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Submission in response to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper



Prepared by Our Watch

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Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples past and present.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes and social structures that drive violence against women.

Guided by our ground-breaking national framework, *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*, we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched, underlying drivers of violence against women, especially those stemming from gender inequality. We work with governments, practitioners and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work and socialise.

About this submission

A comprehensive and holistic approach to preventing violence against women must involve a suite of interdependent and interlinked strategies. The National Plan to End Violence Against Women 2022-2032 (National Plan) and the planned National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality (National Strategy) are critical parts of the infrastructure needed to prevent violence against women. The Early Years Strategy can build upon this foundation, expanding primary prevention to a setting that is integral to support the wellbeing of children throughout the lifecycle. This submission outlines opportunities for primary prevention initiatives and strategies in the early years, including actions that address the broader social context of gender inequality that gives rise to violence against women whilst also supporting healthy development for children of all genders.

Our Watch looks forward to working collaboratively to support the primary prevention of violence against women in early years settings. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspects of this submission or to provide further, more detailed advice to inform the development or implementation of the Early Years Strategy. Please contact Amanda Alford, Director Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, at amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au to discuss.

Summary of key recommendations

Broad recommendations

Our Watch recommends that:

- 1.1 The Early Years Strategy identifies the early years as a critical life stage for targeted primary prevention of violence against women action.
- 1.2 The Early Years Strategy aligns with and explicitly seeks to support the goals of other relevant strategies, including the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 and National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality.

Recommendations in response to discussion paper questions

Our Watch recommends that:

- 4.1 The Australian Government include the primary prevention of violence as a policy priority in the Early Years Strategy.
- 5.1 The Early Years Strategy commits to the expansion of best practice RRE into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres through a phased, whole-of-setting approach.

The importance of primary prevention in the early years

Violence against women is recognised as a serious and widespread problem in Australia, with significant individual and community impacts and social costs. The recently published Australian Child Maltreatment Study collected the first nationally representative data on child maltreatment and found that 43.8% of young people (16-24) had been exposed to domestic violence with correlations to numerous adverse health outcomes.¹ Achieving the vision of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* (National Plan), to end violence against women and children in a generation, requires stopping this violence before it starts. This can only be achieved through effective primary prevention initiatives and strategies that address the underlying gendered drivers of violence against women.

In outlining a national, universal, population-level, evidence-based approach to primary prevention of violence, Our Watch's national framework *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia* identifies gender inequality as setting the social context in which violence against women occurs and makes clear that the drivers of this violence are gendered. The factors that *Change the story* terms the 'gendered drivers' of violence arise from gender-discriminatory institutional, social and economic structures, social and cultural norms, and organisational, community, family and relationship practices that together create environments in which women and men are not considered equal, and violence against women is both more likely, and more likely to be tolerated and even condoned. The gendered drivers of violence against women are:

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

Importantly, in outlining a primary prevention approach to violence against women, *Change the story* makes clear the need to challenge and transform the underlying social conditions and gender inequalities that produce and drive violence against women. To embed, reinforce and sustain change across the population, prevention work must engage people in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways over the course of their lives. There are particular life stages that are

important transition points, or which present opportunities to address the drivers of violence against women using policy, program or legislative levers. *Change the story* identifies early childhood as one of these critical stages.

Our Watch's *Challenging gender stereotypes in the early years: The power of parents* paper demonstrates that early childhood is where gender roles become embedded and personal identities are forming, and where there are near-universal mechanisms to engage with children through kinder, day care and early childhood services. *Change the story* shows that rigid and hierarchical gender stereotypes help create a context in which gender inequality, disrespect and violence against women are more likely. Given children begin developing their understandings of gender in the early years, educators, families and prevention practitioners have a powerful opportunity to support children to establish equitable attitudes towards gender that avoid or challenge limiting or harmful stereotypes, and to develop positive personal identities and interpersonal relationship skills. It is important that work to support children's navigation of gender identity, gender stereotypes and respectful relationships is evidence-based and developmentally appropriate, this includes the use of age-appropriate strategies and resources.

To drive sustained generational social change, age-appropriate primary prevention work must start as early as possible. The Early Years Strategy can contribute to the prevention of violence against women through embedding prevention at this crucial stage of a child's development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our Watch recommends that:

- 1.1 The Early Years Strategy identifies the early years as a critical life stage for targeted primary prevention of violence against women action.
- 1.2 The Early Years Strategy aligns with and explicitly seeks to support the goals of other relevant strategies, including the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 and National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality.

Response to Discussion Paper Questions

Question 2 - What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Our Watch suggests that an appropriate vision is one in which all children grow up safe and live free from all forms of violence. As *Change the Story* identifies, there is clear evidence that experiences of, and exposure to, violence in the early years can have profound and lifelong impacts.

The first five years of a child's life are a crucial stage of development and a time at which environmental influences have significant effects.² Research indicates that, between the ages of zero to three years, children's brains undergo a rapid period of development in which exposure to toxic stress – including abuse and violence – can permanently damage a child's health outcomes.³

Early childhood is a time when gender roles become embedded and personal identities are forming. *Change the story* emphasises the importance of this stage in ensuring children are not limited by gender stereotypes that promote socially dominant forms of masculinity that in turn play a direct role in driving men's violence against women.

Evidence tells us that strong and healthy relationships are important for a child's development and their ability to form respectful relationships later in life.⁴ As a result, Our Watch encourages inclusion of a vision in the Early Years Strategy in which all children grow up safe and free from all forms of violence, are supported by their community to develop the necessary skills for building healthy and respectful relationships throughout their lives and are empowered to pursue their goals and identities without the constraints of limiting gender stereotypes.

Question 3 - What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

The Early Years Strategy provides an opportunity for the Australian Government to demonstrate national leadership and establish mechanisms for system-wide integration, collaboration, and accountability.

Our Watch suggests that an outcomes-focused Early Years Strategy could include centralised collection of data as well as a clear monitoring and outcomes framework. The framework should ideally allow measurement and monitoring of a broad set of early years indicators and periodic reporting against the Strategy's outcomes. This could include gender sensitive indicators that consider both quantitative and qualitative data to understand changes to gender inequalities in

the early years across the socioecological model. This approach would support the development of evidence-responsive, and targeted policy action across the 10-year lifespan of the Strategy.

Aligned with the recommendations for the Strategy's vision outlined in Question 2, outcomes relating to primary prevention in the early years could include, for example:

- Children grow up safe and live free from violence.
- Children develop healthy, equal and respectful relationships.
- Children grow up free from the limitations of rigid gender stereotypes.
- Children, families and communities develop gender equal attitudes and behaviours.
- Australia builds a robust evidence-base and framework for primary prevention in early years settings.

To support these outcomes, it is important that the Early Years Strategy monitors the impacts of primary prevention of violence activities in early years settings. The Our Watch resource *Counting on change: a prevention guide to monitoring* provides a framework for national monitoring and is a guide for policy-makers, researchers, and advocates on measuring population-level progress towards the prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. The *Tracking progress in prevention* report translates this into practice, providing both a baseline report on progress, and an example of how national monitoring could be done on an ongoing basis. These resources provide clear examples of indicators that can be used to measure progress in prevention and gender equality more broadly, accompanied by identification of the appropriate data sets for measurement.

Question 4 - What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Primary prevention of gender-based violence as a policy priority in the Early Years

Early childhood education and care services and facilities are important settings for primary prevention of violence actions. As a result, Our Watch recommends that the Australian Government include primary prevention of violence as a policy priority in the Early Years Strategy.

These settings are sources of direct contact with young children and their families and are places where young children spend the majority of their time outside of the home. They employ large, often feminised, workforces and have the infrastructure to support organisational change. Early childcare and

education centres also operate as community hubs, connecting families, carers and children across the community, so they have significant reach into, and influence in, local communities.

In addition to these centres, health care settings, religious and cultural centres, community centres, and households with new parents are key settings for primary prevention actions.

Why is primary prevention an important policy priority in the Early Years?

The early years are an important stage at which to reach young children, their families, and their communities with relevant and appropriate primary prevention of violence strategies.

In addition to ensuring the population receives appropriate messaging and engagement across all stages of their life, there are certain stages that present specific opportunities to address the drivers of violence against women. *Change the Story* identifies early childhood as an important life stage, where gender roles start to become embedded and personal identities are forming, and where there are near-universal mechanisms to engage with children through kindergarten, day care and early childhood services. Early childhood is also a time at which families, professionals, and local communities play an important role in children's development, which means that it is also important to embed a whole-of-community approach to prevention policy. This approach helps to embed and sustain positive cultural change.

What should primary prevention of violence address?

Primary prevention of violence in the early years should focus on addressing the gendered drivers of violence that are most significant during this formative developmental stage. Evidence suggests that positive, lifelong impacts begin with challenging rigid gender stereotypes, addressing dominant forms of masculinity that promote violence, and preventing exposure to, and experiences of, violence in the early years.

RIGID GENDER STEREOTYPES

Gendered stereotypes can teach children that certain behaviours, emotions, skills, hobbies, and roles are either acceptable or unacceptable for their gender.⁵

These stereotypes can affect the future educational and occupational choices that children will make by limiting their beliefs about the options that are open to them play a role in the devaluation of work in feminised sectors such as early childhood education and care (explored further in the response to discussion question 5).⁶

Gender stereotyped toys teach different skills, which means that children are more likely to miss out on developing skills that are coded as masculine or feminine if their play is limited by gender stereotypes.⁷

Gender stereotypes and heteronormative ideas about parenting continue to place an unequal burden on mothers and other female caregivers in Australia. Combatting gender stereotypes is therefore an action that requires the mutually reinforcing work of parents, carers, educators, and policymakers to support the wellbeing of children in their early years.

DOMINANT FORMS OF MASCULINITY THAT PROMOTE VIOLENCE

There are clear opportunities to challenge dominant forms of masculinity in the early years, when boys are first exposed to gendered norms that encourage and legitimise men's use of violence.

Our Watch's *Men in Focus: Evidence Review* explores how dominant forms of masculinity construct men and boys as biologically or naturally violent, promoting a false narrative that men's violence against women is inevitable. Challenging this narrative is an important part of laying the foundation for prevention work, as it enables men's violence to be understood as a learned – and therefore preventable – behaviour, rather than an inherent gendered trait.

Rigid attachment to socially dominant forms of masculinity play a central role in maintaining and reinforcing unequal power relations and gendered hierarchies within our social structures, organisations, institutions, and interpersonal relations.

The social and cultural acceptance of men's violence against women can present itself in early childhood care and education settings, for example, in the framing of certain antisocial behaviours as acceptable or 'normal' for boys and not for girls. The phrase 'boys will be boys' is an example of how rough, aggressive, and other unwanted behaviours are condoned or normalised when they come from boys. As Our Watch's *'Because Why'* materials explain, this not only sends the message to girls that they should expect or tolerate such behaviour from boys because boys 'can't help themselves', but it suggests that boys who do not demonstrate these behaviours are 'less boyish'.

EXPOSURE TO, AND EXPERIENCES OF, VIOLENCE

Evidence is clear that children who are exposed to or experience violence within their homes can be impacted by these experiences for a lifetime. *Change the Story* explains that these impacts include an increased likelihood for boys to perpetrate violence in the future, and an increased likelihood for girls to be victimised by violence in the future. While these experiences are not inevitable,

preventing children from exposure to, or experience of violence in their family and kinship groups is a critical component of work to prevent future violence.

This could involve, for example, coordinating with local and state-wide organisations to strengthen the promotion of non-violent parenting and support parents to model healthy relationships. This work can also be supported by policy and strategy efforts to prevent all other forms of violence (such as racist, community, public or lateral violence and child abuse), especially through the provision of specialist expertise on the gendered dynamics of these forms of violence.

Recommendations

Our Watch recommends that:

4.1 The Australian Government include the primary prevention of violence as a policy priority in the Early Years Strategy.

Question 5 - What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

In order to improve outcomes for children, particularly those who experience systemic, structural, or social disadvantage, evidence highlights the importance of addressing the underlying causes of inequality that place different limits upon children and their futures.

There are a range of opportunities for primary prevention actions in early years settings, including:

- Building the primary prevention knowledge and capacity of early years workforces
- Implementing Respectful Relationships Education in the early years
- Supporting parents and communities to understand and commit to primary prevention and gender equality actions
- Embedding gender equality in key frameworks, including the National Quality Framework for ECEC and the Early Years Learning Framework.

Build the primary prevention knowledge and capacity of early years workforces

In the few pilot programs evaluated in Australia that have aimed to embed gender equality in early years settings, building the capacity of workforces to implement the programs has been identified as a factor critical to the program's success. As a result, and in line with Our Watch's *Growing With Change: Developing an expert workforce to prevent violence against women (Growing with change)*, Our Watch suggests that primary prevention training and education

should be introduced as a strategic component of workforce development in early years settings.

There are significant opportunities to incorporate primary prevention concepts into higher education teaching content and practice, as outlined in *Our Watch's Educators' guide to upskilling preservice professionals to support the prevention of gender-based violence*. Undergraduate programs that can lead to employment in early years settings – for example, in education (early childhood teachers), nursing (child health nurses), social work (community health centres) - lend themselves to the inclusion of primary prevention content.

There are also examples of primary prevention education currently available at the Vocational Education and Training (VET) level, such as a course in Gender Equity developed by a consortium led by Women's Health Victoria and a Prevention Contributors Course-In developed by the Victorian Government. Both have been registered on the VRQA list of accredited courses, which means these could be picked up and delivered nationally by any VET providers of qualifications for early childhood education or community services.

Growing with change estimates that the number of people with relevant qualifications and knowledge to deliver primary prevention content in universities and TAFEs across Australia is very small. Investment in educator and training capability is essential to ensure that the primary prevention education and training delivered is high-quality, relevant, adheres to the evidence base, and draws from, and is informed by, current good practice in prevention.

Our Watch encourages the Commonwealth Government to consider the *Growing with change* report as the basis for developing initiatives to strengthen educator and trainer capability to deliver primary prevention course content.

Respectful Relationships Education in the Early Years

While there are several sectors and settings in which prevention efforts in the early years can be implemented, there is substantial momentum, evidence, and potential for respectful relationships education (RRE) to be expanded into early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres.

Our Watch defines respectful relationships education (RRE) as the holistic approach to primary prevention of gender-based violence in education settings.⁸ It uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by treating these settings as education institutions, workplaces and community hubs, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence.

The deeply entrenched nature of the drivers of gender-based violence means that a long-term commitment and systemic approach are needed for RRE to

become a catalyst for generational change, which requires leadership and investment from governments.

The Commonwealth Government has a particular role to play in RRE by providing national resources, guidance, and regulatory support to promote consistent policy and practice across jurisdictions, in line with evolving evidence, as well as publicly expressing support for gender equality and RRE that addresses the drivers of violence against women.

Existing practice differs significantly across jurisdictions in Australia. However, best practice RRE policy and program design have the following core elements as listed in the table below.

BEST PRACTICE RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION

Core Element	Description
1. Address the gendered drivers of violence	Pays critical attention to gender inequality and power, with an understanding of the factors that most consistently predict men's violence against women as explained in <i>Change the Story</i> . This work should be both gender transformative and intersectional.
2. Take a whole-of-setting approach to change	Recognises ECEC settings as not only places of care and education but also workplaces and community hubs. This approach involves children, staff, families and kin, and the wider community in targeted, coordinated, and mutually reinforcing long-term initiatives that embed and sustain positive cultural change.
3. Support the change by developing a professional learning strategy and providing ongoing professional learning	A best-practice approach to support the development of professional skills, knowledge and confidence in respectful relationships education requires the development of a professional learning strategy for all supervising, teaching, and non-teaching staff. Staff should be supported to develop their knowledge of and confidence in delivering relevant curriculum that is tailored to the diverse learning needs of children.
4. Use age-appropriate curriculum that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence	Evidence demonstrates that respectful relationships education is most effective when it includes age-appropriate teaching that supports students to understand and critically analyse gender roles, stereotypes, norms, and relations. Curricula must include learning objectives and content that is specifically focused on gender and power – the underlying drivers of violence against women – through age-appropriate messaging.
5. Sustain and commit to the change by having	Implementation of RRE needs to take a phased approach, acknowledging there is significant preparatory work required and that ECEC facilities

a long-term vision, approach, and funding	will have differing levels of readiness for implementation.
6. Support through cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination	The early childhood sector involves many stakeholders from local, state and territory governments, to for-profit and non-profit services and providers, unions, and peak bodies. Within this complex setting, coordination and collaboration should be encouraged and supported through appropriate government mechanisms and cross-sectoral networks.
7. Evaluate for continuous improvement	Evaluations of RRE will provide insights if they measure change against the 4 gendered drivers of violence against women set out in <i>Change the Story</i> , and examine impact across norms, practices and structures. An evaluation of process measures can enable ECEC centres to report on the extent to which activities have been delivered as expected which can identify trends in implementation and assist the government to track progress towards best practice.

There are several factors that increase the complexity of implementing a whole-of-setting, best practice approach to RRE in ECEC centres. These include, for example, the privatisation of ECEC centres in Australia, the different jurisdictional regulatory schemes for regular and ad hoc services, as well as resourcing constraints.

As a result, Our Watch suggests that a phased approach to embedding RRE in ECEC centres is likely to be most effective. In particular, Our Watch encourages the Commonwealth Government to commit to the expansion of best practice RRE into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres through a phased, whole-of-setting approach.

This is likely to require significant government investment and coordination and engagement across jurisdictions. For example, ensuring sufficient and appropriate higher education and vocational education and training courses are available for teaching staff is a first step in developing and embedding prevention content into ECEC qualifications (discussed further under *Build the primary prevention knowledge and capacity of early years workforces*).

One approach to consider is investment in pilot projects to be delivered and evaluated by relevant experts in government-operated ECEC centres. Findings from the evaluation of the centre-based ‘Building Children’s Resilience through Respectful and Equitable Relationships Pilot Project’ may provide useful lessons in the development of future co-designed programs.⁹

The NSW Government-funded 'All In' project being implemented by the Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC) is an example of an emerging model of working with ECEC centres that service communities including First Nations peoples, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ staff and families. The 'All In' program is based on Our Watch's *Change the story* evidence-base and incorporates a whole-of-service model, demonstrating the practical potential for RRE in ECEC centres to reach a wide range of communities and their diverse needs.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATION

Our Watch recommends that:

5.1 The Early Years Strategy commits to the expansion of best practice RRE into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres through a phased, whole-of-setting approach.

Support parents and communities to understand and commit to primary prevention and gender equality actions

Recent data shows that in the first year with a new baby, men make up only 4% of full-time primary caregivers. This pattern continues in the long-term, with women continuing to perform the majority of care work and unpaid housework for as long as ten years after the birth of their first child.¹¹ The effects on women and the community are widespread and include impacts on women's ability to return to work and establishing unhealthy relationship dynamics between parents that can contribute to conflict and relationship breakdowns.¹²

Exposure to gender unequal parenting can teach children to accept or model behaviour that is grounded in stereotypes that afford men greater power than women. Stereotypical gender roles can also result in parents (unintentionally or otherwise) encouraging their children to engage in gendered behaviours and forms of play that can inhibit their choices and development outcomes.¹³

Challenging gender unequal parenting will not only improve outcomes for children but can also improve outcomes for the wider family and community. Programs that encourage new fathers to take more active roles in their child's development and build more equal parenting relationships demonstrate success in improving fathers' awareness of gender inequality and their ability to communicate non-violently with their partners and their children.¹⁴

Our Watch's 'Because Why' suite of resources is an example of an effective and accessible approach to supporting parents to challenge gender stereotypes through everyday actions at home.

Community programs that work with new parents and maternal and child health services can also provide effective interventions to challenge unequal gender roles in parenting while building the capacity of government and health workers to promote gender equality through their engagements with new parents. The Carrington Health 'Baby Makes 3' program is an example of a successful, evidence-based program.

Our Watch encourages the Commonwealth Government to consult and engage with parents and carers at an early stage to ensure that programs are tailored to suit their needs and are designed in an appropriate way. In particular, families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and migrant and refugee communities should be consulted to better understand how programs can be integrated into existing formal and informal support structures to ensure cultural safety and accessibility. The experiences of parents and carers with disabilities, and/or of children with disabilities, and LGBTQI parents should be embedded across all community programs.

Embed gender equality in the National Quality Framework for ECEC

There is an important opportunity to ensure strengthening gender equality in early childhood education is systemically embedded, including through appropriate legislative and regulatory mechanisms.

For example, there are opportunities to strengthen the National Quality Framework through embedding gender equality into the National Quality Standards given the role of the Standards in providing a national benchmark for the early childhood education and care sector, setting important outcomes for children,¹⁵ and providing a basis for assessment and rating of services.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia provides a strong foundation to support the early childhood education and care workforce understand practical ways to embed gender equality into their educational program. Our Watch suggests that there are opportunities to strengthen the Framework to ensure gender equality is visible across all areas of the framework and include explicit examples of ways to challenge gender stereotyping to prompt critical thinking about pedagogy and practice.

Additional actions

There are also a range of potential broader actions the Commonwealth Government could take to advance gender equality in early years settings. While

these are not the focus of this submission, they would contribute to the broader legislative and policy settings in this area. These include, for example:

- **Using policy levers to support a balanced division of unpaid labour and care giving in the early years** – there are opportunities to create structural change that challenges rigid ideas about men’s roles and responsibilities in household tasks and caregiving. Policy levers which create conditions for gender transformative social norms that encourage a balanced division of unpaid labour will support men to role-model equality in their relationships with women and enable children to question and challenge restrictive gender stereotypes.
- **Ensure access to affordable quality early childhood education and care** - removing structural barriers to women’s workforce participation is integral to achieving gender equality and preventing violence against women. Access to affordable quality early childhood education and care is one of the most significant enablers of women’s workforce participation.
- **Raise the status of the early childhood education and care sector** - the socio-economic devaluation of ECEC work through low pay, poor conditions and insecure employment are manifestations of gender inequalities. The National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy recommends immediate action to improve wages and conditions. This was recently reinforced in the final report of the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care and the Women’s Economic Taskforce recommendations for the May Federal Budget.
- **Attract men into ECEC** - male educators in ECEC can help shape children’s perceptions of gender, in particular boy’s experiences of masculinity by counteracting traditional views of women being innately responsible for child caring. Men in ECEC can role model respectful male peer relations and support boys to reject masculinities that emphasise aggression, dominance, and control – a driver of violence against women.

Question 7 - What principles should be included in the Strategy?

To ensure a best practice approach to primary prevention in the context of the Strategy, Our Watch suggests the following principles could be included in the Strategy:

- A **whole-of-community approach** that involves and meets the needs of children, their carers, their broader families and kin, their early educators, and their broader communities in their places of work, learning, and their homes. Efforts to address the gendered drivers of violence must include

policy, practice, and structural change within the early years setting, be complemented by wider policy and regulatory change, and engage broader levers and mechanisms available to government to enable a systematic approach to primary prevention of violence across the early years setting.

- **Gender transformative principles** that intentionally question and challenge (rather than overtly or inadvertently reinforcing) rigid and hierarchical gender roles and stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity that place limits on the roles that children assume and carry into their adult life. These principles should align with the broader approaches to gender equality and gender transformative approaches underpinning complementary strategies such as the National Plan and the planned National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality that are necessary to reach all Australians across the life-course and have the greatest impact on the drivers of violence against women.
- An **intersectional approach** that considers the ways in which gender inequality intersects with other forms of systemic and structural oppression and discrimination – including colonialism, ableism, racism, homo, bi- and transphobia, ageism, and class discrimination, for example – to contribute to discrimination and privilege, and influence perpetration and experiences of violence.

Question 8 - Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

Building, consolidating and further developing the primary prevention evidence base is critical to the effective prevention of violence against women in Australia and central to the success of the National Plan. While *Change the story* sets out the evidence base for prevention in Australia – and is based on the most up-to-date global and national evidence about what drives violence against women – it is critical that work continues to deepen and strengthen this evidence base.

There are a range of different forms of knowledge that inform this evidence base, including programmatic and other evaluations, expertise from practitioners, academic research and the knowledge held by those with diverse lived experiences. Elements of the national evidence base that should be prioritised for attention and future work include expanding the practice evidence about what works to prevent violence against women in particular settings/sectors and contexts, and with specific population groups, cohorts, audiences and communities.

Building evidence in key priority settings, including early childhood, is an important part of ensuring evidence-based policy making and ensuring better outcomes. This can include, for example, research, pilots and trialling new and innovative approaches and piloting and evaluating a range of diverse primary prevention initiatives. While there are significant opportunities for primary prevention in the early years there are currently gaps in primary prevention research, evidence, programs and strategies aimed at children in early childhood and their families.¹⁶

Our Watch is currently considering potential work in relation to prevention work in early childhood settings, which may help contribute to the evidence base in this area.

There are also a number of relevant research, evidence and data strategies and developments that the Strategy could usefully consider, including the development of a National Outcomes Framework, National Research Agenda and Data Improvement Plan under the National Plan.

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