

Guiding principles for primary prevention in the context of COVID-19

Overview

Enclosed is a suite of guiding principles for primary prevention practice in the context of COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery. It is critical to maintain and strengthen sector and community focus on the importance of primary prevention of family violence and violence against women, and for agencies to work collectively to ensure this focus.

These principles have been developed in collaboration with agencies across the family violence primary prevention and response sectors. They draw on the *Change the Story* principles for prevention of violence against women, now widely recognised by policy makers and practitioners. The principles are:

1. Strengthen primary prevention focus across whole of family violence reform effort
2. Build understanding of the impact of intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage into all our prevention efforts
3. Uphold the importance of independence and decision-making in public and private life
4. Challenge rigid gender roles, advance gender equality and advocate for respectful gender relationships
5. Engage men to adopt and maintain respectful and non-aggressive behaviours and peer relations
6. Challenge attitudes that condone violence through association with external stressors

These principles can be applied to inform the messaging used in the context of COVID-19, Their application encourages consistency in approaches to program design and policy advocacy to create a safe and healthy community through stopping violence before it emerges. They are also aimed at increasing the resilience of the prevention sector in operating in times of crisis.

This resource should also inform advocacy for sustained prevention programming through settings such as homes, schools and workplaces which is of heightened importance at this time and into the longer recovery period.

Guiding Principles

1. Strengthen primary prevention focus across whole of family violence reform effort

As the incidence of family violence rises as part of COVID-19, we have witnessed a shift of focus in some areas from prevention to response services, supports for victims and those at particular risk. It remains critically important that primary prevention continues to be programmed and undertaken as an integral part of the spectrum of responses to family violence, that we maintain promotion of a longer-term investment in primary prevention, and that we ensure this is visible and considered an urgent priority.

The heightened awareness of family violence, in all its diverse forms, currently provides a good context in which to promote the importance of sustained investment in preventative approaches. Such approaches should be positioned as complementary to early intervention and response-oriented supports. Adequately resourcing this work is vital to meet the community's expectation that the prevention sector will contribute to mitigating the risk of the increased incidence of family violence associated with this and similar future disaster situations.

COVID-19 has further entrenched existing social and economic inequalities. As such, focus needs to be maintained on addressing the drivers of discrimination and inequality while driving primary prevention efforts throughout the disaster cycle of preparedness, response, management and recovery to "build back better", in all aspects of programming.

Primary prevention of family violence in the current environment has the opportunity to address systemic disadvantage, focusing on positive messages and helping families avoid compounding problems. This will become even more crucial as we move into an extended period of recovery from the pandemic.

Pursuing primary prevention as part of overall attention to family violence means keeping the issues facing women and children in full view. The terrible impact of family violence exposure on children should inform efforts to stop this violence at the earliest possible point, recognising the way in which underlying drivers and reinforcing factors for this violence play out around children in confined home environments.

2. Build understanding of the impact of intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage into all our prevention efforts

It is more important than ever to increase awareness across the community of intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities and how they have been exacerbated by COVID-19, highlighting the particular risks of isolation and hardship for diverse groups. Addressing these factors must be embedded across all our prevention efforts and cut across all six guiding principles.

Many of the factors that put Victorians at higher risk of COVID-19 and its social and economic fall-out – associated with discrimination on the basis of gender, Indigeneity, disability, chronic illness, older age, cultural diversity, migration, refugee and residency status, sexuality and gender identity, geographical isolation and a range of other factors singly or in combination – are also responsible for heightened risk of family violence and violence against women. We have a responsibility to prevent this compounding of risk, recognising that discrimination such as racism, ageism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia may impact on people's safety during the pandemic and its aftermath.

Addressing systemic discrimination and inequality, strengthening communities and championing marginalised peoples' rights, resilience and positive contributions is critical in simultaneously supporting people's health and well-being in the context of the COVID-19 threat, and protecting them from the violence and abuse that can come with increased social pressures.

In addressing these issues, primary prevention efforts should be led by and draw on the strengths of different communities as change-makers by engaging representational groups and honouring principles of self-determination (for example by connecting with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations).

Prevention work relying increasingly on online information and support needs to be attentive to the digital divide that the pandemic has brought into sharper focus. Affordability is the key access and inclusion challenge for breaking down this divide – impacting in particular on women, migrants and refugees, people in rural areas, older Victorians, Victorians with a disability and homeless people – and may require innovative solutions.

3. Uphold the importance of independence and decision-making in public and private life

As the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis become more apparent and social isolation is temporarily the norm, those who sense their power and control weakening may seek to assert it in other ways by constraining the independence of female partners, increasing pressure on elderly parents to provide financial assistance, threatening those with diverse sexuality or gender identity or utilising other forms of family abuse.

These dynamics and their socio-economic context can lead to increased vulnerability to a heightened pattern of coercion, with management of COVID-19 related risks often being inappropriately used as a form of controlling behaviour.

Prevention efforts during this time must challenge systemic barriers to independence and decision-making, and the use of controlling behaviours. They must promote financial independence, continued social engagement, and participation in decision-making for all members of the Victorian community in public and private life.

Particular attention must also be given to the way these issues play out for people with a disability, older Victorians, women from certain migrant and refugee backgrounds, and others who may experience a heightening of powerlessness and reduced independence at this time.

4. Challenge rigid gender roles, advance gender equality and advocate for respectful gender relationships

While governments and businesses have been taking the necessary steps to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to highlight the increased social, economic and emotional burdens placed on women and how these have further entrenched gender inequality and put them at greater risk of domestic abuse. It is essential to communicate, model and support gender-equitable relationships and domestic and parenting practices, including through community and employer-led initiatives.

Programs that encourage children, young people and adults to reject rigid gender roles and stereotypes, like Respectful Relationships and Workplace Equality and Respect, are critical as workplace, household and social dynamics change due to imposed restrictions, home-schooling and working from home arrangements.

Messaging should reinforce that unequal gendered power relations and disrespectful attitudes remain the underlying drivers of family violence and violence against women. In a time of increased hardship for many, such abuse of power in the home, the workplace, and in other community settings is neither a fair nor a productive response.

It is also important to maintain a strong focus on systemic and structural support for gender equality through public policy and advocacy efforts. We need to build capacity to understand the gendered dynamics of the pandemic. This includes the adverse economic impacts such as unemployment and the predominance of women in frontline services. This understanding can drive advocacy to ensure that public policy introduced during both the response and recovery phases of the COVID-19 crisis is underpinned by sound gender responsive principles.

5. Engage men to adopt and maintain respectful and non-aggressive behaviours and peer relations

While the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 have required a more immediate focus on users of violence, it is important to maintain efforts that challenge men to think critically about how gender norms manifest and to encourage and reinforce the benefits of positive peer relations and expressions of masculinity. This work should not only highlight the gendered impact of COVID-19 in their own households, but also emphasise the disproportionate effects on all women and diverse populations in the community.

Isolation may also exacerbate unhealthy male peer relations that may become a greater focus for some men as other outlets and social networks are more limited. There is potential for online forums to become key sites for unhealthy male peer relations, reinforce dominant forms and norms of masculinity, and emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women. It is essential that these continue to be challenged.

During this period, it is critical that prevention agencies support the work of organisations who work with men and boys. This may include promoting platforms and resources that allow men to connect and reflect on their own lives and personal relationships in positive and healthy environments.

6. Challenge attitudes that condone violence through association with external stressors

Many Victorians will experience social, emotional and financial stress brought on or heightened by the COVID-19 crisis. In this situation, some people can slip into the mindset that these external factors somehow excuse violence, or a context exists in which violence against women and family violence is more frequently excused, downplayed, or trivialised.

While it is appropriate to acknowledge the additional pressures people are facing, such as social isolation, deteriorating mental health and loss of employment, it is also imperative that government and the prevention sector

maintain a strong narrative that there is no excuse for violence under any circumstances, and to continue to address the key drivers of this violence: chiefly, gender inequality and other forms of discrimination.

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Agencies

Centre for Excellence in Children and Family Welfare
Djirra
Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria
drummond street services
GenVic
inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence
Multicultural Centre for Women's Health
Municipal Association of Victoria
No to Violence
Our Watch
Respect Victoria
safe steps Family Violence Response Centre
Seniors Rights Victoria
VicHealth
WIRE
Women with Disabilities Victoria
Women's Health Victoria