Respect Victoria

Preventing Family Violence

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Victoria's family violence primary prevention workforce

Gender & Disaster Pod

An initiative of WHGNE, WHIN & MUDRI

In Victoria and across the world, there has been a significant increase in reports of family violence and violence against women since the COVID-19 pandemic began, dubbed the 'Shadow Pandemic' by the United Nations. Existing inequalities have been exposed and exacerbated, with emerging research pointing to the gendered impacts of disasters, including increased rates of violence against women. Early reports suggest in the family violence sectors, resources and staff are being directed away from the primary prevention of violence against women to assist in response and other duties during the pandemic.

This research seeks to gain insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the primary prevention of violence against women workforce. It makes recommendations about the resourcing and support needed for the primary prevention workforce.

To understand whether the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant change and challenges for the primary prevention workforce, Respect Victoria funded the Gender and Disaster Pod to deliver this report. Interviews and a focus group discussion with primary prevention practitioners were carried out between June and August 2020.

A literature review was undertaken, with key findings pointing to: the increasingly gendered division of labour during the response to COVID-19, increasing pressure on women and men to conform to gender stereotypes; the gendered impacts of multiple forms of discrimination on women who are part of other marginalised groups; and the consequences of shifting from primary prevention to response.

Key findings

Balancing work and home
In the 2017 Victorian workforce census, it was found that 93.8% of primary prevention workers were female. All participants in this research were women, and many spoke about the amplification of the gendered division of labour during the pandemic. Several practitioners spoke about the challenges of combining work, childcare and home-schooling. Some worked nights and weekends in an attempt to maintain the balance, and all participants – regardless of whether they had children – said that their workloads had increased.

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I've just been working around the clock. Work is home ... and that's a bit of a challenge too. I go from the kitchen to the office.

Shift to response

Practitioners reported that their work came under pressure to respond to significant increases in family violence, of which some practitioners weren't adequately trained. All participants had, to differing degrees, taken up additional duties related to response. Participants expressed difficulty in juggling their new duties with their original remit of gender equity and primary prevention.

> **There definitely has been a shift into more response...it's all really divided and the focus on external requests is mostly on response right now.**

Some participants felt that organisational decisions to redirect staff failed to consider the short, medium and longer-term impacts of redirecting already 'limited and inadequate' primary prevention resources.

For others, new attention to family violence during the pandemic and a shift to response meant they were able to increase awareness of the importance of gender equality and primary prevention in their organisations. Their shift to response gave them access to new program areas and decision-making forums, allowing them to build on networks and increase awareness of primary prevention.

An online world

All participants talked about the increased flexibility that online platforms offered, with some suggesting that increased organisational efficiencies and professional capacity. For others, there were negative impacts on the support and safety they felt while working from home.

> **Support was not provided for the primary prevention practitioners' loss or suspension of their core prevention work or networks, and reduced incidental interactions meant additional meetings for support and supervision were sometimes needed.**

One practitioner discussed the challenges of building shared trust and confidence in online spaces, particularly when providing training that would usually be conducted face-to-face.

> **It's quite confronting and you don't have that ability to engage and draw on that personal ways that you could in a room ...It's really hard to engage and elicit conversations through this video medium... you haven't had time to build that relationship as they feel comfortable a to be able to engage and interact. The complexities are huge**

Building awareness

Despite the challenges that the pandemic brought to their roles, most participants found that the work they undertook in the response space helped to raise awareness of gender equality and the need to address primary prevention in their workplaces.

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I feel that because of the role that I've taken on in the response side and training up a whole lot of our organisation and getting policies and procedures, both internal and external communications, that we're putting out around family violence, both response and [primary] prevention, has actually raised the profile of gender equality and family violence prevention work within the organisation. And I think that's a huge bonus. I think that will have ongoing benefits.

One participant also spoke to the importance of the increased in media coverage of family violence increases during the pandemic and suggested that it was assisting in unpacking information and breaking down stereotypes for the general public.

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We're starting to see — or potentially, hopefully — an understanding from those outside the sector that violence isn't just physical and there are other controlling factors, and that people can maybe see it in their own lives now a little bit more.

All participants acknowledged the pressing need for their organisations to address violence against women during the pandemic. However, their degree of involvement in decisions was varied according to how well primary prevention had been included in organisational systems, programs and strategic planning prior to COVID-19.

The research report has produced recommendations to provide support and resources for the primary prevention workforce during and after disasters. They address and provide recommendations to Respect Victoria, government, family violence agencies, and organisations with primary prevention programs and practitioners.

You can read the full research report on the **Respect Victoria website.**

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