant and appropriate.

5. *Which vulnerable groups and communities would benefit from an increased focus under the Second Action Plan?*

The current focus in domestic violence legislation and policy is on de facto and married couples, which may prevent access to appropriate police and legal responses for marginalised and vulnerable people. Examples of vulnerable people include those who have experienced violence in a dating relationship that is not seen as a 'family relationship', and people experiencing violence from other non-spousal family relationships, such as mothers experiencing abuse from their adolescent or adult children. This is reflected by a lack of comprehensive data collected about the experience of violence outside of de facto or marriage relationships in data sources such as the Personal Safety Survey, which is the

⁵ Durey, R. (2011). Respect, Responsibility and Equality: Working together against violence: Women's Health Victoria and VicHealth.

measure of success for three out of the six National Outcomes. More information is needed about women's experiences of domestic violence beyond de facto and marital relationships.

While the National Plan's *Progress Report to the Council of Australian Governments 2010-2012* acknowledged the need for services to be flexible in meeting the diverse needs of their clients, there has been little attention given to the specific needs of transgender and intersex individuals.

Transgender individuals face disproportionate amounts of discrimination, harassment, violence, and rejection by family, friends, and other social networks. According to a 2007 study, 16% of transgender people in Australia and New Zealand had experienced partner violence. Less than one in five people chose to report the violence to police, and only 35% of those that did report it felt they were treated with courtesy and dignity.⁶ Transgender individuals who do choose to seek support face unique barriers, such as mainstream services not having the knowledge, skills or resources to address their specific needs, or the threat of 'forced outing' by services that require them to disclose their gender identity. They may also be excluded from services provided by religious organisations or organisations that focus on providing support for a specific gender. Ensuring the availability of trans-inclusive services must be a priority for the Second Action Plan, and there should be an effort to consult transgender and intersex communities and individuals to ensure that their needs are being met.

Women who are experiencing financial hardship are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of domestic violence. While financial abuse, control, or manipulation can act as a trigger for some women to end their abusive relationships, lack of financial independence is a powerful barrier for women attempting to leave. Financial hardship can impact on the ability of women to obtain health care for themselves and their children, to pursue legal matters, and find appropriate accommodation. Recent Australian research revealed that in 2002-03, "there were 37,437 years of health life lost by female DV (Domestic Violence) victims in this country overall"⁷, emphasizing just how vital financial independence is to these female-headed single-parent families.

Childcare and transport can be prohibitively expensive, which makes it difficult for women to sustain employment. Different forms of financial assistance are required throughout the stages of violent

⁶ Couch, M. A., Pitts, M. K., Patel, S., Mitchell, A. E., Mulcare, H., & Croy, S. L. (2007). *TranZnation: A report on the health and wellbeing of transgender people in Australia and New Zealand*.

⁷ Evans, I. (2007) *Battle-scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence*. Melbourne: Monash University.

relationships, including advocacy, financial literacy education and advice, accommodation and housing assistance, and the availability of specialised financial products such as no or low interest loans and other forms of microcredit. Currently, the provision of financial assistance is frequently inconsistent, and can be difficult to navigate by both women and service providers. The National Plan needs to recognise that financial hardship is often produced and exacerbated by domestic violence, and a broad range of financial assistance programs and services are necessary to meet the needs of women experiencing domestic violence.

6. *How can we better engage our leaders and broader civil society to address the attitudinal and cultural change required to reduce violence against women and their children?*

In order to lessen the effects of domestic violence on our community we need to be able to;

- talk about the impact of domestic violence on women
- acknowledge that domestic violence is an issue for men
- reveal where justice and support services are failing to protect and support women

It is widely reported that domestic violence claims the life of one woman every week in Australia,⁸ however there is a continued trend in governmental policy to de-gender domestic violence by talking about violence in universal terms. Framing domestic violence as ‘conflict’ or discussing violence only in general terms like ‘alcohol related violence’ negates the impact of domestic violence on women. Domestic violence must be recognised as an abuse of power that is situated within the context of male entitlement, thereby being a male issue. In acknowledging that domestic violence is an issue for men, we must actively and unreservedly challenge the attitudes and behaviours of the minority of men who use or condone violence against women. This requires urging men to speak out against violence, and changing the perception of domestic violence as a private issue. In addition to this, there must be a focus on confronting harmful gender norms and stereotypes.

The most well documented determinants of violence against women and girls are gender norms and gender relations, and traditional gender-role attitudes, whether held by women or men, are associated with greater acceptance of violence against women. Programs are needed at all levels of the community – schools, workplaces, community organisations, sports and recreational groups, and the media – that emphasise the importance of men denouncing violence against women, and that

⁸ Victoria Police. (2010). Crime Statistics 2009/2010.

question harmful gender norms. Changes to the understanding of domestic violence are desperately needed within the police force and judicial system. In 2007, Dr Rosmarie Winter identified a prevailing discourse within the police about the “genuine victim”, where the person experiencing violence was viewed either as unreliable or complicit in the violence.⁹ Additionally, support was found within the police and the judicial system for the notion of provocation, and for a reluctance to prosecute as indicative of a lack of real threat to the woman and her children. For women to feel safe reporting violence and sexual assault, there must be a trusting relationship between them and the police, as well as child protection and other support services. Values training for all staff in these services is one step towards ensuring they are capable of providing a safe environment for women and children. Also beneficial would be greater police participation in forums related to domestic violence, such as the regional and state-wide Domestic Violence Coordinating Committee.

Conclusion

Attitudes towards violence correlate strongly with exposure to violence and may be transferred across generations via learning processes, schools, the media and experience of violence. Whether a person acts on their attitudes depends on their assessment of what others think and the presence of factors in the social environment that either sanction or condemn violent behaviour.¹⁰ Consequently, it is important that programs use evidence-supported strategies to promote attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that support respectful relationships and establish an intolerance of violence as the norm. Such programs must be implemented at all levels of the community: schools, workplaces, community organisations, the media, sports and recreation. People's right to safety and a life free from violence is a right for all individuals.

⁹ Winter, R. E. (2012). *Intimate Partner Violence: The impact of discourse on a coordinated response*. University of Tasmania.

¹⁰ VicHealth. (2006). Two steps forward, one step back: Community attitudes to violence against women - Progress and challenges in creating safe and healthy environments for Victorian women: A summary of findings of the Violence Against Women Community Attitudes Project. Carlton South, Victoria: VicHealth.

SHE's achievements

SHE's recent achievements in regards to primary prevention and family violence include:

GROUP PROGRAMS such as KYSS (Keeping Yourself Safe and Sane) and the SHE/HWHC (Hobart Women's Health Centre) co-facilitated CARES Group (2013). The former is a tertiary intervention therapeutic program, based on a mutual help group model, for women who have been or currently being abused. The latter group was designed as part of a primary prevention strategy in which women share and learn strategies and ideas for emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships.

SHE COMMUNITY EDUCATION: SHE delivers a range of information sessions and training opportunities in Southern Tasmania including schools, parenting groups, hospitals, community groups and services

Community campaigns: One Billion Rising, Red Rose Alerts and Candlelight Ceremony. The Pets Aware Program which offered assistance to adults and children escaping from situations of domestic violence and/or sexual assault by providing accommodation for their pets. The program recognises the importance of pets in the lives of women and children and covers the costs of boarding the family pets while a woman is staying in a shelter after leaving a violent relationship. Research has shown that many women are fearful of leaving their partner due to threats of violence to the family pet.

SHE Publications:

Booklet: *Toolkit to leaving*. Women leaving domestic violence are often faced with many complicated financial, health and legal situations. In conjunction with Women's Legal Service Tasmania, SHE developed a booklet that can be utilized by all women leaving abusive relationships

Booklet: *Relationships Should be Heaven not Hell*. A guide to healthy relationships for young people

Booklet: *My Child Frightens Me*: Information for Families with Abusive Children