



A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy - Consultation Paper March 2016

1. Introduction

Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Victorian Government's consultation paper, *A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*. While the information provided below reflects the key issues from our perspective as an Aboriginal¹ community housing organisation, AHV does not presume to speak for the Victorian Aboriginal community on this issue.

A strategy to achieve gender equality needs to be sympathetic to different cultures, and this diversity needs to be acknowledged and respected. AHV strongly supports further opportunities for meaningful dialogue between the Government and the Victorian Aboriginal community on this issue, as the priorities for achieving greater gender equality within the Aboriginal community may not necessarily reflect those of the broader community. Similarly, strategies and initiatives to promote greater gender equality among Aboriginal women must be developed in collaboration with the Aboriginal community, if these initiatives are to have any chance of success. AHV's response below provides some suggestions for the development or extension of government responses and programs to support improved outcomes for Aboriginal women, but we do not presume to have all the answers.

AHV would welcome the opportunity to participate in broader government consultation with the Aboriginal community to further develop culturally safe and inclusive initiatives to support improved gender equality outcomes for Aboriginal women.

2. Background

The Aboriginal population

In 2016 Victoria's Aboriginal population is estimated to be 53,663², slightly less than 1 percent of the State's total population. It is a young and fast growing population. Between the 2006 and 2011 censuses, the Victorian Aboriginal population grew by 26 percent with an average annual growth rate of 4.7 percent compared to only 1.7 percent for the general community. Only in the Australian Capital Territory did the Aboriginal population grow at a faster rate. The average age of Aboriginal people in Victoria is 22 years compared to 37 years for the general population. Almost 60 percent of Victoria's Aboriginal population is aged 25 years or younger, compared to 32 percent of Victoria's non-Aboriginal population³.

Three factors drive this population growth:

- a far higher than average birth rate;
- interstate immigration, and
- more people identifying as Aboriginal.

¹ Throughout this paper "Aboriginal" is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

² ABS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population projections

³ Victorian Government, 2015, *Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2014/2015*, December 2015, Melbourne, pg 23.

Aboriginal Victorians tend to partner and parent earlier than the broader Victorian community, and also experience higher rates of family breakdown, partly through the disproportionate impact of family violence.

The Aboriginal population is significantly more disadvantaged than the broader Victorian population. Education and economic outcomes for Aboriginal people are far lower than for the general population. On average, Aboriginal people have lower levels of formal education attainment, higher rates of unemployment, lower rates of economic participation and proportionally lower incomes. Aboriginal people are 6 times more likely to live in social housing⁴. They are also more likely to be Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) recipients. Almost one quarter of Aboriginal households were estimated to receive CRA at 14 June 2013, compared with 15% of other households⁵. Victorian Aboriginal households have much lower rates of home ownership than those of the broader Victorian population, and as a result have less opportunity to enjoy the wealth creation benefits that home ownership can provide. Rates of contact with the child protection and the criminal justice systems are much higher all the way through both systems for Aboriginal children and adults, from first contact to child removal and incarceration respectively. The incidence of family violence in the Victorian Aboriginal community is also understood to be roughly ten times higher than the general community although this data was not available in preparing this report.

Aboriginal Housing Victoria

AHV is a not-for-profit registered community housing organisation and is the largest Aboriginal housing organisation in Victoria.

AHV was the first Aboriginal housing agency to be registered as a Housing Provider in Victoria and it is also the largest in Australia. Our tenants are assured of access to an Aboriginal landlord and personalised and culturally sensitive services for Aboriginal people.

AHV provides housing to approximately 4,000 low income Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians in 1,525 properties, representing at least 8% of the Victorian Aboriginal population. AHV manages tenancies across metropolitan and regional Victoria with the largest number in the Loddon Mallee (302), Gippsland (219), Hume (198) and the northern (187) and southern (167) Melbourne metropolitan areas.

3. Issues

AHV client profile

AHV predominantly provides tenancy services to women and their children. Of the 1469 current AHV tenancies, women are identified as the main tenants in 1116 cases. Almost 90% of tenants in single parent households are women (585 women, compared to 52 men). After women in single parent households, the next largest AHV tenancy group is single women (314), including female Elders. These two groups alone make up 62% of all AHV tenancies.

The predominance of women in AHV housing is generally consistent with the demographics of the broader social housing sector, and reflects the socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by women who have sole responsibility for the care of children, and older women who have formerly undertaken the primary care of children, at the expense of access to paid work and superannuation to support them in

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Indigenous Observatory*

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Indigenous Observatory*

retirement. In the case of Aboriginal women, primary care of children often extends to care of grandchildren and children within the broader kinship/community network, as a result of family breakdown and violence and/or alcohol and substance misuse.

AHV has a key focus on sustaining tenancies, because we recognise that safe, affordable, long term housing provides a foundation for closing the gap on socioeconomic outcomes for Aboriginal people in relation to education, training, employment, health and financial independence. To this end, AHV has developed a *Life skills* program to provide practical assistance with tenancy establishment (eg “starter packs” and assistance to source furniture), together with case management services for new and existing tenants, to facilitate access to supports they may require to establish and sustain their AHV tenancies. Over time, with additional funds or resources, we could potentially enhance our *Life skills* program with a range of add-on support programs such as financial literacy training, confidence building workshops, job readiness training, and home management skills. With adequate resourcing, *Life skills* could also be further developed in partnership with education, training and employment providers, to provide scholarships and internships to AHV tenants and residents, to support them to achieve their higher education and career aspirations.

It is no accident that low-income, predominantly female-headed households are over represented in AHV tenancies. The failure of other housing tenures such as private rental and home ownership to present viable options for low-income Aboriginal Victorians means that the only affordable option is the social housing sector. As an Aboriginal community controlled organisation within this sector, AHV provides tenants with the security of culturally safe housing services.

AHV is committed to working with government, other housing service providers and the Aboriginal community to investigate ways in which Aboriginal Victorians can enjoy improved access to culturally appropriate mainstream housing and related services. AHV is also keen to build relationships with relevant agencies, including financial institutions, to explore opportunities for partnership programs which may facilitate the transition of Aboriginal social housing clients to home ownership, in circumstances where household incomes can support mortgage repayments.

Aboriginal women and the rise in homelessness

Aboriginal Victorians are over represented in the homeless population. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s *Homelessness among Indigenous Australians report 2014*, found almost 9% of all clients of specialist homelessness services in Victoria during 2012-13 were Aboriginal, despite the fact that Aboriginal people represent only 0.9% of the total Victorian population.

Census data confirms that Aboriginal Victorians experience homelessness at over five times the rate for non- Aboriginal people and the *Report on Government Services* indicates that Aboriginal Victorians access homelessness services at almost eight times the rate of non Aboriginal people⁶.

The national profile of Aboriginal people accessing homelessness services indicates over-representation of Aboriginal females, and Aboriginal children:

- families with children represented 54% of Aboriginal clients seeking services;
- clients aged under 10 comprised nearly one-quarter (24%) of Aboriginal clients compared with 14% of non-Aboriginal clients;

⁶ Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2014-2015

- Aboriginal clients were more likely than non-Aboriginal clients to be female (62% and 57% respectively); and
- this difference was largest among the older age groups; 62% of Aboriginal clients aged 55 and over were female compared with 49% of non-Aboriginal clients in that age range.

This profile presents some particular implications for:

- Aboriginal children (disconnection with school and community, poor health outcomes);
- Aboriginal women generally, particularly relating to family violence and disconnection to community and training/education/employment opportunities; and
- female Elders (health and support needs, and inability to obtain affordable housing).

While we need to be cautious about extrapolating national statistics to the Victorian context, the high rates of family violence experienced within Victorian Aboriginal households, lends weight to the conclusion that Aboriginal women and children are also over-represented in the Victorian homelessness sector.

Multiple disadvantage and family violence

Aboriginal women are 35 times more likely to experience family violence than non-Aboriginal women. This cannot be explained on the basis of unacceptably high rates of violence in remote communities, alone. It is unfortunately a far more pervasive problem that has a significant impact on Aboriginal women and children living in urban and regional centres. Victorian data on the over representation of Aboriginal women as victims of family violence was not available in preparing this submission. It is understood that this data is collected and we strongly recommend that it is made available through public reporting.

AHV is aware that many of our tenants have multiple and complex needs. AHV engaged an independent company to administer a tenant satisfaction survey in 2015. Results of this survey identify some of these needs in the experiences of tenants and members of their households, during their AHV tenancy:

- 60% have one person with a long term illness or disability; 40% have two or more;
- family violence - 35%;
- mental health problems - 30%;
- relationship breakdown - 29%;
- child protection involvement - 25%;
- financial abuse - 23%; and
- racism - 23%.

That more than 1 in 3 AHV households has or is experiencing family violence is of major concern to our organisation. We also fear that this already alarming statistic may be a conservative estimate, as some tenants may not be comfortable disclosing their experience of family violence due to:

- fear of retribution;
- fear/distrust of police and the justice system;
- fear that disclosure may lead to further violence;
- fear of their children being taken away;
- lack of services offering culturally safe support services.

It is widely recognised that the causes of increased family violence experienced by Aboriginal people are varied, complex and intergenerational. The post-European settlement history for Aboriginal Victorians is one of forced relocation from land and community, forced removal of children, restrictive controls, degradation of language and culture, poorer health outcomes and socioeconomic disadvantage. These experiences contribute significantly to many of the serious social issues experienced within Aboriginal communities, including higher incidences of violence, contact with the justice system, suicide, and alcohol and substance misuse.

It is also important to recognise that the perpetrators of family violence against Aboriginal women are not always Aboriginal men.

4. Some possible strategies

Ensuring safety and providing appropriate support for Aboriginal women

AHV is actively seeking to maximise opportunities for our tenants to access the range of community/health/legal supports that they require, through consolidating and improving our relationships and partnerships with other community agencies (Aboriginal community controlled and mainstream).

Further, AHV recognises that existing services are already overstretched, and improvements to integrate services for our clients are only part of the answer. Advocating for social policy change and redesign of funding for therapeutic, community and housing services that are culturally safe for Aboriginal women and men is also essential.

In the case of AHV tenants experiencing family violence, there is potentially a range of services that may be required to assist the household to maintain their tenancy or if necessary to relocate to a safer location, unknown to the perpetrator. AHV strongly supports the notion that women and their children who are victims of family violence should be spared the additional trauma of disconnection from school, community, kinship supports, and possibly training and employment, in order to escape family violence. However, this can only be achieved with access to quality legal advice and with concerted police and justice support, to ensure that all legal avenues are explored to support the victims of family violence to remain safely in their homes and their local communities.

In circumstances where remaining in existing housing is not going to be a safe option for a woman and her children, access to transitional services and/or alternative housing is necessary. AHV attempts to transfer families experiencing violence to alternative housing where they will be safe and preferably where they can connect or re-connect to family, social and community supports. However, our capacity to match families in crisis with vacant properties that meet their locational and support needs is limited. AHV strongly supports increased provision of culturally sensitive transitional housing for Aboriginal women and their children escaping family violence. AHV believes that there should be recognition of the costs involved in ensuring that victims of family violence have safe and secure housing. In particular support for costs associated with rectification of past damage to houses caused by family violence is essential if women and children are to continue to reside safely in their family homes.

Availability of support services for Aboriginal men who are perpetrators of family violence is also essential if the cycle of family violence within the Aboriginal community is to be broken. Again, the design of support services needs to recognise the multiple disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal men. For support

programs to be successful, it is not sufficient to focus solely on the violent behaviour, and/or drug and alcohol misuse. Programs must be designed in a way which acknowledges and confronts the root causes of this behaviour, such as loss of male cultural roles, and alienation from economic and community participation.

Improving education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal women

We already know that there is a significant pay gap between men and women, with men earning 19.1% higher wages than women. We also know that women are under-represented in positions of executive leadership and directorships.

The employment population ratio for Aboriginal Victorians improved slightly from 48.2 per cent in 2011 to 48.7 per cent in 2012-13⁷. However the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people for employment to population ratio for working age Victorians increased from 12.7 per cent in 2008 to 27.8 per cent in 2012-13⁸.

Despite some long term progress in national employment rates for Aboriginal women, workforce participation remains significantly lower for Aboriginal women than Aboriginal men. Nationally, Aboriginal male employment rate increased from 34.1 per cent in 1994 to 55.3 per cent in 2008 before falling to 50.1 per cent in 2012-13. The equivalent figures for Aboriginal women were 23.4 per cent, 41.6 per cent and 41.2 per cent.⁹ While the gender pay gap for Aboriginal men and women has reduced since 1994, it remains a significant issue for Aboriginal women, particular when these rates are compared with the 72.1 per cent of non-Aboriginal Australians who participate in the workforce¹¹. There are therefore significant barriers to workforce participation and pay equality for Victorian Aboriginal women by virtue of their gender and Aboriginality.

There is a strong link between education and employment, and significant progress towards closing the gap in employment rates can be achieved by increased opportunities for young Aboriginal people to complete secondary school and participate in higher education. The gap in employment outcomes between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people reduces as the level of education increases. In fact, at higher levels of education, there is virtually no employment gap¹². Consequently, a continued focus on improving education participation for young Aboriginal people is essential if improved employment outcomes are to be achieved.

Government initiatives and programs to support increased workforce participation for women, including professional and executive participation, need to acknowledge the compound disadvantage faced by Aboriginal women. The design of such programs must actively support greater accessibility and participation by Aboriginal women and incorporate cultural safety and inclusion.

In particular, the fact that young Aboriginal women tend to start their families earlier and are more likely to be the sole carers of their children needs to be recognised in any education/training/employment programs, which aims to improve participation for young Aboriginal women. In 2013, the fertility rate of teenage Aboriginal women (63 babies per 1,000 women) was over four times that of all teenage

⁷ Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2014-2015

⁸ Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2014-2015

⁹ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Closing the gap Report, 2016

¹⁰ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Closing the gap Report, 2016

¹¹ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Closing the gap Report, 2016

¹² Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Closing the gap Report, 2016

Australian women (15 babies per 1,000). The highest birth rates for Aboriginal women occurred in the 20-24 years age-group compared to 30-34 years age-group for all women.¹³ These differences have a significant impact on the capacity of many young Aboriginal women to successfully engage in secondary and higher education, and training and employment during their late teens to mid-twenties; the period when young people generally participate in higher education and commence their working careers.

Provision of support for young Aboriginal women to manage education, employment and care giving roles is therefore essential if improved outcomes are to be achieved, eg, flexible training and working arrangements; child care support.

Similarly, government initiatives that aim to support increased participation of Aboriginal Victorians in employment and business need to recognise the particular challenges faced by Victorian Aboriginal women. AHV strongly supports the Government's vision and goals as articulated in the *Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy*, particularly its emphasis on supporting young Aboriginal Victorians, improving employment participation rates and reducing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal earnings. However the strategy fails to acknowledge the particular challenges faced by Aboriginal women with regard to workforce participation and income, or to outline options for improving employment outcomes for Aboriginal women.

AHV considers that the development of government, community sector and corporate partnerships can be particularly effective in improving Aboriginal employment outcomes. AHV has formed a partnership with *AFL SportsReady* and a small group of corporate companies to provide job opportunities for Aboriginal job seekers in Victoria. *AFL SportsReady* has already provided over 1,500 Aboriginal people with education and employment opportunities, and provides an access point for younger Aboriginal people to participate in on the job training across a range of diverse industries.

Our corporate partners recognise that without secure housing, a person's capacity to maintain ongoing employment is severely compromised. AHV tenants and residents are therefore suitable candidates for the project and *AFL SportsReady* provides training, support and mentoring for prospective employees.

AHV currently has three *AFL SportsReady* trainees (two female and one male) working in our head office, who are gaining access to on the job training and mentoring in a culturally appropriate workplace.

AHV has found that there is significant good will within the corporate sector and the Victorian community to actively engage in programs and activities that support improved outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians. Similarly, the focus in government, training and employment sectors on encouraging young women to participate in formerly male dominated industries, which in the main attract higher wages and earning capacity has reaped rewards in relation to increased participation of women. Adapting these programs to improve access to young Aboriginal women would be one way in which the gender/Aboriginality gaps in employment outcomes can be reduced.

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014) *Births, Australia, 2013: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander births and fertility*. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics

Role of men in gender equality strategy

Achieving a culture of zero tolerance for sexism, bullying, harassment, and violence, including violence against women, will only occur when men are actively encouraged to lead and participate in cultural and behavioural change strategies.

AHV is in the process of becoming a *White Ribbon* accredited organisation. A key focus has been the lead role taken by several Aboriginal male staff members in committing to the objectives of *White Ribbon* and facilitating activities and discussions particularly amongst their male colleagues, to promote gender equity and zero tolerance for violence against women. AHV is committed to ongoing training and awareness-raising to ensure policy and practice is fully embedded in our organisational culture.

Supporting and promoting male led campaigns such as *White Ribbon Australia* and the *No More* campaign are important strategies for shifting deeply embedded, cultural and intergenerational sexist attitudes and beliefs. Providing opportunities for positive male role models to speak out against violence against women can be a powerful tool in raising awareness around issues of violence. Enabling male role models to speak out in organisations and across communities has a powerful ability to effect change and influence male behaviours. Particularly powerful are the voices shared from experience, utilising champions such as *White Ribbon* ambassadors from all spheres of influence and sectors, and sporting personalities and entire clubs linking arms, through the *No More* campaign. This will hopefully lead to greater understanding and awareness that will foster positive relationships based on mutual respect and equality between men and women, and will in turn achieve improved gender equality outcomes for women.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, AHV is strongly of the view that the gender equality strategy needs to be inclusive of culturally diverse groups. This requires meaningful engagement and consultation with culturally diverse communities and recognition of the unique challenges faced by women within different communities in formulation and implementation of the strategy . As noted earlier, AHV welcomes the opportunity to participate in broader consultation with the Aboriginal community to support improved outcomes for Aboriginal women.

In particular, we believe that a gender equality strategy could advance the position of Aboriginal women by reducing the exposure to and impact of family violence and improving education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal women. Improvements to education attainment and economic participation for Aboriginal women can be achieved through more concerted efforts which pay heed to the reality of the lives of young Aboriginal women and their role as parent and often sole parent. Similarly, reducing the impact of violence on Aboriginal women requires consideration of the disadvantaged circumstances within the Aboriginal community.

The levels of violence experienced by Aboriginal women are at unacceptable and intolerable levels. The safety of Aboriginal women is paramount and a first priority is to provide more effective support so that victims of violence can remain safe and secure in their homes without needing to relocate. Sustaining safe and secure housing for victims of violence includes compensating property owners for rectification of property damage caused as a result of family violence. In addition where violence is intolerable and safety cannot be ensured timely relocation to safe and secure housing is fundamental. This may require continuing development of culturally safe, holistic therapeutic, community and housing services. In particular it is recognised that in the Aboriginal community reducing violence against Aboriginal women

must also involve effective therapeutic and behavioural change services for Aboriginal male perpetrators which address the root causes of violent behaviours. Additionally, Aboriginal males have a role in championing equality for Aboriginal women and promoting zero tolerance to violence against women, sexism, bullying and harassment.