

SAFE+EQUAL

Standing strong
against family
violence

Safe and Equal's commitment to intersectionality in primary prevention



Safe and Equal acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay respects to Elders past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded.

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Safe and Equal is the peak body for specialist family violence services that provide support to victim survivors in Victoria. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving and respected.

To support this, we aim to grow our leadership role in representing and developing the primary prevention workforce, and building and sharing innovative practice expertise.

This resource builds on Safe and Equal's commitment to intersectionality. It aims to draw on existing knowledge in applying an intersectional analysis to family and gender-based violence, and existing experience in implementing intersectional approaches in primary prevention. We acknowledge the work of many other organisations and individuals in defining and leading this work.

This is not intended as a definitive guide, but as one contribution to the development of future thinking and approaches in this area – by outlining our own organisational commitment to intersectionality in primary prevention of family and gendered violence.

Acknowledging existing work

The following resources provide a detailed analysis of the drivers of violence for particular communities. We acknowledge the individual and collective leadership that these resources have provided in deepening intersectional knowledge and approaches in primary prevention in Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

- [Changing the Picture](#), Our Watch

Women with disabilities

- [Changing the Landscape](#), Our Watch
- [Intersectionality and primary prevention of violence against women](#), Women with Disabilities Victoria

Immigrant and refugee women

- [Intersectionality Matters](#), Multicultural Centre for Women's Health

LGBTIQ+ communities

- [Pride in Prevention: Evidence Guide](#), Rainbow Health Australia
- [Pride in Prevention: Partnership Guide](#), Rainbow Health Australia

What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality emerged as a theoretical lens developed from Black feminist theory and activism in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. It grew out of the realisation that the feminist movement did not represent the experience of all women and, as bell hooks writes, presented a challenge to the idea that “gender” was the primary factor determining a woman’s fate.¹ Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote about intersectionality as a framework for understanding the ways that different dimensions of identity (specifically race and gender) interact and influence each other and create unique experiences of violence for women of colour.²

Intersectionality has developed over time as a way to analyse, and act meaningfully to change, the ways that multiple and overlapping experiences oppression impact on individuals and communities. Across many fields and sectors in Australia, it has been used as a powerful tool for promoting and working towards social justice and social inclusion.

Our commitment to intersectionality in primary prevention

Safe and Equal’s commitment to intersectionality is a guiding principle of our work as an organisation, and this includes a commitment to deepen our understanding of the family violence evidence base, build coalitions and partnerships, and engage in critical reflection. This commitment includes a focus on both theory and analysis, and, importantly, action.

For us, an intersectional **lens** in primary prevention means looking at how family and gender-based violence occurs in the context of both gender inequality and multiple other forms of structural and systemic inequality, oppression and discrimination.

An intersectional **approach** means we, as an organisation, take action to ensure primary prevention programs, systems and policies recognise and address multiple forms of oppression and disadvantage that exacerbate the experiences of gender inequality and gender-based violence.

Through ongoing partnerships with key organisations working with particular cohorts and communities, Safe and Equal seeks to demonstrate and build on our commitment to intersectionality – by integrating this into all our work and taking meaningful action to prevent family and gender-based violence, in solidarity with communities leading this work.

In prevention, as in all of our work, we are committed to the principle of Aboriginal self-determination and will work towards stronger relationships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Elders and communities. This includes supporting and advocating for primary prevention that is led and driven by Aboriginal communities. It means developing equitable partnerships that inform our own primary prevention work, and participating actively in organisation-wide efforts to build our understanding of the

1 hooks, b. (1984) *Feminist theory: from margin to center*. New York and London: Routledge.

2 Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, p. 1241–1299.

impact of colonisation and other forms of discrimination, and strengthen cultural safety across the family violence sector.

Our commitment to intersectionality in primary prevention includes an ongoing focus on deepening our knowledge and our approach, and integrating this into our workforce development activities and resources for practitioners. This is ever more important within a policy and funding environment that requires a focus on intersectionality.

Key elements of deepening our commitment to intersectionality

Understanding

Intersectionality is a way of seeing how systems of power and privilege shape people's lives and experiences through multiple and overlapping experiences of discrimination and inequality. Deepening our understanding of how these systems operate and produce positive or negative outcomes for people, as well as how to transform these systems, are the foundations for our approach to intersectionality.

Action

Our approach to intersectionality is specifically about centring the experiences of marginalised groups and communities. We recognise that this requires effort and investment, and the allocation of additional resources and attention. It means making sure whole-of-population approaches are accessible, safe, and effective for all, **and** ensuring initiatives for particular communities are informed and led by them. Intersectionality, for us, means taking action in solidarity, through coalitions and partnerships, to collectively work towards social justice and equality.

Critical reflection

Intersectionality means engaging in ongoing critical reflection, as an organisation and as individual practitioners. This includes examining and re-examining dominant approaches, cultures and ideas; how these exclude, marginalise and oppress people and communities; and how we can inadvertently replicate and perpetuate these. We are committed to ensuring our own practices do not perpetuate the oppressive power dynamics we seek to transform – through ongoing learning, accountability and repair.

Intersectionality in policy

Increasingly, intersectionality is recognised as a key principle in a range of policy areas, including family violence policy.

In Victoria, it was a feature of the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence from 2016. This was comprehensively outlined in the [Everybody Matters: Inclusion and Equity Statement](#), which is a ten-year commitment to building an inclusive, safe, responsive and accountable family violence system for all Victorians.

Intersectionality in the family violence response space has a distinct and necessary focus on the range of experiences of social inequality and power that can both compound risk and create barriers to accessing services. Policy responses in family violence service design, development and delivery in Victoria have therefore focussed on:

- Ensuring intersectionality is prioritised, integrated and embedded
- Developing both targeted services for particular communities, and working towards inclusive services across the system

The [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#) also includes intersectionality as a cross-cutting principle, with a focus on understanding how violence is experienced in different ways by different communities and how this needs to be addressed across prevention, early intervention, response and recovery.

A commitment to intersectionality is echoed in Victoria's approach to family violence primary prevention, as outlined in [Free from Violence](#). This plan takes an explicit approach based on delivering targeted initiatives for diverse groups as well as applying intersectionality as a principle across all programming, workforce capacity building and other prevention activity.

Intersectionality is also recognised strongly in the second edition of the national framework for prevention of violence against women and children, [Change the Story](#), with a focus on how systems of power and privilege interact to both drive violence and influence how this can be prevented.

An intersectional approach is critical for preventing violence against women because patriarchal power structures always intersect with other systems of power. Violence against women occurs in the context of both gender inequality and multiple other forms of structural and systemic inequality, oppression and discrimination. All of these intersect to influence the perpetration of violence, the prevalence, nature and dynamics of violence, and women's experiences of violence. Understanding and addressing these intersections is necessary to effectively address the drivers of violence against women and prevent this violence across the population.³

A key point here is that intersectionality in policy involving family violence response in Victoria has necessarily focussed on how individuals and communities experience violence, as well as how the service system needs to change to meet their needs. This necessitates a focus on eliminating systemic discrimination, supporting individuals to successfully navigate services and have their needs met, but, more importantly, changing the system over time so it is safe and meets the needs of everyone.

In primary prevention, the focus is instead on social structures and ideas that need to change, on a large scale, across society. While intersectionality is positioned strongly as a principle in various policy frameworks for primary prevention, we are committed to making this real by taking action for change.

³ Our Watch, *Change the Story: a shared national framework for preventing violence against women and children* (second edition). (2021). Melbourne: Our Watch, p. 135.

What is primary prevention?

Primary prevention is focused on whole-of-population initiatives, in different settings where people live, work, learn, socialise and play. It aims to address the underlying drivers of violence (or factors that lead to violence) and stop violence from happening in the first place.

A primary prevention approach works to change the underlying social conditions that produce and drive violence against women, and that excuse, justify or even promote it. It works across the whole population to address the attitudes, norms, practices, structures and power imbalances that drive violence against women.⁴

[Change the Story](#) has established that men's violence against women is driven by:

1. Condoning of violence against women
2. Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
3. Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
4. Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control⁵

The socio-ecological model in [Change the Story](#) is used widely to show how these drivers of violence operate at different levels – individual and relationship, community and organisational, system and institutional, societal.

The gendered drivers of men's violence against women are well-recognised and described, but preventing all family and gender-based violence means looking at other drivers of violence as well. These include inequality, stigma, discrimination and marginalisation experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from migrant and refugee communities, people of colour, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, and intersex (LGBTIQ+) communities, and people with disabilities, amongst others. A number of complementary frameworks address these issues directly, such as [Changing the Picture](#), [Changing the Landscape](#), [Pride in Prevention](#) and [Intersectionality Matters](#).

For us, intersectionality in primary prevention is about looking at multiple and overlapping drivers of violence, and how to act together against these at a whole-of-society level.

Our approach to intersectionality in primary prevention

As an organisation, Safe and Equal is working toward a future free from family and gender-based violence. This includes and builds upon long-standing work focussed on the prevention of men's violence against women.

4 Our Watch, *Change the Story*, p. 8.

5 Our Watch, *Change the Story*, p. 36.

Increasingly, there is an understanding that various systems of discrimination and inequality impact on men's violence against women, including prevalence, patterns and impact. 'Women' is not a homogenous category, and some will also experience violence driven by additional ideas, practices, structures and social power imbalances. Further, LGBTIQ+ people of all genders experience violence that is driven by many of the same ideas that drive violence against women – e.g. rigid and binary ideas about gender and sexuality.

Focussing on the gendered drivers of violence is a key feature of primary prevention efforts – with a clear evidence base and tested techniques to create change. We seek to do so in ways that enhance and work in solidarity with many movements for social change in coalition to address issues like racism, the ongoing impacts of colonialism, ableism, ageism, homophobia and transphobia, and class-based discrimination, amongst others. Often, this means promoting and enabling the leadership of organisations led by communities working at the forefront of these issues, as well as taking leadership ourselves.

Rather than complicating efforts, we see this as strengthening primary prevention. In doing so, we don't aim to talk about and solve all social inequality at once. Instead, we aim to be specific about the focus of particular initiatives, acknowledge the diverse and intersecting experiences of discrimination and inequality of the people in focus, and ensure that inequality and exclusion aren't accidentally reinforced or replicated.

A focus on men's violence against women is a necessary part of our work, and centres around addressing the gendered drivers of violence. But for women who experience multiple forms of oppression, these must be taken into account and addressed in primary prevention initiatives by challenging the structures and systems that perpetuate this oppression. Understanding how to do this at a whole of society level is still evolving.

In all our primary prevention work, we aim to ensure that we don't continue to reinforce the exclusion of communities with overlapping experiences of oppression. This means consistently bringing in to view how different communities experience and understand family and gender-based violence, and the gendered drivers themselves. It also means considering how structures and systems we build can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities and exclusion. In contrast, we aim to celebrate and centre these communities and their knowledge.

More specifically, we note that family violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ communities can be obscured and erased in narratives that focus exclusively on heterosexual and cisgendered bodies, identities and relationships. The overlapping drivers of violence against women and violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ communities mean that effective primary prevention of one cannot be done without the other. Resistance and backlash is increasingly focussed in particular on trans women, and we stand in solidarity with movements for inclusion and equality for all trans and gender diverse people.

Informing prevention programs and messages

In primary prevention, we see intersectionality as particularly important in informing program design and messaging. The experiences and understandings of communities influence how people think and talk about family and gendered violence, as well as many issues relevant to the gendered drivers, like gender roles, family, relationships and sexuality. This means that all primary prevention programs and messages must address this complexity in order to be effective.

Initiatives with and for particular communities must ultimately be controlled and led by communities themselves – e.g. the principle of Aboriginal-led primary prevention is widely acknowledged. For us, this means supporting specific and targeted programs and messages developed with and for particular communities, and amplifying their uptake, in order to create widespread social change that prevents violence both within and directed towards particular communities.

In addition, we have to transform universal programs and messages delivered to create change at whole-of-population level – by elevating the voices and leadership of marginalised and oppressed communities. Another widely-used concept that captures this is ‘nothing about us without us’, which grew out of international campaigns and organising by people with disabilities. For us, this is not only about a commitment to social justice principles, but is essential in making sure programs actually achieve their aims in ways that are effective and do no harm.

We are aware this requires commitment, work and time. As the Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health explains in [Intersectionality Matters](#):

While the principle is simple, prioritising community ownership requires clear processes, flexibility and a long-term mindset to build strong and equitable relationships. This is as true for multicultural and ethno-specific organisations as it is for mainstream organisations and prevention programs.⁶

In all our work in prevention policy, systems development and practice we are constantly seeking to integrate a rich understanding of how marginalised communities experience family and gender-based violence, and how to act together to address overlapping drivers of violence. This requires intentional and long-term engagement with communities that goes beyond a focus on ‘representation’.

6 Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health, *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women*. Melbourne: Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health, p. 12.

More than representation

Intersectionality is often applied with an intention to make visible certain marginalised experiences and identities in broader moves towards social inclusion and equity. However, a consequence of this is that intersectionality can be reduced to a facet of diversity and inclusion, whereby individuals of different backgrounds and experiences are given voice and visibility – as an end in itself. Intersectionality can be reduced to an additive formula where one identity after another is brought into view and given representation. We seek to do more than this in deepening our commitment to intersectionality.

Intersectionality initially emerged as a way of challenging the discreteness of categories, and looking at how these are created, interact and operate in systems. This way of thinking about intersectionality goes beyond a simple focus on identity categories to look at the systemic change that is needed to act against discrimination and inequality and transform systems of power.

For us, visibility and representation are important, as these both reflect change that has already occurred and can be an important lever for further change. If marginalised communities are not ‘in the room’ then they can’t speak for themselves, and this risks perpetuating exclusion and silencing. Without representation, consultation ‘after the fact’ puts these communities in the position of having to criticise systems and structures that may actually be intended to create positive social change.

But on their own, we know visibility and representation are not enough. A narrow focus on these can even make it look like change has occurred when it hasn’t, or put an undue burden onto individual advocates. Instead, we aim to focus on collective and organisational responsibility for change.

Meaningful consultation and partnership

For us, intersectionality means directly funding organisations working with and for particular communities, and this is a key advocacy point that we will continue to raise. But it should also involve enabling meaningful and ongoing consultation with organisations and communities to ensure all programs and messages at the whole-of-society or community level are representative of their collective experiences, as well as appropriate and effective.

In deepening our primary prevention practice, there is increasingly a focus on building long-term partnerships with organisations working with and for particular communities. This focus acknowledges that many of these organisations are conducting primary prevention activities within a broader focus on health and wellbeing, family violence or equality and rights for their communities. They often face multiple demands, and ongoing requests to consult can feel transactional or even extractive.

Through intentional and structured partnerships, lessons emerging from our own practice suggest that relationships can be built with community-led organisations that reinforce and support their leadership of work for their own communities, while also meaningfully informing our own prevention activities. Partnership is a powerful way for us to demonstrate a long-term commitment to equitable organisational relationships.

Ongoing reflection and change

There are many different ideas and approaches that fit within an intersectional understanding and approach, and there's always more to learn. Reflecting on current and past practice – as practitioners and as an organisation – is part of our ongoing commitment to intersectionality in primary prevention. We look forward to future conversations and genuine exchange in improving our understanding and our action through critical reflection. Ultimately, this is the only way to achieve our goal of ending family and gender-based violence for all.