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Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees  
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## **Submission to Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee – Domestic violence and gender inequality**

### **About the Illawarra Forum**

The Illawarra Forum, established in 1990, is the peak body working for community services and organisations in the Illawarra and the Shoalhaven. It supports community organisations, promotes expertise and innovation in community development, fosters industry development and provides advocacy for social justice. The Illawarra Forum is an independent organisation governed by a committee of management elected annually by the membership.

The Illawarra Forum represents the non-government community services industry in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven, which consists of approximately 300 organisations which provide support to vulnerable people across the region including:

- Services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault
- Social housing providers
- Homelessness services
- Home and community care services
- People with disability
- Individuals and families with multiple layers of social and financial disadvantage
- Youth work programs
- Community health services, including mental health and drug/alcohol services
- Community legal centre services
- Community development and community capacity building programs.

The Illawarra Forum welcomes the opportunity to comment on the role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to domestic violence.

This submission has been prepared following consultations with Illawarra Forum members.

## General Comments

During our consultations, Illawarra Forum members considered the concept of 'domestic' violence somewhat limiting and recommends the consideration of the issue of gender inequality and 'relationship' violence. There is a danger that if the Inquiry only considers the impact of violence in domestic situations, all of the other relationships in which violence may occur will be overlooked or trivialised. Relationship violence implies some form of connection or association, but not necessarily an intimate or kinship relationship, and not residing in the same place. Some examples of non-domestic relationship violence situations include employer or supervisor and employee, support worker and client, friends or acquaintances, paid carer and the person for whom they are caring.

Gender inequality pervades all spheres of life, and it must be recognised that gender inequality can have a negative impact on people of both genders. While the impact on women may be to disempower and create a victim mentality, men may also suffer as they are expected to be strong, controlled, and unemotional. Positioning men in this way leaves limited outlet for negative emotions. The only legitimate strong negative emotion available for men is anger, which can have some violent manifestations. Men can be regarded as 'weak' if they express other negative emotions such as sadness, fear or grief.

Therefore, society has much to benefit from in balancing the gender equation as it would not only reduce violence, but would allow men to step out of their perceived roles and reduce the rate of male mental illness and suicide.

According to evidence collected by the World Health Organisations (WHO), "gender inequality increases the risk of violence by men against women, and gender inequalities also inhibit the ability of vulnerable people to seek protection". We also know that the rates of violence against women are lower in countries where women achieve greater equality with men.<sup>1</sup>

Illawarra Forum members recommended that gender inequality needs to be approached from a human rights perspective and relationship violence given restorative justice consideration.

## Role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence

Many institutions in Australia have a gender imbalance which disadvantages women and contributes to the perception that men hold most of the power in Australian society. This is especially evident in religious organisations, senior management in business, education and government departments, and in politics.

Australian culture is very much based on the Judaeo-Christian heritage in which men are the ones who hold power and influence. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition – and indeed in many of the important religions of the world, - women are excluded from pivotal roles. Men hold

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/gender.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/gender.pdf)

all of the senior positions, and women are not allowed to perform the most important rituals or ceremonies.

When these traditions form such an important basis for much of our culture and behaviour, it is evident that women are positioned for subservience and submissiveness. This can contribute to feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem in women that can lead them to become victims of relationship violence.

Much religious teaching and a great deal of literature positions women as either “damned whores or God’s police” (to quote the famous work by Anne Summers).<sup>2</sup> Thus women are positioned either as temptresses who must be either used unemotionally for sex or shunned; or as society’s moral compass, responsible for not only their own behaviour but for regulating the behaviour of others.

### **Gender Pay Gap**

The National Center for Social and Economic Modeling (NATSEM,) using robust microeconomic modelling techniques, found that simply being a woman is the major contributing factor to the pay gap in Australia, accounting for 60 per cent of the difference between women’s and men’s earnings. The results showed that if the effects of being a woman were removed, the average wage of an Australian woman would increase by \$1.87 per hour, equating to an additional \$65 per week or \$3,394 annually, based on a 35 hour week.<sup>3</sup>

The gender pay gap subliminally promotes the perceptions that the work performed by women is not as good as that of men, and therefore women are subordinate to men. The societal attitudes that see women paid less for the same work, and under-represented in key leadership roles are the same attitudes that allow a man to justify his destructive behavior towards his partner.

Income inequality can be a strong contributory factor to the prevalence of relationship violence including financial abuse, as women often have to stay in destructive relationships simply because they cannot afford to live on their own income.

### **Marriage and Children**

Marriage is still widely regarded as one of the most important institutions in Australia and is another cultural sphere of life which upholds genders inequality. Following the amendment to the Marriage Act in 2004 the definition of marriage only recognises the union of a man and a woman<sup>4</sup>. This disadvantages people of both genders who are in same sex relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> Summers, A. *Damned Whores and God’s Police The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Penguin Books, 1975, 1994, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> *National Center for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) – Report for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009*

<sup>4</sup> *Marriage means the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life. Certain unions are not marriages. A union solemnised in a foreign country between: (a) a man and another man; or (b) a woman and another woman; must not be recognised as a marriage in Australia - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage\\_Act\\_1961\\_\(Australia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_Act_1961_(Australia))*

Traditionally when a couple marries, the father gives the bride away to the husband and the woman takes the man's name. These rituals reinforce the power relationship between men and women by treating the bride as if she is property of a man being handed over by one male to another. As 'property' she is clearly positioned in a way which enables her to be treated however her new owner chooses. Equally the practice of the children taking the man's name in a marriage indicates that they 'belong' to him.

Another simple manifestation of gender inequality is the fact that a man is privy to a single title (Mr) while a woman is expected to change her title depending on her married status (Miss to Mrs). Although the title Ms. has been introduced, it is often regarded to have a negative connotation, and is certainly not adopted until a woman is old enough to understand the nature of gender inequality and make a choice to use it. If gender equality were to be upheld by Government, the titles of Miss and Mrs should be abolished and all people known as either Mr or Ms.

Thus the traditions associated with marriage serve to promote women in society as helpless objects who cannot look after themselves or make decisions. This objectification of women subliminally supports domestic violence as men are taught that they 'own' women and therefore women should behave as men direct them. This is especially true in the cultural acceptance of child brides.

### **Women with Disability**

Illawarra Forum members are concerned that women with disability, especially those with intellectual disability, are at increased risk of violence in their relationships. These women are already vulnerable and the perception that they are helpless and powerless can mean that they are easily manipulated and subjected to violence and abuse. Society's perception that people with disability somehow feel less inexplicably makes it more acceptable. The trauma these women suffer is often overlooked.

Sexual abuse is especially common in this cohort and traditionally sex education was not delivered to people with disability as it was considered they would never enter into a sexual relationship, or wouldn't understand it if it happened to them. In the event they did enter into a sexual relationship, sterilization to prevent unwanted pregnancy was seen as the only consideration. Many women with disability report they were never taught what to expect in a healthy sexual relationship.

### **Gender stereotypes contributing to cultural conditions which support domestic violence**

#### **Marketing of toys and other products**

The marketing of toys has a huge impact on contributing to cultural conditions which support domestic violence. The Illawarra Forum observes that many toys targeted to young boys are physical and action based, while those marketed to girls focus on building nurturing

or caring skills (e.g. dolls, prams, domestic appliances), or contribute to early sexualisation (e.g. make-up, dress ups, Barbie-type glamour dolls).

Thus young boy gets to play at being a strong action hero, protector of the universe etc. while young girls toys often encourage them to be high maintenance princess characters or passive domestic motherly types.

Consequently, the marketing of toys promotes boys and girls to adopt roles where females are subservient and males dominant. These roles create a perception in society that women are supposed to be docile and weak and men are powerful and controlling.

### **Education**

Many Illawarra Forum members noted that history is a particularly gendered area of education and that the roles of women in history are not emphasized. In many cases, men have largely been given all of the credit for achievements to which women have also contributed including the discovery of DNA<sup>5</sup>, computer programming<sup>6</sup> etc. This simple omission leads to a lack of diversity of women as strong, independent role models.

### **Entertainment**

#### ***Pornography***

Many Illawarra Forum members commented on the impact of the rise of pornography as entertainment, particularly since the advent of the internet which has made pornography more accessible, and has contributed to the rise of more extreme forms of pornography.

Members reported that the rise of pornography as entertainment is disempowering for young women both sexually and physically. Members report there is increased pressure on young women to perform certain sexual acts that are often not realistic and that there is confusion for both young men and young women about what is normal in a healthy sexual relationship. Members expressed concern that some young women are expected to perform oral sex 'as commonly as kissing', and that anal sex is regarded as a realistic alternative for vaginal sex simply to avoid unwanted pregnancy.

Pornography, and the pressure to perform sexual acts, is increasingly being blamed for the rise in anxiety disorders in young women. In addition, members reported a rise in sexually related injuries including anal or rectal tears in very young women, many of whom are under the age of consent.

Illawarra Forum members call on the Australian Government to urgently invest in programs targeting boys as young as years 5 and 6 to address the impact of pornography, and to invest in programs which promote what both genders should expect from healthy, respectful sexual relationships.

### **Games**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/13/130519-women-scientists-overlooked-dna-history-science/>

<sup>6</sup>

There was great concern among members about the impact of some video games such as those made for Playstation and Xbox. Many video games contain either overt sexism or misogynistic undertones in the treatment of women, but the greatest concern was expressed about the 'Grand Theft Auto' games.

Grand Theft Auto V became the subject of widespread online debate over its portrayal of women. There was particular criticism for its treatment of women as "strippers, prostitutes, long-suffering wives, humourless girlfriends and goofy, new-age feminists".<sup>7</sup> Not only were women portrayed in demeaning or submissive roles, but points were scored by performing violent acts upon them. Games such as these legitimize violence in all its forms, and members of the Illawarra Forum were concerned that this legitimisation promotes the prevalence of domestic violence among young men and women are playing these games.

### ***Movies***

The lack of good roles for female actors is an often-heard lamentation from successful women in acting, and women note it is especially difficult for older women to land a good role. Roles for women are generally stereotypical, and when an action role is written for a woman, its *raison d'être* is questioned in social media and mainstream media.<sup>8</sup>

While the omission of the recent Star Wars female protagonist's figure from the merchandising proved controversial, its message to women that an action toy is generally for young boys and wouldn't be a good seller.

### ***Women's Sports***

Women's sports do not get the same coverage as male sports, and female sports stars – even at elite levels – are paid significantly less than their male counterparts. This is sending the message to both men and women that female sports are not good enough to be valued or to be aired in prime time. This enforces so many other messages in society, that men and male activities are superior to women and supports the prevalence of domestic violence in society.

## **Role of government Initiatives at every level in addressing underlying causes of domestic violence**

As is evident from the information above, government at all levels need to address not only the impacts and effects of domestic violence, but to address the issues in society which contribute to its prevalence. This would include the careful regulation of marketing and advertising, investment in programs to combat the influence of pornography on young people, investment in trauma-informed responses to sexual assault and domestic violence, and promotion of the equality of the sexes.

At a time when domestic violence was finally receiving the awareness and attention it deserved, it was very disappointing that the Commonwealth public service removed Domestic Violence Leave from workplace agreements. As an employer, the Commonwealth

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<sup>7</sup> Carolyn Petit, Journalist – Gamespot

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theverge.com/2015/12/19/10626896/star-wars-the-force-awakens-rey-mary-sue-feminist>

Government should lead the way by recognizing the needs of victims of domestic violence for time to recover and plan for the future.<sup>9</sup>

### **Recommendations**

***Investigate the use of restorative justice measures in cases of domestic violence.***

***Regulate the marketing of toys and games, including consideration of plain or universal packaging, and bans on video games which promote misogyny and violence against women.***

***Remove all titles which imply marital status for women (Miss or Mrs) from Government documentation – i.e. implement options of Mr or Ms.***

***Work with media and sporting codes to promote equality of salary and media exposure for women in sports.***

***Invest in specialist, trauma-informed and trauma specialist responses to sexual assault and domestic and family violence including specialist community legal assistance.***

***Set an example as employers by re-instituting Domestic Violence Leave for Commonwealth employees.***

***Invest in programs which combat the impact of pornography and promote the development of healthy, respectful sexual relationships.***

The Illawarra Forum thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to domestic violence. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information or contribution.

Sincerely,

Nicky Sloan  
CEO  
Illawarra Forum Inc

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/malcolm-turnbulls-public-servants-lose-domestic-violence-leave-20160308-gndjcr.html>

